1 **Porcelain and Catholic Enlightenment: The Zwettler Tafelaufsatz**

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4 **Abstract:**

5 The mastery of a hard-paste porcelain technology in Dresden in 1708 was a major natural
6 philosophical achievement for the European Enlightenment. From the outset, the material
7 possessed a representative function at the Saxon court, where it served to promote the
8 power and cultural prestige of the Wettin dynasty. As porcelain factories were established
9 at courts across Europe, however, the material's signifying role became complex. On the
10 one hand, its alchemical associations aligned it with unfettered princely power in the
11 realm of the absolutist court. On the other, its origins in laboratory investigation could
12 indicate a princely engagement with the enlightenment pursuit of scientific
13 knowledge. These contradictory associations reached an apogee in the so-called
14 "Catholic Enlightenment," producing artworks that sought to consolidate the church. This
15 paper analyzes the Zwettler Tafelaufsatz—the great porcelain table centerpiece that was
16 created in 1768 as part of a multimodal baroque celebration of Abbot Rayner Kollmann's
17 jubilee at the Cistercian monastery of Zwettl in Lower Austria. Here the porcelain
18 medium enabled the Cistercian brethren to argue for the continuing role of monasteries
19 and monastic scholarship in eighteenth-century enlightenment learning, while
20 simultaneously declaring the limits of human learning and the ultimate supremacy of
21 divine revelation in the context of an absolutist world order.
22 23

24 **Keywords:**

25 Catholic Enlightenment, Vienna porcelain, monasticism, Stift Zwettl, alchemy

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27 Although the concept of the Catholic Enlightenment remains dubious for some, a
28 growing body of recent scholarship has revealed how the reforming impulse of the
29 Catholic Church in the eighteenth century was real, if inconsistent.¹ This recognition of
30 Enlightenment tendencies in Catholicism—the effort to integrate science, philosophy,
31 philology, or political thought into an understanding of Catholic teaching and the reform
32 of church and society—invites us to look anew at Catholic institutions in the eighteenth
33 century. In this essay, I consider the case of an enlightened defence of monasticism that
34 took form amidst the jubilee celebrations of a Cistercian prelate, the Abbot Rayner
35 Kollmann at the monastery of Stift Zwettl in Lower Austria in 1768. On this occasion,
36 three interlinked art forms—a set of ceiling frescoes, a cantata, and a porcelain table
37 centerpiece—functioned as part of a multimodal presentation that celebrated monastic
38 life within an overarching allegory of the cardinal virtues. The Zwettl celebrations
39 belonged to a baroque courtly culture of representation that aimed to engage all of the
40 senses, in this case, to proclaim the dignity of the monastic life and progressive learning.
41 In grand terms, they expressed a commitment on the part of the Cistercians to the
42 intellectual and social transformation of the Age of Reason, as far as was possible for an
43 institution whose authority was founded upon a belief in divine revelation and historical
44 privilege.² I wish to argue, however, that the depth and complexity of Catholic
45 commitment to enlightenment thought is reflected in particularly revealing ways in the

Zwettl Tafelaufsatz, the remarkable large-scale porcelain table centerpiece that served as the focus of the Abbot's celebrations.

This artwork exploits the complex signification of the porcelain medium in eighteenth-century Europe. European porcelain's origins in alchemical experimentation located the material firmly in the representational world of the absolutist court. But simultaneously, the discovery of the porcelain "arcanum" by laboratory investigation pursued by natural philosophers saw porcelain become increasingly associated with the rational, empirical approach typical of Enlightenment science. These increasingly contradictory associations imbued porcelain with a rich range of signification, which patrons exploited by commissioning artworks in this medium. At once a product of rational scientific knowledge, but also an alchemical *donum dei* (divine gift), the Zwettl porcelain centerpiece embodied the measured acceptance of Enlightenment learning by an eighteenth-century Catholic monastic community, while clearly communicating the limits of such knowledge and the ultimate supremacy of divine wisdom.

<A>A Jubilee Celebration

When, on the 17th of April 1768, the Abbot Rayner Kollmann of the monastery of Zwettl celebrated the jubilee of his joining the Cistercian order, his brethren arranged a number of impressive gifts for their leader. Famously, the court composer of the Esterhazy princes, Joseph Haydn, was retained to write an *Applausus musicus* for performance at the event.³ This genre of celebratory cantata, similar to the opera seria but without the staged action, was particularly associated with monastic institutions in eighteenth-century Austria. It was a form of musical entertainment clearly favored by Abbot Kollman for

whom a number of examples were commissioned from various composers throughout his career.⁴ The allegorical Latin libretto of Haydn's cantata, entitled *Jubilaeum Virtutis Palatium*, was probably authored by a Cistercian father resident in the monastery.⁵ It features the four cardinal virtues—Temperantia (temperance), Prudentia (prudence), Justitia (justice), Fortitudo (fortitude)—and the figure Theologia (theology). These allegorical characters express their joy at residing in the monastery, described as a “palace of virtue,” extoll the benefits of the monastic life in general, and praise the benevolence of the reigning abbot.⁶

