

COLLECTIONNEURS CÉLÈBRES

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GRAND DUKE GEORGII MIKHAILOVICH (1863–1919)

The Grand Duke Georgii Mikhailovich (1863–1919) was one of the great coin collectors of his days, the initiator and general editor of ten enormous volumes of the catalogue, known as the *Corpus of Russian Coins and Medals*, printed 1888–1914. This is still the best publication on Russian numismatics.

Georgii Mikhailovich was born near Tiflis (Georgia). He was the third son of seven children of the Grand Duke Michael Nicolaevich and the Grand Duchess Olga Fedorovna, born Princess Cecily of Baden. The grandson of Emperor Nicholas I and cousin of Emperor Alexander III, he grew up in Georgia where his father was the Governor-General of the Russian province of Transcaucasia. As he himself mentioned, he started collecting coins in 1877, when he was 14 years old, buying items at the Armenian bazaar. From his childhood he collected only Russian coins and medals.

Georgii Mikhailovich was destined for a military career. Just after his baptism, he was appointed patron of the 3rd battalion of the Life Guards cavalry and granted the rank of adjutant general, but some permanent injury to his leg prevented an active military career. Georgii Mikhailovich moved with his family from the Caucasus to St Petersburg when he was 18 years old. There he started collecting seriously, guided by Christian Gil' (1837–1908), his tutor in Numismatics.

Christian Gil' assisted in enlarging the collection of the Grand Duke. In 1882 it included about 3,600 coins. Georgii Mikhailovich carefully studied the coins in the collection of the Emperor at the Hermitage as well as one of the best private coin collections in Russia, which was owned by Count I. I. Tolstoy. During this period the Grand Duke purchased several coin collections: Peter the Great's coins from Davydov, the collections from Saveleyev and Smirnov in 1883, from Brykin and Plakhov in 1884, from Kozlov, Chebarov and Count Emeryk Hutten-Czapski in 1885. The last was the best one and known for its perfect selection of medals, which included about 900 pieces and was enlarged over time by the Grand Duke to 2,000 specimens.

In 1886 the Grand Duke's collection contained almost 8,000 coins. Of these 2,000 predated the reign of Peter the Great: the number of silver coins (2,942) was slightly larger and also that of copper coins (2,570). It also contained 437 gold coins and 51 platinum ones. In Georgii Mikhailovich's work, *Description and Depiction of certain Rare Coins in My Collection*, he published 44 rare coins, the date range of which stretched from the reign of Peter the Great to the 1880s. These coins – either rare or even unique specimens of

their kind and considered by the Grand Duke to be of special interest – were being published for the first time. It is worth singling out in particular the silver *polupoltinnik* (25-kopeck coin) from the reign of Peter I (1701) and a *poltina* (50-kopeck coin) from the reign of Catherine I (1726), found by the Grand Duke Vladimir Alexandrovich when his Palace was being rebuilt in 1876 and then presented as a gift to Georgii Mikhailovich on 19th April 1881.

This unique personal collection was to provide the basis for a multi-volume work which was brought out over a thirty-year period – between the 1880s and 1914, when it was interrupted by the outbreak of World War I.

Ten issues were published as folio-volumes, each of which was devoted to one of the Romanov dynasty reigns in the 18th and 19th centuries and consisted of two parts: (1) descriptions of a large range of coins (virtually all types and variants known at that time), images of which were provided in the numerous plates, and (2) publication of written sources relating to the coin production of the period in question. Some of the issues contained such a large quantity of material that they had to be published in two separate parts: the first containing documentation and the second descriptions and illustrations of the actual coins. Twelve volumes were published in all and to this day they have not been surpassed either as regards the range of material or the quality of the academic research.

The real authors of the *Corpus of Russian Coins of the 18th–19th centuries* were known Russian numismatists – Christian Gil', who was called upon to present the coins systematically, to provide scholarly descriptions of the coins and to draw up appropriate plates for them, and also Michael Demmeni (1859–1920), who carried out the archival part of the work, identifying the documents, selecting those to be included and preparing them for printing. During the last stage of the work, when Christian Gil' was no longer able to work, having almost completely lost his sight, the Grand Duke Georgii Mikhailovich called upon the well-known numismatists and scientists, A. A. Ilyin (1858–1942) and I. I. Tolstoy (1858–1916), to complete the volume.

In addition to documents from archives in St. Petersburg, Moscow and Yekaterinburg, other archive material is also published in the *Corpus* – from the Cabinet (personal collection) of Peter the Great, the Senate, the Supreme Privy Council, the Mining Ministry (*or kollegia*), the Ministry of Finance, the Coinage Chancellery attached to that ministry, the Department for Internal Affairs and other institutions.

This meant that the publication emerged as unique both as regards the detail in the treatment of the main questions concerning the history of monetary circulation and also the minting of coins in Russia during the era of the Romanov dynasty.



