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Enamels from the Moscow Workshop of Mariia Semenova

By Karen L. Kettering

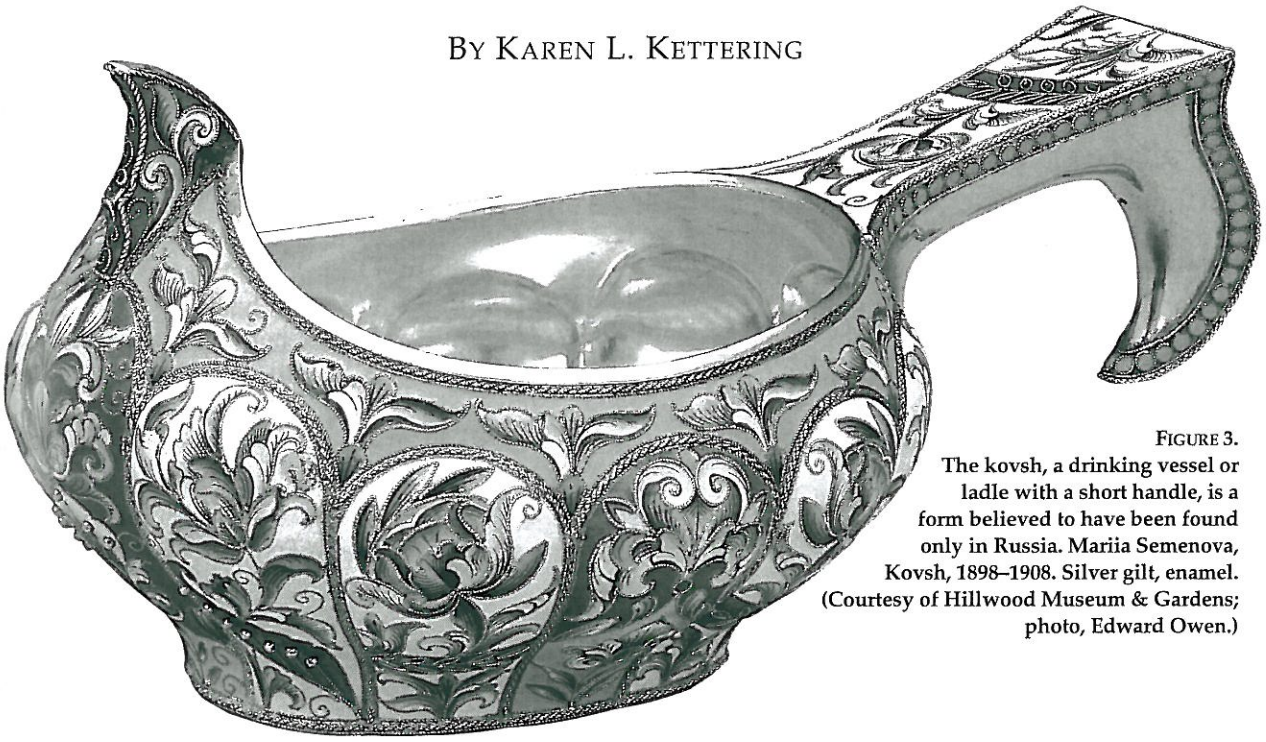

Figure 3.
The kovsh, a drinking vessel or ladle with a short handle, is a form believed to have been found only in Russia. Mariia Semenova, Kovsh, 1898–1908. Silver gilt, enamel. (Courtesy of Hillwood Museum & Gardens; photo, Edward Owen.)

As recent exhibitions and the articles in this catalogue so vividly demonstrate, women have built successful careers as gold- and silversmiths in Europe and North America for several centuries.[1] The pioneering work of a number of scholars has told us much about the lives and works of Britain's Hester Bateman, Elizabeth Godfrey, Rebecca Emes, and Louisa Courtauld, and the Americans Mary Catherine Knight, Katherine Pratt, and Margret Craver. It becomes far more difficult to find published information, however, on women who owned or worked in workshops outside the English-speaking world.

