PORCELAIN FIGURES REFLECTING XVIII CENTURY AMUSEMENTS

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No artistic achievement of the eighteenth century caught the color and movement of the gayer aspects of life more brilliantly than did the little porcelain figures which picture, as if in suspended animation, now the pirouetting dancer, now the grimacing Harlequin, now the huntsman at the moment of the kill. Scaramouch seated beside Columbine and plucking his lute, or the gallant tossing a kiss to his lady, though less dramatic and more tranquil, seem also to have been transfixed in the midst of activity.

We are today so familiar with porcelain, particularly in its utilitarian forms, that we can hardly conceive the thrill with which it was regarded when it was first produced in Europe. For a long time oriental porcelain had been enormously admired, and those who could afford to do so acquired quantities of it for display. Persistent efforts were made to discover the technical secrets of porcelain production, but because of the meager scientific knowledge of the times there was a long interval of costly trial and disheartening error before satisfactory results were achieved. On the Continent these undertakings were frequently directed and financed by kings or lesser princes, who regarded them as private hobbies and who for personal prestige strove to obtain the services of the most promising alchemists and potters and the most gifted sculptors. The sculptors, trained to working in wood or stone, found porcelain provocative and exciting. Its plasticity before firing, its hardness afterward, its gleaming surfaces, and its colorings made it different from other media and susceptible of use in new and varied forms.

Such men as Kaendler working at Meissen, Bustelli at Nymphenburg, and Melchior at Hoechst were supreme artists at creating these small sculptures. Each worked in the style of his own period but, by his fresh invention, contributed to its development and range of expression. The well-conceived composition, the rhythm and flow of line, the subtle harmony of color and form, and the fertility of imagination in theme and decorative detail make these porcelain groups and figures as pleasing today as when they were first modeled.

In their own time they presented familiar delights. Now, as through a magic lantern, they reveal to us the almost forgotten diversions of an age long past. It was inevitable that the subjects chosen should more often reflect princely pleasures than serious or somber themes. As various writers have ably shown, these amusements to a great degree were concerned with dramatic spectacles of every sort, from performances of the commedia dell’arte and the opéra comique to masked balls, country fetes, and pageants. So the little figures appear now as comic actors, dancers, and musicians, now as court ladies and gentlemen disguised as shepherds, farmers, or tradespeople. Other activities, such as the hunt, became occasions for impressive display and in their turn were reproduced in porcelain. Many other figures, dressed as Chinese, Turks, or Moors, bear witness to the keen interest in foreign lands and people. To these preoccupations and diversions our attention is directed afresh by the admirable collection of European ceramics given to the Museum by R. Thornton Wilson and now on display in Gallery F 17, where many of these subjects find delightful illustration.

The world of the Orient had captured the imagination of Europeans, whose knowledge of it came in part from Chinese porcelain, with its procession of exotic and gaily dressed
characters. European artists copied some of these subjects directly. Others they transformed with wit and inventiveness into chinoiseries which they painted on the surface of their porcelain or modeled in the round. What these designers did not know about oriental costumes or manners did not embarrass them, for they supplied the missing details according to their fancy. So the little lady in Hoechst porcelain (see ill. p. 192) who wears a loose-fitting black dress, white tunic, dull red sash, and yellow head scarf, pretends to be a Chinese musician but plays a European instrument, a vielle or hurdy-gurdy. She was originally one of a set of musicians attendant upon a Chinese emperor, the whole assemblage designed to serve as table decoration for a great banquet.

Such surtouts de table, often most elaborate, reproduced in miniature various contemporary activities. From a set that was probably part of a table decoration celebrat-
ing the noble sport of hunting come two
groups made at Nymphenburg (see ill. p. 190). In one of them, a Tartar horseman is
charging a lion. In the other, the attacking
beast does not appear, but the Chinese rider,
his mount, and the dog running beside them
are vibrant with the nervous excitement of
the chase. The lean face, the fanciful costume,
and the vigorous movement are characteristic
of the work of Franz Anton Bustelli, who
modeled these groups.

Akin to the allure of the foreign and curi-
ous was the fascination of the queer, the gro-

tesque. Dwarfs, so often favorites at court,
were also presented in porcelain, sometimes
innocently amusing, more often ugly and re-
pellent. Two early Meissen figures in the
Museum’s new display are a reflection of the
continued popularity of “Callot” designs. An-
other dwarf, modeled at the Hoechst factory,
appears in an officer’s uniform to mock the
dignity of the Hussars. Fantastic beasts ap-
pealed to the same robust humor. The ex-
tremely rare figures in brilliantly colored
Chantilly porcelain, illustrated on page 193,
probably were inspired by masqueraders dis-
guised as monkeys.

