

A. TILLANDER – JEWELLERS OF ST. PETERSBURG

by *Ulla Tillander-Gothenhielm*

Managing Director of A. Tillander, Jewellers, Helsinki, Finland.

When discussing the goldsmith's art of fin de siècle St. Petersburg, Fabergé will come first to mind. Surprisingly little is known about his contemporaries and colleagues. Their life-work and activities are so far largely unexplored. The reason for this is that we have such fragmentary knowledge about them. Also research is difficult until Soviet archives are made accessible to study.

Dr. Marina Lopato, the Keeper of the Hermitage Gold Room, gave us a ray of hope when she started looking for information on Fabergé's output in the State Historical Archives of Leningrad. Her article in *Apollo* 1984, *Fresh Light on Carl Fabergé*, shows us what a treasure trove these archives are.¹

There is also abundant material on Russia in Finland, accumulated as a result of intimate contacts between the two countries when Finland was a Grand Duchy of Imperial Russia. But hardly any research has been done in Finland on the jewellery trade from a Russian-Finnish angle. Leonard Bäcksbacka's outstanding register of St. Petersburg goldsmiths (1951), still remains the only printed work on the subject.²

Much valuable information about the St. Petersburg jewellers was lost in Finland in the early decades after the country became independent. The hostility felt towards the newly established Soviet Union, made it difficult for the hundreds of Finnish gold- and silversmiths returning home, to talk about their life and work in Russia. They were afraid to be branded as traitors to their country and chose to be silent.³

The Finns' important role

During the second half of the nineteenth century, 3,000 people, on an average, worked in the goldsmith's trade in St. Petersburg. The workshops amounted to about 300, with 6 to 9 employees in each. A good quarter of the total were of Finnish origin. About a hundred of these Finns were self-employed masters, working either as subcontractors or as independent suppliers to retail jewellers.⁴

The Finns came to be the dominating nationality in the goldsmith trade of St. Petersburg mainly due to geographical reasons. The city centre was only 15 miles from the Finnish border. Of the hundreds of 10 to 13 year old boys, who each year left home to be apprenticed to the goldsmith trade, a remarkable number succeeded in life. Of Fabergé's 24 masters, 14 were Finns: Kollin, Wigström, August & Albert Holmström, Höllning, Aarne, Armfelt, Nevalainen, Niukkanen, Mickelsson, Stefan & Alexander Wäkevä, Pihl and Lundell. Even Carl Fabergé's own teacher, Hiskias Pender, was of the same nationality.

The diaries of A. T. Tillander

By a happy coincidence, a unique written record of one St. Petersburg jeweller has survived to our day – the diaries of Alexander Theodor Tillander.

The notes on his private life written from 1898 onwards go into the life of the Tillander family in great detail. His annual reports cover 16 years (1901–17) and show how the business grew from a small workshop to a flourishing jewellery firm.

There is for each year a resumé of the St. Petersburg jewellery trade: general trends, development, good news and bad. There naturally is a certain amount of trade gossip to liven up the text. For each year, there is information on the staff, naming the craftsmen and stating their qualifications. There are details on production, cost and sales figures. There is information on suppliers and subcontractors and lists of the clients.

The early history of Tillander

The early history of Tillander is documented in a 'family chronicle'.⁶

Alexander Eduard Tillander was the youngest son of a tenant farmer near Helsinki. At the age of 11, in 1848, he was sent off from home on a cart load of farmer's produce destined for St. Petersburg. With the help of his elder brother who was working there as a journeyman shoemaker, he was apprenticed to the goldsmith-master Fredrik Adolf Holstenius at Tsarskoe Selo.

After the seven compulsory years Alexander qualified as a journeyman. He worked for the German master Carl Becks (workshop in Gorohovaya Street, retail shop Moika 42), known along with Keibel, Kämmerer, Kordes and Eduard as makers of the Imperial orders and decorations.⁷

