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Imperial Timepieces And More at Armory

By The Moscow Times

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The Kremlin Armory opens its doors to a fantastic collection of watches, including the first wristwatch, timepieces belonging to numerous Russian tsars, and the world's smallest clock.

The exhibit, "500 Years of the European Watch," boasts 63 different timepieces painstakingly chosen from the best museums and private collections in Europe by the Swiss Foundation de la Haute Horlogerie.

"The exhibition has been prepared specially for a Russian audience, and a separate section is devoted to Imperial Russia and its relationship with foreign manufacturers of timepieces," said Gregory Gardinetti, a historian at the foundation, which was set up five years ago to promote fine watchmaking.

The relationship between Russia and foreign watchmakers first began in the 17th century, when Tsar Mikhail Fyodorovich Romanov imported more than 20,000 watches.

In the 18th century, many watchmakers began to relocate to St. Petersburg. Famed Russian

hockey player Pavel Bure's great-grandfather, who had the same name, opened a shop in 1815 in St. Petersburg and crafted watches for the tsars. The exhibit features one of Bure's creations, a 1905 chronograph encased in rose gold with the royal coat of arms, commissioned by Tsar Nicholas II.

In addition to watches, there are other masterpieces of timekeeping on display. Most notably, the exhibit boasts the Calibre 101. Designed by Jaeger-LeCoultre in 1929, this clock is considered to be the world's smallest, weighing in at 0.9 grams with 74 different components.

Guests can also learn a bit about high-society etiquette from studying the watches. In one of the ladies' wristwatch showcases, there is a 1939 Van Cleef & Arpels watch designed for the duchess of Windsor. This model, called Cadenas, looks like a bracelet in the style of a chain and padlock. This design helped camouflage the face of the clock, allowing a lady to discreetly check the time without anyone seeing. It was considered impolite to be seen looking at your watch in high society.

Though the exhibit features countless antique watches, the technological innovations of the 20th century have not been overlooked. The featured Bulova Accutron model, made in 1960, was the first watch to use a "tuning fork" mechanism (the predecessor of quartz), which greatly improved the accuracy of timekeeping. The watch had a daily accuracy of plus or minus two seconds a day, as compared with the 20- to 40-second error in the average mechanical clock. American astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin verified the accuracy of the tuning fork mechanism when they famously used Accutron timers on the moon in 1969.

In 1990, the most complicated wristwatch to date was released, the aptly named Grande Complication, which has nine arrows, more than 600 parts, and took seven years to design.

"500 Years of the European Watch" runs through Nov. 10 at the Kremlin Armory Museum. Metro Alexandrovsky Sad. Tel. +7 (495) 697-0349, www.kreml.ru.

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