

## THE PETERHOF CABINET OF THE FRENCH EMPRESS

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1. Eugénie de Montijo (1826–1920),  
Empress of France.

This publication is the text version of the video program “Russian Stones for Dessert.” The author’s cycle is based on the studies and publications of Ludmila A. Budrina – Doctor of Art Sciences, Assistant Professor of the Ural Federal University, a well-known expert in history of Russian and European stone cutting heritage.

The video series telling the audience about the bright moments of Russian stone cutting was released in 2020 thanks to the Shmotiev Family Foundation – noncommercial organization with one of its goals being support and development of hardstone carving traditions ([www.shmotievfoundation.ru](http://www.shmotievfoundation.ru)).

The history of the cabinet created by the craftsmen of the Imperial Peterhof Lapidary Factory in 1860s – one of the three presently known masterpieces made by the highest order of Alexander II.

Historism as a style boomed by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. It assumes close imitation or interpretation of styles from the previous epochs. A fashionable home would typically have a room made in gothic or renaissance or the styles of Louis XIII, XIV, XV, or XVI. Craftsmen – furniture designers, decorators, wood cutters, jewelers – would try to reproduce the patterns, shapes, and colors of long-forgotten objects. Artists would assist them by making albums with sketches of ideal interior designs and suitable furniture and décor elements.

One of the popular styles giving decorators a good room for imagination was neorenaissance: a new interpretation of the furniture pieces that had been out of use allowed them to show their creative abilities. It is not surprising that a cabinet standing on legs and with multiple drawers and doors was so popular – it allowed using all kinds of decorative material on its facade. There were ivory incrustations, ensembles of bronze and turtle shells, Japanese precious polished panels or their European imitations, marquetry from precious wood types, painted porcelain plaques, and many other things. The only limitations to artist’s fantasy were the access to a certain type of manufacturing and the budget of the customer.

The traditional cabinet was part of the late renaissance and was a quite common interior attribute in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. That was the time of European hardstone mosaics, which logically resulted in the trend to decorate the facades of the drawers and the doors covering the niches of the cabinet with colored stone mosaics. The development of this genre of the furniture art led to the creation of real masterpieces. One of those that deserves a special notice was the Badminton cabinet (since 2004, Liechtenstein Herzog’s collection), which was created by the Florentine artists in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A whole collection of monumental cabinets with mosaics made by the royal factory in Gobelens was ordered by Louis XIV for the decoration of the Versailles Palace in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. A new trend for such decorations coincided with the revival of mosaic works in Paris. However, the few pieces made by the hardstone carvers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century that survived the disassembly of the Versailles cabinets could not satisfy the steadily growing demand for mosaic furniture decor. So the works of the mosaic school of Francesco Belloni, which was opened at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, were in high demand, and his students repeatedly received awards at the French industrial exhibits in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>.

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, French furniture dealers offered their customers various pieces decorated with relief stone mosaic panels: half-closets (lockers), bureau tables, vanity sets, and cabinets<sup>2</sup>. Made in Paris, those mosaics had a schematic drawing style and a rather nar-

rite is not random: in 1860s, the Peterhof Lapidary artists produced a whole series of the interior objects for the Lyon Hall of the Great Palace in Tsarskoe Selo. This series not only included tables and guéridons<sup>6</sup>, but also a fireplace screen, jardinières, lamps, sconces, and a chandelier. In general, this decade in the Royal factory history can be called “*lazurite*.”

Against the background of black wood, gilded bronze, and bright blue lazurite panels, one can isolate the eight panels of black “*paragon*” marble with berries on them. The four rectangular, horizontally oriented mosaics are attached to the entablature of the cabinet above the doors and side walls. On these panels, there are relief representations of dark cherries, white raspberries, black and white currants. The larger oval panels are attached to the lazurite panels on doors and side walls. Here we see a strawberry plant, branches of red raspberry, cherry, and red currant.

The selection of hardstones in the mosaics is limited: white agate, carnelian, rhodonite, coral, jade, jasper, and cobalt glass. However, careful matching of the materials creates a very realistic image, with red, orange, and cream berries providing “juicy” accents on the blue background, and the subtle greens gently balancing the colors.

A few stone losses on the panels make us appreciate the technique used in Peterhof to create them. For longevity, the mosaic elements were not just glued to the surface of a black board, as it was traditionally done in European workshops, but embedded in the marble plate.

The cabinets made with *pietra dura* – precious hardstone elements – take a special place in the history of the European lapidary art and European furniture décor. Russian artists deserved their recognition here alongside with the carvers from the Florentine school of the Great Herzogs of Medici and royal mosaic artists of Louis XIV. Theodore Chriten, a Paris hardstone carver, noted in his book “*Scientific Works on Stone-Cutting Art*” that among the presented pieces in the Russian section of the 1867 World Exhibition in Paris, there were “*three magnificent cabinets decorated with the high-quality Persian lazurite, relief branches of fruit and flowers, so superbly made that one can take them for the Italian work*”<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> A *guéridon* is a small table supported by one or more columns, or sculptural human or mythological figures, often with a circular top.

<sup>7</sup> Chriten Th. *Traité scientifique de l’art du lapidaire* [Chriten Th. The scientific treatise of the stonecutting art]. – Meulun: impr. A. Masson, [ca 1860]. – P. 461.



8. A cabinet with eight mosaics.  
Imperial Peterhof Lapidary Factory. 1867.  
Arenenberg Palace.  
Photo: Ludmila A. Budrina.

<sup>1</sup> Budrina, L.A., Paris School of Stone Cutting in the First Third of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and N.N. Demidov’s Orders // *Izvestiya Ural Federal University. Series 2. Humanitarian Sciences*. 2013. No. 1 (111) – Ekaterinburg, 2013, pp. 5–19 (In Russian).

<sup>2</sup> Budrina, L.A., French Relief Mosaics: Color Stone in the Furniture of the Mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century // *Kafedra. Collection of Scientific Articles. Part I*. St. Petersburg: 000 “Kopi-R-Grupp” 2013. Pp. 23–33 (In Russian).