In addition to this musical composition, famous today for the letter penned by Haydn to accompany the score detailing performance instructions for the work, the gifts accompanying the jubilee celebrations included other significant artistic commissions: a portrait of Abbot Kollmann by Joseph Hauzinger, and an extensive porcelain dessert service that included a large-scale Tafelaufsatz, or centerpiece, commissioned from the Imperial and Royal Porcelain Factory in Vienna (figure 1).⁷ Most of this porcelain was delivered to the monastery by wagon in three crates on 3 February 1768.⁸ An invoice for the dessert service from the Vienna factory, dated 26 January 1768, survives in the archives at Zwettl, enumerating the individual components and their costs:

An itemised invoice for the dessert service from the Vienna factory, dated 26 January 1768, survives in the monastery archives. The invoice indicates that the service, costing 488 guldens and 20 kreuzers, paid for by a secret collection taken by the abbot's brethren, included forty-eight bowls, seventy-two dessert dishes, two sauce boats, eight salts and the components of the Tafelaufsatz, the large centrepiece consisting of some sixty-three figures and vases, all in the white, on a 4.3 metre-long, mirrored porcelain plateau. The invoice further itemizes the figures: one central group, four side groups, four smaller side groups, eighteenth single figures, eighteen small single figures and eighteen small flower vases.

88 The centerpiece from the service is today in the collections of the Museum für
 89 Angewandte Kunst in Vienna.⁹ This extraordinary ensemble is arguably the best
 90 preserved porcelain table centerpiece to have survived from the eighteenth century and is
 91 one of the most important extant productions of the porcelain factory at Vienna. These
 92 porcelain sculptures include various allegories, mythological figures, and members of
 93 assorted trades and professions, all arranged around a central group of female allegorical
 94 figures representing the cardinal virtues. The four cardinal virtues are unique works, not
 95 known from any other examples; all four of the sculptures bear an impressed "O" mark
 96 that is probably that of the repairer Dionysius Pollion, and this, together with a receipt
 97 dated 26 March 1768 recording the separate delivery of four large white figures,
 98 components of the centerpiece, suggests that these models were newly created especially
 99 for this commission (Neuwirth, 4). By contrast, many of the other figures making up the

100 centerpiece, such as the mythological groups, are known from other examples more or
101 less similar in their details and were probably assembled at the factory from existing
102 models to make up the ensemble (4).

103 The figures of the cardinal virtues suggest a possible connection between the final
104 form of the porcelain centerpiece and Haydn's cantata. Abbot Kollmann's jubilee
105 festivities represent a form of courtly celebration current in eighteenth-century central
106 Europe. We must bear in mind that the monasteries of the old orders (the Benedictines,
107 Canons Regular (Augustinians), Cistercians, and Premonstratensians) in the Holy Roman
108 Empire of the Counter-Reformation shared characteristics with the secular court. The
109 prelates who presided over these monasteries were not only the heads of religious
110 communities but also, by virtue of their office, territorial rulers of princely rank in the
111 empire. Acutely aware of their position, they exploited every opportunity to affirm their
112 rank and standing.

113 The culture of courtly display, which was the principal means of asserting status
114 amongst the aristocracy of central Europe, affected every aspect of court ceremonial,
115 including formal dining. The formal court table setting was neither a private ceremony
116 nor primarily a culinary event. Instead, the grandeur of the dining chamber, the splendor
117 of the table decoration, and the perfection of the service demonstrated the dignity of the
118 prince, with the aim of instilling loyalty in his subjects.¹⁰

119 The dessert had been the most elaborate and important part of courtly celebratory
120 dining since the Renaissance. The dessert table was the site of complex theatrical
121 displays, initially created from sugar-paste sculpture, but by the mid-eighteenth century,
122 executed in small-scale sculpture in porcelain, a material which was itself, as we shall

123 see, highly charged symbolically, occupying an important position in eighteenth-century
 124 court cultures. Gottfried Siegmund Corvinus, in 1773, described the strictly
 125 choreographed and symbolically rich *Schauessen* of the dessert table in the following
 126 terms: “On important ceremonial tables, desserts are often combined with many
 127 allegorical and figural representations, the placing of which demands a great knowledge
 128 of history, poetry, and fables, as well as architecture and perspective.”¹¹ The subject
 129 matter of table displays was often carefully calculated both to refer to the occasion for the
 130 festivities, and to flatter the participants. In other words, they were densely scripted
 131 artworks intended to be read by the viewer, which a contemporary audience would
 132 readily understand. Recognizing the subject matter depicted in the small-scale sculptural
 133 works was an opportunity for the viewer to demonstrate his learning and served as a
 134 prompt for conversation, in the process, establishing one’s status.

