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Return to Russia

After nearly a century-long absence from St. Petersburg, Cartier has opened a boutique in the city where it once served as the tsar's official jeweler.

BY JILL NEWMAN

IT WAS LIKE OLD TIMES in St. Petersburg one weekend last May as some of Cartier's best clients convened at the Grand Hotel. A century ago, when the Romanovs ruled the country, they might have been drawn by the retail shop that Cartier operated at the hotel during the winter holiday months. On this weekend, however, the clients were there to help Cartier celebrate the opening of its new store around the corner. The hotel, because of its historical tie to the brand, was one of the venues for the festivities; guests lodged there and attended cocktail hours courtesy of Cartier. Another venue was the new store itself.



"It is the very best address in this city," Bernard Fornas, president and CEO of Cartier International, declared during a cocktail reception for 300 guests at the new Maison Cartier, a three-story structure located on the bank of the Moyka River. The focal point of the new shop is an Empire-style chandelier that hangs in the center of the boutique, extending down two stories from the ceiling. The main stairway, off to the side, is lined with portraits of Russian royals wearing their Cartier jewels and with framed original sketches of those commissions. Also on display is Pierre Cartier's royal warrant noting his appointment as Tsar Nicholas II's official jeweler.

The panther necklace (opposite) is made of platinum and sculpted petrified wood. The Church of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ (above) is where assassins fatally wounded Tsar Peter II in 1881.



Pressing the diamond in the middle of this circa-1909 floral basket pendant (left), which was once owned by Prince Yusupov, opens the central flower and reveals a watch dial. The circa-1912 wristwatch (right) is set with rose-cut diamonds, pearls, and onyx beads.

After cocktails at the new boutique, Cartier hosted a black-tie dinner at Mikhailovsky Castle, a fortified structure that Tsar Paul I had built in 1800 to protect himself from his enemies (see, "Russian Roulette," page 48). There, before dinner, the Russian maestro Valery Gergiev conducted a private performance of the Russian National Orchestra for the guests. The evening concluded with a cruise on the Neva River, during which Cartier's guests were entertained by a fireworks display that lit up the city.

Among the guests were Crown Prince Alexander of Yugoslavia and his wife, Katherine. The prince is a great-grandson of Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna, who joined the Romanov family in 1874, when she married Grand Duke Vladimir, the third son of Tsar Alexander II. Were it not for the grand duchess, Cartier might not have become such a fixture among Russia's upper class—and may not have had its designs so profoundly influenced by its tastes.

"The link with Russia is one of the historical elements that influenced our own style and pushed us to evolve," said Pierre Rainero, image, strategy, and heritage director for Cartier International, during the boutique's opening ceremony. "The Russians have an exuberance that wasn't present in French taste."

In the latter half of the 19th century, Russia's wealthy had a voracious appetite for luxury, and Cartier was their preferred jewelry house. No one was more responsible for Cartier's prominence in Russia than Maria Pavlovna. Over the years she became Louis Cartier's best client, commissioning numerous important pieces—including the Vladimir Tiara, which is now owned by England's Queen Elizabeth II—and introducing the jeweler to her friends and family. It was she who encouraged Louis Cartier and his brothers, Pierre and Jacques, to open the seasonal store, in 1907, at the Grand Hotel, where it thrived for several years until the onset of World War I forced its closure. The Russian Revolution followed, and then there was no place for a luxury jeweler in the Soviet Union.





The focal point of the new Cartier boutique (above) is an Empire-style chandelier. Cartier's *Tapis Rouge* bracelet (below) was made with 334 carats of rubies and nearly 13 carats of diamonds.

By the early years of the last century, toward the end of the Romanovs' regime, Pavlovna had amassed a treasure trove of Cartier jewelry that included a six-row pearl choker adorned with two diamond-encrusted imperial eagles, an elaborate diamond tiara with a 5.22-carat *Beauharnais* ruby, and an intricate diamond-and-onyx bow-shaped brooch with a lorgnette. Her cache so impressed her nephew Tsar Nicholas II that in 1907, shortly after the opening of the boutique at the Grand Hotel, he appointed Cartier as the jeweler to the Imperial Court in St. Petersburg, then the capital of Russia.

When the Russian Revolution began, 10 years later, the grand duchess hid her jewels in a vault in the Vladimir Palace, her home in St. Petersburg, and fled to the Caucasus. (Her husband, Vladimir, had died in 1909.) She refused to leave her country and remained in the Caucasus until 1920. Meanwhile, Vladimir-family friend Albert Stopford, a member of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, which was sympathetic to the Romanovs, retrieved the jewels from the vault and smuggled them out of Russia. He eventually brought them to the grand duchess in Venice, Italy, after she finally had left Russia. Pavlovna settled in France in 1920 and died later that year. She was the last of the Romanovs to leave Russia, and she became the first to die in exile.

After her death, her jewels were divided between her four children. A year later, England's Queen Mary, Elizabeth II's grandmother, purchased the Vladimir Tiara from the grand duchess' daughter, Elena, then known as Princess Nicholas of Greece. Two years ago, a collection of cuff links and cigarette cases were discovered in the archives of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs; Maria had left the items at the Swedish embassy in St. Petersburg before she fled.



PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW HELLER; STYLING BY WYATT WALKER



This agate bowl (above) features a 14.25-carat cabochon-cut yellow sapphire. The circa-1913 desk clocks (below) are part of Cartier's archive collection in Paris.

Cartier's archive collection in Paris does not contain any of the grand duchess' jewelry, but it does include an elaborate brooch made for Prince Yussupov, who is best known for participating in the murder of Grigori Rasputin, the faith healer who had a disconcerting influence over Tsar Nicholas II and his wife, Alexandra. The brooch features hundreds of round and rose-cut diamonds. An ornate platinum tiara, set with 15 pear-shaped diamonds and a host of round diamonds and natural pearls, is also among the archive treasures that once were Russian-owned.

These big and bold pieces and others that the grand duchess and her fellow royals and aristocrats commissioned were among a number of Russian influences that shaped Cartier's designs in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1908, the jewelry house produced a series of diamond-encrusted tiaras—including the Vladimir Tiara—that were inspired by Russian peasant headdresses, and Peter Carl Fabergé's colorful enamel creations from that period informed Cartier's brightly colored clocks, accessories, and

cigarette cases. On a visit to Russia in the early 1900s, Louis Cartier was captivated by the bright costumes worn by performers in the Ballets Russes, leading him to employ blue and green in many of his designs. He also began incorporating Russian jade, alabaster, and obsidian into his designs after spending time in Russia.

The Russian influence has had a lasting impact on Cartier's signature designs, said Rainero. "In the process of creating today, we have a memory of the Russian culture, and it is now in our genes, and it pushes us to go further." As evidenced by the popularity of Cartier's panther- and crocodile-motif jewelry in Russia, Cartier is poised to captivate the country's elite the way it did before the revolution. "The Russian women are strong, but at the same time refined," said Rainero. "And now they suddenly have a lot of freedom, and that exuberance of the turn of the 18th century has returned." ■

Cartier, www.cartier.com

