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Date:
2024

Citation:
Martin, M. (2024). Sentimental Porcelain: Meissen Porcelain and Enlightenment Sensibility in Late Eighteenth-Century Saxony. Diciottesimo Secolo, 9, pp.75-84. https://doi.org/10.36253/ds-15043.

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Firenze University Press
https://oajournals.fupress.net/index.php/ds

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**Citation:** Martin, M. (2024). Sentimental Porcelain. Meissen Porcelain and Enlightenment Sensibility in Late Eighteenth-Century Saxony. *Diciottesimo Secolo* Vol. 9: 75-84. doi: 10.36253/ds-15043

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**Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

**Competing Interests:** The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

**Edited by:** Andrea Gatti.

Dossier: L'amore al tempo dei lumi

# Sentimental Porcelain. Meissen Porcelain and Enlightenment Sensibility in Late Eighteenth-Century Saxony

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**Abstract.** Meissen porcelain objects representing sentimental subjects – such as scenes of familial and romantic love, and the joys of childhood – are documents of fundamental importance for understanding the penetration of Enlightenment ideas into late eighteenth-century Saxony. They speak to the reception of key Enlightenment literary works in social contexts characterised by a new elite made up of wealthy members of the bourgeoisie and liberal aristocrats united in their embrace of progressive ideas about the relationship between reason and sentiment. Embedded as they were in very specific social practices – the sociable rituals of hot beverage consumption, and cultures of viewing and conversation in the domestic interior – these porcelain objects are primary evidence for identifying and reconstructing emotional communities founded on a shared embrace of Enlightenment sensibility amongst the upper echelons of Saxon society in the last decades of the eighteenth century.

**Keywords:** Meissen porcelain, Sentimentality, Emotional community, Enlightenment.

In the final decades of the eighteenth century, in the wake of the devastation of Saxony during the Seven Years War, the electoral Meissen porcelain factory faced considerable financial difficulties, so much so that at one point the closure of the factory was being seriously considered. The Saxon conflict with Prussia had been particularly traumatic for Meissen. The forces of Frederick the Great had occupied the factory, carting off the stocks of porcelain, as well as forcibly moving many workers to Prussia where they were put to work in Frederick's new porcelain factory in Berlin[1]. The kilns and machines at Meissen had been destroyed in advance of the Prussians' arrival, in order to prevent production secrets from falling into the invader's hands[2]. After the conclusion of the war in 1763, the economic collapse of Saxony, compounded by the renunciation of the Polish crown by the Wettins, saw the main-

[1] N.W. Wraxall, *Memoirs of the Courts of Berlin, Dresden, Warsaw and Vienna in the Years 1777, 1778 and 1779*, Strahan, Cadell and Davies, London 1800, vol. 1, pp. 213-214.
[2] A. Loesch, *Sentimental, Enlightened and Classical? Meissen Porcelain from 1763 to 1815*, in *Triumph of the Blue Swords. Meissen Porcelain for Aristocracy and Bourgeoisie 1710-1815*, ed. by U. Pietsch and C. Banz, E.A. Seemann and Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Leipzig-Dresden 2020, p. 39.

stay of Meissen's traditional markets, the Saxon court and the elite circles in its immediate vicinity, evaporate overnight. Lack of funds resulted in poorly paid, unmotivated workers, and the necessary artistic innovation required to revive the factory's fortunes proved near impossible to achieve. All of these difficulties saw Meissen rapidly supplanted by the French royal Sèvres manufactory as the preeminent European porcelain manufacturer.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Meissen's loss of its role as leading innovator in the European porcelain industry has led to a rather blanket characterisation of the factory's production in the post Seven Years War period as of minimal artistic quality and interest[3]. From the mid-1760s, Meissen struggled to transform its repertoire in order to achieve financial stability. The innovation and originality of Meissen's production during the reigns of Augustus II and Augustus III, epitomised by the creations of the great porcelain sculptor Johann Joachim Kändler, was no more. Kändler remained *Modellmeister* at the factory until his death in 1775, where he worked in a modified form of his characteristic baroque style. Although still highly individual, Kändler's work was no longer at the leading edge of fashion which was more and more dominated by neoclassicism. Unsurprisingly, it was frequently to France, more specifically the Sèvres factory, that Meissen turned for inspiration in order to enhance the marketability of its products[4]. While the late eighteenth-century production at Meissen is frequently associated with the leadership of Count Camillo Marcolini, minister to prince-elector Frederick Augustus (later King Frederick Augustus I of Saxony), and director of the Meissen factory from 1774 to 1813, in fact, transformations in Meissen's output are already detectable in the later 1760s. Especially significant was the recruitment in 1764 of the French sculptor Michel Victor Acier, a Versailles-born, *académie royale* trained artist, as the factory's second *Modellmeister*, in an attempt to update the repertoire of small-scale porcelain sculptures with more modern subject matter[5].