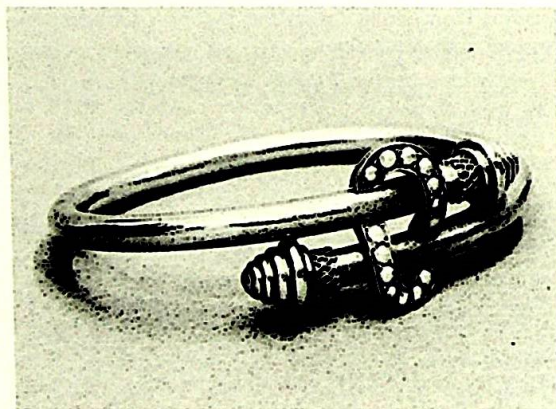
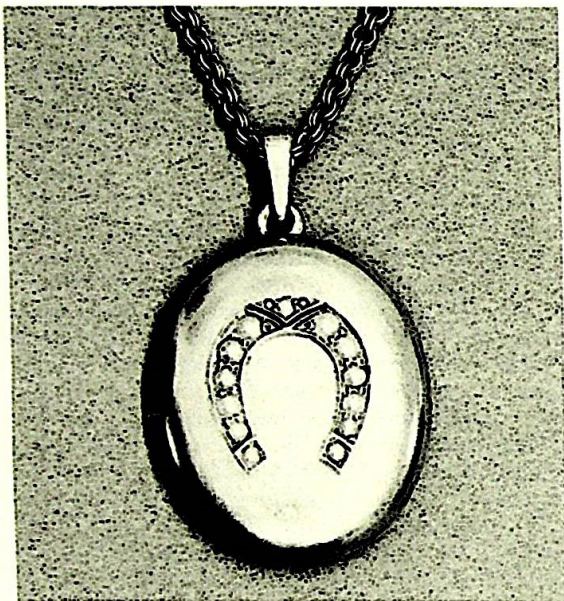
In 1860, at the age of 23, Alexander Tillander started a workshop of his own.

He had by then enough savings, amounting to 200 roubles, equivalent to £1,200 today. He rented a room on the corner of Gorohovaya and Bolshaya Morskaya Street and bought gold for the entire sum of that money. He already had a small work-bench and tools. Tillander started off his newly established business by making a selection of gold bangles, which were the latest fashion at the time, and he sold them to the retail-shops in Nevsky Prospekt. The start was difficult and demanded 18-hour working days. Gradually he acquired a number of regular customers, and the business got on its feet.

In the first decade, Tillander's workshop grew from a one man shop to a firm employing six to eight journeyman and a workmaster in charge. Alexander himself had time to cultivate his clientele, to establish new contacts and to develop production.

In 1874, Tillander went on his first business trip abroad, visiting Paris. He came back with new inspiration and ideas.

The literature on Fabergé persistently calls Alexander Tillander a workmaster of the jeweller Hahn. The source seems to be Bainbridge, who introduces Tillander as one of Hahn's masters, not to be confused with Fabergé's Alfred Thielemann, whose speciality was jewellery and jewelled badges. Hahn, who had his shop at No 26 Nevsky Prospekt may well have been one of the retail jewellers mentioned as Tillander's first customers, but there was at no time a contract of employment between the two.



1. Gold jewellery by Tillander, late 19th Century.

The list of hallmarks below, showing the letter combination AT in 19th century Russia, is far from complete. Occasionally, a new piece of information comes to light, to fill in the gaps on the list.

AT

ALEXANDER TILLANDER, St. Petersburg, Helsinki, 1860–1917, 1920–gold and platinum jewellery, objets d'art, miniature eggs, medals and badges.

AT
TILLANDER

AT

ALFRED THIELEMAN, St. Petersburg, 1858–1910?

gold jewellery and jewelled badges, worked solely for Fabergé.

AT

A. TOBINKOV, St. Petersburg, 1870, 1872

among other products, Imperial orders, worked for Nicholls & Plincke.

AT

ANTTI TAIVAINEN, St Petersburg, Viipuri, Helsinki, 1884–1917, 1919–1982

gold crayons and small objets d'art, independent supplier to retail jewellers.

AT

ALEXANDER TREIDEN,

St. Petersburg, retail jeweller at Nevsky Prospekt 42, 1912.

?

AFANASIEV TIHONOV, Moscow, 1820–1833

AT

ALEXANDER TREDER, Tallinn, 1884–1905.

AT

ALEXANDER TIITAIN,

St. Petersburg, 1870–1880 silversmith.

?

ANDREAS TURUNEN,

St. Petersburg, 1858–1873 goldsmith.

?

?

AUGUST TAMLANDER,

St. Petersburg, 1857 goldsmith.

