

Mystery Russian Collection



IN 1892 AN UNUSUAL PRINT PORTFOLIO was published in Moscow celebrating the autograph collection of a member of the Russian imperial family: 20 large 25x18 high quality, heavy stock photographic prints issued loose with an accompanying table of contents. The print titles and table of contents are in French—logical, given the long intimate ties between France and Russia. Considering the quality of the prints, the collection was likely housed within a cloth-bound “binding” of some sort, and it’s there too that the title and other relevant information may have appeared.

There’s the rub. Whatever this binding was, it’s missing—a common problem with print portfolios. So far, the National Library of Russia has been unable to assist in identifying this intriguingly cryptic record. Fingers remain crossed. This puzzle also highlights the sad fact that the autograph collecting hobby has no definitive bibliography of books about autographs and autograph collecting.

Title or not, though, it’s a fascinating record of who this Romanov thought worthy of remembering prior to the turn of the century, and a delightful and unusual record of one collection. One wonders if the original autographs depicted survived the Russian Revolution and World War II, and in what Russian archive they may lay buried today.

Each of the 20 prints shows off autographs in a specific field. Subject matters

stars, writers and poets, statesmen and more. Naturally there’s a strong Russo and Franco bias in the selection. Each black-and-white print consists of a photograph of a montage of signatures, signed cartes-de-visites, signed cabinet photographs, letters and documents, all arranged in an artful hodgepodge atop a background of appropriate ink-and-wash decorative background elements.

“*Peintres et sculpteurs*,” for instance, shows a baker’s dozen of autographs splayed around an ink-and-wash nature scene, with a palette and brushes poking out prominently at upper right. The painters depicted are Leighton, Newreff, Detaille, Polenoff, Kiwchenko, Sourikoff, Chavanne, Gue, Werechtchaguine and Kisseleff, while the sculptors are Gumbuch, Tchigeoff and Fremiet—obscure to all but art historians today, but in late 19th century Russia they were the cream of the crop.

“*Ballet et Opera*” displays portraits and signatures of Virginia Zucchi, Sigrid Arnoldson, Libia Drog, Deycha-Sionitzky, Leopoldine Loscher, Marie Petipa, Luigia Cerale, Eugenie Mravine and Lydie Heiten. “*Drame et Opera*,” a similar print, but leans toward the drama queens, displays Pauline Lucca, G. Fedotoff, Eleonora Duse, P. Strepetoff, N. Wassilieff, M. Slavine, Marcella Sembrich-Stengel, N. Nikouline, Alma Fohstrom and Medea Figuener. “*Musiciens*” includes Z.A. Bourgaault-Ducoudray, Pierre Tchaikovsky,



include the classic areas of autograph collecting: scientists, artists, musicians, actors, opera performers, ballet

Charles Gounod, Antoine Rubinstein, J. Massenet, Pierre Chostakowsky, Camil Zauer, Serge Taneyev, P. Blaramberg and J. Paderewsky. Interestingly, of the two opera prints only Duse remains well known today, while Sembrich would be recognized by opera buffs. Among the musicians—that is, composers—fame is less fleeting; Tchaikovsky, Gounod, Rubinstein, Massenet and Paderewsky are names most know.

How do the scientists fare in name recognition? Test yourself: “*Naturalistes, professeurs de chimie et de physique*” depicts Henry A. Rowland, Carl Claus, Elie Metchnikoff, D. Mendeleev, M. Berthelot, Henry Goyer, W. Dokoutchayeff, Franz Steindachner, N. Buketoff, Rudolph Leuckart, Ira Remsen, D. Kaigorodoff and Ernst Haeckel. “*Professeurs et docteurs en medecine*” depicts Wilhelm Grubbe, W. Paschoutine, Carmen Ludwig, Charcot, N. Sklifasovsky, Leiden, E. Pawloff, Th. Biloth, Ioh. Metzger, A. Krassovsky, William Jenner, P. Kowalewsky, Jean Chtchelkoff, Kussmaul, Cesare Lombroso and L. Pasteur. Finally, “*Professeurs de medecine et de physiologie*” includes C. Slaviansky, C. Raupach, W. Soutouguine, W. Zalensky, Minch, Gwozdioff, L. Berquand, Marey, N. Zdekauer, A. Kogewnikoff, J. Sikorsky and W. Danilevsky. Every schoolchild knows Pasteur, and Jenner is still a big name in his field.

And so it goes, field after field. Shockingly few names attained household name status. The rest fade into oblivion, remembered only by hardcore enthusiasts. These people were towering figures in their day, the favored and the charmed. Today we scratch our heads and try to decipher their names as we ponder these quaint relics from the heyday of the czars. 

IMAGE COURTESY THE AUTHOR