Acier was responsible for a series of sculptures which have profoundly shaped many twentieth-century commentators' and collectors' negative assessments of Meissen's production during the Marcolini period, who have derided them especially for their obvious sentimentality. The English ceramic historian W B Honey was particularly scathing of a number of Acier's models, for example describing the groups *The Broken Eggs* and *The Broken Mirror* as «tiresome and sentimental», and as «amorous allegories of a particularly offensive kind»[6] (figg. 1-2). These sculptures, along with scenes of family life with titles like *Die glücklichen Eltern* (The happy parents), *Die gute Mutter* (The good mother), *Die Sanftheit der Kindheit* (The gentleness of Childhood) , and *Drei spielende Kinder* (Three playing children), inhabit a world of sentimentalism similar to that explored by the late eighteenth-century artist Jean-Baptiste Greuze, the foremost exponent of "Peinture morale" and a significant influence on Acier[7]. This sentimentality may not have been in step with the tastes of art historians, collectors and museum curators for much of the twentieth century – Acier's models are generally not well represented in museum collections – but it was very much a part of the Enlightenment sensibility that characterised late eighteenth-century European society.

The porcelain sculptures of Acier – together with his assistant at Meissen, Johann Carl Schönheit – are not the only manifestations of sentimentality to be found in Meissen porcelain of the Marcolini period. Virtually unique to Meissen amongst German factories of the later eighteenth century is the production of so-called *Literaturporzellan* (figg. 3-4). These are service wares, usually for the consumption of tea and coffee, produced between 1775 and 1790 and decorated with characters or scenes deriving from popular contemporary literature about ill-fated lovers, especially the 1774 *Die Leiden des junges Werthers* of Goethe, but also the tale of Abelard and Heloise from the 1761 novel *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloise* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Theodosius and Constantia from *The correspondence of Theodosius and Constantia* by Joseph Langhorne of 1766[8].

Recent research in both the history of emotions and the study of material culture during the Middle Ages and early modernity has emphasized the relationship of people to things, things to people, and people to other people, via things. It is this latter idea that particularly interests me. In this paper I wish to examine the prod-

[3] K. Berling, *Meissen China: An Illustrated History*, Reprint of 1910 edition, Dover Publications, New York 1972, p. 81; O. Pelka, *Alt-Meissen*, Schmidt & Günther, Leipzig 1923, p. 166; T.H. Clarke, *Marcolini Meissen Figures, Engraved by Friedrich Elsasser 1785-1792*, Th. Heneage Art Books, London 1988, p. 7.

[4] *Triumph of the Blue Swords*, cit., pp. 379-380, no. 486.

[5] A complete list of Acier's models for the Meissen factory can be found in W. Goder, *Michel Victor Acier zum 250. Geburtstag*, «Keramos», 112, 1986, p. 27.

[6] W.B. Honey, *Dresden China: An Introduction to the Study of Meissen Porcelain*, A&C Black, London 1934, p. 140.

[7] Clarke, *Marcolini Meissen Figures,* pp. 9-10, 26.

[8] A. Müller-Scherf, *Wertherporzellan: Lotte und Werther auf Meißener Porzellan im Zeitalter der Empfindsamkeit*, Michael Imhof Verl., Petersberg 2009; P.-Ch. Wegner, *Literatur auf Porzellan. Abälard und Heloise: die "Leidensgeschichte" und die "Briefe"*, in *Popescher Manier auf Meißner Porzellan der Marcolini-Zeit*, «Keramos», 202, 2008, pp. 39-50; Id., *Literatur auf Porzellan. Langhornes Theodosius und Constantia auf einer Meißner Tasse der Marcolini-Zeit*, «Keramos», 202, 2008, pp. 51-56.

ucts of the Meissen factory that feature imagery founded in enlightenment sentiment from the last four decades of the eighteenth century through the lens of Barbara Rosenwein's notion of emotional community. Much of Rosenwein's work focusses on the patterns of language deployed in the communication of emotion that define the particular norms of emotional valuation and expression that characterise a community – the emotions that they value, devalue, or ignore; the nature of the affective bonds between people that they recognize; and the modes of emotional expression that they expect, encourage, tolerate, and reject[9]. This focus on language has characterised much work in the history of emotions. But more recent scholarship has begun to explore the significance of material culture as a source for emotional history. In the 2018 collection *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History*, the editors rightly assert that «material culture itself may be productively understood as a "form" of emotional expression, capable of embodying the emotions of individuals and groups»[10]. The studies in this volume show the variety of ways in which objects from the past – often passed over in favour of textual evidence – may be interpreted as "sources" of emotion in pre-modern history.