By 1880, A. Tillander could be classified as a manufacturing retail jeweller. The address was 28 Bolshaya Morskaya Street, corner of Gorohovaya. Here a beautiful, large hall with granite pillars was being decorated on the first floor for the reception of customers, among these some extremely wealthy landed gentry from the south of Russia.⁸

The range included all the various types of jewellery – gem-set brooches, bracelets, necklaces, rings, studs and cuff-links, in the Russian taste. A variety of



2. Alexander Edvard Tillander, photographed in the Russian civil uniform of 1855, indicating that he had been granted the title 'Imperial Court Goldsmith'. St. Petersburg, 1909.

gemstones were used, getting costlier every year. Jewellery in the antique style and the Etruscan style were best sellers in the 1880s. the Kertch finds of classical jewellery were well known in St. Petersburg as they had been included in the Hermitage Museum collections. Tillander had seen the work of the Castellanis and Fontenay at the exhibitions in Paris.

Miniature eggs were made by the hundreds, in hardstone or gold, gem-set or enamelled, The 'egg business' was listed under separate headings in the books.

A considerable number of commemorative medals and badges were commissioned by organizations, societies, firms and private people. Part of the production was subcontracted, due to lack of capacity in the workshop, which now numbered 20 people.

Objects of fantasy and everyday function were made on the premises and by subcontractors. This included cigarette cases, frames, paper knives, cane handles and bell-pushes for the dining-table, in gold or silver, often enamelled and gem-set.

3. A. Tillander's workshop, No 28 Bolshaya Morskaya Street, St. Petersburg in the year 1900. Alexander Theodor Tillander on the far right.



The new generation

In 1885, at the age of 15, Alexander Theodor, the only son of the founder, started his apprenticeship guided by his father and an experienced Finnish journeyman in the workshop.

This same year, the firm started taking part in Arts and Crafts exhibitions, arranged in various parts of Russia. Silver medals were won and considerable sales made in St. Petersburg, 1885, and the Pan-Russian exhibition of applied arts in Jekaterinburg, 1887.

After three years at his father's workshop, Alexander Jr. practised abroad, in Paris, London and Dresden. Another three years, and he was back home and ready to take over part of the responsibility in the company.

With the new generation, new business was gained. Alexander Jr. was specially interested in gemstones. He obtained the sole agency for demantoid garnets from a Ural mine company and exported them profitably for a number of years.

He also started a commission business, purchasing interesting fine jewellery from private people, and selling them either in the shop or abroad. This soon developed into an important sector of the business.

The firm's own production was now concentrated on making jewellery only. For each year, there is a list in the books, of the most important customers – it includes more or less all the well-known Petersburg families of the period.

The Imperial family heads the list at the beginning of the new century, starting with Grand Duke Wladimir and his family. All the members of this family were regular customers each year until the Great War.

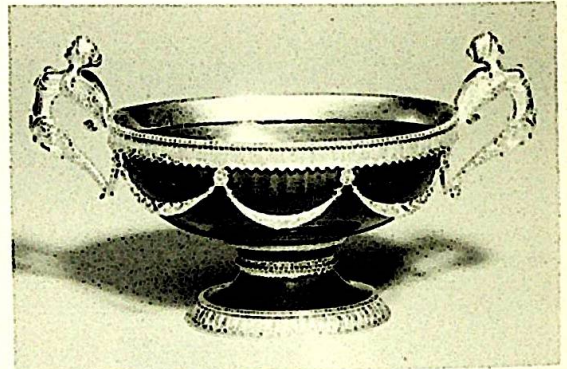
The Tsarina Marie Feodorovna's office made purchases at Tillander's each year until 1915. The Imperial Cabinet, His Majesty the Tsar and Her Majesty the Tsarina are frequently mentioned. The amounts of their purchases vary between £100 and £7,500, calculated in today's money.

This raises a question whether Tillander was granted the Imperial Warrant or not. The family chronicle states that the Warrant was given to the firm. But, due to the strong nationalistic movement in Finland at the time, and Tillander's personal involvement in this movement, he felt he could not accept it. Acceptance would have meant Russian citizenship, which he opposed. There is a photograph of Alexander Tillander senior wearing the Russian civil uniform of 1855, an indication that he did not, in fact, reject the title.