Porcelain modelers turned with enthusi-
asm to the world of the theater, particularly
to the commedia dell’ arte, which from the
sixteenth century on had enjoyed tremendous
popularity. By picturing favorite episodes of
the Italian comedy, paintings and engravings had given wider circulation to its plots and made familiar its stock characters, their costumes and posturings. As dialogue and pantomime were improvised by the actors, the performances were spontaneous and lusty. With its capacity for capturing the fleeting gesture in fully modeled forms and with its range of color, porcelain conveyed the vivacity of these scenes. Kaendler and Bustelli were past masters in this field, for more than all other modelers they endowed their figures with liveliness and humor. One pair of these spirited comedians designed by Bustelli represents Mezzetin, holding a squirming baby monkey, and a woman who lightheartedly comes to his rescue with a dish of porridge and a spoon (see ill. p. 191). The name Lalage which is associated with the latter figure may have been that of some actress who made this comedy role peculiarly her own. The supple grace of the tilted head and the swaying body is characteristic of Bustelli. Less sparkling in wit, less nimble of foot are the Italian comedians of a series produced at Hoechst. The Cynthio from this series—the only known example of the model—now comes to join the figure of Pantaloon which has for many years been in the Museum’s collection.

Other groups extol the pleasures of music and the dance. The Mennecy potter who modeled a group of children playing a violin, a guitar, a hurdy-gurdy, and an oboe has given us a charming contemporary record to show how such instruments were used. From Zurich comes a shepherd who plays his bagpipe while he woos his shepherdess, from Frankenthal a pair of lovers with a hurdy-gurdy, and from Cassel the rare figure of a ventriloquist with his dummy, to add a comic touch (see ill. p. 191).

The different classes of society, especially tradesmen and people engaged in humble tasks, provided a diverting series of figures, many of them inspired by the series of prints Les Cris de Paris. The Museum can now show by way of illustration the boyish bird-vendor balancing a cage of birds on his head, the woman at her churn, and the merchant seated at his counting table. In the last of these, the elegance of manner and the fastidiousness of dress endow the bourgeois citizen with qualities more commonly associated with the court gentleman.

Mythology and symbolic figures offered dramatic material of which the modelers made free and varied use. The early years of the Vincennes factory produced the white-glazed group of Hercules and Omphale which copied an engraving after a painting by Lemoyne. Of unusual size, this group proved difficult to fire, but in spite of the fact that it is warped, it has much of the dignity of monumental sculpture. In contrast to this
treatment there is the playful figure of Cupid disguised as Minerva, one of a series of tiny masqueraders designed by Bustelli at Nymphenburg. Closely allied to these mythological personages are figures symbolizing the seasons, the continents, and the elements. Fire is represented by the fleeing figures of a man and a woman seen against the small backdrop of a burning building in a Höchst group which is shown together with a copy of the engraving by G. Amiconi of which it is an adaptation.

These figures from Mr. Wilson's collection, which have been selected to illustrate prevailing themes in Continental porcelain, offer but a suggestion of the wide array that his generosity has set before us. For the past eight years he has been assembling notable examples of European earthenware and porcelain, both English and Continental, which are too numerous and varied to be described within the confines of this article. These include a large number of important groups and figures in English earthenware, among them some of particular interest and rarity, such as a pair of Whieldon water buffaloes with Chinese boys on their backs, a pair of Turks in salt glaze probably enameled by Littler, and the figure of Diogenes by Ralph Wood. There are representative productions from Continental factories such as Sèvres, Mennecey, Vienna, and Frankenthal, and, more unusual, faience figures from Höchst and rare porcelain figures from Copenhagen, Zurich, and St. Petersburg. The range of Mr. Wilson's selection has been wide because he has always kept in mind the Museum's collection, making his goal the discovery of missing types as well as objects of exceptional quality. His gifts since 1943 have been made in memory of his wife, Florence Ellsworth Wilson.

The foregoing résumé of the development of porcelain in relation to the culture and social life of its period is based on much fuller treatments given by Robert Schmidt, Das Porzellan als Kunstwerk und Kulturspiegel, 1925 (translated and edited by W. A. Thorpe under the title Porcelain as an Art and a Mirror of Fashion, 1932); F. H. Hofmann, Das Porzellan der europäischen Manufakturen im XVIII Jahrhundert, eine Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte, 1932; and W. B. Honey, Dresden China, 1934. The reader is referred to these works for further details and numerous illustrations.

Masqueraders disguised as monkeys. Chantilly porcelain, about 1745.
Gilt-bronze mounts. Formerly in the Burat and Walters collections