



Above: A magnificent silver and blue enamel tea caddy produced in c.1910 by Fabergé.

Left: An exquisite turquoise enamel tea set made in c.1890 by the Grachev Brothers of St Petersburg.

THE ART OF TEA IN RUSSIA: HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE CHITRA COLLECTION

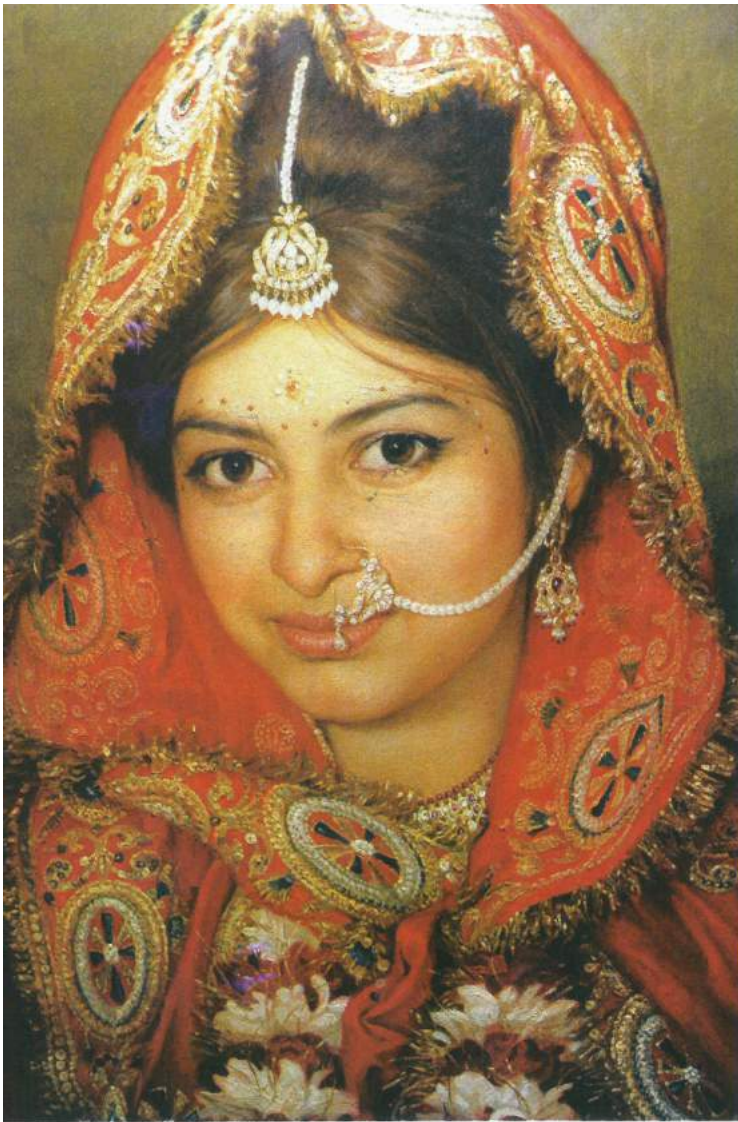
*'Twas growing dark; upon the table, shining,
there hisses the evening samovar, warming the Chinese teapot;
light vapor undulated under it.*

*Poured out by Olga's hand, into the cups, in a dark stream,
the fragrant tea already ran, and a footboy served the cream*

From Pushkin's Eugene Onegin (1823–30)

In 2011, Nirmal Sethia, the Chairman of Newby Teas, and the connoisseur behind the Chitra Collection set himself the task of acquiring the world's greatest collection of tea antiquities. Today, the collection, named in honour of his late wife, Chitra, totals almost 1,700 objects and is already one of the finest and most comprehensive private collections of historic teawares. With objects drawn from Europe, Asia, and the Americas, and from over a thousand years of history, the Chitra Collection is a unique reflection

of the history of tea and the importance and diversity of tea drinking customs across the world. For centuries, tea played a central role in culture and society as a medicinal drink, a focus for hospitality and familial domesticity, and as a symbol of national identity. It was also politically and economically significant as a source of profit, a tool of empire and as a trigger for revolution and war. Today, tea is the most ubiquitous of beverages and, after water, is the most frequently consumed drink in the world.

