

**An Imperial hardstone portrait figure by Carl Fabergé,  
of Kamer-Kazak N. N Pustynnikov,  
the personal bodyguard of Empress Alexandra Feodorovna**

Posed standing, almost to attention, heels together and hands at his side.

The sculpture is a three-dimensional jigsaw, each of the differently coloured hardstones is cut to slot seamlessly into the next and they are invisibly secured with shellac. Fabergé's mastery of his materials is evident in his choice of stones for the Cossack. His woollen winter coat is carved from dark green nephrite. Fabergé's craftsmen have transformed this unyielding stone into a fabric that overlaps, billows at the hem and rumples up on the arms and chest. The Cossack's coats were trimmed with otter fur and this is represented in speckled brown jasper. It is edged with a delicate yellow gold border embroidered with black enamel Imperial Eagles between translucent red enamel stitching. The medals and badges he wears are similarly worked in gold and enamel. The trousers, boots and fur hat are carved from black onyx. The small bag suspended from his hat and his belt are made from purpurine (a lead oxide glass), corresponding to the red livery of Empress Alexandra. His face and hands are worked from cacholong; also known as Kalmuck agate, it is an unusual form of opal named after the River Cach in the Bukhara province of Uzbekistan where it is found. The stone's relative softness and pale milky white colour make it ideal for portraying Slavic skin and Fabergé's craftsmen used it perfectly to depict the Cossack's proud features. His striking full flowing beard is carved from grey Kalgan jasper and his alert eyes are set with bright blue cabochon sapphires.

The heels of his boots are inscribed, 'FABERGÉ' in Cyrillic capitals on one, and, '1912', on the other, the soles are further inscribed in Cyrillic, 'N.N. PUSTYNNIKOV', and 'KAMERKAZAK since 1894'.

Contained in an original silk and velvet lined fitted Fabergé holly wood case, the silk lining stamped in Cyrillic 'Fabergé, St. Petersburg, Moscow, London', in Cyrillic beneath an Imperial double headed Eagle. The box is that of the matching figure of his brother Cossack Andrei Kudinov, guard of Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna held at Pavlovsk. St. Petersburg, 1912, height 7 inches (17.8cm)

**Provenance:**

Nicholas II, Emperor and Autocrat of All the Russia's  
Empress Alexandra Feodorovna of Russia  
Confiscated by the The Bolshevik Government  
Armand Hammer  
Mrs. George H. Davis, Rhinebeck New York  
Thence by Descent  
Stair Galleries, Hudson, New York Sale, 26th October 2013  
Wartski, London  
Private Collection

The hardstone figures produced by Fabergé are works of sculpture that portray in a colourful mosaic the inhabitants of Imperial Russia. They are at the zenith of the long tradition of Russian lapidary works. The figures are a continuation of Imperial Russian representations of its national types and characters in works of art. In the late eighteenth century the Imperial Porcelain Factory, inspired by earlier Meissen examples, began to make figures depicting members of the diverse cultures of Russia. They coincided with Catherine the Great's drive to foster a sense of national identity and were derived from illustrations in contemporary studies of Russia's population, such as Johann Georgi's work *'Description de toutes les Nations de l'Empire de Russie'*, published in St. Petersburg in 1776-1777. The figures proved to be enormously popular and continued to be made by the Gardner and Popov factories until the revolution. During the nineteenth century they evolved to portray the peasantry, tradesmen and all manner of Russians going about everyday tasks. Fabergé would also have been aware of the earlier stone and jewelled representations of the human form. Figures formed from combinations of jewels and hardstones were made in the ancient world, Renaissance Italy and eighteenth-century Germany. It is

likely that Fabergé would also have been influenced by the unusual figure of Joseph Fröhlich, Augustus the Strong's Court Juggler, held in the Green Vaults in Dresden. Fabergé's figures were the preserve of the firm's exalted clients, and most were acquired by Emperor Nicholas II who revelled in their unchanging representation of his people. His sister Grand Duchess Xenia described them as showing Russia under a 'cloudless sky'. Fewer than fifty are recorded, and after the Imperial Easter Eggs they are the firm's most valuable works. The depictions of actual persons rather than representations of national types are rarer still.

This figure is of Nikolai Pustynnikov (b.1857) the personal bodyguard or 'Kamer Kazak' (Chamber Cossack) of the Empress Alexandra Feodorovna. The bodyguards were non-commissioned officers taken from the Cossack regiments. Pustynnikov was born in the Cossack city of Novochoerkassk, north-east of the Black Sea. He began his military service in 1876 and faithfully served Empress Alexandra from the time of her marriage to Emperor Nicholas II in 1894 until the Russian Revolution. Being appointed to attend a member of the Imperial family was a great honour and brought tremendous privileges. He was a highly esteemed servant, who was closely identified with the Empress.