In this paper, I wish to suggest that the consumption and display or use of porcelain artworks whose appearance was shaped by popular Enlightenment ideas about sensibility – the nature of romantic love, familial love and the emotional world of childhood – functioned in elite circles in Saxony to define an emotional community; that a shared visual and material, rather than linguistic, vocabulary of domestic viewing and display defined the progressive elites of post 1764 Saxony, binding them into a coherent community. In particular, I wish to suggest that the circulation of these images in porcelain, rather than as prints or paintings, was significant. Porcelain as a material retained associations with Saxon identity in the late eighteenth century, in part because of the pioneering role of the Meissen factory in European porcelain art and technology, and because of the importance of Meissen porcelain in Saxon diplomacy during the reigns of Augustus II and Augustus III, where it served to project Saxon cultural power across Europe. Although by the 1770s, European market pre-eminence had passed decisively to the royal French manufactory at Sèvres, porcelain nevertheless remained important in Saxon culture as a national luxury product. The material porcelain itself thus contributed to the function of these artworks in helping to define an enlightened Saxon elite. Although, in the scope of this article, we will consider a small group of Meissen sentimental porcelain works in detail, sentimental porcelain was a significant phenomenon in late eighteenth-century Saxon porcelain. Friedrich Elsasser's *Contouren*, discussed below, records over thirty sentimental sculptures produced by Meissen in the 1780s and 1790s and this clearly speaks to their marketplace success, alongside sculptures reflecting the neoclassical taste which was ascendant across Europe. Our analysis of these sentimental images and their significance could easily be extended. In particular, an area which is not explored in any detail here is the occurrence of these porcelains in household inventories of the period. Further exploration in this area would certainly reinforce the proposition made here linking the consumption of sentimental Meissen porcelain works with the new financial and social elites of *Rétablissement* Saxony. The work of Michael North has already revealed that ownership of Meissen porcelain outside of elite social circles was relatively rare in Germany during the last quarter of the eighteenth century[11].

Ultimately, this paper aims to contribute to the growing call amongst art historians working in the area of the so-called *arte minore* of the eighteenth century for these objects not to be dismissed as mere decorations, but instead be recognised as significant aesthetic expressions, both material and visual, of the compelling cultural interests and concerns of the age that produced them[12]. They are primary sources, as valuable as any written document, for reconstructing the thought worlds of past societies.

## ENLIGHTENMENT AND SENTIMENTALITY IN SAXONY

The importance of sentimentality in the production of the Meissen factory during the last three decades of the eighteenth century is undeniable. An important source for the Acier sculptures on sentimental subjects,

[9] B. Rosenwein, *Emotional communities in the early Middle Ages*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca (NY) 2006; Ead., *Problems and Methods in the History of Emotions*, «Passions in Context», I, 2010, pp. 2-32.

[10] *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History*, ed. by S. Downes, S. Holloway and S. Randles, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018, p. 11.

[11] M. North, *'Material Delight and the Joy of Living': Cultural Consumption in the Age of Enlightenment in Germany*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2008, pp. 162-167, esp. p. 165.

[12] E.g. *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain*, ed. by A. Cavanaugh and M. Yonan, Ashgate, Farnham (Surrey) 2010; S. Sloboda, *Chinoiserie: Commerce and Critical Ornament in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2014; M. Martin, *Swiss Porcelain and Slavery in the Global Eighteenth Century*, in *Une Suisse exotique? Regarder l'ailleurs en Suisse au siècles des Lumières*, dir. N. Etienne *et al.*, Diaphanes, Zurich 2020, pp. 47-62.

the so-called *Contouren* published by Friedrich Elsasser between 1785 and 1792 and preserved today in the Berlin *Kunstbibliothek* and the Meissen *Werksarchiv*, are testimony to this. Elsasser was an assistant director of the *weisses Corps* at the Meissen factory, the department responsible for all the processes involved in the creation of sculptures and figures up until the point when they were sent for firing[13]. His *Contouren* consist of copper engraved line drawings, in the neoclassical manner typical of artists like Flaxman, of sculptures produced at Meissen. These engravings are not designs for porcelain sculptures, but rather are executed after Marcolini period models. The 200 or so illustrations, from around 1,000 models produced by the factory between 1764 and 1788, are thus a catalogue of what Elsasser must have been deemed the best, or most saleable models, and so form a remarkable document of contemporary taste in the late 1780s and early 1790s[14]. As well as illustrations of figures modelled after antique sculpture, reflecting the increasing currency of neoclassical taste at Meissen, the *Contouren* include all of the key sentimental models created by Acier, pointing to their contemporary popularity.

Putting to one side criticisms of Acier's skill as a sculptor, the rejection of the subject matter treated of in his work at Meissen reflects, not the attitudes of his own age, but rather the post eighteenth-century attitudes on display in the 1862 essay of the Goncourt Brothers wherein the pathos and moralism – the sentimentality – of an eighteenth-century artist like Greuze's work is dismissed as hypocrisy and manipulation[15]. This rejection of sentimentality was founded upon the assumption that it was something to be construed in opposition to rationality. Such attitudes were prevalent in much twentieth-century understanding of the Enlightenment. More recent scholarship on the eighteenth-century culture of sensibility has challenged such ideas, complicating the notion of the Enlightenment as the 'age of reason', by contending that sentimentalism was an integral part of the Enlightenment as a reformist project[16]. Michael Frazer has explored what he identifies as the two primary streams of eighteenth-century analysis of moral and political reflection – the *rationalist*, corresponding to the common conception of the eighteenth century as the age of reason; and the *sentimentalist*, suggesting an age not of reason alone, but also of reflectively refined feelings shared among individuals via the all-important faculty of sympathy[17]. In the field of art history, Emma Barker, discussing Greuze and sentimentalism, argues that Greuze's paintings offered a Utopian vision of an enlightened social order and helped bring this new society into being by fostering a sense of identification with that social order in the viewer[18]. As David Denby has argued, sentimentalism has an enlightened, democratizing character insofar as its project of moral solidarity involves a breaking down of barriers between different classes[19].

