

FABERGÉ EGGS FOR EVERYONE. POINT OF VALUE

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This article describes a set of Fabergé keychain eggs from the collection of the Fersman Mineralogical Museum of the RAS. The weight, size, and manufacturing material were compared to the original labels on the boxes, which helped to decode their original price range.

5 photos, 1 reference.

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For the more than one and a half century since the time when the Fabergé jewelry firm was founded, this name became one of the most famous brands, a synonym of tsar luxury and the highest-level jewelry art. The most famous pieces from the Fabergé heritage are the Easter eggs made for the members of the Russian Emperor's family from 1885 to 1917. Other relatively inexpensive Easter eggs also manufactured by Fabergé for decorating key chains are much less known. Tatiana Muntyan, curator of the Fabergé collection of the Armoury of the Moscow Kremlin Museum wrote about these: "There was a tradition in old Russia: a girl was presented with a little egg for every Easter (Paskha) since her birth. The keychain eggs were very diverse: golden, silver, sprinkled with gems, or coated with transparent enamel over Guilloché surface. The Empress gave such key chains to maids, house servants, and relatives for Easter. She drew these eggs in a special notebook and marked the price under each: five, seven, ten rubles — Alexandra Fedorovna was not too generous. One of such notebooks is kept in the Moscow Kremlin Museum. Almost none of those keychain eggs remained in Russia: people who left the country after the Revolution took them along as the most precious belongings. The prices for those key chains rose enormously at the antique market: a tiny egg could cost up to 10–12 thousand dollars (Muntyan, 2000).

A set of such key chains made out of rock crystal, jade, lazurite, rhodonite, and purpurine (brownish-red glass, very characteristic of the Fabergé works) is a part of the collection of the Mineralogical Museum (Fig. 1). The eggs have attached golden rings (millesimal fineness 583). One of the rhodonite eggs has a silver fringe (millesimal fineness 800). The keychain eggs are contained in the original box, which has cells of various size carved in a

soft wood and covered with fleece. The cells were obviously shaped for the individual eggs, many of which are placed where they belong. Under each row of cells, iron pins (brands "Original" and "Комите № 2" can probably be used as clues to proper dating) fix the paper labels with ink-written symbols, which probably indicate the price of a particular piece in some coded form. Such coding was evidently used to guide a sales person in Fabergé stores towards a certain price range.

For decoding the prices indicated under the eggs in the box, the following assumptions were made:

1. Letters and letter combinations denote numbers;
2. For the eggs made of the same material, the price is generally proportional to their weight/size.
3. The prices are linked to the Russian monetary system as of the end of the 19th — beginning of the 20th century.

Among the letters used in the codes, there are symbols d, e, m, p, r, z, e.dy, r.dy, to some of which the fractions 1/4, 1/2, or 3/4 are added.

The comparison of the cell sizes for pieces made of the same material results in the following quantitative relations in symbols: $z > r > p$, $m > d > e$, $e > r$, $m > z$, $e.dy > e$. Thus, the all the symbols used can be ranked in the ascending series: p, r, z, e, d, m, e.dy. The jade eggs gradually decreasing in size were marked "p3/4", "p1/2", and "p1/4", which suggests that the fractions are non-coded parts of a monetary unit (probably ruble).

The rhodonite egg marked "e.dy" significantly exceeds others in weight (for example, its mass is 3 times greater than that of the egg marked "e"), therefore, its price should be proportionally higher. As we have already concluded, the symbol "e" corresponds to a single-digit number somewhere in the middle



Fig. 1. A set of keychain eggs from jade, rhodonite, rock crystal, lazurite, and purpurine. FMM, No PDK 2376, 2451–2454, 2475, 2504, 2548, 4082. Photo: Michael Leybov



Fig. 2. Emerald keychain egg. FMM, No PDK-2756.



Fig. 3. Raw materials for chalcedony keychain eggs. FMM, No PDK-2245-2248, 2187.

Fig. 4. Raw materials for bowenite keychain eggs. FMM, No PDK-2402, 2415, 2416, 3899, 3900.

Fig. 5. Raw materials for purpurine keychain eggs. FMM, No PDK-3728.

Photo by Mikhail Generalov



of the 1–9 interval. Hence the price of the egg that is three times larger should be greater than 10. Then, the symbol "dy" means "+ 10".

In the standard "Arabic" numeric system, placing the higher order numbers on the right side is uncommon; so this approach of placing symbols was obviously used to further conceal the relation between the symbols and the actual price value.

The main currency in Russia in the beginning of the 20th century was ruble, which was equivalent to 0.7742 g of pure gold and, before 1914, was one of the most stable currencies in the world. The monetary exchange involved golden coins of 15 rubles (imperial), 10 rubles, 7 rubles and 50 kopecks (half-imperial), and 5 rubles. Commonly used silver coins (millesimal fineness 900) were 1 ruble, 50 kopecks, and 25 kopecks; silver coins (millesimal fineness 500) were 20, 15, 10, and 5 kopecks. Copper coins had the value of 5, 3, 2, 1, 1/2, and 1/4 kopecks. Also credit bills with the value of 500, 100, 25, 10, 5, 3, and 1 rubles were in use.

The only payment amount that could be equivalent to the symbol "e.dy" was imperial. Then the symbol "e" should denote "5". Therefore, the maximum price among the eggs in the set was assigned to the large rhodonite egg with a silver fringe 7.71 g in weight.

Now we can also decode other letter symbols. The row of numbers (prices) less than 5, judging by the mass ratios of the purpurine eggs, is continuous. Then "z" should denote "4", "r" is "3", and "p" is "2".