135 Abbot Kollman’s celebration, staged in the Festsaal, or banqueting hall, of his
 136 private apartments, was clearly a grand affair—the inventory of porcelain despatched
 137 from Vienna mentions seventy-two dessert dishes—and presents us with the delightful
 138 conceit of a formal dessert where the porcelain sculptures of the cardinal virtues sing
 139 Haydn’s music. The libretto of Haydn’s cantata speaks of a “palace of the virtues,”
 140 something that can be understood as referring to both the monastery itself, and also to the
 141 person of Abbot Kollmann, who is celebrated as a virtuous leader of his community. The
 142 centerpiece and musical text together announce the abbot’s standing in the monastery,
 143 and also in society beyond the abbey’s walls. But the centerpiece includes more than just
 144 images of the cardinal virtues; the whole range of figures suggests that there may be more

145 complex iconographic programs at play that are not now immediately discernible, but
 146 that would have been understood by their original audience.

147 Recently, art historian Andreas Gamerith has argued that the arrival of the
 148 centerpiece at Zwettl in 1768 in two shipments—the majority of the centerpiece, as well
 149 as the rest of the dessert service, on 7 February, and then four large sculptures, almost
 150 certainly the figures of the virtues, on 31 March—indicates that the latter four figures
 151 were probably an afterthought, a remedial attempt to render acceptable to its intended
 152 recipient an ensemble that was entirely secular, up to and including allegories of the loves
 153 of the classical gods (33–41). Gamerith maintains that it was the Zwettl prior, Fr.
 154 Placidus Assem, organizer of the surprise celebrations and author of “rhetorical
 155 diversions” in the baroque manner, who may have masterminded the addition of the new
 156 figures to the centerpiece in an effort to make the work a more fitting gift for an aged
 157 abbot. Two manuscript volumes containing works attributed to Fr. Assem include the text
 158 of the *Applausus Jubilaeum Virtutis Palatium* (37).

159 There survives no documentation around the four porcelain sculptures delivered
 160 in the second shipment from the Porcellaine Fabrique in Vienna beyond the factory
 161 invoice of 26 March and the account of their delivery given by the steward, Fr. Nikolaus
 162 (Neuwirth, 4, and Gamerith, 37). It is not possible to say with absolute certainty that the
 163 figures of the four cardinal virtues were an afterthought. That they are the only wholly
 164 original sculptural inventions in the ensemble, not stock figures, means that their creation
 165 would, perforce, have taken longer; designs needed to be arrived at, models sculpted,
 166 moulds made, and the works manufactured. But if we allow Gamerith’s argument that the
 167 addition of images of the cardinal virtues was an attempt on the part of Fr. Assem to

rescue an iconographically ill-informed gift for an elderly prelate, we must acknowledge then how clever the prior was and how successful his efforts at rehabilitation were.

Clues to a fuller reading of the final form of the centerpiece appear elsewhere in the monastery. In addition to implying a close connection between the Tafelaufsatz and Haydn's cantata, the figures of the cardinal virtues also point to a connection with a series of ceiling frescoes executed in 1733 by Paul Troger, the leading Austrian baroque fresco artist, in the library of the monastery. These paintings show allegorical personifications of the cardinal virtues together with the figure of Sapientia (wisdom) in the context of depictions of the trials of Hercules (figure 2).

As Eric Garberson has shown in his important study of eighteenth-century monastic art and architecture, imagery of the virtues was central to the sapiential, or wisdom, tradition that informed the decoration of libraries in eighteenth-century Austrian and Southern German monasteries.¹² Monastic libraries in Counter-Reformation Austria and Southern German played vital roles in the courtly culture of display in these institutions. These libraries were not places of study, but rather show spaces for displaying books, advertising to lay and religious visitors alike the monastery's role as a center of learning and scholarship. This function was of particular importance in debates about the significance of scholarship in eighteenth-century German-speaking Catholic monasticism, and, indeed, in the growing Catholic Enlightenment critique of monasticism in general. The evolving role of scholarship in religious life was a central ~~concern~~ concern in the history of Western monasticism. While scholarship has long been deemed important to the old orders, the concern expressed by some that worldly learning distracted from the seeking after salvation that should be the true task of the religious led

to heated debate in the church over the type and amount of studious activity proper for members of religious orders. The anti-scholarly position was most strongly stated by Armand Jean le Bouthillier de Rancé, founder of the Cistercian Trappists, in his 1783 *On the Sanctity and Duties of Monastic Life*, wherein he rejected all study, arguing that the sole purpose of monastic life was penitence and that only manual labor was a fitting activity for a monk.¹³ This was balanced, however, with a Post-Tridentine call for monastics to be adequately equipped intellectually to combat heresy (especially Protestantism) and to provide adequate education for the faithful. Authors like the French Benedictine Jean Mabillon in his 1691 *Treatise on Monastic Studies* defended the propriety of study and research as an occupation for members of religious communities.¹⁴