The prevalence of sentimentality in much of the Meissen factory's production in the decades from the 1770s to the 1790s clearly speaks to the currency of a culture of sensibility amongst Saxon elites, the primary consumers of such objects. In the wake of the Seven Years War, Saxony experienced radical political and social change. The economic devastation resulting from this conflict, together with the loss of the Polish crown by the Wettin dynasty, saw Saxony reduced to a state of minor significance in central Europe, a region which was now very much the stage on which the political rivalries of an ascendant Prussia and Hapsburg Austria were played out. The Saxon state was also transformed politically by the adoption of enlightened absolutist principles by the successors of Augustus III, Friedrich Christian and Friedrich Augustus III. The new political climate in Saxony nurtured progressive intellectual circles amongst both the aristocratic and educated bourgeois elites. It is the embrace of the work of intellectuals like Goethe and the principles of enlightenment sensibility that we see registered in the productions of the Meissen porcelain factory.

Augustus III's immediate successor, Frederick Christian, had adopted many principles associated with "Enlightened absolutism" even before he assumed the electoral dignity in 1763, famously recording in his journal in 1752: «Princes exist for their subjects, not subjects for their princes […]. His subjects' wealth, public credit and a well-standing army make up the true happiness of a prince […]. He must be primarily concerned

[13] Clarke, *Marcolini Meissen Figures*, p. 5.

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 6, n. 2.

[15] Assessments of Acier's talent are mixed: Clarke and Walch are unimpressed by his work, Loesch praises his skill. Clarke, *Marcolini Meissen Figures*, p. 7; O. Walch, *Meissen Porcelain*, Cassell, London 1981, pp. 153-156; Loesch, *Sentimental, Enlightened and Classical?*, p. 42; E. and J. de Goncourt, *L'Art du dix-huitième siècle*, E. Dentu, Paris 1882, vol. 2, pp. 3-101.

[16] See D.J. Denby, *Sentimental Narrative and the Social Order in France, 1760-1820*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York 1994, pp. 2-6.

[17] M.L. Frazer, *The Enlightenment of Sympathy: Justice and the Moral Sentiments in the Eighteenth Century and Today*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010, p. 5.

[18] E. Barker, *Putting the Viewer in the Frame: Greuze as Sentimentalist*, «Studies in the History of Art», 72, 2007 (Symposium Papers XLIX: *French Genre Painting in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Ph. Conisbee) pp. 104-127.

[19] See Denby, *Sentimental Narrative*, pp. 9, 79-80, 95-96.

with the preservation and defense of his country»[20]. For some time opposed to the domestic and foreign policies of his father's ministers, Heinrich Count von Brühl (1700-1763) and Johann Christian Count von Hennicke (1692-1752), upon his accession, Friedrich Christian immediately embarked upon a program to reconstruct war-ravaged Saxony, working with a group of intelligent and committed ministers to introduce Enlightenment principles into state affairs, embracing administrative and economic reform, including austerity measures at the Dresden court, in a program known as the *Rétablissement*[21]. Members of the Saxon bourgeoisie enjoyed increased participation in government, better relations with Prussia were pursued in foreign policy, while Friedrich Christian sought to instil in Saxony the "Prussian" values of thrift and practicality, at the same time emulating the aim of Frederick II "the Great" to be «the first servant of the state»[22].

Frederick Christian only ruled for 73 days, being felled by smallpox in December 1763, but the transformations of the Saxon state he set in train were continued by his successors. Friedrich Augustus III came to power in 1768 upon attaining his majority, after five years of regency under his mother Kurfürstin Maria Antonia of Bavaria and his uncle Prince Xaver. Unable to pursue an independent foreign policy, Friedrich Augustus focussed his energies on renewing the state's internal structures. His policies of Enlightened absolutism created conditions highly favourable to the Saxon middle classes, enabling them to achieve new levels of financial prosperity and, together with their assumption of more, and more significant, roles in government, this effectively laid the foundations for a new Saxon elite of bourgeois intellectuals and liberal aristocrats. Liberal ideas were readily disseminated, with private salons and friendship circles of intellectuals playing a key role in this development. Halle and Leipzig became centres of the late Enlightenment and middle-class emancipation. In Dresden, the home of jurist Christian Gottfried Körner became the focus of an intellectual and artistic circle dedicated to the values of liberty, equality and fraternity[23]. Körner's guests included many of the most important thinkers of the day: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Friedrich Schiller, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Georg Joachim Göschen, Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt, Carl Friedrich Zelter, Johann Gottlieb Naumann Friedrich Nicolai, August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel, Ludwig Tieck, Carl August Böttiger, Johann Gottfreid Herder, Casper David Friedrich, Abraham Gottlob Werner, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Ernst Moritz Arndt[24]. Freedom of expression and liberality characterised the circle's values. Women were freely admitted to the gatherings where wealthy middle-class patrons and enlightened young aristocrats mixed, and social issues were discussed, art was critiqued, literary readings took place and music was performed[25].