In 1912 Emperor Nicholas II commissioned the figure of Pustynnikov for his wife together with one of his brother Cossack Andrei Kudinov, Kamer Kazak as a gift to his mother the Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna. Henry Bainbridge, Fabergé's agent in London and biographer wrote:

*The Tsar Nicholas II commissioned Fabergé to make stone models of these guards. They were to be portraits from life, the two Cossacks attending at the Fabergé studios where they were modelled in wax.*

Both are posed standing to attention with heels together. Franz Birbaum, Fabergé's workshop manager, named Georgi Konstanovich Savitski and Boris Frödman-Cluzel as possible modellers and Peter Mikhailovich Kremlev and indirectly Peter Derbyshev as the master lapidaries responsible for cutting the stones. Derbyshev's story is an extraordinary one of talent overcoming position. From humble beginnings he trained at the Yekaterinburg lapidary School in the Urals. Wishing to prove himself in the most prestigious firm in Russia he journeyed uninvited to Fabergé in St. Petersburg on foot, arriving 'dressed in rags and shod in lapti [woven bark shoes]'. Recognizing his talent, Fabergé nurtured the young craftsman, and he joined Kremlev's workshop. He studied in the German city of Idar-Oberstein, the centre of the stone-carving industry. From there, Derbyshev moved to Paris, where he worked with Lalique. As Birbaum wrote in his memoirs, Lalique, being delighted with his abilities, wanted to make the young man from the Urals his successor by marrying him to his daughter. Derbyshev chose instead to return to his homeland. Frödman-Cluzel was one of Fabergé's most gifted artists and earlier modelled King Edward VII's and Queen Alexandra's menagerie of animals in England for the Sandringham Commission.

This portrait figure of Nikolai Nikolaievich Pustynnikov, the personal Cossack bodyguard (Kamer-Kazak, or Chamber-Cossack) to the Empress Alexandra Feodorovna was commissioned from Fabergé by Tsar Nicholas II. Pustynnikov (1857-1918) accompanied the Empress whenever she left the safety of the Imperial residences and was held in very high esteem by the Imperial family. He faithfully served the Empress from the time of her marriage to Nicholas II in 1894 until the imprisonment of the Imperial family in 1917.

The figures were made in St. Petersburg under the supervision of Fabergé's chief workmaster, Henrik Wigström. A drawing of the figure of Pustynnikov, dated 31<sup>st</sup> January 1912, is contained in one of the surviving design albums from Wigström's workshop. The figures of the Kamer-Kazaks, Pustynnikov and Kudinov were the costliest made by Fabergé. Their price of 2300 roubles each was more than double the cost of the second most expensive figure purchased by Emperor Nicholas II during the period 1908 to 1912, a Boyar, at 950 roubles and almost three times the cost of the famous dancing Moujik, at 850 roubles, formerly in the collection of Forbes Magazine and now owned by the Link of Times Foundation, St Petersburg.

Following the 1917 Revolution, the Imperial family's possessions were confiscated. The figures of Pustynnikov and Kudinov were taken by the new government to the Pavlovsk Palace, outside St. Petersburg. The figure of Kudinov remains in the collection of the Palace.

That of Pustynnikov was separated from his brother-in-arms sometime between 1925 and 1934. It left Russia with the controversial American entrepreneur and art dealer Armand Hammer, who sold it to Mrs George Davis of Manhattan and Rhinebeck, New York on December 11th, 1934. The holly wood box holding Pustynnikov is that of Kudnirov's figure and was inadvertently taken by the Bolsheviks when they removed the figure from Pavlovsk to sell to Hammer.

Hammer was the son of Julius Hammer the founder of the American Communist party. His name was allegedly derived from the logo of the party an 'arm and hammer'. Through his family's political connections Armand travelled to Russia and began trading with the revolutionary Russian government. He won the confidence of the new regime and made his fortune as an overseas agent.

In the aftermath of the revolution the Bolsheviks desperately needed foreign currency to fund their industrialisation programs. This gave rise to the policy of 'Treasures for Tractors' whereby the regime sold the art collections of the deposed classes abroad.

