EUROPEAN CERAMICS GIVEN
BY R. THORNTON WILSON

By C. LOUISE AVERY
Associate Curator of Post-Renaissance Art

Museums benefit richly by the generosity of private collectors. In many instances the donors contribute things which they have previously acquired for their own enjoyment; in other words, they are private collectors first and museum donors later. R. Thornton Wilson has been exceptional in that he quickly dropped the former role and turned all his energy and enthusiasm to studying the needs of a particular museum and seeking specifically to meet them. As a New Yorker, he chose to devote himself to the Metropolitan Museum, selecting the field of European ceramic art as his immediate concern. Though he began by collecting English pottery, his taste soon turned to continental wares, especially French and German. This interest rapidly increased during the last war, when there was little market for such objects abroad and when Europeans coming to this country brought with them many pieces of rare quality, thus affording American collectors opportunities not offered them before or since. It was during the years of the war and those immediately following that Mr. Wilson bought most of the more than five hundred objects, many of them of prime importance, which he has given to the Museum to enrich its collections. Since the death of his wife, Florence Ellsworth Wilson, in 1943, his gifts have been made in her memory.

These treasures have been drawn from many notable collections — Bondy, Blohm, Tillmann, Ullmann, Goldschmidt-Rothschild, Dupuy, Fitzhenry, Tumin, etc. To appreciate the measure of Mr. Wilson’s achievement, we turn chiefly to two galleries in the Museum, one devoted to French, the other to German ceramics. In each, there is presented a telling sequence of techniques and styles from the Renaissance to the latter part of the eighteenth century. Mr. Wilson has also made significant, though less numerous, gifts in the fields of English, Dutch, Italian, and other European ceramics. In all of this, he has shown both discrimination and restraint.

In the German gallery the gamut runs from the robust, strongly...
Faïence jug with battle scene in red monochrome, after Lepautre, enclosed by scrolls and flowers in colors. Painted and signed by Johann Heel, Nuremberg. About 1680. Height, 10 ¾ inches. Meissen porcelain tankard with chinoiserie in colors and gold. About 1720-1730. Height, 9 inches.
colored earthenwares and the stonewares of the renaissance period, some of them with an almost brutal masculine vigor, to the delicately modeled porcelains of the eighteenth century, which were the delight of a sophisticated and elegant society. Individual pieces not only demonstrate the skill and versatility of their makers but also proclaim the temper and preoccupations of their times.

A late fifteenth-century corner tile in the Wilson collection (shown in the Medieval Galleries on the first floor) conveys a sense of the creative power of the Hafner, or potters whose chief concern was the making of colored stove tiles with relief decoration. Just as dominating in its way is a later example of Hafnerware, a jug made about 1547 or 1548 in the workshop of Paul Preuning, member of a Nuremberg family of potters distinguished for their masterly forms and strongly colored relief designs. That Mr. Wilson should have bought these pieces, together with another Hafner jug of only relatively less importance and a large dish with the scene of the Nativity, is evidence of an audacious approach to collecting. These may not attract the average visitor, may not be popular, as some of the more refined wares of the eighteenth century are, yet they have the same abounding vitality that one finds in German renaissance architecture and sculpture.

If these Hafner pieces bespeak a bold attitude in Mr. Wilson as a collector, a group of sixteenth-century salt-glazed stonewares proves his willingness to disregard personal preference in order that this aspect of ceramic art should be repre-
sented not only adequately but by superb examples. These great jugs, rough-textured, somber in tone, seem almost forbidding to our modern eyes.

But German potters did not always produce such rugged wares. Increasing refinements inspired by the importation of oriental porcelain led to the production of faience with a smooth-fitting white enamel and fresher, lighter designs. Among Mr. Wilson's gifts this revolution in taste finds illustration especially in a series of jugs painted by independent decorators, or Hausmaler—Schaper, Heel, Helmhack, Rössler, and Seutler. Skilled as engravers or enamellers on metal and glass, these men readily turned to decorating the beautiful white faience, Schaper with sensitively painted landscapes in black, his successors with more broadly treated designs in colors.