Körner's Dresden circle, where bourgeois and aristocrat mingled in a manner that would have been unthinkable in the Dresden of the 1750s, provides us with a clear example of an emotional community, where commitment to the ideas and values of the Enlightenment brought together members of disparate social classes. It was in such circles that the cult of sentiment, with its emphasis on the complex relationship between reason and emotion, was nurtured in Saxony. Enlightenment authors suggested that the individual was to be valued for their deeds and personal qualities – intelligence, virtue and capacity for emotion – rather than for their ancestry, possessions or offices, and Körner's circle reflected an attempt to realise these ideals[26]. Such values were the concerns of Rousseau's epistolary novel, *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloise*, published in 1761[27]. A literary sensation across Europe, the novel's call for marriages of love, rather than motivated by the need to build dynastic alliances, elevated authentic human emotion above class-based tradition. Rousseau's text argued for better education of children, discussed the relationship between politics, the common good, morals and virtue, and discussed the legitimacy of suicide. It also inspired a plethora of other epistolary novels, chief amongst which was Goethe's 1774 *Die Leiden des junges Werthers*. Amongst the narrative's various episodes, Goethe's novel describes an intense encounter with nature, tender romance between the protagonists, Werther's affinity for children, and the pleasures of a simple life. The influence of Rousseau's ideas is readily apparent, and the numerous trans-

[20] H. Schlechte, *Das geheime politische Tagebuch des Kurprinzen Friedrich Christian: 1751 bis 1757*, Böhlau-Verl., Weimar 1992, p. 30.

[21] J. Menzhausen, *August III. und die Aufklärung*, «Dresdner Hefte», 14, 1996, pp. 29-34; R. Gross, *Geschichte Sachsens*, Edition Leipzig, Leipzig 2001, p. 152f.

[22] *Die Staatsreform in Kursachsen 1762-1763. Quellen zum kursächsischen Rétablissement nach dem Siebenjährigen Kriege*, hrsg. und eingel. von H. Schlechte, Rütten & Loening, Berlin 1958.

[23] G. Klieme, *Bürgerliche Zirkel im Kontext der Französischen Revolution. Der Kreis um Christian Gottfried Körner*, «Dresdner Hefte», 19, 1989, pp. 44-52.

[24] Klieme, *Bürgerliche Zirkel*, p. 46.

[25] *Ibidem*, p. 47; U. Ullrich, *Im Banne der Empfindsamkeit. Naturidylle Seifersdorfer Tal*, «Dresdner Hefte», 69, 2002, pp. 23-33.

[26] F. Laun, *Memoiren* (Bunzlau 1837), cited in E. Haenel and E. Kalkschmidt, *Das alte Dresden: Bilderund Dokumente aus zwei Jahrhunderten*, Franz Hanfstaengl, Munich 1925, p. 65

[27] On the sensational success of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* in eighteenth-century Europe, see D. Mornet, *L'influence de Jean-Jacques Rousseau au xviiie siècle*, «Annales de la Société Jean-Jacques Rousseau», 8, 1912, pp. 33-67.

lations of Werther that were produced across Europe is clear proof of the popularity of Goethe's sentimental subject, and Rousseau's worldview, in the final quarter of the eighteenth century[28].

It can be no coincidence that Goethe's *Werther* and Rousseau's *La nouvelle Héloise* are reflected in the decoration of Meissen porcelain from the 1780s and 90s. The presence in Dresden at this period of progressive intellectual circles, like that of Körner, involving members of the wealthy bourgeoisie and the liberal aristocracy suggests a ready audience for these and other enlightenment texts – Goethe had been a guest of the circle – and it is to such enlightened circles we should look for the patrons and consumers of this *Literaturporzellan*, and other examples of Meissen's "sentimental" porcelain.

## SENTIMENTAL PORCELAIN

Meissen porcelain reflecting a new interest in ideas about familial love and sensibility does not simply evidence the embrace of these Enlightenment concepts by a Saxon audience, but also places this intellectual engagement in a particular social context. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, porcelain was more readily available to a wider sector of German society than it had previously been, thanks in large part to the proliferation of the smaller Thuringian factories, many of which were commercial rather than court concerns and whose products were aimed at the burgeoning urban middling classes rather than at the traditional aristocratic markets served by a court manufactory like Meissen[29]. European porcelain nevertheless retained some of its luxury status, and the products of the Meissen factory remained relatively expensive and are rarely mentioned in the household inventories of the burgher classes during the last quarter of the century[30].

