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**MATRYOSHKA**

The matryoshka doll is a symbol of Russia and its culture. It is truly a doll—a child's plaything—but it began its history just over 100 years ago as a highly collectible art form. The matryoshka doll (or, simply, the matryoshka) is a nested doll with two halves that can be pulled apart. The outer figure contains increasingly smaller versions of itself.

The painted image on the dolls is most often a woman wearing traditional Russian costume. The woman is a mother; the names Matryona and Matryoshka were common Russian country names for generations. Both come from the Latin root “mater” for mother. So matryoshka has come to mean "little mother" based on the idea that the outer or largest doll holds her babies inside like an expectant mother and that each daughter in turn becomes a mother. They are symbols of fertility and motherhood and have a modified egg shape.

The “Russian” matryoshka doll came to Russia from Japan at the end of the nineteenth century. Little more than 100 years ago, Russia was experiencing an economic boom and a rising sense of culture and national identity. New artistic trends were developing, and a “Russian style” was growing and focusing on the revival of traditions that were in danger of being lost. In St. Petersburg, Russia, in December 1896, an exhibition of Japanese art opened. Among the exhibits was a doll depicting a Buddhist wise man named Fukuruma. The sage was shown as a bald-headed old man with a wooden body that could be split at the waistline into two halves; nested inside were the images of the man when he was younger and bearded and still with hair on his head. The doll came from the island of Honshu; the Japanese claim that they are the inventors of nested dolls or matryoshka, but they also generously admit that the first nested dolls made on Honshu were carved and painted by a Russian monk. That first set of dolls showing Fukuruma is kept in the Artistic Pedagogical Museum of Toys (APMT) in Sergiyev Posad, a city in Russia that is a cultural center for making matryoshka dolls.

The first Russian matryoshka set worked by Vassily Zviozdochkin and painted by Sergei Maliutin (an illustrator of children's books) was made at the Children's Education Workshop, established by Anatoly Ivanovich Mamontov, Savva Mamontov’s brother, and shows a mother carrying a red-combed rooster—inside are her seven children, the smallest being a sleeping, bundled baby.

Whether the first matryoshka was Japanese or Russian, Russian artists have clearly made nested dolls a symbol and souvenir of Russia. Woodworking and turning is an ancient Russian craft, and the first paintings by Maliutin all came from archaeological and ethnographic sources. Embroidery, clothes, historic dyes and colors, and peasant culture were sources of inspiration for him. Clothing for the dolls that are traditional motherly figures includes an apron, a brightly colored scarf, an embroidered shirt, and sarafan (the national dress of Russia).

In 1900, Russia participated in the World Exhibition in Paris and entered various styles of matryoshka dolls. The nation's exhibit won a medal and many admirers for the nested dolls. The Russian Craftsmen Partnership opened a shop in Paris, and, by 1911, matryoshka – or dolls la Russe – were being sold to customers in 14 countries. Until about 1930, matryoshka dolls continued to be very individual. Under the Soviet regime, emphasis shifted to the mass production of nested dolls. In the 1980s, the opening of Russia and the other Soviet countries to the West introduced more freedom, and the “author’s matryoshka”, with the highly individual style of the particular artist, began to dominate again. Today, matryoshka dolls are collected much like paintings or icons on the reputation of the specific artist over the school or style.