

## Recap of the Monighetti Cabinet Highlighted at the Volunteer Appreciation Reception

Dr. Wilfried Zeisler, Chief Curator



The Monighetti Cabinet in its current location in the Icon Room

At the volunteer appreciation reception on Monday, May 20, Dr. Wilfried Zeisler, chief curator, opened the Monighetti cabinet displayed in the Icon Room. The following is a summation of his presentation:

This ebonized wood, lapis lazuli and gilt bronze cabinet ([32.22](#)) with four doors is one of Hillwood's masterpieces of Russian furniture. It is also one of the volunteers' favorite pieces to share with visitors. Marjorie Post acquired this cherished piece in Soviet Russia in the late 1930s. She describes the piece in *Notes on Hillwood*, published in 1970:

"The Cabinet in ebony, ormolu and lapis lazuli was a gift in 1873 to Grand Duke Constantine and his wife Princess Alexandra of Saxe Altenburg to commemorate their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Their portraits hang on the inside of the doors. It stood formerly in the Marble Palace at Saint Petersburg and when I found it in a commission shop in Moscow four imperial miniatures on the outside had been removed, leaving empty places which I had filled with lapis lazuli medallions in Belgium."<sup>1</sup>

The cabinet is documented for the first time in the anteroom of the American Embassy in Brussels in 1939. Lavishly decorated in the neo-Renaissance style with gilt bronze mounts affixed to lapis lazuli panels, it was a gift from Emperor Alexander II and his wife, Empress Maria Alexandrovna, to Alexander's brother, Grand Duke Konstantin, to commemorate his twenty-fifth wedding anniversary with Grand Duchess Alexandra Iosifovna, born Princess of Saxe Altenburg. This is shown by the initials and inscriptions at the top of the cabinet: the interlaced K and A on the escutcheon and the dates of the wedding, August 30, 1848, and of the silver anniversary, August 30, 1873. Russian archival material has confirmed this prestigious provenance. The piece was described in 1873 in the archives of the Peterhof Lapidary Works as "one ebonized wood cabinet with lapis lazuli décor, gilt bronze, and four enameled coat-of-arms."<sup>2</sup> The four medallions that adorned the cabinet seem to have been removed prior to the sale to Marjorie Post. They were very precious, made of enamel on a surface of solid gold. The preparatory drawing for the cabinet by Monighetti<sup>3</sup> show the four medallions, and they are also seen, again in situ, in the Marble Palace's small dining room in Grand Duchess Alexandra's quarters.<sup>4</sup> Their current whereabouts remain unknown.

The Peterhof Lapidary Works archives document also mentions the team involved in the creation of the cabinet: court architect Ippolit Monighetti (1819-78), court luxury goods supplier Nicholls and Plinke, and the Peterhof Lapidary Works. Monighetti was a Russian architect of Swiss origin. During his successful career in Russia, he built several palaces and created designs for the imperial manufactories. Hillwood has several glass and porcelain works from the imperial yacht, *Derzhava*, which were made after his models ([25.341.1-2](#); [25.342](#); [25.343.1-12](#); 2018.10.1-2; [23.479.1-2](#)).

Nicholls and Plinke, also known as Le Magasin Anglais, was a prominent luxury goods workshop and retailer established in St. Petersburg during the 1800s. Hillwood's collection comprises a selection of works by the firm ([11.126](#); [18.31](#); [12.114](#); [12.167.1-12](#) – knives made for Grand Duke Konstantin). The Peterhof Lapidary Works was founded in the 1720s and produced small objects made of colored, carved, and polished stone and panels of Russian mosaics. This team collaborated on a set of furniture similar to the cabinet, made of lapis lazuli and gilt bronze for the Lyon Hall at Tsarskoe Selo, whose restoration was completed in June 2019 after having been damaged during World War II. In the late 1930s, when Marjorie Post travelled throughout Soviet Russia as the ambassador and bought Hillwood's cabinet, she saw the original setting in the Tsarskoe Selo palace.



Archival photo of the Monighetti cabinet displaying some of Marjorie Post's enameled silver at Hillwood, circa 1970. Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens Archives, photographed by Fred M. Hublitz

When Marjorie Post moved back to the United States, the lapis cabinet was installed in the entry hall of Tregaron in Washington, D.C. At Hillwood, the piece was displayed in the Icon Room, where it still stands today. During Marjorie Post's life, the inside was used to display part of her collection of Russian art, especially her Russian enameled silver. Two medallion drawings by Russian painter Natalia Makukhina (1823-1900) hung on the inside of the two top doors but are now in storage ([52.14](#) and [52.15](#)). They are portraits of Grand Duke Konstantin and his wife Alexandra, which were acquired by Marvin Ross in Italy around 1965. They came from the collection of Queen Olga of Greece (1851-1926), the daughter of Grand Duke Konstantin and Alexandra.

1. *Notes on Hillwood*, p. 21.
2. Russian State Historical Archives, St. Petersburg, Fund 504, division 1, document 1140, pages 37-39. See: N. Mavrodina, *Iskusstvo russkikh kamnorezov XVIII-XIX vekov katalog kollektsii* (Sankt-Peterburg : Izd-vo Gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha, 2007), 467.
3. V. N. Listov, *Ippolit Monighetti* (Leningrad : Stroiizdat, 1976), 130-132.
4. Y. Trubinov, *Mramornyi dvoret s i Sluzhebnyi dom : ocherki istorii arkhitektury zdaniĭ i sudeb obitatelei* (S.Peterburg : Izdatel'stvo "Nestor-Istorii a ", 2018), 374-376.

## Hillwood's Events and Program Page

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