More severe criticisms of monastic life in general arose as a result of the growing forces of the Enlightenment. Proposals for suppressing monasteries and religious territories in the Holy Roman Empire became more frequent, beginning in the mid-seventeenth century, and growing more intense throughout the eighteenth century (Garberson, 20). In a *Memorandum* of 1765 (just three years prior to Abbot Kollmann's jubilee), Joseph II, at that time co-regent of the Hapsburg realms with his mother, the Empress Maria Theresa, wrote "on the defects of the present system and the most effectual means of remedying them," and set out plans for reforming the monarchy. A section of this document was devoted specifically to the monasteries. Joseph II declared that they were too successful for the good of the state, and that they ensnared people into taking vows when they were too young to know what they wanted, thus depriving the state of the services of men of genius. He proposed to raise the age of profession to twenty-five, a considerable increase from the sixteen years prescribed after the Council of

214 Trent. He also proposed to establish a commission that would investigate all monasteries,
 215 reform them as necessary, and use them for pious purposes that would benefit the state,
 216 such as educating children “who while becoming Christians would become good
 217 subjects.” He spoke ill of Catholic education, much of which was in the hands of the
 218 monasteries, and proposed its radical reform. Although at the prompting of Maria-
 219 Theresa, Prince Kaunitz, her chief minister, wrote a lengthy response to the co-regent’s
 220 proposals at the time, defending the monasteries, Joseph II had nonetheless succeeded in
 221 giving the idea of monastic reform currency. By 1766, Kaunitz himself was promoting
 222 the idea of monastic reform in the Duchy of Milan of which he was effective ruler.¹⁵

223 In response to both internal and external pressures, monastic libraries and their
 224 decoration became one of the chief vehicles for the prelates of monasteries to express
 225 their personal position on these delicate issues, answering both criticisms from within the
 226 church about whether monks *should* engage in scholarship, and criticism from without
 227 the church that questioned whether monks *could* engage in scholarship. The decoration of
 228 eighteenth-century libraries in Austrian and Southern German monasteries generally
 229 advertised the selective acceptance of the Enlightenment and of secular learning within
 230 the context of Catholic reform, while still acknowledging the ultimate supremacy of
 231 revealed knowledge—divine wisdom—over human learning, although such learning was
 232 now given an implicit role in attaining divine wisdom. The iconography of such
 233 decorative schemes is therefore dominated by the virtues and divine wisdom, the
 234 mainstays of the sapiential tradition, the former necessary for the attainment of the latter.
 235 Alongside these we find representations of the disciplines of secular knowledge,
 236 including the liberal arts and natural sciences, as well as references to the classical

tradition, which, together with the secular disciplines, is acknowledged as leading toward revealed wisdom (Garberson, 104–42). Not surprisingly, the decoration of the library at Stift Zwettl displays this sapiential tradition. Troger's frescoes of the trials of Hercules, representing the virtuous seeker of divine wisdom who triumphs in the face of adversities, accompanied by the cardinal virtues and Sapientia, divine wisdom, preside over the most powerfully charged space in the monastery.

A similar iconographic scheme can be detected in the Zwettl centerpiece. Walthraud Neuwirth in her 1980 article, "Zur Geschichte des 'Zwettler Tafelaufsatzes,'" one of the very few extended art-historical treatments of this porcelain work, noted a broad correspondence between the programs of eighteenth-century palatial ceiling paintings, including those found in the great baroque monastic establishments, and contemporary table centerpieces. They often shared closely related subject matter, including a blend of classical mythological and Christian references, as we observe in the Zwettl library ceiling paintings, but also in the sculptural subjects of the porcelain centerpiece (7). While there exists a *conceptus pingendi*, or written program, for Troger's cycle of frescos in the monastery's library, penned by an unknown author in 1732, we lack any such written sources to guide our reading of the porcelain centerpiece (Gamerith, 33n3). But the centerpiece would have been read, whether an overarching iconographic program existed or not. Identifying the individual subjects represented and deciphering their possible relationships to one another was part of the diverting game of these ensembles. But I would argue that the iconographic types present in the final form of the Zwettler Tafelaufsatz, whether intended from the outset, or a product of the intervention of Fr. Assem, in fact present a much closer relationship with the ceiling

frescoes of the library than a simple correspondence in broad subject matter. Instead, the iconography of the porcelain sculptures seems to capture the sapiential tradition that informs much contemporary monastic library decoration. In addition to the virtues central to monastic life, the centerpiece includes representations of architecture, astronomy, literature and drama—in other words, secular disciplines, or parts of learning. A further grouping of amorous pairs of figures from classical mythology including Neptune and Amphitrite, Venus and Vulcan, Apollo and a muse, and Paris and Venus, represent the classical tradition, while the four seasons represent nature. Smaller figures depicting members of various trades and professions evoke both the mechanical arts, yet further parts of learning, and also society as a whole, suggesting engagement by an outward-looking monastic community with the wider world. Recent explorations of the relationship between the rococo, the style of the white porcelain sculptures of the centerpiece, and Catholicism in the Holy Roman Empire imply that heavenly happiness and earthly paradise were intimately linked in a rococo theology that encouraged engaging with all aspects of society and the world. In fact, Gauvin Alexander Bailey explicitly links such a notion with Catholic Enlightenment in Central Europe and with the quest for a civic, enlightened Christianity.¹⁶