Grand Duke Georgii Mikhailovich (1863–1919)

The virtually exhaustive and faultless *Corpus* compiled by the Grand Duke Georgii Mikhailovich contains descriptions of Russian coins not only from his own collection but also from the well-known Russian numismatic collections of P. V. Zubov, A. A. Ilyin, A. N. Lenivov, G. R. Kirkhner, Count I. I. Tolstoy and A. M. Chernosvetov. The catalogue contains interesting specimens from the historical museums of Vienna and Moscow, the British Museum, the Hermitage Museum, the Russian Academy of Sciences and Moscow University.

It should be mentioned that one of the rarest Russian coins – a Constantine I silver rouble of 1825 – was presented to the Grand Duke by Alexander II of 1855–1881 on 16th June 1879. This specimen was the lightest of the six known specimens (18.52 grammes, 2 grammes less than the standard weight). The Constantine rouble was included in the *Corpus of Russian Coins*, in which other rare and even unique coins from the Grand Duke's collection were also published, such as a *zlatnik* (the earliest Russian gold coin) from the reign of Prince Vladimir, a Prince Yaroslav *srebrenik* (the earliest Russian silver coin), issued in the 10th–11th centuries, Russian silver roubles of the 17th–18th centuries, the so-called “*efimoks counter-stamped with a sign*”,

a 1654 *rublevik* (the new one-rouble coin of the Petrine era), a 1714 double gold *chervonets* (a ten-rouble coin of twice the standard weight – of which there was only one known specimen at the time).

In 1895 the Grand Prince Georgii Mikhailovich was appointed as the Most August Governor (Director) of the Alexander III Russian Museum in St. Petersburg. He served in this capacity without remuneration for 22 years entitled to direct access to Tsar Nicholas II. The Grand Duke was involved in assembling the Museum's collection of paintings and sculpture. On 5th December 1898 Grand Duke Georgii Mikhailovich was elected as honorary member of the Russian Academy of Sciences. He was also an honorary member of the Orthodox Fraternity of Saint and Prince Vladimir in Berlin.

In 1909 Georgii Mikhailovich donated his personal collection of coins to the Russian Museum of Alexander III on condition that a numismatic department be set up in it, to which he also planned to donate his numismatics library. On 12th November 1909 he drew up the documentation for the donation addressed to the Tsar himself and it was duly ratified by Nicholas II. Given that the building of the Museum was not appropriate for the display of such a collection, the Grand Duke, in desperation at the thought that he would probably never see the large collection properly housed in the Russian Museum, unexpectedly changed his mind on the eve of World War I in 1914 and decided to transfer it to a more reliable home. The Grand Duke stored his collection at the State Loan Bank in St. Petersburg for safekeeping. During the Revolution, four of the five crates were smuggled out of the country under mysterious circumstances.

When World War I broke out, the Grand Duke went back into the army as a lieutenant general. In 1915, he was appointed as aide-de-camp to the commander in chief and Nicholas II employed him as supervisor of operations. He also organized a private hospital in his palace in St Petersburg. In March 1915, Georgii Mikhailovich was appointed patron of the 4th Kabansky Sentry Battalion. In the same year, he was sent on a mission to Japan, then an ally in the war against Germany. At the beginning of 1916, he returned to Russia via Vladivostok, and on his way back inspected the situation in the Far East. Later, he was sent to visit German and Austrian prisoners of war. Early in 1917, he was sent to visit the Russian army corps in Bessarabia and Romania.

With the fall of the monarchy, he resigned from his military post on 31st March 1917. He wanted to go to England but the British government had forbidden the entrance of any Russian Grand Duke. In January 1918, he was informed that Nicholas II and his family had been sent as prisoners to Tobolsk. Eventually the situation took a turn for the worse: on 3rd April 1918 he was arrested and brought to Petrograd under the escort of Red

Guards. The Grand Duke was imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress by the Bolsheviks and shot in January 1919 by a firing squad, along with his brother, Grand Duke Nicholas Mikhailovich, and his cousins Grand Dukes Paul Alexandrovich and Dimitri Konstantinovich.

Much is still about the fate unknown of the coin collection of the Grand Duke. Part of the collection was stolen in the West. The Grand Duchess Maria Georgiyevna of Russia (1876–1940), the Grand Duke's widow, did receive most of it as well as his daughters Nina and Ksenia. The coins eventually made their way from Yugoslavia via Rome and New York to Berkeley, where the greater part of it was purchased by the millionaire L. Dupond. This large and unique collection was donated by his son to the National Numismatic Collection in Washington (Smithsonian Institute), where it has resided since the 1950s. Now there are more than 10,000 Russian coins and 1,250 medals. Many rare coins also found their way into other collections – to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, for example, and several medals are now in the State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow. However, the collection of George Mikhailovich as it once existed is now lost for ever.



Unknown medalist, XVIII century
 Peter I the Great (1672–1725)
 Award for the Battle at Lesnaya in 1708
 Gold, weight 16,63 g; size 30,5x27,5 mm

Countermarked on the obverse by the owner – E. Hutten-Czapski,
 purchased by Georgii Mikhailovich in 1885

Collection of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow
 Purchased in 1983 from A. Stakhovich, who bought it at the London
 Auction in 1950