

**2022-2023 Mansion Docent Training**  
**Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens**  
Russian Silver Notes Using SFP Framework

***Some Main Ideas about Russian Silver***

Silver is an important tool for Russian rulers to use in their theater of self-presentation, whether it was used in ceremonial dining, as presentation gifts, or as literal wealth.\*

Many silver objects have uniquely Russian shapes or functions. Examples include drinking and toasting vessels like the kovsh, bratina, and charka, as well as bread and salt plates and salt cellars.

The style of Russian silver across its long history reflects the blend of both Western and Russian influences, and at different times in Russia's history one of those styles was often preferred or favored over the other.

Metalwork—in this case silver—is a unique luxury art because of its ability to be melted down, and therefore used for cash or remade into an object more fashionable.

***\*A Little More about the Theater of Self-Presentation***

Silver is about more than just pretty silver trays or glittering gold cups.

Decorative arts (like silver), fine arts (think portraits of a ruler), architecture (think palaces, gardens, even whole cities like St. Petersburg), and ritual (like court etiquette and events at court) are a ruler's instruments for self-assertion. The arts and ritual, as trappings of ceremonial power, illustrate the power of splendor. Splendor has political uses.

For rulers who owned the objects at Hillwood, the theater of power (also known as the theater of self-presentation or self-assertion) is enacted most successfully during court events like coronations, dynastic marriages, and military victories, as well as at official visits, gift-giving ceremonies, and banquets.

What could an ruler be asserting?

- I am powerful, absolutely. I am an enlightened ruler. I am the legitimate ruler. I rule a great and powerful country. I am a taste-maker or fashion-setter.

### Style

#### **What do these objects' appearance reveal about the people who made and used them?**

- Assimilation of both Western & Russian influences---blend of both
- Influences from the West in shape and decoration
  - most styles to Russia from the West, not the other way
    - Styles (baroque, rococo, neoclassical, historicist, etc.) happen in Russia, just 10-20 years after in West
  - How did Western influences come into Russia?
    - Tsars and nobles purchased Western decorative arts
    - They also brought Western artists to Russia
  - Print sources important:
    - *Symbols and Emblems*, published by Peter in 1705 (reissued in Russian; 7 other languages)
      - A catalog of 840 vignettes, each within a small medallion, of figures and concepts, each with a few words of description and a motto that often points out a moral, derived from Italian Renaissance, popular in Western Europe,
- Also a search for a true Russian style occurs, as opposition to Western influences (after European revolutions, fearful of negative effects of Westernization for instance)
  - Print sources important:
    - *Antiquities of the Russian State*, pub. 1850s....studied and recorded by Solntsev, copied Russian ornamentation on antiquities in Kremlin Armory...established Russian decorative grammar
- Many different types of ornamentation: enamel, niello, images, words, designs, shapes, and more

**Function**  
**What purpose did it serve? Literally? Figuratively? Who used it?**

**Literally**

- Religious ceremonial vessels
  - In church, glittering quality is practical (could see from far away) and symbolic (symbolized divine, hope/light in midst of harsh daily life)
  - Chalices, censers, plates
- Dining
  - Table silver---bread and butter, main output, but not much left today
    - Its hygienic, sturdy
    - Even with adoption of porcelain dishes/plates, silver is still preferred for main courses and serving pieces in Russia
    - Ceremonial banquets for imperial dining, could move services from palace to palace
    - Dowries for emperor's children
  - Drinking
    - For toasts and general drinking at meals
    - Bratina, kovsh, charka---Russian shapes
    - later introduction of Western shapes, like beakers, coffee/tea sets, tankards, vodka sets/cups, reflect new eating/drinking habits
- Presentation Gifts...gift-giving culture of court
  - Court: for visiting royalty, ambassadors, guests at state events like weddings/coronations
  - Kovshi become pres. gifts, not used for drinking (given to tax collectors, military)
  - Beakers---could incorporate the rulers' portrait
  - Bread and salt dishes/cellars---town representatives gave when emperor came to your town, or given during coronation to emperor
  - Gifts to military leader upon promotion or retirement
  - Boxes
- Gifts.....Gold boxes (eg. Iusupov music box, anniversary present)
- Literal wealth---tsars and boyars passed down from one generation to next.....and can melt it down if you need cash (to pay for a war, or need to make something more fashionable)

**Figurative**

- Rulers use it as an accessory in his/her theater of power, theater of self-presentation
- Reflected your status....on sideboards, buffets, dining tables
- Reflected introduction of new drinking customs, new foods
- A promotion of identity: Russian or Western
- A promotion of Russian influence abroad (eg. tankard decorated in Russian style given to foreign dignitary)
- "Worthy" of academic study or appreciation only in 20<sup>th</sup> century---before then viewed as derivative of European prototypes and inferior in quality

**Who used it?**

- At first only Russian rulers, court, nobility, landed gentry, and church, and over time more upwardly mobile (wealthy industrialists and merchants)
- Soviets---confiscated and used for financial and ideological purposes
  - Melt it down (why so little left now) for money for industrialization and propagandizing
  - Wipe out the manifestation of the elite culture and church wealth

**For Post:**

- unlike porcelain, silver is not her passion, but she was still a noteworthy collector. She liked niello, enamel, chalices, liked to mass similar objects---like silver in Icon Room

**Production**  
***How was it made? Who made it?***

Goes back to earliest days of Kieven Rus times (mid-1000s)

Could be collaborative: designers, goldsmiths, metal decorators (chasing/repoussé), enamelers

Many silversmithing techniques: niello, enamel, engraving, chasing/repoussé, gilding, embossing, later: machine-made

Throughout imperial period, many Russian silversmiths, esp. in St. Petersburg, were foreigners (Germany, Scandinavia)

Moscow ---a center of silver production up until Revolution, tended to be more native-Russian silversmiths

Peter establishes guilds, but they do not manage quality, mostly to collect taxes

Can melt down and remake

Bread and butter for any silversmith: tablewares

For many silversmiths, we only have their initials; it is only with later pieces that we can we have more success with knowing full name

Drinking vessels would have originally been made of wood, and the shapes get transferred into silver

Must mine the silver from earth.....importance of natural resources inside of your country

Carl Fabergé is founder of what became Russia's most famous jewelry, silver and goldworks

- The firm is less famous for its silver production than for its enamels and jewelry, but it certainly produced the usual bread and butter items of all jewelers---tablewares---most of which doesn't exist anymore.....for instance he made tableware for dowries of both of Nich. II's sisters

After the Revolution, Russian silver just disappeared

- Interestingly worldwide: Silver production declined rapidly everywhere in 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially after Great Depression and World War II; social customs changed (silver polishing time-consuming, and had other alternatives for tableware)