

# Family Activity Guide

A TASTE OF RUSSIAN CULTURE

VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS



# Добрый день

The Russian words printed above mean “Good Day.” You pronounce them like this: *dohb-rihy dyen*.

In the time of the tsars, Russians welcomed special guests by presenting them with bread and salt (*kleb i sol*) on a beautifully embroidered napkin.

In the center of this bread-and-salt presentation dish is the symbol, or coat of arms, of the Kherson province. The inscription says “From the loyal zemstvo of the Kherson Guberniia.” The *zemstvo*, a governing body in Kherson, presented this dish to Tsar Alexander III and his wife in 1888.



The elegant egg on the cover was made by Karl Fabergé (1846–1920), the premiere Russian jeweler of his era. In 1912 Fabergé made this egg for Tsar Nicholas II of Russia. Many Russian rulers were called tsars. The word tsar comes from the Roman title Caesar. A tsar’s son was called a tsarevich and the heir to the throne was the tsesarevich.

Nicholas II gave this egg to his wife as an Easter present. The surprise inside the egg is a portrait of their son, Tsesarevich Aleksei Nicholaevich. *Imperial Tsesarevich Easter Egg, 1912, VMFA, Bequest of Lillian Thomas Pratt*

In this guide, you’ll learn more about Aleksei’s country and other works of art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Visit [www.vmfamuseum/resources/faberge/](http://www.vmfamuseum/resources/faberge/) to learn more about the imperial egg on the cover!

This dish is one of hundreds presented to the tsars as they visited Russian cities and towns. *Bread-and-Salt Dish, 1888, VMFA, Bequest of Lillian Thomas Pratt*

# The Cyrillic Alphabet

Russians had no written language when they converted to Eastern Orthodox Christianity. To help the new faith spread throughout Russia, Cyril and Methodius, two Greek Orthodox priests, constructed an alphabet for the Russian people by combining the Greek alphabet with new symbols for distinctly Russian sounds.

There are thirty-three letters in the Russian alphabet, including eleven vowels, twenty consonants, and two pronunciation signs. They look like this:

А Б В Г Д Е Ё  
Ж З И Й К Л М  
Н О П Р С Т У  
Ф Х Ц Ч Ш Щ  
Ъ Ы Ь Э Ю Я

In Russian, Tsar Nicholas II is called Nikolai II. This is how you write his name in Russian letters: Николай. Notice that the first letter, which in Russian sounds like an *N*, looks like the letter *H*. How many times can you find Nicholas's Russian initial *H* among the Russian objects on view at VMFA?



Один [ah-deen] is Russian for 1.



This box features the initial belonging to Tsar Nicholas II. *Imperial Presentation Box, 1899–1908, VMFA, Bequest of Lillian Thomas Pratt*

# Russian Orthodox Easter and the Giving of Eggs



This egg is made of gold, platinum, diamonds, rubies, enamel, bronze, sapphire, watercolor, ivory, and rock crystal. *Imperial Peter the Great Easter Egg, 1903, VMFA, Bequest of Lillian Thomas Pratt*



Два [dvah] is Russian for 2.

In ancient times, Russians exchanged decorated eggs to celebrate spring. This tradition began even before Grand Prince Vladimir of Kiev accepted Christianity as the religion of his people in 988. When the Russian Orthodox Church adopted the popular tradition, the eggs came to symbolize Christ's Resurrection and were exchanged at Easter.

Many Russian families colored hens' eggs at Easter by boiling them with the skins of red onions, which gave the eggs a deep red color. Wealthier Russians often gave eggs of painted wood, lacquer, or porcelain to friends and family.

In the 18th century, members of the tsar's court began giving gold and silver eggs decorated with beautiful enamels and jewels. Wealthy aristocrats and merchants also enjoyed giving and receiving precious miniature eggs worn on long necklaces or on bracelets. There are seventy-eight of these little masterpieces in the VMFA collection.

Tsar Nicholas II gave this egg (pictured left) to his wife for Easter in 1903 to celebrate the two-hundredth anniversary of the founding of the city of St. Petersburg. Inside the egg is a surprise: a tiny replica of a famous statue of Tsar Peter the Great, founder of the city!

