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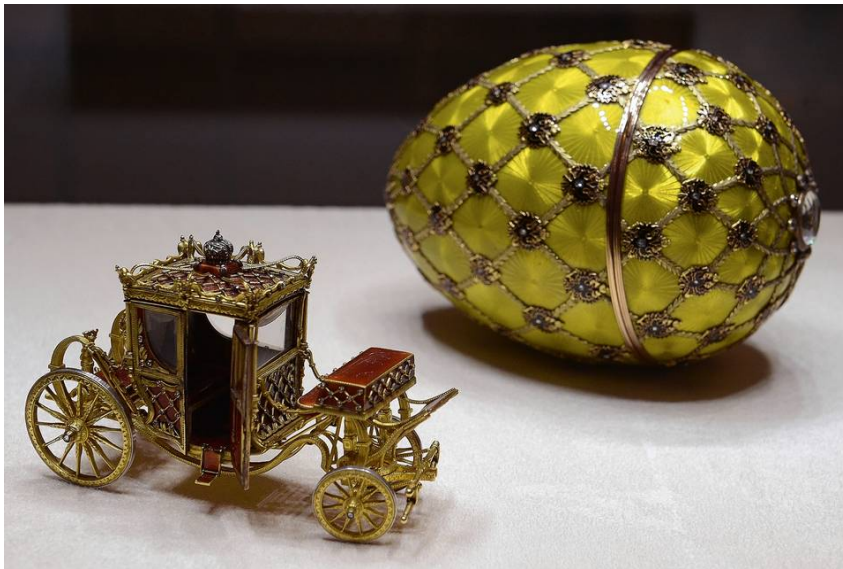
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ARTS | ART

A U.S.-Russia Fabergé Exhibit on Ice

Stalled Fabergé exhibit points to chill between American and Russian museums



An exhibit planned for the Fabergé Museum in St. Petersburg and the Virginia Museum of Fine Art in Richmond, Va., is now on hold. Pictured, the Imperial Coronation Easter Egg was presented by Nicolas II as a gift to his wife, the Empress Alexandra Feodorovna, on Easter, 1897. *PHOTO: ALEXANDR MIRIDONOV/KOMMERSANT/GETTY IMAGES*

By **PAUL SONNE**

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MOSCOW—Russia planned to host perhaps the world’s biggest Fabergé exhibit last month, combining the vast collections of the Fabergé Museum in St. Petersburg and the Virginia Museum of Fine Art in Richmond, Va.

The giant exhibition of imperial ornaments and objects by czarist-era jeweler Peter Carl Fabergé—including up to 14 of his famous imperial eggs—seemed the perfect way to promote U.S.-Russia cultural exchange. The idea, according to Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Director Alex Nyerges, was to show “the most amazing extravaganza of Fabergé in the world”—first in Russia, then in the U.S.

But those plans are now on ice, thanks to frosty relations between Washington and Moscow. While both the Russian embassy and State Department supported the exchange, Mr. Nyerges said, Virginia state insurance authorities advised the Richmond museum to take out an extra political-risk policy that would cost around \$1 million. The cost, to insure against the U.S. collection’s possible confiscation in Russia due to greater political tensions, was simply too high for the museum to pay, Mr. Nyerges said.

Both

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museums vow to hold the Fabergé exhibition in the future, but the difficulties reflect a broader problem. Relations between American and Russian museums have become stuck in a deep freeze, precluding the sort of high-profile exhibitions that were a critical feature of cultural exchange during and after the Cold War.

“We’re facing unclear and troubled times,” said Fabergé Museum Director Vladimir Voronchenko. “I believe it’s an unpleasant moment but that it will be a short-lived one.”

The chill between American and Russian museums—worse than during much of the Cold War era—began before the conflict over Ukraine. Five years ago, a U.S.-court ruling on Jewish religious documents prompted Russia to halt loans from its state museums to the U.S. Russia feared works traveling to the U.S. risked being seized.

Since then, the situation has grown worse. The deterioration of political relations has

brought new difficulties, including increased insurance premiums in some cases and skittishness among museum boards. Political will to resolve the issue in both capitals has dwindled.

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The
result
is a
half-

decade drought of U.S.-Russia art exhibitions at big museums such as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, at a time when most museum officials say cultural ties should deepen to counteract political tension.

