A PAIR OF MEISSEN VASES

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Augustus the Strong, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland, like many another cultured prince of his time, greatly admired Chinese and Japanese porcelains and avidly collected them. Foreseeing that his extravagance might empty his coffers, he tried to learn how porcelain, so prized for its translucency and whiteness, was made. Researches into its essential nature and the discovery in Germany of the requisite white china clay eventually brought success, and by 1710 Augustus had established a porcelain factory at Meissen near Dresden. Eager to imitate the magnificence of the French, he was determined that Meissen should add splendor to his court and bring him financial advantage as well. To this end he engaged potters who could shape and fire ornamental pieces of impressive size and sculptors who could model dramatic and powerful figures. In the 1720’s, under the factory’s able art director, Herold, many of the elector’s desires were met. His fondness for colored grounds led Herold to experiment until he achieved amazing results, such as the blue, green, yellow, and red-violet grounds, which were especially effective on large vases.

One of the rarest grounds was the brilliant red on two vases that belonged to the Sohanski family of Poland, recently given by R. Thornton Wilson. Upon this ground stylized designs of flowering branches, fantastic animals, and giant butterflies are painted in shades of blue, green, brown, yellow, and reddish purple. It is interesting to compare these vases with their colored grounds with a handsome Meissen vase, formerly in the collection of Prince Liechtenstein, which Mr. Wilson presented to the Museum in 1950. Here oriental flowers and birds are painted in enamel colors on the pure white of the porcelain.

Mr. Wilson in the past sixteen years has brought together a distinguished collection of European ceramics, most of which he has now given to the Museum. Built up with great care and sensitivity, its special strength lies in the fields of eighteenth-century French and German ceramics. Particularly in the field of German porcelain, in which it is now so rich, it proclaims the technical skill and high artistry of the potters, sculptors, and decorators whose combined gifts made porcelain not simply a gay fashion but one of the supreme achievements of the century. The vases are shown at the head of the main staircase.