It is also important to consider the ongoing associations between the products of the Meissen factory and the Saxon state. The perfection of a kaolinic porcelain technology in Dresden in 1708 was a major technical and cultural triumph for the Wettin rulers of Saxony. The ability to command the alchemical transformation of valueless raw earth into porcelain, "white gold", the secret of whose production had eluded European investigators for centuries, functioned as a physical manifestation of the absolutist claims to power of the Wettin king-electors[31]. The establishment of the royal manufactory at Meissen in 1710 enabled the Saxon rulers to produce European porcelain to serve as diplomatic gifts to princes across Europe, thus projecting the splendour and power of the dynasty on the European stage[32]. The role of Meissen porcelain as a particularly Saxon product, intimately associated with the ruling electoral house, continued to have currency into the nineteenth century. Indeed, the eclipse of Meissen as the foremost luxury porcelain manufacturer in Europe must have functioned to enhance its specifically Saxon associations – the acquisition of Meissen porcelain by Saxon elites, as opposed to the products of any other porcelain factory, must reflect a conscious choice on the part of these consumers. A costly porcelain sculpture depicting a loving mother with her children, or a richly decorated porcelain service designed for the consumption of imported tea and coffee, painted with scenes from the tale of Werther by the finest artists working at the factory at that time, speaks specifically to the currency of the culture of sensibility amongst consumers of luxury porcelain products – members of the Saxon financial elite[33].

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton have drawn attention to how things can mediate human experience, through their ability to «embody goals, make skills manifest, and shape the identities of their users»[34]. Objects can help define our sense of self by shaping our status – rare or expensive objects act as status symbols, affirming the owner's position in a social hierarchy. They situate us temporally by «providing foci of involvement in the present, mementos and souvenirs of the past, and signposts to future goals», and locate us within networks of relationships. In essence, they help to determine how we think about ourselves, and others[35]. More specifically, Tara Hamling has discussed the importance of household objects in connecting forms of thinking and feeling with specific domestic activities. Tablewares, she suggests, had inherent significance as symbols of hospitality and sociability, belonging and community[36]. A porcelain service, decorated with scenes

[28] K. Scherpe, *Werther und Wertherwirkung. Zum Syndrom bürgerliche Gesellschaftsordnung im 18. Jahrhundert*, Verl. Gehlen, Bad Homburg 1970.

[29] H. Scherf, *Thüringer Porzellan unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Erzeugnisse des 18. und frühen 19. Jahrhunderts*, E.A Seeman, Leipzig 1985.

[30] North, *Material Delight*, pp. 162-167.

[31] On the relationship between alchemy, porcelain and princely power in the early eighteenth century see G. Adamson, *Rethinking the Arcanum: Porcelain, Secrecy, and the Eighteenth-Century Culture of Invention*, in *Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain*, pp. 19-38.

[32] *Fragile Diplomacy: Meissen Porcelain for European Courts, ca. 1710-63*, ed. by M. Cassidy-Geiger, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 2007.

[33] Müller-Scherf, *Wertherporzellan*, pp. 56-58, 73.

[34] M. Csikszentmihalyi and E. Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1981, p. 1.

[35] *Ibidem*, pp. 20-54.

[36] T. Hamling, *Household Objects*, in *Early Modern Emotions: An Introduction*, ed. by S. Broomhall, Routledge, London 2016, pp. 137-138.

from *Werther*, that facilitated the rituals of hot beverage consumption associated with polite society in the late eighteenth century suggests both the importance to the people who owned and used such objects of, for example, Goethe's narrative and the emotional values it promulgated, but also it implies the existence of a community of like-minded individuals who wished to be surrounded by visual reminders of these shared emotional values – of romantic and familial love – when they gathered socially[37]. Pertinent here is Alfred Gell's theory of "distributed personhood" and his suggestion that crafted objects can function as indexes of a person's thoughts and desires, existing simultaneously as material forms and as intentions to mediate social relationships and influence the behaviour of others[38].

Meissen *Literaturporzellan* is evidence of the embrace and, through social rituals, promulgation of Enlightenment ideas concerning sentimental love that bound together circles of a newly constituted Saxon elite in the last decades of the eighteenth-century. But *Literaturporzellan* is not a source of evidence independent of the sphere of textual sources which has underpinned so much work on the history of emotions. It instead serves to locate particular texts – popular sentimental novels – in a very specific social context. Rosenwein, in accord with her emphasis upon written sources as evidence for the identification of emotional communities, has observed that often a textual community may form the foundation of an emotional community[39]. Although *Literaturporzellan* is sure proof that texts like *Werther* and *La nouvelle Héloise* were being read by Saxon elites, even more telling evidence for the embrace of the ideas promulgated by these novels is to be seen in Acier's Meissen porcelain sculptures on sentimental subjects. Rather than simple illustrations of scenes from popular texts, these sculptures speak to an engagement with the Enlightenment sentimentality that novels like those of Goethe and Rousseau were exploring.