“We hope to be able to resume loans and cultural exchanges as soon as possible,” said Thomas P. Campbell, director and CEO of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “This is especially important now, with the world so polarized by political and religious extremism.”

Zelfira Tregulova, director of Moscow’s Tretyakov, said the gallery is intensifying its contacts and exchanges with European partners but loans to the U.S. remain off-limits. She also said she hopes the situation will change.

Even during the Cold War era, American and Russian museums joined forces to put on some of the world’s most spectacular art exhibitions. Groundbreaking exchanges took place between the Met and the Hermitage. Cooperation blossomed further after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

Then, the landmark exhibitions stopped. In 2011, a U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., ordered Russia to hand over religious texts from its state library to the New York headquarters of Jewish movement Chabad-Lubavitch.

In the case, Chabad successfully argued that Russia should hand over the Schneersohn collection—books and manuscripts that Soviet officials seized from Chabad leaders after the Bolshevik Revolution, as well as Chabad materials Soviet forces retrieved from Germany during World War II.

Russia argued the U.S. court lacked jurisdiction. It also suspended loans to the U.S. from

Russian state museums, citing fears Chabad would petition to seize the Russian assets while on tour.



The Bay Tree Easter Egg, one of several ornaments expected to be exhibited. The egg was originally presented by the Emperor Nicholas II as a gift to his mother, the Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna, on easter, 1911 *PHOTO: RUSSIAN LOOKZUMA PRESS*

Half a decade later, the standoff continues. In an emailed statement, the Russian Ministry of Culture said exchanges with the U.S. would resume once Russia received “a 100% guarantee the items sent for exhibitions will be returned.” The ministry called the cancellation of the Chabad ruling and the withdrawal of the lawsuit “necessary conditions for such a guarantee.”

Steven Lieberman, a lawyer representing Chabad, says Chabad has guaranteed the court

it won't seek the seizure of any Russian cultural assets. He called Russia's de facto freeze on state museum loans to the U.S. a "red herring" designed to turn public opinion against Chabad's rightful claim.

Amid the impasse, Fabergé seemed like the perfect way to resuscitate the era of blockbuster U.S.-Russia exhibitions. The Fabergé Museum in St. Petersburg is free to loan items to the U.S. because it's a private collection, assembled by tycoon Viktor Vekselberg, not a state museum. The Virginia Museum of Fine Art, meanwhile, houses the biggest Fabergé collection in the U.S., donated by the late wife of a General Motors executive.

Soon, politics intervened. In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea. Later that year, an arbitration court at The Hague ruled that Russia appropriated the assets of defunct Russian oil giant Yukos in 2004 and owed the firm \$50 billion. The ruling opened up a legal path for Yukos affiliates to seize Russian state assets abroad.

It wasn't long before Virginia insurance assessors, calculating the potential impact of increased political tension, recommended extra political risk coverage for the Fabergé exhibition. According to Mr. Nyerges, the insurance companies began quoting astronomical premiums after relations between the U.S. and Russia soured. Because the VFMA is a state museum it must go through state insurance authorities to receive insurance for exhibitions. The cost increase put the exhibition on hold.

Proposed U.S. legislation that would give greater protection to foreign institutions lending art to the U.S. has stalled for years. It arose after 14 works by Kazimir Malevich, while on loan in Houston from the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, became subject to a 2004 lawsuit in U.S. court by Malevich's heirs. In an out-of-court settlement, the museum agreed to give five Malevich paintings to the descendants.

Some American art loans are still flowing to Russia. Kate Fowle, Chief Curator at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow, said she had secured some recent loans from the U.S. but noted that political tensions could change the situation. "If there's an inkling people aren't sure, then chances are right now that they won't lend to Russia," she said.

Vladimir von Tsurikov, Director of the Museum of Russian Art in Minneapolis, is preparing to loan paintings by Soviet-era artist Geliy Korzhev for a coming show at the Tretyakov Gallery. "I think this will be an important milestone," Mr. Von Tsurikov said, expressing hope that it will help restore relations. Still, he worries the U.S. cares less about exchange with Russia than it did during the Cold War. "I don't think this is

necessarily a high priority.”

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