

A Romanov Provenance Boosts Prices at Auction

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Svetlana Chestnykh spends her days in the state or museum archives of St. Petersburg poring over bills, newspapers, letters and photographs from the tsarist era.

Documentation she found helped boost the price of a Faberge parasol knob to \$80,500 at Sotheby's New York last November. Bills she dug up showed Tsar Nicholas II and Empress Alexandra Fedorovna purchased the gem-set object for 185 rubles on Oct. 28, 1897.

"If it didn't have the imperial connection, it probably would have stayed within the estimate" of \$15,000 to \$20,000, said Karen Kettering, Sotheby's vice president for Russian art.

Sotheby's catalog acknowledges Chestnykh's help with its cover lot in Tuesday's Russian art sale: an elaborate micro-mosaic table made by Italy's Barberi workshop for the Russian court in the early 1830s. It has a presale estimate of \$400,000 to \$600,000.

Resting on a pedestal shaped like three double-headed eagles, the tabletop has hundreds of thousands of tiny pieces of colored glass arranged to depict a battle between Russian and Turkish soldiers.

"I dedicated more than a year to this table," said Chestnykh, 41, in an interview in New York last week. "It's like my baby. You sit on your bum and read, read and read."

The research led her to Russia's Prince Anatole Demidoff, an heir to an industrialist family who lived in Italy and commissioned the table from Barberi, a famous company patronized by Nicholas I.

"Demidoff had a complicated relationship with the tsar and most likely intended this table as a gift for him," Chestnykh said.

Research often takes years, yet occasionally she gets lucky. She spent less than two months locating a file related to two sets of early 20th-century skis and a pair of leather boots that belonged to Prince Alexei and are offered at the Sotheby's sale with a presale estimate of \$60,000 to \$80,000.

The items were a gift from the Moscow Ski Club to the tsar's son in 1910. The group petitioned the Imperial Court for permission to present the skiing equipment to the 6-year-old Alexei and request that he become a patron of the organization. The Bolsheviks killed Alexei with the rest of his family in 1918.

"The archivist told me that I was the first person who requested this file in 50 years," said Chestnykh, whose name means "honest" in Russian.

What is imperial provenance worth? "Depending on what the object is, it can easily double or triple in value," said Mark Moehrke, Christie's director of Russian art.

Last November, Christie's sold a Faberge brooch decorated with a diamond lily-of-the-valley for £32,450 (\$53,059), up from the presale estimate of £10,000 to £15,000. It was a gift from Empress Alexandra Fedorovna to Baroness Ungern-Sternberg in June 1898.

"Having a good object is one thing," Chestnykh said. "But history gives the same object the wings."

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