If this reading of a sapiential iconography implicit in the final form of the centerpiece is correct, then the Zwettl Tafelaufsatz is no mere decorative party favor. Instead, it is an example of the rhetorical artworks found in monastic communities at this time that express the positions they adopted in contemporary debates around the proper balance between acquired human knowledge and revealed or divine wisdom. The centerpiece acknowledges the value of secular learning in monastic scholarship, perhaps

even more so than does Troger's earlier library scheme, where Hercules and the virtues become grounds for modern monastic virtue in select moral teachings of the ancients (Garberson, 120). And, as the eighteenth century progresses, we observe just such a growing engagement with secular learning and with new fields of knowledge appearing in many sapiential schemes of monastic library decoration (Garberson, 121).

The occasion, too, for which the centerpiece was commissioned is of relevance here. In 1768, Abbot Kollmann was celebrating fifty years in his profession as a Cistercian religious. Born in 1699, he was nineteen years of age at the time that he took his vows. In Joseph II's 1765 *Memorandum*, the future emperor had called for the minimum age of profession to be raised to twenty-five to prevent young people, through inexperience and ignorance, being inappropriately entrapped in the monastic life. The celebrations around the abbot's jubilee were thus not only a pointed statement about the significance of secular learning in monastic life and a defense of monastic scholarship in response to attacks on the supposed intellectual sloth and indolence of religious communities, but they were also a defense of the very idea of monasticism itself. In the libretto to Haydn's *Applausus*, the virtue of Strength sings telling words: "The fierce tempests of our times, as much as they may rage with their terrible roar, they cannot depopulate this house" (Gamerith, 39).

We see here, in Abbot Kollmann's jubilee celebration, not an iteration of a tired baroque court ritual, but a sophisticated deployment of a variety of artforms in the abbot's private apartments to express a Catholic, Enlightenment monastic ideal. The porcelain centerpiece takes sapiential iconography out of the libraries, and brings it into the spaces of formal court ceremonial, where the monastery's princely ruler negotiated

and defended the institution's place in the wider empire. Joyful commemoration of an event in the life of an individual, Abbot Kollmann's profession, the communal centerpiece can be understood to function more generally as a statement of solidarity by the brethren who commissioned it and as a defiant endorsement of a way of life that was becoming progressively more embattled. The coordination of artforms and iconography—the painted sapiential cycle in the library, the musical performance, the Schauessen of which the centerpiece forms an important part—engaged all of the senses of the participants, sight, taste, smell, hearing, in a spectacle that employed baroque spatial aesthetics to represent principles of the Catholic Enlightenment.

<A>The Meaning of Porcelain

There is one important aspect of the Zwettl centerpiece we still need to address, one figure group that we have not yet examined. As Neuwirth has observed, we can no longer be certain about the precise positioning of many of the centerpiece's figures upon the mirrored plateau, because we possess no original display scheme for the work. But the January 1768 invoice from the Vienna manufactory does give us some indication of the positions occupied by some of the figures. Four Seiten Crouppes are mentioned, as well as four smaller examples of the same. The relative scale of the various porcelain sculptures gives us some sense of what the arrangement must have been, with the largest of the sculptures toward the center, and with the various groups to either side, probably in descending scale. The individual figures were likely arranged around the perimeter of the plateau, again with the smaller figures farthest from the center. The invoice also mentions a Crouppe in die Mitten, which clearly occupied the central position of the entire

sculptural ensemble. This group, at 33.5 cm, the largest in the centerpiece, represents an unusual subject; referred to in the literature as die Porzellanerzeugung, it shows putti engaged in producing porcelain (figure 3).

Gamerith has argued that this figure group stands at the center of the representations of the arts to express the triumph of porcelain production, surrounded by those intellectual pursuits that inform the subjects it portrays (39). If Gamerith's argument about the addition of images of the cardinal virtues to the centerpiece as a corrective afterthought is accurate, why did the additions stop at the four virtues and not include the figure of Sapientia (or Theologia in the *Applausus* libretto), the central figure in a sapiential iconography that the presence of the four virtues evokes in Troger's ceiling paintings in the library? Were just the four virtues added, retaining porcelain production as the central figure, for the sake of simple visual symmetry? Gamerith readily acknowledges that the originator of the celebrations for Abbot Kollmann's jubilee, Fr. Assem, was known as an author of baroque rhetorical diversions, including perhaps the text of the *Applausus* (37). If he instigated the additions to the centerpiece, would he have been satisfied with an incomplete allegorical invention?