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russia, women regularly participated in many different types of family businesses, including gold- and silversmith workshops. Yet it was not until the end of the nineteenth century that they began to register their own names and hallmarks. The most recent edition of the magisterial guide to Russian hallmarks, *Zolotoe i serebrianoe delo, XV–XX vv. (Gold- and Silversmithing in Russia, 15th–20th Centuries)*, lists 25 women among the many thousands of entries.[2] What is perhaps most striking is that out of the 25 listed, 13 worked in Moscow. It is difficult to say why Moscow provided a more congenial atmosphere for these businesswomen than St. Petersburg, Kiev, or some other city. For many years, politics demanded that Soviet historians focus their energies almost entirely on industrial workers rather than merchants and managers; histories that might explain the advantages Moscow offered to women silversmiths are only now being written.[3] At this point, we must

content ourselves with the observation that the ancient capital had long been the center of gold- and silversmithing, as well as the empire's commercial heart.

Among this group of 13, Mariia Vasilevna Semenova is the most interesting and mysterious. Everything we know of her life and work must be painstakingly teased out from the traces she left behind: a few entries in yellowing city directories, brief mentions in government documents, and a large group of richly ornamented objects in silver and enamels. Like many of the other women who officially registered with the Russian government's Assayer's Office *(probirnoe upravlenie)*, Semenova (pronounced Sim-*yŏn*-ova) came to the business through family connections. Her father, Vasilii Semenovich Semenov (? – ca. 1896), founded the workshop in 1852 in a neighborhood of northwestern Moscow known as Gruziny. (The term *gruzin* designates a man from Georgia and the district was so named because it had belonged to the Georgian King Vakhtang VI in the early eighteenth century.) As Moscow grew, the quiet neighborhood of Gruziny slowly became the central Moscow district of Presnia. By the time that Vasilii Semenov established his business at No. 11 Bolshoi Tishinskii Lane, it was one of the city's most vital business districts and home to many Russian merchants and small manufactories.

FIGURE 1.
An 1892 tea caddy decorated with silver gilt, niello, and cork features views of Moscow and bears the mark of Vasilii Semenov, the father of Mariia Semenova. (Courtesy of Hillwood Museum & Gardens; photo, Edward Owen.)

To fully appreciate what Semenova achieved during the period she directed the workshop, one has to understand the sort of business her father created. Semenov never became a major manufacturer on par with Ovchinnikov, Sazikov, or Fabergé, all of whom produced works in gold as well as silver, sold their wares abroad, and competed in the great international exhibitions of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, Semenov was not without ambition. He frequently competed in nationwide industrial or applied arts exhibitions, the Russian-only counterparts to the great expositions of London, Paris, Vienna, and Chicago. During his long career, he achieved solid, if modest, success. At the 1870 All-Russian Manufacturing Exhibition, he was awarded a silver medal for the "production of silver and niello objects with especially clear and beautiful designs."[4] (Niello is a black alloy of sulfur, copper, silver, and lead used to decorate metal onto which a pattern is engraved. Once heated, the softened alloy can be pressed or rubbed into the engraved pattern.) Press reports indicate that he exhibited a wide variety of goods, including "small plates for hors d'oeuvres, a full tea set, a *cabaret* [a tea set for two persons], tea spoons, and table spoons."[5]

Like many smaller Moscow silversmiths, Semenov's works were sometimes marketed through larger firms. Semenov seems to have struck a deal with the prominent Ovchinnikov firm to produce silver gilt tea and coffee services elaborately decorated with niello inlay.[6] An 1892 tea caddy from one such service in the collection of Hillwood Museum & Gardens, Washington, D.C., exhibits many of the characteristics of these works, telling us much about his stylistic choices and the audiences for whom he worked. (See Figure 1.) The bulk of Semenov's work was produced in the so-called Russian Style *(Russkii stil')*, a term that encompasses efforts by designers, architects, and others to revive native forms that had been eclipsed by Peter the Great's (1672–1721) forcible introduction of western European artistic forms in the early eighteenth century. It arose in part as a response to the writings of the Slavophiles, a group of intellectuals who argued that Russian civilization was spiritually separate from, and superior to, that of the west. Influential figures such as the Slavophile philosopher and theologian Aleksei Khomiakov (1804–1860) urged his fellow citizens to decorate their homes only with objects that were truly and authentically Russian. In response to this new consumer demand, silversmiths, cabinetmakers, and ceramicists revived traditional Russian designs that became particularly popular among Moscow's wealthy and sizeable population of merchants.