The symbols following "e" in the ascending order are "d" and "m". The mass ratios of the rock crystal eggs are consistent with the assumption that "d" corresponds to the number "6". The next symbol "m" could be presumed to be "7", but the mass ratios of the rock crystal eggs suggest that if $e = 5$, and $d = 6$, the "proportional" price of the largest egg should be around 7.60–7.80. It is also possible that "m" means not a number, but rather a price equivalent to the half-imperial value – 7 rubles and 50 kopecks.

The attempt to relate the letter symbols to the first letters of numerals in other languages that use Latin alphabet was not successful. It seems that for making decoding more complicated, the symbols were not associated with any abbreviations. The characteristics of the eggs from this set and their preliminarily decoded prices are listed in Table 1.

The stone material used in this set of the egg key chains has a diverse origin. The dark green jade was brought from the Onot River (Eastern Sayan). Judging by the deep blue uniform coloration of the lazurite, it was brought from the famous Badakhshan mines (Afghanistan). The translucent bright pink rhodonite could only be mined from the Sidelnikov deposit in the Urals. The rock crystal was probably also delivered from the Urals. The synthetic jewelry material purpurine (glass with a substantial admixture of copper), very typical of the Fabergé works, was also used in this set. Brockhous and Efron Great Encyclopedic Dictionary says the following about this glass: "... at 8% [Cu] and higher, the glass is opaque red, and the copper monoxide can be present in it as red crystals clearly visible at high magnification; such opaque glass of bright red-purple color is called purpurine (hemation of the ancient)". This glass was manufactured at the Petersburg Emperor's Glass Factory.

Comparing the decoded prices of the eggs that are close in weight but are made from different minerals, one can obtain the relative costs of those materials. The row with ascending cost is as follows: jade – lazurite – purpurine – rhodonite – rock crystal.

However, the egg set in the box is not the only key-chain heritage present in the collection of the Mineralogical Museum. There are about a hundred small eggs made out of various materials among the large volume of art stock – inserts, cut stones, and gems that were handed over to the Museum by the Russian Committee on Natural Manufacturing Resources (KEPS) in 1924. In addition to the eggs similar to those present in the set, there are some made out of agate, sapphirine, and other varieties of chalcedony, beryl, jasper, marble, and noble serpentine (bowenite) (Figures 2–5). Some of those pieces are finished works and have some golden or silver rings on them. But most of them evidently are just stock items, some having drilled holes for fixing the metal parts. The holes for fixing brackets are usually located on the narrow end of an egg, but there are cases when the fixtures and rings are attached on a side. Obviously, one of the cells in the box was prepared for such egg type, although it now contains a rhodonite egg (probably misplaced) marked with the symbol "e".

Table 1. Characteristics of the keychain eggs in the set and their presumable decoded prices

Material	Total mass, g	Dimensions, length . max diameter, mm	Price symbol on the box	Price (rubles) as the beginning of the 20 th century.	Notes
Jade	8.61	20.7 x 15.8	r ^{1/2}	3.50	
Jade	4.31	15.7 x 12.9	r	3	
Jade	3.03	14.8 x 10.7	p ^{3/4}	2.75	
Jade	2.02	11.7 x 9.4	p ^{1/2}	2.50	
Jade	1.25	10.4 x 7.6	p ^{1/4}	2.25	
Jade	0.69	8.0 x 5.9	r.dy	13	Misplaced; the cell is much larger than the egg
Rhodonite	7.71	19.6 x 13.9	e.dy	15	
Rhodonite	2.62	12.5 x 9.6	e	5	Probably misplaced; the cell is designed for a keychain egg with side fixture
Rhodonite	1.90	11.5 x 8.4	r	3	
Rhodonite	1.03	8.9 x 6.5	p ^{3/4}	2.75	
Lazurite	2.03	12.6 x 9.6	p ^{3/4}	2.75	
Lazurite	3.09	15.2 x 11.0	r	3	
Lazurite	1.34	11.4 x 8.0	p ^{1/2}	2.50	
Lazurite	0.63	7.8 x 5.5	p ^{1/2}	2.50	Misplaced; the cell is larger than the egg
Rock crystal	2.59	14.4 x 11.6	m	7	
Rock crystal	1.96	13.4 x 8.9	d	6	
Rock crystal	1.72	12.2 x 9.2	e	5	
Purpurine	9.49	18.4 x 14.4	z ^{1/2}	4.50	
Purpurine	5.00	14.4 x 11.8	z	4	
Purpurine	3.58	13.1 x 10.4	r ^{1/2}	3.50	
Purpurine	2.33	11.0 x 8.8	r	3	
Purpurine	1.24	8.5 x 6.8	p ^{1/2}	2.50	
Purpurine	0.84	7.4 x 5.8	p ^{1/4}	2.25	
Purpurine	12.53	20.4 x 16.0	m	7	
Purpurine	7.85	18.0 x 13.2	z	4	
Purpurine	1.79	10.6 x 7.9	r	3	
Empty cell			d	6	
Empty cell			e	5	

It is very probable that these eggs, as well as a number of other stone works that arrived to the Museum during that period of time, were acquired from the stocks of the Fabergé shops as a result of collaboration of A.E. Fersman and A.K. Fabergé, whose firm stopped its business in Russia in 1918. In this case, the eggs without fixtures cannot be unambiguously attributed to the products of the famous firm, since such "half-fabricated" materials were often bought by Fabergé from other manufacturers. As for the "complete"

eggs, we can now estimate at what price the customers could buy them in the beginning of the 20th century; although those estimates have certainly little to do with the present-day prices for the products produced by Fabergé or even assumingly associated with the name of the famous firm.

Reference

Muntyan T.N. Family's Treasures // Profil. 2000. No 7 (179), February 28. (In Russian.)