I would like to propose that, beyond the group's engaging self-referential character—porcelain figures making porcelain figures—the image of porcelain production can in fact be read as completing the allegorical grouping formed by the sculptures of the four virtues. The ubiquity of porcelain in our lives today often leads us to see it purely as a utilitarian commodity. But for much of the eighteenth century, porcelain was a symbolically charged, representative material.¹⁷ All of the great, early continental porcelain factories were not, strictly speaking, commercial concerns, but were

instead court institutions. Prior to the eighteenth century, porcelain was only available as
 an import from Asia, and its collection and display was a marker of status amongst
 European elites: possession of Asian porcelain demonstrated access to the global trade
 networks that facilitated its transfer to Europe. The mastery of kaolin porcelain in
 Dresden in 1708 was one of the major technological achievements of the eighteenth
 century in Europe.¹⁸ From the outset, the material assumed an important representative
 function at the court of Augustus the Strong, where it symbolized the achievements of the
 Wettin king-electors. This had much to do with how the secret of porcelain production
 was discovered. European porcelain was not a product of traditional ceramic industries.
 The persons responsible for perfecting a formula for hard-paste porcelain—
 mathematician, physicist, physician and philosopher Ehrenfried Walther von
 Tschirnhaus, and Johann Friedrich Böttger, an apothecary, metallurgist, and professional
 alchemist—were not mere potters; instead, they were natural philosophers, and the milieu
 in which they worked was that of the court-sponsored laboratory.¹⁹ Natural philosophy in
 the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries encompassed a broad range of disciplines, all
 concerned with understanding the natural world. Some of these intellectual endeavors
 would be adopted by the Enlightenment academy, becoming the foundations of scientific
 knowledge. Other aspects of natural philosophy—like astrology, for example—would
 find themselves excluded from the realm of science and relegated to the realm of the
 occult.

Porcelain occupies a position on one of these fault lines in the historiography of
 science. A material whose fabrication had eluded European technicians for centuries,
 porcelain's successful manufacture is regularly construed as a triumph of investigative

chemistry and one of the chief material technological discoveries of the Enlightenment. But porcelain production was for much of the eighteenth century closely associated with the study of alchemy, that field of natural philosophy that concerned itself with revealing the nature of matter and discovering means to manipulate and transform it.²⁰ Johann Friedrich Böttger, a key figure in the mastery of a porcelain technology, was active in Berlin and Dresden as an alchemist. The modern historiography of science has, until very recently, drawn a firm distinction between alchemy—characterized as a fraudulent pursuit practiced by charlatans, banished from the canons of rational learning of the academy by the end of the first quarter of the eighteenth century—and chemistry, the system of rational knowledge about the nature of the material universe pursued through experimental, laboratory-based procedures. Historians of science such as Lawrence Principe and Marco Beretta, however, have shown how the search for a clear-cut distinction between alchemy and chemistry in the eighteenth century is anachronistic; they explain that many natural philosophers engaged in laboratory investigation and associated by later historiography with the Enlightenment science of chemistry in fact spent much of their careers simultaneously pursuing activities traditionally associated with alchemical knowledge.²¹ Alchemy was characterized, first and foremost, by its laboratory-based procedures that encompassed a broad range of undertakings, all of which involved transforming materials, including manufacturing pharmaceuticals, refining metals, producing dye, not just pursuing *chrysopoeia*, the transmutation of base metals into gold, with which alchemy is most commonly associated today.

European porcelain's origins in alchemy had a profound effect on the meaning of the material in court culture. The transmutation of raw earth into translucent, white

398 porcelain—white gold, as it was known—could be understood as a resounding
 399 affirmation of the transmutational goals pursued by alchemy. Porcelain production
 400 became not merely symbolic of Saxon technical achievement, although it was clear proof
 401 of prowess in this field, it also functioned as a metaphor for power. Alchemical learning
 402 was deeply embedded in a theocentric view of creation; the secrets of successful
 403 alchemical transmutation had long been regarded as a divine gift, so success in creating
 404 porcelain implied divine favor (Principe, *Secrets*, 192ff). Saxon porcelain was proof of
 405 the Saxon elector’s status as an anointed prince and his God-given power to command the
 406 very matter of the created universe.²² With the mastery of a porcelain technology in
 407 Dresden, Augustus the Strong was also able to claim that he had surpassed the emperor of
 408 China, a figure who had up until that point represented an ideal absolute ruler.²³ The
 409 Saxon discovery happened to coincide with the beginnings of a radical shift in European
 410 attitudes toward China, triggered, as Christopher Johns argues, by the Kangxi emperor’s
 411 definitive rejection of Christianity. Whether or not the discovery was part of the shift, it
 412 can only have reinforced the idea that it was the Saxon, not the Chinese monarch, that
 413 God favored.²⁴ Positioned somewhere between “naturalia” and “artificialia,” porcelain’s
 414 alchemical origins lent the material a sacral quality, a notion absent from the science of
 415 chemistry.²⁵ Although mercantilist considerations were not absent in the quest by
 416 European courts to possess the secret of porcelain production, the proliferation of
 417 princely sponsored porcelain manufactories across continental Europe should be seen not
 418 primarily as examples of economic competition between states, but instead as evidence of
 419 the rapid apprehension of porcelain production as a new and essential element in the
 420 symbolic arsenal of absolutism (Johns, *China*, 53). Indeed, in the 1758 founding decree

of the Ludwigsburg factory, Herzog Carl Eugen von Württemberg famously declared that command of a porcelain factory was, for a prince of his rank, “ein notwendiges Attribut des Glanzes und der Würde” [“an essential attribute of splendour and dignity”].²⁶