A special agency, operated by People's Commissariat of Enlightenment, named the Antiquariat, was formed to oversee the sales. Fabergé's works were primarily sold to Wartski in London or consigned to Hammer for sale in the United States of America. Hammer struck on the idea of marketing the works of art through American department stores. He cleverly orchestrated a six-month travelling exhibition entitled Russian Imperial Treasure, which appeared in twelve stores nationwide ending at Lord and Taylor, New York, in 1933. As an agent of the young Bolshevik Republic, working hand-in-hand with Anastas Mikoyan, Commissar for Foreign and Domestic Trade, Hammer opened his own Hammer Galleries at Lord and Taylor. A further exhibition was held at Marshall Fields in Chicago during the World's Fair of 1933–4. The New York Times announced on 2 January 1933: 'Jewelry of Czar on view this week. Gift Easter Eggs Encrusted with Gems among pieces bought in Russia by Dr. (*sic*)Hammer'. They were estimated collectively at \$1 million and included the 1896 Revolving Panel Egg and the 1912 Tsarevich Egg. Even the humblest object sold by Armand Hammer was supplied with a small parchment certificate embossed with a double-headed eagle, attesting to its provenance from one or other member of the Imperial family. The meticulously made pieces and the stories of romance and tragedy accompanying them captured the imaginations of wealthy American collectors, including Matilda Geddings Gray, Marjorie Merriweather Post, Lillian Thomas Pratt and India Early Minshall.

Hammer sold the Imperial figure of Kamer-Kazak Pustynnikov to Mrs George Davis, a collector from New York. As the generations passed and the wealth of the Davis descendants dwindled, the figure lay wrapped in a blanket, forgotten, in the attic of the family's house in Rhinebeck, in upstate New York. It was uncovered during a house clearance, lodged in the roof rafters. The owners of the house were unaware of its existence and subsequently sold it at auction in 2013 for \$5,980,000. Wartski acquired the figure at the auction and sold it to a private collector.

Exhibited at The V&A Faberge Exhibition, London, 2022.









The Tsar also ordered from Fabergé another figure this time of Kudinov, the Kamer-Kazak to his mother the Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna. Following the Revolution the Imperial Family's possessions were confiscated by the Bolshevik government. The figures of Pustynnikov and Kudinov were taken by the new government to the Pavlovsk Palace, outside St. Petersburg.

The figure of Pustynnikov remained at Pavlovsk until the 1920's when it left Russia with the American entrepreneur and art dealer Armand Hammer, who sold it to Mrs George Davis of Manhattan and Rhinebeck, New York on December 11th, 1934. No more than fifty hardstone human figures by Fabergé are recorded. They are on a level of rarity with the Imperial Fabergé Easter Eggs. Portrait figures, the depictions of actual persons rather than representations of national types are rarer still.



The design for the figure of Pustynnikov dated 31st January 1912 is contained in the design album of Fabergé's Chief Workmaster Henrik Wigström. Although the production of the figure was supervised by Wigström, it was probably carved by either, Derbyshev or Kremlev, the master lapidaries. They worked from a wax model produced by the sculptor Boris Frödman-Cluzel. Henry Bainbridge, Fabergé's agent in London and biographer wrote:

*The Tsar Nicholas II commissioned Fabergé to make stone models of these guards. They were to be portraits from life, the two Cossacks attending at the Fabergé studios where they were modelled in wax.*

For an essay on the sculptor Boris Frödman-Cluzel see, Valentin Skurlov, Fabergé Firm Artist and New Discovery of Fabergé's Stone Sculptures, Carl Fabergé, Goldsmith to the Tsar, National Museum, Stockholm, 1997, where the author notes (p.37), that, "as late as 1925 the figurine of Chamber-Cossack Pustynnikov was still at the Pavlovsk Palace Museum, together with his 'brother' Chamber-Cossack Kudinov."

The figures of the Kamer-Kazaks, Pustynnikov and Kudinov were the costliest figures made by Fabergé. Their price of 2300 roubles each was more than double the cost of the second most expensive figure purchased by Nicholas II during the period 1908 to 1912, which was the boyar, at 950 roubles and almost three times the cost of the famous dancing Moujik, at 850 roubles, formerly in the collection of Forbes Magazine and now owned by the Link of Times Foundation, St Petersburg.



**The boxes to the two figures were muddled up when the transaction took place in Russia and the wrong box was given to Hammer. At the exhibition at the V&A the figures were transposed, and this was filmed. The figure on loan from the Russian government fitted exactly into the box of the figure, now privately owned by a client of mine. Unfortunately, the Russians have misplaced their original box, so restitution proved impossible.**

John Hawkins  
August 2024