Semenov, like other devotees of the Russian Style, often used the ancient city itself as a source for decorating his wares. While the form of the tea caddy itself is quite typical for the late nineteenth century, much of the decoration evokes Moscow in the days before the birth of Peter the Great. The elaborate ornament in niello is modeled on the

niello ornamentation on historic vessels produced in the Kremlin Armory Workshops in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although niello was widely used as a means of decorating metal in both the Classical world and Renaissance Italy, after 1500 it continued to flourish only in Russia and parts of the Islamic world. Its use, therefore, was seen as a revival of a particularly Russian national sort of art. The sides of the caddy are decorated with views of Moscow monuments within medallions. Two of the vignettes depict Moscow's Kremlin, a 70-acre complex housing cathedrals, monasteries, museums, and palaces that had once been the nation's spiritual, cultural, and political center. Opposite these is a scene of the famous sixteenth-century church of St. Basil's on Red Square, commissioned by Ivan the Terrible to commemorate his victory over the Tatars at Kazan. On the final panel is the monumental Cathedral of Christ the Savior built to give thanks to God after the last of Napoleon's troops were expelled from Russia. The images of Moscow's important spiritual and historic sites recall the city's significance before (and after) Peter the Great shifted the capital to his new, westernized city of St. Petersburg in 1714.

The date of Vasilii Semenov's death has not been established, but as of 1896, the Moscow city phone directory indicates that the silver workshop and house at No. 11 Bolshoi Tishinskii Lane were the sole property of Mariia Vasilevna Semenova.[7] From the beginning, the new business owner took steps to show that the firm was entirely in her hands. She registered new marks (Figure 2) using her own initials, rather than continuing to use her father's old marks. Many of the widows and daughters who carried on family gold- and silversmith businesses continued to use the old family mark, suggesting that the government did not demand registration of new marks when a firm changed hands but stayed within a family.[8]

Precisely what role Mariia Semenova played in the creation of works marked with her initials is hard to assess. The difficulty can be traced in part to the complex nature of metalwork. Although we say that a pair of silver candlesticks or a gold charger is the work of a particular individual, in reality most workshops employed numerous persons specializing in different aspects of production such as engraving or enameling.[9] At least one author has recently noted that Semenova, like so many of her competitors, provided the drawings from which silversmiths in her workshop created finished works, although she does not cite the source for the intriguing assertion.[10] While everything the workshop produced might not have passed through her hands, it is safe to assume that she approved objects before they went on the market bearing her initials.

From the moment she took over the business, Semenova fundamentally transformed the workshop's goods. The dark, somber niello was replaced with silver gilt enameled in a marvelous range of colors, a change that tells us something of her entrepreneurial spirit. The new technique would have required significant investment in new equipment and supplies and probably required hiring additional staff. But Semenova did not abandon the firm's long history of creating works in the Russian Style; indeed, she strengthened it. While her father had often selected modern forms to decorate with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Russian ornamentation, Mariia Semenova made the ancient Russian form of the kovsh (Figure 3) the canvas on which her craftsmen painted. The kovsh (plural—kovshi) is a drinking vessel or ladle with a short handle that can be used for one or many persons depending on its size. Thought to be based on the form of a swimming bird or a ship, the form was first made in precious metals in the medieval city of Novgorod around the early fourteenth century.[11] Most importantly, the kovsh was thought to be the most Russian of all drinking vessels. While other shapes had their analogs in European or Asian vessels, the distinctive form of the kovsh was believed to have been found only in Russia.

The enamels, too, underscored the connection of these turn-of-the-century vessels to Russia in the centuries before westernization. The fantastic flowers decorating Semenova's kovshi often bear little resemblance to the more mundane blooms in one's own garden. For Russians they evoked yet another ancient artistic tradition: late seventeenth-century painted Usolsk enamels (Figure 4) from the northern Russian city of Usol'e, later renamed Solvy-

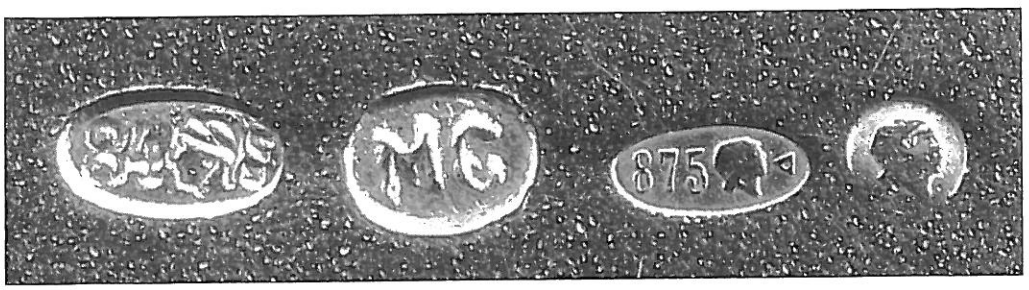

FIGURE 2.
Mariia Semenova's maker's mark was her initials, MS, in an oval-shaped frame. The Cyrillic letters MS are identical to the Roman letters MC. (Courtesy of Hillwood Museum & Gardens; photo, Edward Owen.)

