

Making Plates For Tsars, Commissars and Presidents

By [Kit Rees](#)

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Porcelain models of the peoples of the Russian Empire that are on show at Moscow's Tsaritsyno Museum.

ST. PETERSBURG — The Imperial Porcelain Factory was created on the orders of a tsarina in the 18th century and has survived 270 years, outliving the imperial family and the communists, and now looking to the future with optimism, even if it may have to find a new source of clay — which currently comes from Ukraine.

The anniversary is currently being marked with an exhibit at Moscow's Tsaritsyno Museum as well as celebrations in St. Petersburg.

"The Imperial Porcelain Factory is the birthplace of Russian porcelain, and it has preserved almost all of the unique technologies laid down by our ancestors," the factory's general director, Tatyana Tylevich, said as she met journalists on a press tour from Moscow earlier this year.

The factory was founded in 1744 in St. Petersburg by Empress Elizabeth, Peter the Great's daughter. It was only Europe's third porcelain factory and today, Tylevich says, it is used by "both the president and the ordinary housewife."

White Gold

Porcelain originated in China more than a thousand years ago, but the material and the techniques behind its production remained a national secret for centuries. It wasn't until the early 1700s that the Europeans discovered how to reproduce the elusive substance, when German mathematician Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus mixed kaolin, a white clay from China, with alabaster to create the prized "white gold."

Soon after the opening of the factory in St. Petersburg, renowned Russian chemist Dmitry Vinogradov began working as the factory's head and independently discovered, after much experimentation, the sought-after formula of porcelain.

The factory started off making little snuffboxes, which the royal family gave as gifts to important visitors. Snuffboxes in the shape of a sealed letter were particularly popular with the court.

The factory's range eventually expanded to larger items, such as the famous collection "Peoples of the Russian State," created in the 1780s by French sculptor Jean-Dominique Rachette. The series consisted of 79 figurines representing the different peoples of Russia, from the Finns of the north to the Asiatic tribes of the east, all in traditional dress. Rachette also created the renowned "Arabesque Service" for Empress Catherine II.

During Catherine II's reign, porcelain started to really develop, and the factory received orders for busts of the empress herself and for gala dinner services, such as the "Kabinetnsky Service," made up of 800 items and depicting various classical Italian architectural monuments.

There was also much interest in military themes, like the nine-piece "History of the Russian Guard" set, where the figurine of a mounted hussar officer was created from 10 separate parts by Baron Konstantin Rausch von Traubenberg.

"The entire development of imperial porcelain came about by the will, taste and preference of the emperors," said Anna Ivanova, curator of the exhibit at Tsaritsyno. "This is why fashions are reflected in the porcelain."

Propaganda on a Plate

The factory's fare naturally changed after the revolution as previous clients fled or were killed. It then began to specialize in work that supported the new regime, many examples of which can be seen at the Tsaritsyno exhibit.

Propaganda pieces sporting the Soviet hammer-and-sickle emblem as well as portraits of Lenin and Stalin are on show alongside dishes, such as ones for the Sovnarkom (Council of People's Commissars) that feature a bouquet in which, if you look closely, you can discern the names of communist governmental bodies skillfully incorporated into each flower.

It was in many ways a golden age as designers did things with porcelain that had never been done before. Check out N.A. Zander's "Silhouette of Chimney Shafts" (1919), which creates a striking industrial landscape by using a restricted palette and simple abstract forms, or M.A. Sorokin's "Alter libitum" chess set (1996), which plays with different shapes and levels.

One of the most celebrated forms is a work by Kazimir Malevich, a pioneer of the suprematist art movement, who created a famous suprematist teapot and half-cup in 1923.

The factory's trademark "cobalt net" design, which Tylevich noted is its "most popular service, "was created by Anna Yatskevich in the late 1940s for a tulip-themed service.

"The secret lies in that it is a very convenient form with a very beautiful design," Tylevich said of the iconic blue-and-gold pattern.

Surviving, Thriving

With the tsarist family and communist support a distant memory, the factory, which employs a thousand people and has more than 4,000 products, looks to the future in a stoic Russian way.

"Our factory has survived cataclysms, revolutions, blockades, perestroikas, and so from our point of view the factory has a strength that will enable it to not only survive but also progress," Tylevich said.

The factory has felt the reverberations of recent events: Its stores in Kiev, Odessa and Donetsk have closed, but Tylevich hopes that they will reopen.

"At present we have not felt the sanctions," Tylevich said, although there has been a "decline in purchasing ability." The factory is instead hopeful that "due to such sanctions, more of the population are turning to Russian manufacturers."

The factory also imports its clay from the Ukraine, but hasn't had any problems with delivery so far.

"We received a container last month," Tylevich said. "We have stocked up for half a year," but she said they are considering alternative options.

China's rise in manufacturing has also made the factory rethink its strategy over the years and change tack.

"To compete with the Chinese in price range is completely pointless and foolish," she said. "We understood that we needed to develop high-art porcelain, exclusive porcelain, unique porcelain and to position ourselves in the luxury category."

"Quite a few Western manufacturers have already moved their production to countries in southeast Asia, leaving only the design and brand for themselves," said Tylevich, who is proud that the factory has remained in St. Petersburg.

Tricky Material

Porcelain is a notoriously tricky material. To create porcelain, kaolin is heated along with other materials such as quartz, feldspar and pegmatite, to very high temperatures in a kiln.

Nelya Petrova, who is the head artist at the Imperial Porcelain Factory and has worked there since 1975, has created hundreds of works including the service made for President Vladimir Putin's last inauguration.

Petrova said her most interesting order was for the 300th anniversary of St. Petersburg, in 2003, when she had to "come up with the sketches in three days" for several large gala services for Tsarskoye Selo and Peterhof.

"A service shouldn't be too striking on the table because people eat from it," Petrova said about her designs.

"Only certain decorative objects on the table can dominate either by their color or form. But a service should be soft, especially a morning set. Gala services can be a bit brighter, but a morning service should calm a person."

"For me, understanding porcelain means knowing its technology," she added. "So when an idea is born you already know how it should turn out, as well as the materials and techniques you will use."

There is a certain element of risk in the creation of porcelain, as "either everything turns out great — it is simply amazingly beautiful — or everything burns out" in the kiln, which has "its own magical workings," she said.

For Petrova, it took "about 10 years" before she fully understood porcelain, a material in which she sees human qualities.

"He is fragile — you have to look after him — and he is very capricious, but he has a solid character."

"Imperial Porcelain Factory. Dialogue of Epochs" runs till Jan. 11. Tsaritsyno Museum. 1 Ulitsa Dolskaya. Metro Tsaritsyno, Orekhovo. 499-725-7287. www.tsaritsyno-museum.ru

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