

VIEW FROM THE SALT BOX - #31

We found the salt shown on the right as part of a collection that we were lucky to buy. It is about 1-3/4" diameter, made of silver with Russian marks. It had a gold wash at one time but this is pretty well gone now. It wasn't until Gerry Grube identified it as niello work that we really began to learn about it. Then the Antiques Road Show on TV showed a larger piece of niello with Plique-a-Jour that they valued at several thousand dollars, so we started to dig deeper.



We've found that it deserves a lot more appreciation than we were previously providing.

Looking at the salt with a magnifying glass you can see that the design is definitely hand-made. Most of the surface is formed by hammering with extremely fine "punches" which indent the surface and leave the vine-like whorls raised above the background. This is a laborious process, probably done under a magnifying lens. It is typical of the detailed work done by the Russian silversmiths in Czarist times, like the enameled cloisonné on many early Russian salts.

The design includes 3 small and 3 larger medallions on the sides of the bowl. The small medallions are blank, but the larger ones are where the niello work shows up. In each there is an inscribed design. Two of the panels show buildings, and the third has two people with a gazebo in the background. These decorations are also very detailed and hand-done, and are what sent us to the encyclopedia to find out about niello.

The niello process is evidently an old one, because the encyclopedia references are to works of art done from the first through the 16th centuries. The process is usually done on silver or gold, and produces a detailed black design flush with the surface. First you scratch the desired picture into the metal. It can be as detailed as you want, because even the tiniest scratch will show up in the finished picture. Then you prepare a mixture of silver, copper, lead and sulfur and fuse it together into a black solid. It is somewhat like enamel, but is metallic rather than a glass like the enameling process uses. You grind it to a fine powder, then melt it onto the metal surface so that it fills every part of your design. The excess is scraped off and the surface polished to give a permanent picture on the finished piece.

Because the process is so laborious it has survived only in Russia and India, according to our encyclopedia. This was written before World War II, so it may not be in use anywhere by now. We have interpreted the marks on our salt as I. Khlebnikov, Moscow, 1873. There is a salt like it shown in Smith 229-1-3, though the buildings are different as far as we can tell. We've never seen another one, but these two are undoubtedly part of a set. We'd love to learn how they got from Russia to the U.S., but we don't know how to find out. There have to be more of them out there somewhere. We hope you are lucky enough to find one.

Ed Berg
401 Nottingham Rd., Newark, DE 19711

November 1997