Porcelain’s alchemical heritage located the material firmly in the representational world of the absolutist court. But simultaneously, the rediscovery of porcelain production by laboratory-based natural philosophers saw the material come to be increasingly associated with the rational, laboratory-based investigation of the material universe typical of Enlightenment heroes like Antoine Lavoisier (Beretta, 69–107). At one level, a triumph of natural scientific learning, the mastery of porcelain reflects the expanded fields of Enlightenment knowledge that progressive monastic scholarship sought, even if tentatively, to embrace. But as an exercise in alchemical transmutation and the perfection of base matter, porcelain creation was emblematic of the perfection of knowledge that only revelation, not mere human learning, could bring. In an image of porcelain production, the idea of divine wisdom, touchstone of the sapiential iconographic program, is introduced into the Zwettl centerpiece, completing the allegorical grouping of the four virtues.

The final form of the Zwettl centerpiece thus acknowledges the value of secular learning in the world of monastic scholarship, affirming the role of the monasteries of the old orders as spaces where engagement with Enlightenment learning took place. But, typical of the qualified acceptance of Enlightenment ideas characteristic of the Catholic Enlightenment, the absolute limits of human learning and the ultimate authority of revealed knowledge is emphasized by porcelain’s alchemical and sacral character. In the contemporary court culture cultivated in the formal apartments of the monastery’s abbot,

porcelain production was ultimately a gift of revealed knowledge. By commissioning the centerpiece from the Imperial and Royal Porcelain Factory in Vienna, a manufactory owned since 1744 by the Habsburg state, the Cistercian brethren of Zwettl were expressing loyalty to the empire, eschewing the products of foreign manufacturers, and indicating their familiarity with, and closeness to, court practice in Vienna—in 1761, Maria Theresa had declared that from that point on, formal table decorations at court were to consist exclusively of porcelain figures, excluding the traditional sugar sculptures that had served similar functions.²⁷ But the Cistercians were also endorsing the traditional order of imperial society and the position of monasticism therein. Habsburg porcelain was material proof of the divine favor enjoyed by Maria Theresa, the anointed Habsburg ruler, embodiment of the *pietas austriaca*, and protector of monasticism in her realms.²⁸ It was thus an appropriate talisman for Cistercian monks expressing commitment to an Enlightenment monastic ideal.

Even if the final configuration of the centerpiece's iconography was a product of intervention by the monastery's learned prior, the rhetorical intent of the work and its relationship to other artworks at Zwettl seem clear. In the Zwettler Tafelaufsatz, we have a fashionable artwork where the medium itself is as symbolically charged as the imagery. Just as the iconography of divine wisdom ~~resembles~~ recalls the decoration of Zwettl's library for guests assembled in the abbatial Festsaal, where celebratory dining and musical entertainment proclaim a Catholic Enlightenment vision of human learning and monasticism's role in its propagation, the porcelain that graces the festive banqueting table both physically embodies this Enlightenment epistemology, and evokes the presence of the anointed Habsburg ruler who is its guardian. A rich array of artworks

displayed in a baroque courtly ritual that engages the full range of the senses impresses upon its participating audience a vision for the place of Catholic monasticism in imperial society. An intriguing overlap of spatial realms—monastic library, prelate’s princely apartment, and alchemical laboratory—is achieved through artworks whose baroque character embodies Enlightenment content in a fashion that reveals the ambiguities of the Catholic Enlightenment.

Notes

¹*Enlightenment and Catholicism in Europe: A Transnational History*, ed. Jeffrey D. Burson and Ulrich L. Lehner (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 2014), and Christopher M. S. Johns, *The Visual Culture of Catholic Enlightenment* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ., 2015).

²Dino Carpanetta and Giuseppe Ricuperati, *Italy in the Age of Reason, 1685–1789* (London: Longman, 1987), 122–29

³Robert N. Freeman, “The Applausus Musicus, or Singgedicht: A Neglected Genre of Eighteenth-Century Musical Theatre,” in *Music in Eighteenth-Century Austria*, ed. David Wyn Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1996), 197–209.

⁴H. Özelt, “Geschichte der Sängerknaben im Stifte Zwettl,” *Jahresbericht des Bundes-Gymnasiums und Realgymnasiums Krems* (1959–60): 11–29.

⁵Andreas Gamerith, “At a Loss for Words: The Zwettl Centrepiece and Its Origins,” in *300 Jahre Wiener Porzellanmanufaktur*, ed. Christoph Thun-Hohenstein and Rainald Franz (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche, 2017), 37.

⁶*Joseph Haydn, Applausus 1768*, ed. Heinrich Wiens and Irmgard Becker-Glauch (München-Duisburg: Henle, 1969), supplement to the music recording, vii–x.