Unquestionably porcelain was the art most truly and spontaneously expressive of the spirit of the eighteenth century, with its craving for novelty and its love of luxury. The imported oriental porcelain had charmed Europeans with its whiteness, the brilliance of its glaze, its exotic designs in color. When the secret of making a comparable material was discovered at Meissen about 1710, the factory modelers and decorators eagerly explored the possibilities of their new and lovely material. As one visits the Wilson collection, one sees with what skill and liveliness of invention these men worked, how the forms changed from the vigorous baroque to the supple and sometimes over-elaborate rococo, how the color range shifted from strong tones to softer, more harmonious tints, how even the humor varied from period to period. Here are an imposing wall fountain and handsome ornamental vases, the pride of the Meissen kilns. Though less impressive in size, some of the tablewares are more exquisite in workmanship. The large tankard here illustrated is remarkable for the gaiety and rhythm of its pattern of Chinese amidst huge lily pads. The same playful imagination animates the painting of the sugar bowl and caddy from a tea and coffee service made in 1735 for Clement Augustus, Archbishop of Cologne, in which Chinese lordlings with charming insouciance display his initials and the symbols of his office. Mr. Wilson's gifts also include a brown-glazed tankard with chinoiserie in gold signed by the painter Christian Friedrich Herold, kinsman of the factory's director and talented innovator, Johann Gregor Herold. A Bolognese dog of horrendous mien, whose hair literally stands on end in orange-red flame-like points, suggests how full of life and humor were many of the early Meissen figures modeled by Kirchner and Kaendler.

The porcelain factory founded at Vienna in 1719 was less ambitious and far less successful than Meissen, but it nevertheless produced distinctive designs of jewel-like charm within a baroque formality. Of the work of the independent, often itinerant, painters who sought to obtain undecorated porcelain from whatever sources possible, Mr. Wilson has given us numer-
ous examples, none, however, so extraordinary as the Kaiserbecher, which is undoubtedly a unique piece. This beaker, blazoned with the figures of three Hapsburg emperors, their crowns made brilliant with jewels, is the work of the Hausmaler Christoph Konrad Hunger.

From other German factories during the third quarter of the eighteenth century there tumbled out, as from a horn of plenty, a rout of little porcelain figures and groups portraying the pleasures and pastimes of the courtly folk whose candle-lighted banquet tables they were made to decorate. Because the Duke of Wurtemberg delighted in the ballet and maintained a troupe of dancers at his court, his factory at Ludwigsburg catered to his taste by producing ballet groups in porcelain. In these perfectly poised little figures color, though sparingly used, emphasizes their rhythm of movement. The Nymphenburg factory owes its distinction to its great modeler, Franz Anton Bustelli, a Swiss sculptor whose figures are fashioned with simple broad planes like those of wood carvings but with the fragile grace of porcelain. Two vivacious comédiennes in the Wilson collection are the embodiment of the graceful, arch, elusive lady of this lively type of theater. Two oriental horsemen in the collection express in their sensitive faces a nervous energy wholly different from the lusty spirit


Rarely does one find in eighteen-century German porcelain a subject with religious content, but in a group symbolizing the journey of a soul to heaven Konrad Linck at Frankenthal created a composition with spiritual feeling and sculptural power. The man’s strong features, his flowing robe, the swirling clouds and angel forms which bear him upward seem appropriate to the dignity of the theme. The Wilson example of this model may well be unique.

Gathered in one exhibition case in the German gallery are more than a dozen figures and groups from the Höchst factory, dominated by a relief portrait of its patron. This porcelain medallion, supported by putti on clouds, repeats in miniature a marble relief of Emmerich Joseph, Prince-Bishop of Mainz, which was executed by the court sculptor J. P. Melchior for the Royal Riding Academy. Like his peers, this prince maintained his porcelain factory as “an indispensable accompaniment of splendor and magnificence,” while it furnished his banquet tables with a galaxy of figures to celebrate any occasion, be it a marriage, a fête, or a hunting party. The
German porcelain figures of a girl frightened by a snake and a boy frightened by a dog. Höchst, about 1770. Height, 8 3/8 inches
French porcelain figures made at Saint-Cloud, about 1725-50, different in spirit and modeling from the figures shown on the opposite page. Height, 8 3/4 inches
Faience dish with scene representing the nymph Scylla and the sea god Glaucus, painted in blue on white and outlined in purple. From the factory of Saint-Jean-du-Désert in Marseilles. About 1700. Diameter, 20 inches.

The group illustrated on the cover, the Chinese emperor with a courtier presenting a scholar and an artist, was intended as a table centerpiece to be surrounded by attendant figures. Perhaps inspired by a French engraving, it is singularly fine in composition and color. The emperor himself, though a fantastic personage, expresses by his aloof pose a regal dignity and reserve.

In most German figures there is a certain hardness which is natural to the high-fired porcelain of which they are made. The extravagant and daring poses, the crispness of modeling, the brilliance of glaze and color, all contribute to this effect. They offer a fascinating contrast to the early French soft-paste porcelains in another gallery, and also suggest the radical differences in temperament and taste of the aristocratic classes in the two countries.