FIGURE 4.
Usolsk bowl by an unknown maker, last quarter of the seventeenth century. Silver gilt, enamel. It is thought that bowls such as this example decorated in a typical Russian style served as an inspiration for Semenova's exuberant floral motifs. (Courtesy of Hillwood Museum & Gardens; photo Edward Owen.)

chegodsk. The large tulips and poppies bursting forth from a scrolling vine on the Usolsk bowl shown here are immediately recognizable as the source of Semenova's flowers, even if the range of enamel colors available in northern Russia in the late seventeenth century was far smaller.

As the kovsh in Figure 3 shows, the workshop's artisans used a variety of enamel techniques to decorate each object. Major forms such as a flower or an embossed lobe are outlined with twisted or braided wire in a process known as filigree enamel. Wires are soldered to the body of the kovsh to form cells that are filled with colored enamels and fired. These larger areas would be used as a background on which a range of colors (Figure 5) were painted by hand, rather than using metal to structure the design. The second, more delicate layer would be fired briefly and, finally, covered with a thin layer of transparent enamel to protect against chipping or shattering.[12] In the modern era in which Semenova worked, jewelers and metalworkers added chemistry to their skills as they competed to produce new colors and to make these new shades transparent, opaque, or opalescent. Semenova and her artisans quickly mastered the problem of producing a large range of interesting colors with which to tempt customers. Their enamel work, produced with consistent high quality and attention to detail, had the great honor of being selected by Fabergé to be marketed through the larger firm's stores.[13]

Semenova was never a slavish traditionalist, however, and frequently updated her designs to keep them competitive. A large and imposing kovsh (Figure 6) in Hillwood's collection is decorated in part with Usolsk-style flowers on a stippled gilt ground. Such stippled gilt grounds were almost as common a background for the painted enamel flowers as the larger panels of white or cream colored enamel. But the curling forms of the traditional flowers quickly give way to curving wires embedded within and ornamenting a band of pea-green opaque enamel. Even

more startling are the almost cartoonish arabesques set along the edge of the bowl and painted with every shade of enamel the artisan had at hand. The smooth, uncomplicated silhouette of a traditional kovsh has been taken over here by a baroque, sinuous line to create a form that is simultaneously traditional and innovative.

The juxtaposition of the old and the new can also be seen in the use of set stones. Around the turn of the century, many Russian jewelers and silversmiths greatly expanded the range of intensely colored semi-precious stones they used, a task made easier by the rich mineral deposits in Russia's Ural Mountains. They were inspired by the important historic objects made in the Kremlin Armory workshops in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries whose chief decoration was painted enamel and large, bezel-set colored stones. As the decoration of this kovsh shows, Semenova interpreted this latest trend by selecting dark purple Siberian amethysts cut *en cabochon* to contrast with the muted green of the enamel ground. The tip of the kovsh culminates in a historically inaccurate, yet visually delightful, curling line set with polished apple-green chrysoprase. Although this jade-like chalcedony had experienced something of a vogue in the late eighteenth century, it was largely ignored until the end of the nineteenth when the firm of Fabergé is credited, perhaps erroneously, with reintroducing it to the Russian consumer.

FIGURE 5.
In the workshop, kovshi were decorated with filigree enamel in which wires were soldered to the body of the form and then filled with colored enamels and fired (detail of Figure 3; photo, Edward Owen).

Although the distinctively shaped kovsh seems to have been the most popular form in Semenova's workshop, it was not the only historic shape she revived. Hillwood's collection includes a lobed bowl on three ball feet (Figure 7) extravagantly decorated with painted enamel on both the interior and exterior. While the proportions might appear a bit ungainly to the contemporary eye, they recall seventeenth-century enameled bowls on display in the Armory Museum in Moscow's Kremlin. The stylized flowers based on Usolsk enamels decorate the panels on both the interior and exterior. The most prominent detail,

FIGURE 6.
Mariia Semenova, kovsh, 1898–1908. Silver gilt, enamel, Siberian amethysts, chrysoprase. (Courtesy of Hillwood Museum & Gardens; photo, Edward Owen.)

