Sèvres Decorative Porcelains

by Carl Christian Dauterman

The brilliant display pieces with which we are concerned here eloquently summarize the major contributions that made Sèvres porcelain artistically pre-eminent during the third quarter of the eighteenth century. Essentially these contributions were expressed in the imaginative variety of original shapes and in the predilection for colored grounds with miniatures in medallions, or cartels, reserved in white. The shift away from the decorated white backgrounds of earlier French porcelain was a conscious bid to check the heavy influx of German porcelain that had made enormous inroads into the French market and throughout Europe.

Economic rivalry, while basic to the development of Sèvres, was reinforced by an equally important factor: cultural prestige. The French cherished their tradition of leadership in maintaining a national art which had its mainspring in the monarch and his court.

By 1750, a lately established porcelain factory at Vincennes, operating under a franchise from Louis XV, employed more than a hundred workers. Its chief products were artificial flowers fitted to wire stems so that they could be arranged in vases or attached to chandeliers or other ornaments, in the manner of Meissen flowers. The account books of the court purveyor, Lazare-Duvaux, show how immensely fashionable these flowers became. Huge orders were sold to the royal family and to prominent figures at court, notably Mme de Pompadour.

This wise and art-loving marquise most fully appreciated the potentialities of the Vincennes factory, which, for all its popularity, had run heavily into debt. It was apparently she who in 1753 induced the King to inject a financial transfusion into the venture by extending its privileges and completely reorganizing the establishment. In any case, the monarch assumed a one-fourth interest in the syndicate and gave it a new name: La Manufacture Royale de Porcelaine de France. He further sanctioned the use of the royal cipher, two crossed “L”s, as its official mark.

With this new lease on life the factory was able to attract a number of outstandingly talented persons. During the administration of Boileau, its former “inspector,” and the directorship of Bachelier, the popular painter François Boucher was engaged to prepare projects for painted and sculptured compositions. Within the factory, Dodin emerged as the leading painter of cupids and pastorals à la Boucher, and a department of more than sixty flower painters soon came into being. The King’s own designer, Duplessis, was

Fig. 13. Rose Pompadour boat-shaped pot-pourri vase, 1757. Height 17 3/4 inches
Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, 1958
placed in charge of patterns, a post which he held until succeeded by the sculptor Boizot in 1774. Another gifted sculptor associated with the establishment was Falconet, who for nine years was director of sculpture. Thus it may fairly be claimed that Sévres porcelain represents, in a very real sense, an entente of genius.

With such an auspicious staff, ably abetted by color chemists and other technicians who made innovations, it is not surprising that production boomed. And sales were stimulated by holding annual Christmas exhibitions at Versailles, where the King and Queen set the example by placing generous orders. As time went on, Sévres became an increasingly popular medium for royal and ambassadorial gifts. A number of the pieces in the Kress Collection are of this caliber. In 1756 the manufactory removed to Sévres, the community which ever since has had its name memorialized in porcelain. Three years later, Louis XV became sole proprietor, a distinction proudly maintained by his successor, who in the relative poverty of his desperate last years refused an offer to sell the factory, saying: “Je garde la Manufacture de Sévres à mes frais.”

This noble porcelain was totally distinct from its German rival, Meissen, in a very fundamental way: it was constituted of quite different ingredients. Technically, it is called “soft-paste” porcelain, in contradistinction to the German “hard-paste.” The difference is one that affects its aesthetic qualities. Sévres has a marvelous ability to absorb enamel colors into its glaze. Thus the decoration becomes one with the surface upon which it is painted, unlike the hard-paste types, in which the enamel brush strokes stand upon the surface of the glaze in floating islands of pigment. Painting on Sévres has the limpid depth and sparkle of a translucent gem.