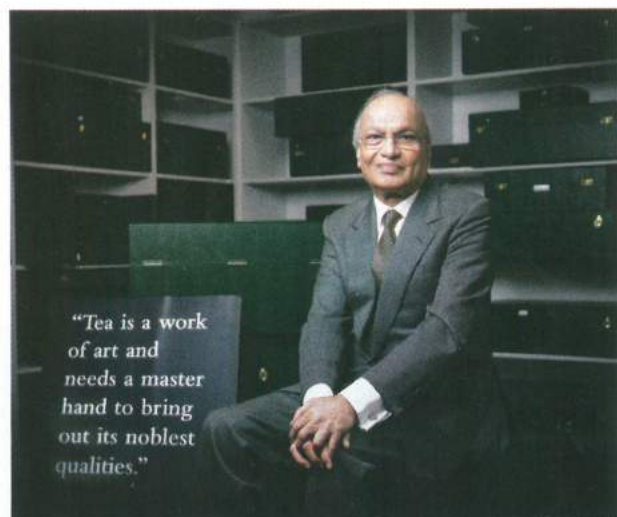


unheeded, however, and the tea was brought back to Russia. Over the following century tea drinking slowly became established amongst the Russian upper classes. It was imported by camel caravan from China, where tea was first grown, a long and arduous journey that took the train of 200-300 hundred camels around a year to complete. The difficulties of this trade route meant that the cost of tea was extremely high and the pleasure of drinking it was therefore confined to royalty and the aristocracy. It was not until the second half of the 19th century, when Russian merchants were permitted to import tea by ship from Canton that imports rose steadily, prices fell and its use spread to the middle and lower classes. By the turn of the 20th century, tea had transformed from an expensive luxury to an everyday household necessity.

As the Russians' love of tea drinking grew, leading manufacturers responded through the production of teawares that showcased the latest fashions and advances in craftsmanship. Amongst the Russian pieces in the collection, there are several tea caddies made by leading Moscow and St Petersburg manufacturers of the 19th and 20th centuries. The most significant of these is a magnificent silver and blue enamel tea caddy produced in c.1910 by Fabergé, the firm of goldsmiths who supplied the infamous jewelled Easter eggs to the Russian royal family. Decorated with

The Russian teawares in the collection are some of the most interesting and inspiring. Tea has long occupied an important place in Russian culture and society and the business of tea drinking (*chaepitie*) is still taken very seriously. Tea first arrived in Russia in 1638 when the ambassadors of Tsar Mikhail I, Vasiliï Starkov and Stepan Neverov, travelled to the court of Mongolia to bestow gifts upon the Mongol Khan. There they were served a beverage 'consist[ing] of leaves, I know not whether from a tree, or a herb [sic]', as Starkov recorded. This was their first taste of tea. On their return to the court in Moscow, Starkov and Neverov brought gifts from the Khan to the Tsar, which included fine damask of various colours, 200 sables, two beavers, two snow leopards, and 200 packets of tea. Initially, the ambassadors had refused the tea, saying it was 'unknown' and 'superfluous' in Russia, and requested that the Khan give them the equivalent in sables. Their protest went

Above: A portrait of Chitra Sethia.
Below: The enterprising Nirmal Sethia.





A set of 12 beautiful enamel teaspoons by Fabergé.

spiralling floral motifs, the caddy typifies the Art Nouveau or 'Stil Modern' movement that dominated Russian art and design at this time. Although early tea caddies were usually quite small, the Fabergé caddy is large, reflecting the much lower price of tea by the turn of the 20th century.

The traditional Russian method of making tea first involves heating the water for the teapot in a samovar, a large vase shaped urn that is unique to Russia, Eastern Europe and the Middle-East. In the Chitra Collection there is a very fine silver samovar dating from 1879 that is fitted with a burner underneath for heating the water and a chimney top upon which the teapot was placed to keep it warm. The Russian method of brewing and serving tea is distinctive as the tea is allowed to steep in the teapot for a very long time. Once the tea has brewed, a small amount of the drink is poured into the teacups and then diluted with more hot water from the samovar. The tea is also usually sweetened with sugar, jam or honey or drunk with a sugar cube held in the mouth. Milk is rarely added as flavouring the tea with lemon is often preferred.

Of central importance to the Russian tea ceremony was a richly decorated tea set,

usually comprising of a matching teapot, teacups, milk jug, strainer, sugar bowl and tongs. During the late 19th century, tea sets decorated with cloisonné enamels in bright colours became especially popular in Russia due to the trend for traditional, 'national' styles in the decorative arts. In the Chitra Collection there are several important enamel tea sets including an exquisite turquoise and purple set made in c.1890 by the Grachev Brothers of St Petersburg and an intricately patterned set of c.1900 by Pavel Ovchinnikov, a preeminent jeweller and silversmith in Moscow. There is also a set of twelve beautiful enamel teaspoons by Fabergé and a several ornate caddies, including one by Gustav Klingert who ran one of the most important of Moscow's enamel workshops.

Today, tea is iconic of traditional Russian culture. Although most Russians now own electric kettles rather than samovars, making and drinking tea with friends or family is still considered an important occasion and time is taken in its preparation and service. The Russian tea culture reminds us that tea should be taken seriously, enjoyed slowly and its ceremonial traditions observed with great reverence. ■

For more information: www.chitracollection.com / www.newbyteas.com
 The Chitra Collection is owned by the N. Sethia Foundation, a British registered charity.
 To read more about the Foundation's work visit <http://www.nirmalsethifoundation.com/>