FIGURE 7.
Mariia Semenova, bowl on three ball feet, 1904. Silver gilt, enamel. (Courtesy of Hillwood Museum & Gardens; photo, Edward Owen.)

however, is the large double-headed eagle rendered in reddish-brown and mustard yellow enamels set against a pea green ground. Although stylized, one can recognize the triple crowns above the double-heads. This essential heraldic device had been used since the sixteenth century to denote Russia's conquering of Kazan, Astrakhan, and Siberia, victories that served as the basis for the nation's claim to imperial status.

On the underside of the bowl is an engraved inscription rendered in precise Cyrillic italics revealing that the extravagant bowl was a housewarming gift from one couple to another. The dedication suggests how many of Semenova's enamels were probably used and displayed. In the final decades of Imperial Russia, genteel Russian homes included a *gostinaia*, a room for receiving guests that greatly resembled the American parlor in both its decoration and usage.[14] Comfortable, well-upholstered sofas and chairs stood next to numerous bookcases and étagères whose shelves provided ample space on which to display a myriad of objects attesting to the host and hostess's taste and discernment. The range of historical references found in Semenova's works suggests that her customers were also interested in displaying their patriotic pride in, and knowledge of, their homeland's history.

Sometime around the turn of the century, she made her boldest change, incorporating recognizably non-Russian influences in her designs. A large kovsh and matching spoon in Hillwood's collection (Figure 8) suggest the impact the first exhibitions of Japanese art held in Moscow had on Semenova's workshop. While dealers like Siegfried Bing had been supplying the avant-garde of Paris collectors with Japanese prints, textiles, and samurai swords since the 1880s, Russians had only the black and white illustrations of European art periodicals. This changed in 1903 when Russia's first exhibition of Japanese prints opened in a gallery in St. Petersburg.[15] Additional

exhibitions of Japanese stone carving and metalwork followed in 1904. Artisans in Semenova's workshop had once contented themselves with a palette of pastel colors occasionally relieved by navy blues and isolated areas of crimson. Suddenly the firm's work included pieces whose color schemes depended on the striking contrasts between deep khaki greens, rich reds, and pale blue typical of Japanese textiles. The embossed lobes, once straight and even, now bend and twist under the influence of the swirling forms of art nouveau. They sway with motion once reserved for the scrolling vines from which Semenova's flowers burst forth. Even the relatively sedate enamel surfaces have been enlivened with the application of twisted wires and granulation (tiny beads of gilded silver) interspersed with cells left entirely empty.

FIGURE 9.
Detail of Figure 8 (photo, Edward Owen).

A monumental kovsh recently given to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (Figure 10) demonstrates Semenova's continuing ambitions for her company even in the last years before the Russian Revolution. The massive piece is over 16 inches wide and almost 10 inches deep. An inscription on the underside notes that it was a gift from prominent Rhode Island politician and businessman Samuel Pomeroy Colt, founder of U.S. Rubber, the precursor to the Uniroyal Corporation. The recipient is unknown but the date of 1916 suggests that it was made shortly before World War I or during the early years of the conflict. The complex interplay of colors and surface enlivened with decorative wires, granulation, and voided cells are all present, but are now overshadowed by the cast head of a bear forming the tip of the kovsh. The integration of sculptural forms suggests something of the new paths her work might have taken had it not been for the events of 1917. The creation of cast forms was another risky investment; like the transition to enameling, it required additional equipment and, most likely, more staff.

But politics and world events cut her new path short. In the first months after the Bolshevik seizure of power, the new government nationalized the contents of all workshops producing items in gold and silver.[16] Trade in gold, silver, platinum, and precious stones became a state monopoly.

It is not known whether Semenova stayed in Soviet Russia or, like many of her fellow workshop or factory owners, chose to emigrate. Her ultimate fate remains unknown, but hopefully will be uncovered in the files of one of Moscow's archives.[17] As for the skilled craftsmen she employed, we can assume that their lives followed the course of their colleagues at other silver- and goldsmith workshops. Many of the male employees of Fabergé, Ovchinnikov and other firms were drafted during the war. Those who survived found work in state factories established after 1918. Goldsmiths and enamellers who had once produced kovshi, gold cigarette cases, and ornate silver for the dinner tables of wealthy homes now devoted

FIGURE 8.
Mariia Semenova, kovsh and matching spoon, ca. 1900. Silver gilt, enamel. (Courtesy of Hillwood Museum & Gardens; photo, Edward Owen.)