Sévres is exceptional among eighteenth century porcelains in that it is inscribed not only with crossed “L”s to identify the royal factory, but also with supplementary marks, sporadically present, recording the year of manufacture and the artists responsible for the painted decoration. Inscriptions serving such multiple purposes are rare among porcelains, although paralleled in France by silver. Thanks to the marking system, we are provided with a detailed key to the sequence in which changes of taste took place. In terms of the fifty-five examples of the Kress Collection, many of which are unmarked, it has been possible to fit the pieces into the general progression of trends at Sévres by comparing them with adequately marked examples in other collections.

The visitor to our exhibition, finding these porcelains disposed in the shopwindow and upon the furniture of the new Kress galleries, will thereby be able to recognize the sweep of the changes that occurred during three of the four fateful decades preceding the downfall of the monarchy. Consider, for example, the shapes. They move from forms having a low center of gravity and broad stable bases to slender ovoids on constricted stemlike supports. Modeled decoration gradually puts aside openwork designs in favor of ornament in relief, expressed in gadroons and cabochons, and in the greater prominence of handles. Another progression is seen in the
ground colors. These reflect the relative popularity of the short-lived rose Pompadour, which was eclipsed soon after the death of the marquise whose name it carried but which shared the field with a variety of more or less pastel-colored blues and greens. The latter continued, but from 1763 was forced to meet the increasing competition of a dense, purplish enamel, the bleu-de-roi. Finally, the most revealing evidence of changing taste lies in the pictorial subjects chosen for the little cartels. In the fifties and sixties, cupids à la Boucher, boors à la Teniers, goatherds, and military subjects prevailed. These yielded to romantic pastorals, quayside views in the manner of Vernet, and, as one might expect, mythological vignettes.

It is characteristic of Sèvres that marks, and books relating to them, are often perplexing and inadequate. One finds combinations that are inexplicable or even contradictory in the light of our present knowledge. Sometimes the marks are at considerable variance from the published ones, or even totally unknown. When one is thus thrust upon a sea of unruly information, among great uncharted voids, he must be prepared to tack downwind. The most promising area of investigation in an effort to discover the identity of artists and decorators is to regard the porcelains as a picture gallery in miniature, containing in this case 105 panels, most of them painted anonymously. One must bear in mind that the average vase is decorated on two sides, usually with a figural subject on the front and a cluster of flowers or a trophy on the back. Further, it represents the work of three collaborators: a figure painter, a flower painter, and a gilder. The craftsman who applied the colored grounds was not a signing member of this hierarchy. By some criterion not yet determined, the finished work might emerge with the signatures of all three, or any two, or sometimes one—or none. It is as if a painting and its frame, being considered of equal importance, were released from an artist’s studio only after lots had been drawn

Fig. 15. Rose Pompadour elephant candelabrum vase, about 1758. Height 15 1/2 inches

Fig. 16. Turquoise-blue vase à oreilles, 1757. Height 12 1/4 inches
to determine who might be permitted to sign on the back of the canvas: the painter, the carver, or the gilder; or some combination.

The decorative miniatures on these objects include figures, landscapes, trophies, and other ornamental devices rarely found on porcelain furniture plaques. Indeed, floral subjects, so usual on furniture, seem relegated to a secondary role on the vases, where figural compositions enjoy greater prominence.

The ensuing descriptions offer only a partial review of this impressive section of the Kress Collection. A few key pieces have been selected to illustrate the artistic delight and the intellectual challenges they present. The objects have been arranged in chronological order so that significant developments at Sévres may be scanned in their historical sequence.

In terms of rarity the most outstanding object in the rose Pompadour family is a boat-shaped vaisseau à mat (Figure 15), the form of which is regarded as deriving from the ship in the coat of arms of the city of Paris. There are probably not more than ten of these in recorded collections, and the one at Windsor Castle may be the only other example with a rose-colored field. Unlike ours, it combines trophies with the floral motifs on the verso, and it carries the mark of Falot, a painter of ornaments and birds.

