



CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

After A Hush, A Gleam: Russian Jewels In U.S.

By ROBERTA SMITH

WASHINGTON, Jan. 28 — Few blockbuster exhibitions have popped into view as suddenly as "Jewels of the Romanovs: Treasures of the Russian Imperial Court," the jewel-studded display of art and artifacts that opens here on Wednesday at the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

Exhibitions of this kind usually involve at least two years of preparation and months of drumrolls, publicity and ticket sales. In contrast, the arrival, even the existence, of the Romanov exhibition was unknown to the public and most museum professionals until late November, when the Corcoran sent out a brief news release.

The secrecy and paranoia surrounding this exhibition may be standard for Russian-American collaborations, even in these post-perestroika times. Add precious gemstones that are considered central to the Russian patrimony, not to mention other objects that have never left the country before, and anxiety levels can zoom off the charts.

That's where they seemed to be in last few weeks and days, especially over the weekend, when Russian and American curators (and their translators) worked around the clock, and the show's installation went down to the wire.

The bulk of the objects in the exhibition, including royal portraits, letters and photographs; examples of court gowns and military dress and numerous



In "Jewels of the Romanovs" at the Corcoran, from left: a portrait of Empress Alexandra Feodorovna, wife of Czar Nicholas I; a pectoral badge with a miniature of Peter the Great, circa 1720, and the Cross of the Order of Alexander Nevsky, 18th century. Below, a gold and enamel bracelet with the world's largest table-cut diamond, with a portrait of Alexander I.

Photographs from Corcoran Gallery of Art



ecclesiastical objects in gold, gems and mother-of-pearl, had arrived more or less on schedule. But the imperial jewels from the Russian State Diamond Fund that formed the heart of the show were another matter. After all, they include a 19th-century brooch incorporating the world's largest sapphire, a bracelet in which the largest table-cut diamond in the world serves as a pane of glass, and a blue diamond stickpin whose stone is rumored to have come from the Hope Diamond, just a few blocks away at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History.

Established by Peter the Great in 1719 to separate the Romanov family wealth from the state's, the Diamond Fund was reconstituted in the early 1920's by the Communist Government (which then proceeded to auction off more than half of its inventory between 1927 and 1936). Since its opening to limited public viewing in 1967, the fund had never allowed more than 5 or 10 jewels at a time to be lent from its vaultlike galleries beneath the Kremlin. Now it is lending more than 115 pieces, a sizable percentage of its holdings.

At first the fund curators were reluctant to transfer the jewels from the Russian Embassy to the museum, which meant that when they finally arrived on Friday, Corcoran staff members had to rush to make the brass mounts to hold them upright in their cases. The installation was further delayed when the Russians decided that the cases themselves needed thicker glass. Anyone who saw the state of the galleries late Monday would not have believed that the show would be ready for today's press preview.

But ready it was, at least ready enough to see what all the fuss was about. At the preview of the show, which runs through April 13, James Symington, chairman of the American-Russian Cultural Cooperation Foundation, an exhibition sponsor, spoke not inaccurately of "a miracle on

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17th Street." (He was referring to the Corcoran's location, 500 17th Street, N.W.). David C. Levy, the Corcoran's director, euphemistically mentioned "complicated logistical issues." And Nick Nicholson, the exhausted American art historian who has overseen the organization of the exhibition, gave English a certain Russian tilt when he called his team's efforts "a consistently growing dramatic event."

Like most blockbusters, "Jewels of the Romanovs" is as much about history, personality and power as art. But the jewels and the ecclesiastical objects do not disappoint, and the rest of the show — the handsome portraits of Catherine the Great and her descendants, the elaborately embroidered court gowns from the last Romanov family — swirls around them like gorgeous footnotes. (The elaborate hair ornaments called *sigrettes*, for example, are both in the show and in Alexander Roslin's full-length 1770 portrait of the Grand Duchess Maria Feodorovna.)

In all, one comes away with a heady sense of the pomp and circumstance of both secular and religious life under the Romanov czars.

And like some blockbusters, "Jewels" has what might be called a layered agenda. Mr. Sympington's foundation first conceived of the show as a celebration of the 125th anniversary of the American tour of Grand Duke Alexei, fourth son of Alexander II, the "Czar-Liberator." Thus the exhibition begins with a

small display of memorabilia pertaining to the Duke's tour, in 1871.

Similarly, the Russian curators who selected the exhibits wanted to highlight jewelry making in Russia today. Thus near the show's finish is an anomalous vitrine containing several contemporary brooches, earrings and necklaces, none of which have the visual presence or historic credentials of the earlier pieces.

Still, three exceptionally complex pieces produced by Diamond Fund jewelers in the 1980's and 90's and based on jewels sold during the Communist era are nearly as dazzling as anything here, especially a sparkling

the order of St. Alexander Nevsk; ablaze with intricately set diamond of various sizes. It was made in 177 by Leopold Pfisterer, the Viennese jeweler who was in the service of Catherine the Great for 40 years (Also here are the lavish diamond and spinel earrings with which Pfisterer secured his post a decade earlier.)

The ecclesiastical objects are out standing, too. They date from the 17th to the early 20th century, all lent by the state architectural and historical museum in Yaroslavl, a city northwest of Moscow that was once a famous metalworking center.

The pieces range from a selection of ornate bishops' pendants whose central sapphires have been etched with the Savior's face, to various reliquary crosses studded with pearls and stones. In one, the bluntness of the large jewels and natural pearls contrasts strikingly with the refined rendering of the bleeding body of Jesus, in enamel on gold.

No less beguiling are the densely bejeweled and pearl-covered crowns commissioned by the wealthy faithful in the 18th century to adorn their favorite icons of the Virgin. Several of these extend far beyond the crown itself, covering most of the image completely, with special attention to converting the folds of the Virgin's headdress into rippling fields of pearls.

Although they barely figure in the show's title, these religious objects match the imperial jewels item by item, forming a show within the show that is on its own worth the price of admission.

The exhibition will travel to the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston (May 11 to July 13), the San Diego Museum of Art (July 31 to Oct. 12) and the Memphis Brooks Museum (Oct. 30 to Jan. 11, 1988).

A history lesson on the Romanovs, with a commercing finale.

diamond tiara from which an intricately cut yellow diamond shines forth like a not-so-little headlight.

In between the show's history-laden beginning and its commercing finale, however, are sights that can boggle: objects expressive of intense religious faith or absolute political power in which no skill or expense was spared.

Over the course of the imperial jewels, one can actually watch skills (and probably expenses) mount. One of the rarest objects is a pectoral badge that surrounds a wonderfully dopey enamel portrait of Peter the Great with curling leaves of silver rather crudely set with diamonds.

In the next vitrine, however, is the technically formidable neck badge of