In 1911, Alexander Tillander was offered to take over the lease in 26 Nevsky Prospekt of the jewellers K. Hahn, who was closing down his business. The price of the lease was £60,000 (12,000 roubles) and only a few hours were allowed for consideration. As an op-



4. A gold cigarette case by A. Tillander, enameled in a brilliant translucent rust. It was made for Alexander III, who presented it to his son the Tsarevich, later to become Tsar Nicholas II, at Gatchina Palace on Christmas Day 1893. The engraved Imperial Romanoff double-headed Eagles, on both sides of the case, appear through the enamel, and the case is fitted with a match compartment and a tinder cord attachment. The interior of the cover is engraved in the facsimile handwriting of Alexander III: 'From Papa, 25th Dec. 1893, Gatchina'. Wartski, 1981.



5. A gold bowl by A. Tillander, late 19th century, enameled in blue, winged caryatid handles, applied festoons. Christies's, London, March 1984.

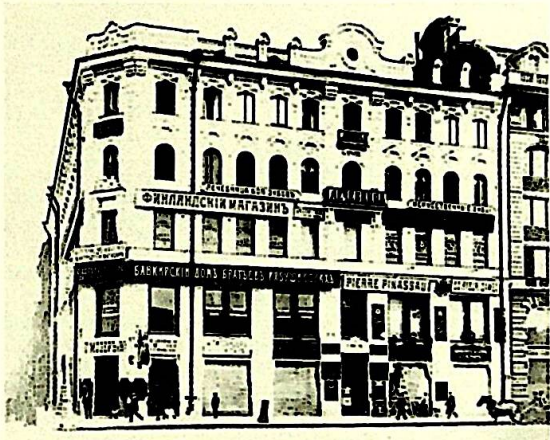
portunity like this was unlikely to turn up again, the chance was taken and a month later Tillander was established at Nevsky.

The location was excellent: the turnover doubled in 18 months.

Shortly afterwards, there was shocking news for the trade. The French jewellers Boucheron had been running a flourishing subsidiary in Moscow headed by M. G. Délavigne. He and his young son were robbed and murdered on the train from Beau to Moscow. The result of this tragic incident was that Boucheron closed their business in Moscow and started looking for somebody to represent them in Russia.



6. A gold, jewelled and enamel charka by Tillander, late 19th century, with bombé sides, the handle in form of a curling snake, enamelled in translucent strawberry enamel, the upper rim set with emeralds. Sotheby's, Geneva, May 1987.



7. No 26 Nevsky Prospekt, photographed on a Sunday in 1911, with the shutters lowered. The sign above the shop says A. Tillander, Ex K. Hahn. The next-door neighbour is Moser & Co.



8. The business card of Alexander Theodor Tillander, 1911, showing that he was the representative of Boucheron in St. Petersburg.

Alexander Tillander was offered this representation and accepted it. He purchased the entire Moscow stock of Boucheron at 42,000 roubles (£200,000). Further stocks were sent from Paris on commission and were renewable annually. The Boucheron agency increased Tillander's business tremendously.

At the outbreak of the Great War, business flourished. The first signs of the war increased the interest in investing in jewellery. Costs went up too. Wages rose as did the price of precious metals, especially platinum. At this time, production was mainly concentrated on fine jewellery in platinum.

For the business year 1916, the diary states: "The annual report I now note down is written only for myself. I keep the information confidential, because I feel embarrassed to tell even my closest associates of the brilliant financial results of this year. All that I have earlier regarded as good results for our business, fades in comparison with this year's result. Our turnover is more than a million roubles, and our net profit prudently calculated amounts to 350,000. This last mentioned figure is difficult to determine precisely, because I cannot possibly evaluate our stock to the high price paid for it. A large write-off is necessary, because a price fall most certainly will come when the war ends. That is why I had to take the measure of reporting more moderate figures in our books".

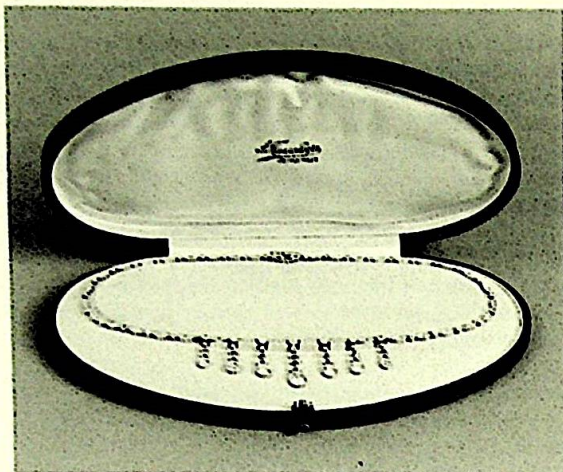
And the writer continues: "Before giving out details of the year, I must establish the reasons for this exceptional success:

- the depreciation of the rouble and the growing interest in investing in our products,
- increases of precious metals and gemstones,
- our large stock of modern and attractive diamond jewellery,
- many competitors have closed down their businesses,
- the liquidation of the jewellers Edouard Burchard, 34 Nevsky affects us - we have hardly any competition here in Nevsky,
- we provide a good management and good service in our company".