The cover is a marvel of reticulation, suggesting a mast from which the pennant of France idly flutters above four gold shrouds separated by openwork panels in rose. The resemblance to a ship is furthered by a row of “porthole” apertures along the shoulder and by terminal ornaments shaped like the prow of a Grecian galley. A cartel reserved upon the body depicts two cupids floating upon clouds. The painting of these figures corresponds absolutely with that on a bleu celeste “tulip vase” at Waddesdon Manor in
Buckinghamshire, also marked with the date-letter “E” (a crisp, bold capital letter, for 1757, followed by a dot). This hand is seen again at Waddesdon in a pair of lapis-blue elephant vases painted with a shepherd and a goatherd. It bears the date letter “I,” plus the accepted mark of Dodin, a lower-case “k.” Curiously enough, Dodin frequently omitted his personal mark. Therefore if further research can establish that he was in the habit of painting date-letters of the character shown in these three instances, we may in effect have found an alternate mark. The suggestion is reinforced by the mark on a small rose Pompadour tray in this Museum, decorated with a cupid conforming in style to the examples cited. Here the same “E” occurs. Since no other decorator was involved (except the gilder), it is likely that Dodin affixed the mark.

The sales records at Sèvres reveal this transaction on October 20, 1758:

Vente Comptant faite à Versailles
à Monseigneur Le Prince De Condé
1 Pot poury à Vaisseau
Rose Enfants     1200

Fig. 18. Rose and green pedestal-form vase with porcelain flowers, 1759. Height 9 3/4 inches

Was this the Kress vaisseau, or the one now in the Royal Collection—or still another? We know from dated factory records that it was not unusual for an object to be sold during the year following that indicated by its datemark. We may be certain of one thing: that at the extraordinary price of 1200 livres this imposing nef brought great éclat to the collection of its original owner, as it does to ours.

A gondola-shaped pot-pourri vessel fitted with a cover and stand (Figure 14) displays a transparent turquoise-green ground. This vase of 1757 is allied to the vaisseau à mat. Its walls are patterned with ten spatulate floral reserves and two cartouches: one depicting cupids soaring upon a cloud, the other a cluster of flowers and fruit. The incurvate neck and shoulders of the vase are pierced with four receptacles for flower bulbs, in a field of reticulated panels enclosing husk pendants. The pointed dome cover is molded in four lobes, elaborately filled with colorful floral openwork and topped by a nosegay of blossoms in the full round.

There is a very close relationship between the

![Fig. 19. Turquoise-blue pot-pourri and bulb vase, about 1760. Height 12 3/8 inches](image-url)
flower painting of this “gondola” and that of a pair of vases of 1761 in the Jones Collection (No. 122) at the Victoria and Albert Museum, signed by Jacques Fontaine. The same hand appears in a signed Vincennes cup and saucer of about 1752-1754, also at the Victoria and Albert (435-1921). The style is individualized by its softness of color, its leaves in sage green, the minimizing or omitting of dark ribs, and the peculiar treatment of roses as firm, compact blossoms with small centers framed by an everted rim. The painting style and the calligraphy of the marks claim the cupids for Dodin.

Two other “gondolas” are recorded, also in green, and of the same date. One is in the Wallace Collection, the second in the Rice Collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

An extraordinary pair of pyriform vases (Figure 16) stands apart by means of its fluctuating tonality which approaches that of Chinese turquoise-blue. Its mouth is a marvelous example of a bifurcate lip that rises at either side in burgeoning foliate forms. The resulting looped handles justify the eighteenth century name, vase à oreilles. These vases are virtually unique in two respects: first in being decorated on both sides with pairs of cupids sprawling upon clouds; and second, for their rococo scrolled cartouche borders molded in relief beneath the gilding. They are signed with crossed “L”s enclosing an “E” for 1757, surmounted by a solid five-pointed star, an unrecorded mark.

