

A Hardstone Cameo Portrait of the future Tsar Alexander III, carved circa 1867 - by Paul-Victor Lebas (active 1851-76), Paris

The future Tsar Alexander III was born 10 March 1845, with the title Grand Duke Alexander Alexandrovich. He became Tsesarevich Alexander Alexandrovich Romanov on the sudden death of his older brother Nicholas on 24 April 1865. On his deathbed Nicholas expressed the wish that Alexander marry Nicholas' fiancé, Princess Dagmar of Denmark.

Dagmar accepted Alexander's proposal and they married 9 November 1866 in the Imperial Chapel of the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg. Dagmar converted to Orthodox Christianity and took the name Maria Feodorovna.

The following year Tsesarevich Alexander travelled with his father Tsar Alexander II to the Paris International Exposition of 1867 (Exposition Universelle d'Art et d'Industrie), at the invitation of Napoleon III.

Tsesarevich Alexander was in the carriage with Alexander II and Napoleon III on 6 June 1867 when an assassination attempt on the Tsar occurred after a military review at Longchamp. The Tsesarevich also attended the famous "Three Emperors Dinner" at Café Anglais in Paris on 7 June 1867, the three emperors present being Emperor Napoleon III, Tsar Alexander II, and King Wilhelm I of Prussia.

This cameo portrait of Tsarevitch Alexander was carved by Paul Lebas around 1866-1867. It was probably intended for the Paris Exposition, in hope of attracting the attention of the Russian Royal visitors.

Lebas was patronised by Napoleon III, having carved a cameo of Empress Eugenie in 1855. In 1865 Lebas also prepared the cameo of their son the Prince Imperial. So there is also the possibility Napoleon III recommended Lebas to the Tsesarevich for a sitting in Paris, or that Napoleon III commissioned the cameo as gift to the Russian Royals. Given the timeframe, one has to wonder if this was a wedding portrait, and if there was a matching cameo of Maria Feodorovna.



Paul-Victor LEBAS was a prominent 19th century cameo sculptor in Paris, at 19 Rue Guenegaud. He was active 1851-1876.

Lebas exhibited at the Paris Salons and worked with the jewellers Caillot & Peck, specialists in cameo settings.

Around 1851 Lebas carved the famous cameo of the young Queen Victoria for Felix Dafrique. This cameo was based on the portrait by Thomas Sully, painted in 1838 when Queen Victoria was 19 years old. The cameo is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

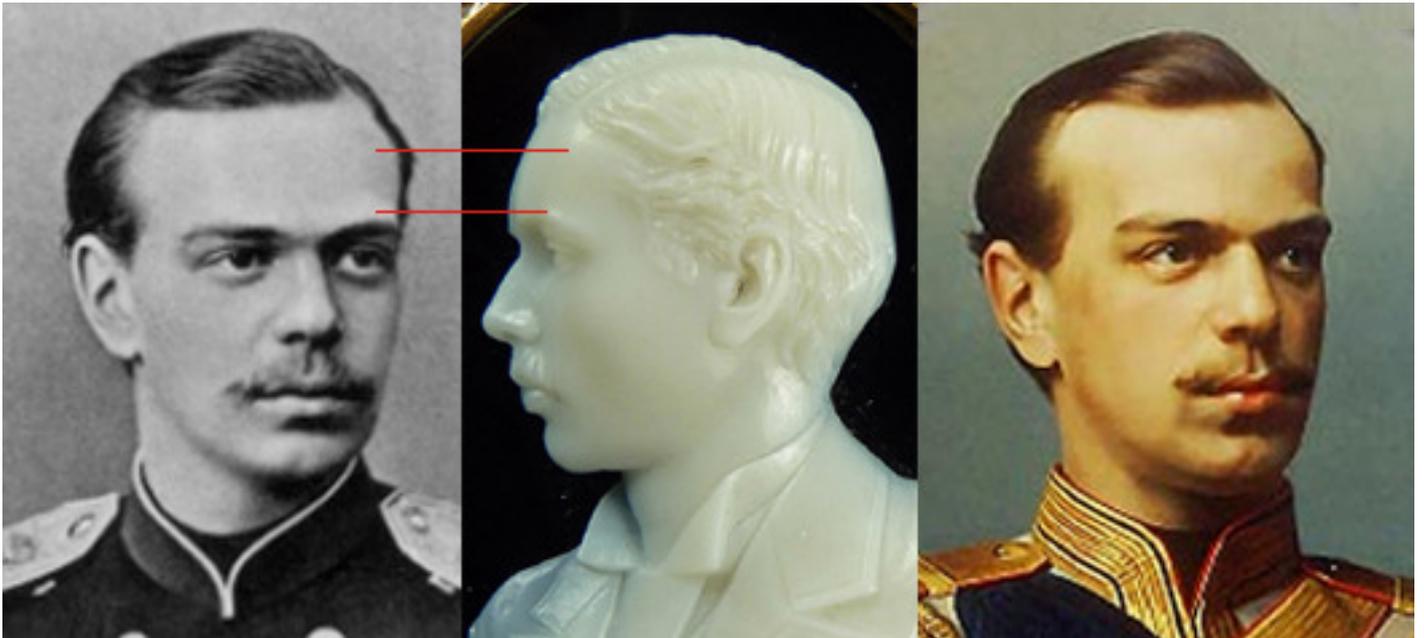
The image of the Tsesarevich was carved in about 1867, probably based on a composite of images dating 1864 - 1867.

