

## “Alix and Pollie” - A Lifelong Friendship

by Pat Hazlett, Master Docent, Houston Museum of Natural Science, Texas



Fabergé Jeweled Gold-Mounted Guilloché Enamel Brooch  
(Courtesy McFerrin Collection)

“Good things come in small packages.”

“Diamonds are a girl’s best friend.”

“Pretty in pink.”

Occasionally these trite sayings are actually true. Even more rarely, they are all true at the same time. Most docents have had the experience when touring a Fabergé exhibit of finding ourselves drawn again and again to the same object. We circle the room, look at each item in wonder, but find ourselves back where we started - staring at “our” piece. Is it the perfect craftsmanship? The exquisite detail? The sweet story of its history? For me, a tiny pink enamel and diamond brooch from the McFerrin Collection at the Houston Museum of Natural Science is all of these things. Let’s begin with its story.

For “Alix” of Hesse and by Rhine (1872-1918), making the transition to Alexandra Feodorovna, wife of Nicholas II and Empress of Russia was difficult. Unlike her mother-in-law Maria Feodorovna, who had lived in Russia 15 years before becoming Empress, Alexandra was wary and uncertain of her new home. Nicholas’ parents made no secret of their disapproval of their son’s marriage to a German Lutheran. However, when Emperor Alexander III died unexpectedly in 1894, Nicholas’ mother was forced to accept the marriage, just a mere week after her husband’s funeral and her son’s confirmation as Nicholas II. Acceptance did not mean approval. For example, Maria, now the Dowager revived an old custom dictating Alexandra follow behind her own husband and mother-in-law at court functions. Maria’s message was clear.

Alexandra, too, had been raised in a royal household. Her mother was Princess Alice, the third child of Queen Victoria and Albert, the Prince Consort; her father was Grand Duke Louis IV of Hesse and by Rhine. Alexandra was a happy child, nicknamed “Sunny” by her mother. However, in 1878 when Alexandra was just six years old, tragedy struck - the family was engulfed by a diphtheria plague, taking the lives of both Princess Alice and Alexandra’s beloved baby sister, May. Thereafter, Alexandra spent much of her time alone. Though she remained close to her father until his death in 1892, Alexandra was largely brought up by her morally rigid grandmother, Queen Victoria. She was, therefore, somewhat shocked by the carefree morality of the Russian court. Nor did she ever master the Russian language. These issues coupled with her innate shyness and awkwardness at court occasions challenged Alexandra. She was an unpopular figure for most Russians.



Empress Alexandra Feodorovna

[http://www.alexanderpalace.org/2006alix/chapter\\_IX.html](http://www.alexanderpalace.org/2006alix/chapter_IX.html)



The "Wee" Gift from Alix to Pollie  
(Christie's London,  
November 29, 2010, Lot 220)



Baroness Ungern-Sternberg  
with Her Children  
(Christie's London)

Alexandra was, however, absolutely dedicated to her family and friends. Even as a young German princess, she spent months planning and making gifts for family, friends and even palace staff. Alix was generous, thoughtful and kind. During her early difficult years as Empress, and in later years as mother of an ill child, her friendships were vital to her private happiness. One such friend was Marion "Pollie" Delme-Radcliffe. Marion, the child of Emilius C. Delme-Radcliffe and Louise (also Louisa) Buddicott Holroyd, was born in Pakistan (1870-1949) where her father served with the Connaught Rangers, a division of the British Army. She later married the Grand Duke of Hesse, Baron Reinhold von Ungern-Sternberg, Chamberlain of the Hessian Court, in Darmstadt, Alexandra's birthplace. The mutual connection, and a similarity in age and background (Pollie, too, descended from royalty: Edward IV's brother, the Duke of Clarence), formed the basis for a life-long friendship preserved in letters collected over 30 years, and still held by Pollie's descendants. Some of the letters were accompanied by gifts from Alix to her dear friend.

In June 1898, Pollie was expecting her first child. Alix, having given birth to two children already, likely knew what awaited her friend in both childbirth and motherhood. Alix wrote an encouraging letter to accompany two gifts: a quilt she had made for the new baby and an exquisite brooch for the new mother. In the letter she wrote:

"I must send you a few lines to tell you how much my thoughts and prayers will surround you next month. God bless & protect you, Darling, & may you not suffer too much-tho one willingly suffers, so as to have the intense joy of holding one's own precious Baby in one's arms. I have worked a quilt for you to cover the tiny little Being with-the brooch is for you as a wee remembrance of a dear friend."

The "wee remembrance" (width 1 1/8" x height 7/8") mentioned in Alix's letter is an oval, gold-mounted guilloché enamel Fabergé brooch. The translucent pink surface is bordered by a gold and diamond-set rim and surmounted by a gold and diamond-set ribboned bow. The face of the brooch is fixed with a diamond-set lily of the valley. Even today the pin is in its original silk and velvet-lined wood box, stamped *Fabergé/St. Petersburg/Moscow*, beneath an Imperial warrant, circa 1898. Lilies of the valley were popular in the pre-revolutionary court, and special favorites of Alexandra, a flower and nature lover. Ice-filled train carriages carried flowers to St. Petersburg from the south of France to

meet demands. Nicholas II and Carl Fabergé, both attentive to Alexandra's preferences, included the lily of the valley motif for both the 1898 Imperial Easter Egg, and other pieces owned by Alexandra.

Pollie gave birth to her first child, a daughter, on July 7, 1898. Alexandra served as godmother. The child was named Alix Louisa Emilia Marion Hedwig von Ungern-Sternberg, "Alix" after Pollie's dear and thoughtful friend. Two more gifts from Alexandra to Pollie sold at the same 2010 auction are gold brooches with flower motifs. All three pins are known by descent through Pollie's family to their present owners.



Flower Pins (Not by Fabergé) Given by "Alix" to "Pollie"  
(Christie's London, November 29, 2010, Lot 221-222)

<http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/jewelry/a-jewelled-gold-mounted-guilloche-enamel-brooch-by-5380111-details.aspx#top>

Pollie had one other child, a son. She died in England in 1949. Her correspondence with Alix is a testament to a lifelong friendship between two women ... simply, two mothers.

#### Sources Consulted:

With special thanks to the McFerrin Collection exhibited at Houston Museum of Natural Science. The brooch is recorded in Dorothy McFerrin's book, *From a Snowflake to an Iceberg*, 2013, 180.

de Guitaut, Caroline. *Royal Fabergé*. London: Royal Collections Enterprises Ltd., 2011.

The Marquis of Ruvigny and Raineval. *The Plantagenet Roll of the Blood Royal, Mortimer Percy Volume*. London: Heritage Books, 1911, 472.

<http://www.geni.com/people/Marion-von-Ungern-Sternberg/600000022674999477>

<http://www.alexanderpalace.org/2006alix/>

<http://www.alexanderpalace.org/realtzaritsa/>