In the gallery of French ceramics the Le Breton collection, given to the Museum by J. P. Morgan in 1917, illustrates the development of faience from the Renaissance to the middle of the eighteenth century. Mr. Wilson’s gifts continue the story to about 1775, and also present
the chief aspects of French soft-paste porcelain. In the seventeenth century the extensive importations from the Orient had stimulated keener appreciation of the work of the French potter. At the end of this century soft-paste was in a highly experimental stage and consequently expensive to make and difficult to obtain. The more abundant faience was also well esteemed and gained increased prestige when Louis XIV, to defray the cost of his wars and the building of Versailles, requisitioned the silver plate of the realm. Forced to relinquish their silver, his nobles turned to the faïenciers, buying up their stocks and begging for more. Thus faience competed with porcelain and each influenced the other’s development. From about 1680 to 1720 both followed the blue and white color scheme made popular by Chinese porcelain. Some faience pieces, as for instance the Wilson dish with a scene illustrating the story of Scylla and the sea god Glaucus, reflect the styles of Italian, especially Savona, maiolica. More often the designs at this period adopt the careful symmetry of the baroque, as exemplified in a rare Rouen porcelain potpourri vase and a Saint-Cloud spice box in the Wilson collection. In the first third of the eighteenth century the importation of Chinese and of Japanese Kakiemon porcelains
The Bather, in Sèvres soft-paste bisque, after a marble sculpture by Falconet. 1758. Height, 22 inches

with asymmetrical designs in colors created a new fashion, which is illustrated in the collection by characteristically gay examples of Chantilly and Mennecy. Two seated figures from the Saint-Cloud factory suggest Chinese but are not closely imitative of oriental models. Their costumes are enlivened by passages of deep blue, blue-green, iron red, and gold. With their air of detachment and gentle animation, they offer a striking contrast to contemporary German porcelain figures. Because soft-paste combines materials which are not homogeneous and which tend to collapse or warp if exposed to too much heat in the firing, French figures are compactly made. Gestures are restrained yet express an easy grace; poses are relaxed. The paste is generally warm in tone, the colors harmonious; the whole has an appeal compounded of elegance, graciousness, and wit.

As the fashions in porcelain favored more elaborate color schemes, the faience-makers tried new techniques in order to achieve comparable variety. By firing the glaze first, then adding the colors and exposing them to a much lower heat in the muffle kiln, it was possible to obtain a far wider range than ever before. It is this period of French faience—from about 1750 to 1775—that the Wilson pieces most effectively set forth. Among numerous examples of Mar-selleses, a pair of large vases and a table centerpiece, intended for an aristocratic clientele, show the exuberance in their forms and in their painted and applied flowers that is characteristic of this provincial factory. Other Wilson pieces exhibit the bold rococo forms and colors of Strasbourg, the delicate modeling of Niderviller, or reflect the influence of Sèvres designs in Aprey faience.

The Vincennes and Sèvres porcelains with their richly colored grounds and dignified shapes mirror the magnificence of court life. Of the more impressive styles Mr. Wilson has secured brilliant examples in a superb vase made in 1757 and associated flower vases of 1763, with rose Pompadour ground and panels of flowers and cupids in the style of Boucher. This set of vases is said to have been given in 1784 by Louis XVI to Prince Henry of Prussia. The shapes of a pair of tall vases with apple-green ground, floral festoons, and military trophies suggest fortified towers. Known as the “Fontenoy” vases, they recall the battle at Fontenoy in 1745, in which the French army under Marshal Saxe defeated the English and their allies.
Many less ambitious pieces show the same beautiful ground colors, fine gilding, and exquisite painted designs. Others, sparingly decorated, reveal the purity of the Vincennes paste.

The extraordinary talent of French sculptors and the adaptability of Sevres paste to sculptural forms inevitably led to the production in bisque porcelain of a series of figures and groups which, like their originals in marble, terracotta, or bronze, epitomize French taste and sense of form. Mr. Wilson's gifts include in this unglazed soft-paste The Bather, after a famous marble by Falconet, and a number of smaller groups after his designs.

As we survey these Museum galleries, we are conscious of the fact that hitherto Americans have generally had fewer opportunities than Europeans to become familiar with the decorative arts of the past and perhaps for this reason have been somewhat more limited in their response to them. To see fine examples of an art, such as that of the potter, assembled in a closely related sequence can be a revelation. Thus we may best appreciate the taste and creative imagination they express and recognize their essential vitality. By his wise and objective approach to collecting and his generosity, Mr. Wilson has made it possible for the Museum to present an illuminating progression of styles in the art of the European potter and thereby has contributed immensely to our understanding and enjoyment.

Sevres soft-paste porcelain vase with turquoise ground and birds, painted by Etienne Evans. 1758. Height, 7 1/4 inches