

The Magical History of The Matryoshka

(Russian Nesting Dolls)

BY BELINDA HOGAN

The history of The Matryoshka is full of mythology intertwined with politics. But this is what makes this colourful wooden doll within a doll, within a doll, so iconic.



My grandmother gave me a beautiful little Russian doll for my 10th birthday that sat on my dressing table for years. I used to play with it for hours, puzzled as to how it was actually put together. You may have one yourself. But did you know that as well as being works of art and a Russian icon, the Matryoshka has a history that is as intriguing as it looks? Often called Nesting Dolls or Stacking Dolls, the Matryoshka appeared sometime during the 1890s with the common belief that its name is related indirectly to the Russian word 'mat,' meaning 'mother.' Although the word 'matryoshka,' stands alone and is not a derivative of the word 'mat,' the symbolism of the mother and family is obvious.

How these dolls came to be iconic of Russian culture is laden in legend, however, one thing is certain, the Matryoshka has Japanese origins. Some believe that Russian prisoners of war brought

back nesting type dolls after the Russo-Japanese conflict of 1904-05, while others say a Russian monk or Orthodox priest visiting the island Honshu brought back a funny figurine of a bald-headed man called Fukurama, consisting of seven figurines nested inside one another. Another view is that it was actually a merchant who brought the Japanese nesting doll back from his travels. We do know that the design was given to a craftsman in the city of Sergiev Posad, some 50 kilometres outside of Moscow. This city was the folk art and toy making capital, and is still one of the most important regions for Russian doll manufacturing today.

The history of the Matryoshka from its beginnings to the present day intertwines with Russia's diverse political tapestry. Woodwork had been a custom in Russian rural towns for centuries, however, prior to the emergence of the Matryoshka, peasant craftsmen mostly designed objects such as



cutlery, plates and trays, as well as traditional nesting Easter eggs.

It is generally accepted that Sergei Malyutin, a top artist at the Abramtsevo Children's Education Toy Workshop, and lathe operator Vasilii Zvyozdochkin created the first Matryoshka. The first sets of Matryoshka generally depicted a peasant woman dressed in colourful traditional costume, because the craftsmen wanted to make something that represented their people. These dolls consisted of sets of three, six or eight pieces. Each doll piece was made out of separate pieces of wood, normally birch or linden, hollowed out then turned on a lathe. They were then carefully wood-burned, hand painted and lacquered as they still are today, in colours that were darker than the modern Matryoshkas. This technique has not really changed except that the wood burned outlines have been replaced with painted contours.

During this time, Russia was fast becoming industrialised and master craftsmen were quickly losing their jobs. Then, in 1900, the first public display of a Matryoshka took place at The Great Exhibition in Paris. According to Barnaby Dixon, who along with Alexander Khmelev owns the Dream of Russia Gallery in London, the doll was a hit with the crowds.

"The exhibition made a huge difference to Matryoshka

manufacturing," he says. "Up until this point, one or two artists had essentially been working for their own pleasure." The exhibition brought Russian dolls to the world stage and they captured the imagination of people all over Europe. "From this point, a much larger group of artists began creating the Matryoshka," says Barnaby. "It became almost a craze."

Russian nobility decided that objects with peasant themes were deemed works of art, making Matryoshka valuable. The Sergiev Posad artists thus turned their attention to manufacturing the dolls and, according to Matryoshka collector Meryl Pringle, owner of Brisbane's Matryoshka and More, the Romanov's would have had





special dolls made for them. "It's quite conceivable that the top artists were constrained to make sure that their dolls only went to the royals and the court," she says. "They would have been very expensive."

As Russia moved towards revolution in 1917, the manufacturing of Matryoshka boomed until the late 1920s in Sergiev Posad. The city had 41 workshops and hundreds of artisans were making the nesting dolls. The traditional peasant girl design, holding a chicken, basket or bundle also came into existence. Wood turners had perfected the flange, which is the inside rim of the doll that connects the two halves together. This creates a vacuum inside the doll when it is closed and what creates the popping sound when opened. A museum was even established. It was a period where artisans had design freedom, which Meryl says was flamboyant. "The sizes, shapes, colours were just incredible," she says. "They did dolls with murals, males, females, it was an extremely diverse period." However this artistic independence was about to come to a halt.

When Josef Stalin consolidated his power, he merged all the workshops that had formed since 1900. Sergiev Posad was renamed Zagorsk and artists were no longer free to paint what they wanted. The state-run workshop was named the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army Artel, and others like it were established in different regions of the USSR over the next 30 years. The Semyonov, The Maidan and The Nolinsk were the main ones, each producing one typical style of Matryoshka. The Semyonov is possibly the most distinctive to the rest of the world, as the peasant girl with her yellow rose-covered scarf has become synonymous with Russian culture.



Stalin sold many of the original Matryoshka from museums to fund his World War II efforts and made sure that factory workers produced them en masse for the Western market. It was illegal to make them at home, although some artisans did so in secret.

Vitaly Shukin, owner of The Russian Shop in Lisle Illinois, USA feels it was a sad time for the Matryoshka. "The doll was exploited by the Soviet Government as a quintessential souvenir," he says. Tatiana Titkova, collector and owner of the online store Matryoshkastore.com agrees. "During the so-called Soviet period, the Matryoshka doll had an academic simplicity," she says. "But lacked the warmth of its predecessors."

The Mikhail Gorbachev reforms during the Glasnost period of the 1980-90s saw a Matryoshka revival. Markets started selling them, factories were opened up and

designers given back some of their artistic freedom. Tatiana says a fresh wave of variety was injected into the industry. "Themes unheard of in the past such as caricatures of politicians including "Gorby" and branded merchandise such as Star Wars revived the interest in the Matryoshka, including the traditional dolls," she says.

Like its shape, the Matryoshka seems to have gone full circle in regards to its development. Today there are only about 60 artists working independently of factories, such as Stephan Gorancey, Olga Kiselyova, Masha Streltsova and Zhanna Nikolaeva. Their dolls can take anywhere from one month to two years to complete and collectors will pay thousands for them. Karen Wade owner of Babooshka Gallery in Devon, England fears, like other collectors, that there is a distinct possibility that Matryoshka painting will not be a viable occupation for much

longer. "Although we have recently employed new young artists, generally the youth of Russia want jobs in banking, journalism and real estate," she says. "We shall just wait and see."

China also manufactures Matryoshka, but to-date has not been unable to perfect the flange that creates the vacuum between each doll. In Australia, Meryl and Tatiana are the only people who import dolls designed by individual Matryoshka artists, and they also stock the cheaper Russian factory dolls, as do boutique doll stores.

You can also buy your own "blanks" to create your own Matryoshka, like Brisbane artist Libby Hayward who paints Matryoshka with Australian themes. One thing is certain; the unique and colourful Matryoshka is an iconic symbol of Russia. Meryl feels it is more than that. "She is one of the forms of art that has a soul," she says. "She speaks to people." ■