Alexander Tillander still believed in a future for his business and employed a second designer, Edvard Eklund, who had worked for K. Bock for a number of years.

In 1917, as the value of the rouble plunged and the plundering and the assaults became everyday phenomena, Tillander finally had to accept the futility of continuing the business in Russia. Hundreds of thousands of roubles deposited in four banks were lost because, suddenly, payments stopped. The safe deposit at the bankers Wewelber & Cie, where the stock of gold and platinum and the 'smaller merchandise' was kept, was frozen.

Finer merchandise was hidden in the home of Alex-



9. Diamond set platinum necklace in its original case.
A. Tillander, Petrograd.

ander senior. Most of it was later taken across the border to Finland with the help of friends. It was dug in the ground in the garden of the summer house.

In September 1917, the shop in Nevsky closed officially. Alexander senior continued his work a few hours a day: he repaired customers' jewellery to keep himself busy. One day in November, on his way back home with a small case in which he had a few pearl necklaces, he was attacked by six bandits who shot him in the head. The old man never fully recovered from this frightening incident. He died the following year at the age of 81 in Petrograd.

Flight to Finland

The young generation was by then in Finland, which, in the turmoil of the Russian revolution, became an independent country.

The firm started up again in Helsinki. The confused conditions in Russia caused many people to emigrate to Finland. Usually, their jewels were all they had with them. In this way, a large quantity of jewellery and objets d'art collected in Finland, and much of it was too costly for the straitened circumstances of the country.

The company books of the time show numerous objects by Fabergé and his contemporaries. Most of these were immediately sold to foreign dealers. This helped Alexander Tillander jr to re-establish contacts with the outside world and to get business back on its feet.

His three sons, Leo, Herbert and Viktor all came into the business. They trained as their father and grandfather before them and became gold- and silversmith masters.

The Tillanders, their designer Oskar Pihl (son of Fabergé's Moscow master Knut Oskar Pihl and grandson of August Holmström), and all their craftsmen who gradually fled to Finland from Russia, brought with them the Petersburg style, both in design and technique.

To this day, there is an unbroken continuity of the Petersburg era in the company. Oskar Pihl inspired, trained and helped designers, the craftsmen trained and guided the younger ones and the result today is what we call the 'Tillander style.'

This inspiration from the old days does not mean that today's style has stagnated into a Petersburg mould, but one can feel the flavour of it in the background.

Footnotes

- ¹ Lopato Marina, 'Fresh Light on Carl Fabergé', article in Apollo, No 263, January 1984. This article was preceded by her paper (in Russian) 'Jewellery Production of Fabergé', in the journal Decorative Art, USSR, 1982.
- ² Bäcksbacka Leonard, St. Petersburgs juvelerare, guld- och silversmeder 1714-1870, Helsinki 1951.
- ³ The syndrome 'ryssäviha' (i.e. 'Russohate') in Finland (1914-1944). The author's interview with the descendants of the Fabergé masters Johan Viktor Aarne, Hjalmar Armfelt, Väinö Hollming, Albert Holmström and Alma Pihl clearly show that they refused to talk openly of their life and work in St. Petersburg.
- ⁴ Information drawn from census figures of St. Petersburg. Research by Max Engman, Helsinki.
- ⁵ Private diaries of Alexander Theodor Tillander, 1898-1934 and Annual Reports on the Business, 1901-1917. A. Tillander, Helsinki.
- ⁶ 'Family chronicle', written by Alexander Theodor Tillander. A. Tillander, Helsinki.
- ⁷ For a complete list of the makers of the Imperial orders and their marks see:
Bergroth Tom C., Venäläisten ritarikuntien kunniamerkkien tunnetuimmat valmistajat. Article in the journal Numismaatikko, 4/1982.
- ⁸ 'Family chronicle' by Alexander Theodor Tillander. A. Tillander, Helsinki.
- ⁹ Annual Reports on the Business, 1901-1917, page 245. A. Tillander, Helsinki.