The idea of an egg with a series of surprises, one inside another, was familiar to all Russians. The search for a treasure hidden within a series of nested objects is a part of many Russian fairy tales. In *The Maiden Tsar*, Ivan the Merchant's Son must find the egg that holds the maiden's love for him. A wise old woman tells him where to look:

*On this side of the ocean there stands an oak;  
in the oak there is a coffer; in the coffer there is a hare;  
in the hare there is a duck; in the duck there is an egg;  
and in the egg lies the Maiden Tsar's love.*

**Turn the page to read about another famous Russian fairy tale!**



Три [tree] is Russian for 3.



This beautiful egg was made in the Imperial Porcelain Factory. Less luxurious than many Fabergé eggs, it represents a more common example of a Russian Easter egg. *Imperial Presentation Porcelain Easter Egg*, ca. 1900, VMFA, Bequest of Lillian Thomas Pratt

# A Russian Fairy Tale



The miniature painting on the top of the little box above reflects the Russian love of fairy tales. The image is a copy of a famous Russian painting (also pictured). *Enamel Pictorial Box*, 1908–17, VMFA, Jerome and Rita Gans Collection of Russian Enamel; *Ivan Tsarevich Rides the Grey Wolf*, Viktor Vasnetsov, 1889, Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



Четыре [che-ti-rych] is Russian for 4.

# *Ivan Tsarevich, the Firebird, and the Grey Wolf*

Long ago and far away, there lived a tsar with his three sons. One summer in the dark of night, a thief began to steal golden apples from the tsar's magical garden. The tsar promised his kingdom to the son who could catch the thief. Ivan Tsarevich, his youngest son, decided to hide in the garden and wait for the thief.

That very night, a huge glowing firebird with blue crystal eyes and golden feathers flew into the garden. Ivan seized her tail, but she flew away leaving only a glittering feather behind. Ivan immediately set out after the firebird, riding near and far, high and low. He soon met a large grey wolf.

“Jump on my back and I will help you catch the firebird,” said the grey wolf. Three days later in a far away kingdom, they came to a palace. The wolf told Ivan to take the firebird from a cage inside the palace but not to touch the cage. Ivan, unable to resist the shining cage, picked it up and was immediately caught by the tsar of that kingdom, who demanded that Ivan bring him a horse with a golden mane in exchange for the firebird.

The grey wolf grumbled at Ivan for not listening but carried him swiftly to a second kingdom. The wolf told Ivan to take the golden-maned horse from the stable but not to touch the golden bridle. Ivan found the horse but couldn't resist the gleaming bridle. He was immediately caught by the tsar of the second kingdom, who demanded that Ivan bring him Tsarevna Elena the Fair in exchange for the horse.

Once again the grey wolf grumbled but decided to help Ivan again and carried him swiftly to Elena's palace. At sunset, as Elena walked in the palace gardens, the grey wolf seized her and carried her off to Ivan. As soon as Ivan and Elena saw one another, they fell deeply

This is a short version of this famous fairy tale. Read the whole story at <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/gask/tales/IVAN.html>.



Пять [pyat'] is Russian for 5.

in love. Taking pity on the couple, the grey wolf turned himself into an exact image of Elena, which Ivan traded for the horse in the second kingdom. After three days, the wolf changed back into himself and caught up with Ivan and Elena, who were already riding toward the first kingdom on the golden-maned horse.

Just before the group reached the first kingdom again, the grey wolf turned himself into an exact image of the horse, which Ivan then traded for the firebird to complete his quest. After three days, the wolf changed back into himself again. He soon caught up with the travelers, who were already riding toward Ivan's home.

After a long time or a short time—and many more adventures—Ivan and Elena returned to Ivan's home and gave the firebird to Ivan's father. They were married and lived together with such love that neither could bear to spend a moment apart—and *they often thought fondly of the grey wolf*. . . .



The *gamaiun* is a creature in Russian folklore with the body of a bird and the head of a woman. She is pictured in books of fairy tales because she is a symbol of wisdom and knowledge. *Plate (detail), 1899–1908, VMFA, Jerome and Rita Gans Collection of Russian Enamel*



Шесть [shest'] is Russian for 6.

