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**Hillwood Estate, Museum and Gardens appoints  
Wilfried Zeisler as associate curator of 19<sup>th</sup>-century art**

**In first month, Zeisler worked on re-dating Fabergé imperial Easter egg and acquired a rare Franco-Russian tablecloth for the collection**

WASHINGTON—Hillwood Estate, Museum and Gardens has appointed Wilfried Zeisler to associate curator of 19<sup>th</sup>-century art. With an academic background in French 19<sup>th</sup>-century art in the Russian court, Zeisler brings significant professional and academic experience to this important and unique area of focus at Hillwood. He began his new position last month.

Zeisler had previously been a curatorial fellow at Hillwood in 2013, during which time he conducted research into the intersection of French 19<sup>th</sup>-century decorative art with Russian imperial art and its patrons. Since returning to Hillwood for this new position last month, Zeisler has already applied his findings to two new projects: the re-dating of Hillwood's Fabergé *Twelve Monogram Egg* and the acquisition of a rare Franco-Russian tablecloth.

"Representing the largest collection of Russian imperial art outside Russia, Hillwood is also known for the distinct blend of Russian and French decorative arts of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that founder Marjorie Merriweather Post cultivated and brought together with perfection here," explained executive director, Kate Markert. "The unique background that Wilfried brings to us will open up a new window onto these interconnected areas of Hillwood's collection."

Zeisler received his doctoral degree in art history from Sorbonne University, Paris, with a dissertation on "The Purchases of French *objets d'art* by the Russian Court, 1881-1917," offering a dual perspective on French and Russian decorative arts in the context of political, commercial and artistic interactions of the time. He has also been a research lecturer at the École du Louvre on the subjects of French decorative arts from the Middle Age to Art Nouveau, French 19<sup>th</sup>-century art, French jewelry, 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian art, Fabergé, and the history of Russian palaces from 1825 to 1925.

### Re-Dating the *Twelve Monogram Egg*

The news last month, just as Zeisler began at Hillwood, that one of the last missing Fabergé imperial Easter Eggs was re-discovered, prompted him and colleague Dr. Scott Ruby, Hillwood's associate curator of Russian and Easter European art, to explore further the notion that Hillwood's *Twelve Monogram Egg*, long believed to have been made in 1895, was actually one of the two eggs fabricated in 1896, as some scholars had put forth. The re-discovered egg, purchased several years ago by an anonymous scrap metal dealer in the mid-West for its intrinsic gold value, is believed to be the third of the finely-crafted Easter eggs made



by Carl Fabergé's jewelry workshop for the Russian royal family from 1885 to 1917. Alexander III began the tradition when he gave his wife, Empress Maria Feodorovna the *Hen Egg* for Easter in 1885. Nicholas continued the tradition until he was overthrown in 1917. Known as the *Third Egg*, this egg fits the description found in the invoice for the 1887 egg: "Egg with clock decorated with rose-cut diamonds and sapphires." This date had been previously associated with the *Blue Serpent Clock Egg* (Monaco), which in actuality did not fit that description, primarily for its lack of sapphires and also because neither the price nor design correspond to such early egg fabrication, as noted by Fabergé scholars Marina Lopato and Geza van Habsburg. Rather, the *Blue Serpent Egg* does fit the description of an 1895 egg: "Blue enamel egg, Louis XVI style....," which was associated with Hillwood's *Twelve Monogram Egg*.

Marjorie Merriweather Post acquired the *Twelve Monogram Egg* from a private collector in Italy in 1949. This imperial egg, a masterwork of Michael Perkhin (1860-1903) for Fabergé, was originally a gift of Nicholas II to his mother dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna. Since Post bought it, the egg's date has changed several times between the years 1892 to 1895. The 1895 date was proposed in 1997 by Tatiana Fabergé, Lynette G. Proler and Valentin V. Skurlov on their seminal book on the history of the imperial Easter eggs, in which the authors published new archival material, including Fabergé invoices. The *Twelve Monogram Egg* features blue enamel but does not fit with the Louis XVI style description, a style particularly well-mastered by the Fabergé firm.

Following up on scholars' suggestion that the *Twelve Monogram Egg* more accurately fits the description in the Fabergé invoice: "Blue enamel egg, 6 portraits of HIM Alexander III, with 10 sapphires and rose-cut diamonds and setting" of 1896, Zeisler connected additional dots to establish

the new date for Hillwood. The mention of portraits, which are not apparent on the *Twelve Monogram Egg*, had made the association with the 1896 invoice inconclusive. However, in reviewing personal letters between the Emperor Nicholas II and his mother the dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna, first published in an article by Preben Ulstrup in 2002 then quoted in Geza von Habsburg's 2004 *Fabergé: Treasures of Imperial Russia*, Zeisler concluded that the portraits mentioned were the now missing "surprise" that was a part of every imperial Easter egg. In a letter dated 22 March 1896, the dowager Empress wrote to Nicholas: "...I can't find words to express to you, my dear Nicky, how touched and moved I was on receiving your ideal egg with the charming portraits of your dear, adored Papa. It is all such a beautiful idea, with your monograms above it all..." This correspondence places together the monograms with the portraits, corroborating the new proposed date of 1896.

#### Tablecloth Commemorating Franco-Russian Alliance

Shortly after arriving at Hillwood, Zeisler seized on the opportunity to acquire a tablecloth commemorating the military and commercial alliance between the Russian and French nations that began in 1891, when the French navy was welcomed in Russia. Dating ca. 1893-97, the superbly-crafted ceremonial tablecloth features iconography of both nations: the double-headed Russian imperial eagle and the crossed French and imperial flags, all connected with garlands of pansies. It will be on view in the Breakfast Room at Hillwood, alongside French and Russian objects from the collection that are examples of those featured in the tablecloth, from May 5 to June 2, 2014.

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When Post cereal heiress, art collector, social figure, and philanthropist Marjorie Merriweather Post left to the public her northwest Washington, D.C. estate, she endowed the country with the most comprehensive collection of Russian imperial art outside of Russia, a notable 18<sup>th</sup>-century French decorative art collection, and 25 acres of serene landscaped gardens and natural woodlands. Opened as a public institution in 1977, today Hillwood Estate, Museum and Gardens offers a gracious and immersive experience unlike any other. Highlights of the collection include Fabergé eggs, Russian porcelain, Russian Orthodox icons, Beauvais tapestries, and Sèvres porcelain, and Post's personal collection of apparel, accessories, and exquisite jewelry. Thirteen acres of enchanting formal gardens include the Japanese-style Garden, Rose Garden, French Parterre, and a greenhouse full of orchids.