In his other works, such as the cameo of Queen Victoria, Lebas didn't slavishly follow an original portrait. He was known to reverse the original image, and his cameos have a tendency to idealise the subject, perhaps with a view to capture the essence of their personality in such a minute medium.

The two colour onyx cameo is scratch signed on the obverse "PL" for Paul Lebas. It is set in a fine 18ct gold mount with both brooch and pendant fixtures. The brooch pin and clasp are stamped with the 'eagle's head' French control marks for 18ct gold. Although it doesn't have their hallmark, the mount is almost certainly by Caillot & Peck.

Click for a high resolution picture: <http://theholysgrail.com/images/CameoPortraitAlexanderIIIaged19.jpg>

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Alexander III had a prominent brow and forehead, shown somewhat exaggerated in the colourised picture on the right. This provided the first clue to the identification of the Lebas cameo portrait as Tsesarevich Alexander. The cameo portrait has the same ridged brow and prominent forehead, shown aligned above by the red lines in the left and centre pictures.

There are no known left profile pictures of Tsesarevich Alexander that allow a direct comparison with the cameo. However while the white onyx layer of the cameo portrait is only about 4mm deep, it is so finely detailed that a forward facing photo of the cameo can be taken.



An extract from the forward facing photo of cameo on the right above is a near perfect fit to the circa 1864 photo of Alexander on the left. In fact the fit is so good that it is highly likely this circa 1864 photograph was the primary source image used by Lebas to carve the cameo.

For reference purposes here's the link to the forward facing cameo image in high resolution:
<http://www.theholysrail.com/images/Lebas-Cameo-TsarevichAlexander-side.jpg>

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Alexander's hairline rapidly receded in his late teens to early 20's, and at this time he progressively gained weight and became more full in the face, as shown in the pictures below. The facial features and hairline of the cameo portrait conform closely to the young Alexander of 1864-5.



circa 1864, aged 19

circa 1865 aged 20

circa 1866-7 aged 21 or 22

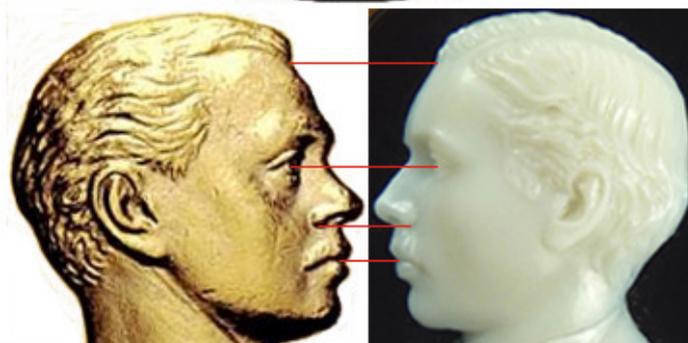
circa 1873 aged 28

Another identifying clue is the wing collar worn by Alexander in the cameo portrait. As seen in the pictures above, the Tsesarevich favoured these collars. In fact the 1866-7 photo with Maria Feodorovna (shown in full below) was probably another one of Lebas' source images. Under high magnification it is possible to make out a stickpin in Alexander's tie, placed similarly to the one in the cameo portrait.



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While there is no formal left profile picture of Tsesarevich Alexander to directly compare with the Lebas' cameo portrait, there is the following right profile on Alexander and Maria's wedding medal. This is dated with their wedding date in 1866, however it may have been modelled and released a little later (medal catalogued as Diakov 740.3).



It is likely this medal was Lebas' third source when preparing the cameo of Tsesarevich Alexander. The medal provides the shape of the face and head, and the size, shape and details of the ears, all of which closely conform between the medal and cameo (taking into account that the medal must be at least 2 or 3 years later than the primary 1864 photographic source image).

Paul-Victor Lebas specialised in cameos of royalty looking at their best. No doubt this was a sound commercial strategy in such a rarefied market. In his image of Queen Victoria carved in 1851, he looked back 13 years to the young Victoria. He captured a flattering image of Victoria as a beautiful young queen, in a particular pose chosen to emphasise her most attractive features.

In his cameo portrait of Tsesarevich Alexander, Lebas has drawn on contemporary images to achieve a similarly flattering depiction of the Tsesarevich as a young man, handsome, regal and reflective.

These are not descriptions usually associated with the young Alexander. In his cameo portrait Paul-Victor Lebas has shown another side of the young man destined to become one of the most powerful people of his time, Tsar Alexander III.