Can you find eight hidden Easter eggs in this picture of Ivan Tsarevich, Tsarevna Elena, and the grey wolf? Have fun coloring the picture at home!



Семь [syem] is Russian for 7.

# Collecting Tales and Songs

Beginning in the middle of the 18th century, many Russians wanted to remember ancient Russia to celebrate their cultural history. Scholars traveled around the country collecting fairy tales and folk songs. Their discoveries inspired an exciting new time for Russian art and music.

The musician Mily Balakirev collected many folk songs including *The Song of the Volga Boatmen*, a famous sea shanty sung by *burlaks*, or barge haulers, who pulled boats laden with cargo up the Volga River. You can hear the song at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Song\\_of\\_the\\_Volga\\_Boatmen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Song_of_the_Volga_Boatmen).



In this watercolor, the artist shows a group of Russian villagers enjoying the music made by a performer plucking the strings of a *gusli*, the oldest known Russian stringed instrument. *Village Scene with Performers* (detail), ca. 1900, VMFA, Gift of Priscilla Cunningham in honor of Frederick Brandt

## *from The Song of the Volga Boatmen*

Yo, heave ho!

Yo, heave ho!

Once more, once again, still once more

Volga, Volga our pride,

Mighty stream so deep and wide.

Ay-da, da, ay-da!

Ay-da, da, ay-da!

Volga, Volga you're our pride.

Yo, heave ho!

Yo, heave ho!

Once more, once again, still once more

Yo, heave ho!

Yo, heave ho!

Visit [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ilia\\_Efimovich\\_Repin\\_\(1844-1930\)\\_-\\_Volga\\_Boatmen\\_\(1870-1873\).jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ilia_Efimovich_Repin_(1844-1930)_-_Volga_Boatmen_(1870-1873).jpg) to see a famous Russian painting of Volga boatmen called *Barge Haulers on the Volga* by the artist Ilya Repin.



Восемь [voh-syem] is Russian for 8.

# Making *Blini*, or Russian Pancakes

Eating *blini* is another tradition that started long ago in Russia. These round, golden pancakes were symbols of the sun. Russians made blini at the end of winter to celebrate the return of spring during *Maslenitsa*, which means butter week. Eat your *blin* (one pancake) with traditional Russian toppings, such as butter, sour cream, caviar, jam, or smoked salmon.

Here's a simple recipe that makes about four dozen blini, but you can find many variations of blini recipes.

- 3 eggs
- 3/4 cup buttermilk
- 1 cup milk
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 3/4 cup buckwheat flour
- 1/3 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 cup of butter

Whip the eggs, buttermilk, and milk until frothy. Sift together the all-purpose flour and the buckwheat flour. Add the dry mixture to the egg mixture and stir vigorously until your batter is smooth. Heat your frying pan over medium heat and coat the bottom of the pan generously with butter. Use about 1 tablespoon of batter per blin. Cook each blin for a minute or two until the top looks dry and the edges are bubbly. Flip each blin with a spatula and cook the other side for about 30 seconds. They should turn a lovely golden color. Recoat the frying pan with butter between each batch of blini.

## До свидания

(das-vi-dan-niye) means good-bye!



The back of this spoon's bowl features a man in court dress reading a scroll to a *boyarina* (woman of noble birth). *Serving Spoon*, 1908–17, VMFA, Jerome and Rita Gans Collection of Russian Enamel

## Russian Empire, ca. 1900 (Alaska not pictured)



Pictured with Russian numbers: Like many of the works in this guide, these miniature eggs were designed by Karl Fabergé. *Miniature Easter Egg Pendants*, VMFA, Bequest of Lillian Thomas Pratt

To learn more about the Fabergé collection at VMFA, purchase *Fabergé Revealed*, a landmark publication featuring new scholarship and splendid photography. Available in the VMFA Shop! 436 pages, 585 color plates, 15 b/w plates; \$65 (limited edition with slipcase, \$100)

VMFA photography by Travis Fullerton and Katherine Wetzel  
Guide © 2011 Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Jun (6047-213)