In the middle decades of the eighteenth century, the most common use for small-scale porcelain sculptures had been as ornaments for the formal dining table in court contexts. This was a practice pioneered at Meissen in the early 1740s and soon emulated across Europe[40]. By the Marcolini period in the 1780s, however, this use of porcelain figures was beginning to decline. Instead, porcelain figures, referred to as *Kabinettstücke*, could be found displayed as independent sculpture in the elite domestic interior[41]. It is to this class of object that the Acier figures of sentimental subjects belong. Such use of porcelain sculpture invites us to consider cultures of domestic display and the role objects play in expressing individual and community identity. In *The Comfort of Things* (2008), anthropologist Daniel Miller provides a compelling analysis of the material worlds of thirty modern individuals living on a single London street. Miller contends that the objects with which people surround themselves in their domestic environments do not form a random collection. Instead, they have been gradually accumulated as an expression of that person or household. They thus form an authentic insight into the interests and concerns of the people who have gathered them together[42]. Miller suggests that the items «store and possess, take in and breathe out the emotions with which they have been associated»[43].

How then did the display of Acier's sentimental sculptures function in a domestic setting? A model like *Die gute Mutter (The Good Mother)*, designed between October and November 1774 and based upon a drawing by Johann Eleazar Zeissig, presents an image of maternal love and happiness unconnected to any particular narrative[44] (fig. 5). A mother, fashionably dressed in the Parisian manner of the late 1760s or early 1770s, is seated upon an armchair in the Louis XVI style, surrounded by her three children. The youngest child, seated on her lap, has thrown both arms up in the air, scattering a set of playing cards. The scene is one of domestic happiness, informed by familial love. Anette Loesch has drawn attention to the manner in which the triangular composition of the sculpture evokes similar compositions found in images of the Madonna by Rafael and Correggio, images in which Mary is depicted without the trappings of the Queen of Heaven and instead is shown in the role of loving mother[45]. Acier's sculpture links the well-known Christian image with the secular subject, transforming the Christian iconography into a vehicle for the Enlightenment's new ideal of motherhood. In the 1770s, such an image would also have brought to mind the figure of Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, for an educated audience. Upon the death of her husband, Scipio Africanus Gracchus, Cornelia, a second centu-

[37] Klieme, *Bürgerliche Zirkel*, p. 48.
[38] A. Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1998.
[39] Rosenwein, *Problems and Methods in the History of Emotions*, pp. 11-12.
[40] M. Cassidy-Geiger, *The Hof-Conditorey in Dresden: Traditions and Innovations in Sugar and Porcelain*, in *Triumph of the Blue Swords*, pp. 120-131.
[41] S.-K. Andres-Acevedo, *Die autonomen figürlichen Plastiken Johann Joachim Kändlers und seiner Werkstatt zwischen 1731 und 1748*, Arnoldsche Kunstverl., Stuttgart 2023, pp. 57-58.
[42] D. Miller, *The Comfort of Things*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2008, p. 2.
[43] *Ibidem*, p. 38.
[44] The Zeissig drawing is held in the Dresden Kupferstich-Kabinett (inv. no. c1874-16).
[45] Loesch, *Sentimental, Enlightened and Classical?*, p. 42.

ry BC Roman matron, refused to remarry and instead devoted her time to the raising of her children who, in turn, became responsible for a program of humanitarian social reform in the Roman Republic, something credited to the education they received from their mother. The mother of the Gracchi was a frequent subject in French and German genre painting between 1779 and 1789 and helped to promote the ideals of maternal love, female modesty and self-denial on the eve of the French Revolution[46]. Acier's portrayal of a harmonious maternal relationship, despite its evocation of historical and religious references, remains firmly rooted in its contemporary context thanks to the extraordinary attention to detail in the depiction of costume – great care has been lavished on the representation of textiles, and the outfits worn by the three children clearly delineate their differing life ages, evoking the notion of a parent's careful oversight of the physical development and emotional growth of their children over time.

In 1785, some ten years after the creation of Acier's *The Good Mother*, Acier's assistant Schönheit completed a pendant group, *Der gutter Vater*, copying the same compositional structure as the original group (fig 6). In contrast to the formal outfit worn by the mother, the father is depicted in informal dress: house robe, cap and slippers. His attention is focussed on his three children who climb all over him in a scene of remarkable informality and familial affection. Such a depiction of fatherhood departed radically from the convention of the patriarchal head of the family whose relationship with his children was characterised by distance and discipline. In an age where most men were required to work in order to support their families – and often women, too, needed to work – such an idyllic space for childhood would have been extremely rare[47].

This pair of porcelain sculptures, then, are in fact depictions of abstract ideals concerning family life and natural human emotion, rather than necessarily being portrayals of commonly encountered social realities in Saxony of the 1770s and 1780s. The display of such sculptures in a domestic environment thus takes on special significance. The sculptures represent Enlightenment ideals of familial love and harmony to which their owners clearly subscribed. These were also ideals that they wished to advertise to those with whom they socialised in their homes. Such images might have served as prompts for discussion about sentimental issues. They almost certainly served as models of behaviour to be emulated – in the same way that domestic display of images of the Madonna and Child served to model an ideal of maternal love in elite residences in early modern Italy[48]. We are reminded of Barker's contention that sentimental artworks offered a window onto a Utopian enlightened social order, providing exemplars for identification and emulation by the viewer, thus helping to bring this new society into being[49]. As the Meissen sculptures were luxury objects, there is every chance that those members of the Saxon financial elite who could afford to acquire such images also had the means to live out the family values being portrayed. But what is most important is that the acquisition, display and contemplation of these objects clearly indicate the existence of a community of like-minded individuals, bound by shared emotional values, access to financial resources, and a commitment to progressive Enlightenment ideas concerning the nature of the family and its role in society, both in Saxony specifically, and the rest of Europe more generally.