FIGURE 10.
Mariia Semenova, kovsh, ca. 1916. Silver gilt, enamel, hardstones. (Courtesy of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia, The Jerome and Rita Gans Collection of Russian Enamel; 98.16; photo by Katherine Wetzel, ©Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.)

their skills to producing military orders, badges, and insignia for the new government. The last works of Russia's pre-revolutionary metal smiths and jewelers are most likely the flags and banners of the Order of Lenin decorated with perfectly translucent, deep red enamel.

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PHOTOGRAPHS

All photographs except Figure 10 are courtesy of the Hillwood Museum and Gardens, Washington, D.C.

NOTES

1. Philippa Glanville and Jennifer Faulds Goldsborough, *Women Silversmiths, 1685–1845: Works from the Collection of the National Museum of Women in the Arts* (Washington, D.C.: The National Museum of Women in the Arts in association with Thames & Hudson, 1990).
2. M.M. Postnikova-Loseva, N.G. Platonova, and B.L. Ul'ianova, *Zolotoe i serebrianoe delo XV–XX vv: territoriia SSSR* (Moscow: Iunves and Trio, 1995).
3. For a lively introduction to the topic in English, see Catriona Kelly, "Teacups and Coffins: The Culture of Russian Merchant Women, 1850–1917," in Rosalind Marsh, ed., *Women in Russia and Ukraine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 55–77.
4. *"Illiustrirovannoe opisanie Manufakturnoi Vystavke 1870 g.,"* 87.
5. Ibid, 90.
6. Examples of such objects at Hillwood and the Hermitage bear both Vasilii Semenov's mark and that of the Ovchinnikov firm.
7. It is usually assumed that he died in 1895 or 1896. The recent appearance of a typical niello tea set with views of Moscow bearing dated marks of 1890 and 1893 together with Mariia Semenova's mark suggest that there may have been a transitional period at the end of her father's life. See Christie's (Geneva), *Russian Works of Art and Fabergé*, 15 November 1989, lot 21. For the entry in the city directory, see *Vsia Moskva: spravochnaia kniga* (Moscow: Tip. Suvorin, 1896), 172.
8. While many of the Russian hallmarking regulations have recently been published, they so far have focused on those laws regulating the conformation of the assayer's and silver purity marks. See A.N. Ivanov, *Probirnoe delo v Rossii (1700–1946): Rukovodstvo dlia ekspertov-iskusstvovedov* (Moscow: "Russkii natsional'nyi muzei," 2002).
9. For a detailed discussion of this question, see Philippa Glanville, "Women and Goldsmithing," in *Women Silversmiths, 1645–1845*, 13–28.
10. Unfortunately, she did not cite the source on which she based the statement. Ekaterina Istomina, "Starye veshchi," *Kommersant Weekend* (Moscow), November 26, 2001, 5.
11. M.M. Postnikova-Loseva, *Russkie serebrianye i zolotye kovshi* (Moscow: Goskul'tprosvetizdat, 1953), 10–11 and Julie Emerson, "Vessels of Tradition: The Kovsh," in *Moscow: Treasures and Traditions* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service and Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), 104–7.
12. Although this technique is properly termed painted enamel, it is sometimes referred to as shaded enamel, in recognition of the vast range of colors needed to model a three-dimensional form convincingly.
13. Géza von Habsburg, "History of the House of Fabergé," in Géza von Habsburg and Marina Lopato, eds., *Fabergé: Imperial Jeweler* (Washington, D.C.: Fabergé Arts Foundation, 1993), 37, note 29.
14. Catriona Kelly, *Refining Russia: Advice Literature, Polite Culture, and Gender from Catherine to Yeltsin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 160–62.
15. G.G. Smorodinova, "Zolotoe i serebrianoe delo Moskvy rubezha XIX i XX vekov," *Muzei 10: Khudozhestvennye sobraniia SSSR* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1989), 62.
16. For an overview of the earliest years of the Soviet luxury metalwork industry, see V.P. Tolstoi, ed., *Sovetskoe dekorativnoe iskusstvo, 1917–1945* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1984), 132–34.
17. I am grateful to researchers at the Slavic Reference Service at the University of Illinois for combing through available Moscow records for the date of Semenova's death.