⁷The portrait of Abbot Kollman today is in the abbot’s quarters at Stift Zwettl Abbey. On the Haydn letter, see *Haydn, Applausus*, ed. Wien and Becker-Glauch, 2.

⁸Waltraud Neuwirth, “Zur Geschichte des ‘Zwettler Tafelaufsatzes,’” *Alte und Moderne Kunst* 170 (1980): 2–7, especially 3.

⁹Museum für Angewandte Kunst in Vienna, Inv. Nr. Ke 6823.

¹⁰Katharina Hantschmann, “The Arts of Dining,” in *Fired by Passion: Vienna Baroque Porcelain of Claudius Innocentius Du Pacquier*, ed. Meredith Chilton and Claudia Lehner-Jobst, 3 vols. (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art, 2009), 2:773–91.

¹¹Gottfreid Siegmund Corvinus, *Nutzbares Galantes und Curioses Frauenzimmer Lexicon* (1715), 3rd ed. (Leipzig: Johann Gleditsch, 1773), 129.

¹²Eric Garberson, *Eighteenth-Century Monastic Libraries in Southern Germany and Austria: Architecture and Decorations*, Saecula Spiritualia 37 (Baden-Baden: Valentin Koerner, 1998).

¹³Abbé Armand Jean de Rancé, *De La Sainteté et des Devoirs de la Vie Monastique* (1683) (Reprint Farnborough: Gregg International, 1972), 292–304.

¹⁴Jean Mabillon, *Treatise on Monastic Studies*, trans. John McDonald (Lanham: Univ. Press of America, 2004).

¹⁵Derek Beales, *Enlightenment and Reform in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), 231–33.

¹⁶Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *The Spiritual Rococo: Decor and Divinity from the Salons of Paris to the Missions of Patagonia* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 115–18.

¹⁷For a recent important conspectus of scholarship on the meaning of porcelain in eighteenth-century Europe, see *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain*, ed. Alden Cavanaugh and Michael Yonan (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

¹⁸For an overview of the discovery of the arcanum process in Dresden, see Christina H. Nelson and Letitia Roberts, *A History of Eighteenth-Century German Porcelain: The Warda Stevens Stout Collection* (Memphis: Dixon Gallery and Gardens, 2013), 117–83.

¹⁹Martin Schönfeld, “Was There a Western Inventor of Porcelain?,” *Technology and Culture* 39 (1998): 716–27.

²⁰On the history of alchemy in European thought, see Lawrence Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 2013).

²¹Lawrence M. Principe, “The End of Alchemy? The Repudiation and Persistence of Chrysopoeia at the Académie Royale des Sciences in the Eighteenth Century,” *Osiris* 29 (2014): 96–116; Marco Beretta, “Transmutations and Frauds in Enlightened Paris: Lavoisier and Alchemy,” in *Fakes!? Hoaxes, Counterfeits, and Deception in Early Modern Science*, ed. Beretta and Maria Conforti (Sagamore Beach: Science History, 2014).

²²Pamela H. Smith, *The Business of Alchemy: Science and Culture in the Holy Roman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton Univ., 1994), 182.

²³Julia Weber, “Copying and Competition: Meissen Porcelain and the Saxon Triumph over the Emperor of China,” in *The Transformative Power of the Copy: A Transcultural and Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Corinna Forberg and Philipp W. Stockhammer (Heidelberg: Univ. of Heidelberg, 2017), 331–73.

²⁴Christopher M. S. Johns, *China and the Church: Chinoiserie in Global Context* (Oakland: Univ. of California, 2016).

²⁵For definitions of the terms “naturalia” and “artificialia,” see Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux, Paris, Venise: xvie-xviiiè siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987). On porcelain’s dual status as both natural and artificial material, see Michael Yonan, “Igneous Architecture: Porcelain, Natural Philosophy, and the Rococo,” in *Cultural Aesthetics*, ed. Cavanaugh and Yonan, 65–85; Stacey Sloboda, “Displaying Materials: Porcelain and Natural History in the Duchess of Portland’s Museum,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 43 (2010): 455–72; and Vanessa Alayrac-Fielding, “From the Curious to the ‘Artinatural’: The Meaning of Oriental Porcelain in 17th and 18th-Century English Interiors,” *Miranda* 7 (2012), online at <<http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/4390>>.

²⁶Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart, 5 April 1758, A 248 Bü 2430. The Württemberg Court at Stuttgart had a long-standing association with alchemical research. Tara Nummedal, *Alchemy and Authority in the Holy Roman Empire* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 2007), 32, 122–40.

²⁷Ingrid Haslinger, *Küche und Tafelkultur am kaiserlichen Hofe zu Wien: Zur Geschichte von Hofküche, Zuckerbäckerei, und Hofsilber-, und Tafelkammer* (Bern: Benteli, 1993), 51

²⁸Anna Coreth, *Pietas Austriaca* (West Lafayette: Purdue Univ., 2004), 55–56,
and Michael Yonan, *Empress Maria Theresa and the Politics of Habsburg Imperial Art*
(University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ., 2011), 38.

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