And if Acier's sculptures advertised abstract Enlightenment social ideals, *Literaturporzellan* embedded engagement with sentimentality in very specific social practices. In porcelain services decorated with images from *Werther*, or with sentimental portraits of other famous lovers whose plights were explored in contemporary fiction, sensibility and sociability are inextricably intertwined, predicated upon access to both leisure time and luxury domestic commodities. The porcelain objects served, as Gell suggests, to mediate the social relationships and reinforce the importance of the ideas explored by Goethe to the participants[50]. We do not know if, for example, members of Christian Gottfried Körner's circle owned examples of the Meissen porcelains that we have been considering, but such an intellectually engaged group represents exactly the type of context in which we might expect to find such objects. Of especial interest is the fact that the Meissen porcelains are not preserved in great numbers. Müller-Scherf's comprehensive catalogue of the extant examples of eighteenth-century *Wertherporzellan* includes only three complete, or near complete, services, a tray from a fourth service otherwise lost, and nine individual cups and saucers (including two sets destroyed during the Second World War)[51]. Although precise numbers are harder to ascertain, eighteenth-century examples of the Acier sculptures are not to be found in great quantity

[46] W. Busch, *Mutterliebe. Veilleicht*, in *Ars et Scriptura. Festschrift für Rudolf Preimesberger zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. by H. Baader *et al.*, Gebr. Mann Verlag, Berlin 2001, pp. 77-90.

[47] Loesch, *Sentimental, Enlightened and Classical?*, p. 42.

[48] J.M. Musacchio, *Art, Marriage, & Family in the Florentine Renaissance Palace*, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 2008, pp. 190-228.

[49] Barker, *Putting the Viewer in the Frame*, pp. 104-127.

[50] Gell, *Art and Agency*.

[51] Müller-Scherf, *Wertherporzellan*, pp. 77-123.

either – the majority that appear on the market today are later nineteenth-century examples produced from the original moulds. Their relative rarity, together with their expense, suggests originally a quite focussed market for these objects. Such being the case, the appearance of any of these Meissen porcelains in, for example, a Saxon inventory of the late eighteenth century should immediately prompt us to investigate the social connections of the individual concerned as such an object is as sure a sign of that person's membership of an Enlightened intellectual circle like that of Körner as any appearance of an edition of Rousseau, Goethe or the like.

Too often disparaged as the epitome of late eighteenth-century kitsch, Meissen porcelain objects representing sentimental subjects – such as scenes of familial and romantic love, and the joys of childhood – are documents of fundamental importance for understanding the nature of the *Rétablissement* Saxon elite. They evidence the penetration of Enlightenment ideas into late eighteenth-century Saxony and to the reception of key Enlightenment literary works in social contexts characterised by a new elite made up of wealthy members of the bourgeoisie and liberal aristocrats, united in their embrace of progressive ideas about the relationship between reason and sentiment. Embedded as they were in very specific social practices – the sociable rituals of hot beverage consumption, and cultures of viewing and conversation in the domestic interior – these porcelain objects are primary evidence for identifying and reconstructing emotional communities amongst the upper echelons of Saxon society in the last decades of the eighteenth century, clearly demonstrating the necessity to not give short shrift to art and material culture in favour of textual sources in pursuit of the history of emotions.

**Fig. 2.** Meissen Porcelain Factory, Michel Victor Acier (modeller), *Die zerbrochene Brücke (The broken bridge)*, c. 1777 modelled, hard-paste porcelain, Porzellansammlung Dresden PE 1623.

**Fig 1.** Meissen Porcelain Factory, Michel Victor Acier (modeller), *Die zerbrochenen Eier (The broken eggs)*, c. 1777 modelled, hard-paste porcelain, Porzellansammlung Dresden PE 1620.

**Fig. 3.** Meissen Porcelain, Johann David Schubert (decorator), *Déjeuner*, c. 1790, hard paste porcelain, Victoria and Albert Museum 1328 to L-1871.

**Fig. 4.** Meissen Porcelain, *Abélard and Héloise*, covered cup and saucer, c. 1790, hard paste porcelain, Grassi Museum, Leipzig 1929.61 a-c.

**Fig. 5.** Meissen Porcelain Factory, Michel Victor Acier (modeller), *Die gute Mutter* (*The Good Mother)*, 1774 modelled, hard-paste porcelain, Porzellansammlung Dresden PE 1624.

**Fig. 6.** Meissen Porcelain Factory, Johann Carl Schönheit (modeller), *Die guter Vater (The Good Father)*, c. 1785 modelled, hard-paste porcelain, Porzellansammlung Dresden PE 3521.