The rose Pompadour group includes a magnificent pair of candelabra vases (Figure 15) dating from about 1758. The neck of each is embellished with a pair of addorsed elephants’ heads in white porcelain touched with gold, with upturned trunks for the support of candle sockets. The vases are of baluster shape, with a crisscross of rose-colored ribbons edged in gilding. The lozenge-shaped interstices contain miniature nose-gays. The original plaster model, still preserved at Sèvres, is traditionally credited to Duplessis.

Eighteenth century documents provide fascinating sidelights on the furnishings of French royal apartments. Pierre Verlet graciously offers an extract from the archives of the royal wardrobe in the Musée Condé at Chantilly. It is from
an inventory made at the Palais Bourbon in 1779: “Sur la commode, quatre grands vases de porcelaine de Sévres, dont deux portant 15 pouces de haut à fonds lilas et lozenges en fleurs et or, monté sur un socle à 4 pieds, en haut desquels sont deux têtes d’éléphants dont les trompes faites pour recevoir des bobèches.”

Two of these four vases are described as fifteen inches high. This fits our candelabra minutely, since the old French pouce closely approximates the English inch. As for the commode, M. Verlet has shown that it is one by Leleu, now in the Wallace Collection. We may suppose that exactly this kind of piece adorned a well-known Leleu commode which in 1779 stood in the béd-chamber of the Prince de Condé.

Three groups of rose Pompadour items—a pair of pot-pourri candelabra, a pair of pedestal vases (Figures 17, 18), and a tête-à-tête service—are linked together by the complete agreement of their floral painting and the style of the factory mark. These two criteria also apply to a fruit dish in the Frick Collection marked with the initials “a:m.” Until these unpublished initials can be identified, we shall refer to our decorator as the Master of the Luminous Leaves. His handwriting on our candelabra, which have figural as well as floral decoration, upsets the preconception that the figure painter would be more likely than the flower painter to affix the factory mark.

A cozy bombé look marks a pair of turquoise-blue triangular bulb vases (Figure 19). Each resembles a serpentine tripod, its sides paneled with sunken openwork trellises descending to three bulbous receptacles painted with blossoms, fruit, and military trophies. The total aspect suggests a date close to 1760. No painter has as yet been assigned, and it may well be that separate artists are responsible for the military pan-oplies and the subjects from nature.

There is a relationship not apparent at first glance between these pots-pourris and the pyriform vases already mentioned. The decorative field in each is four-lobed (though differently proportioned), the upper edge bordered by a compass-curve with a cusped arch above. The same tendency toward an explosive development
Fig. 24. Turquoise-blue vase à culots, 1771. Height 18 1/2 inches

of curling foliage marks the very top. Less conspicuous but expressing the same sculptural approach are the shallow vertical furrows, which here outline the trellises and bulb holders, and in the vases à oreilles converge on the neck. These and kindred correspondences with other works attributed to Duplessis suggest again the likelihood of his having created both designs.

A charming departure from vase forms occurs in a pair of wall sconces (Figure 20). Each consists of a boldly molded reverse-scroll bracket supporting two branching arms of curling oak leaves and berries. They are deep blue-green, heightened with gilding, against a foil of white porcelain. Again, as with the elephant candelabra vases, the modeling is credited to Duplessis. Such bras de cheminée are exceedingly rare among Sèvres products. It is doubtful whether more than six pairs have survived. The records show a few scattered listings in 1761, 1762, 1765, and 1768—all pairs, except for one large group of ten green sconces sold to the King in 1762. There appears to be no entry earlier than that of December 24, 1761 for Mme de Pompadour’s purchase of 2 Bras de Cheminée Verd et or, at 384 livres. Describing just such a pair as ours, it may in fact be a direct reference to them, especially since we find no other pair recorded as “green and gold.” Therefore, if our pair is indeed this one, it has the distinction of being the first of its kind ever sold by the Sèvres factory.

Our sconces are fitted with one set of eighteenth century gilt bronze mounts and another of later origin. Although fully matching, these appear to have been adapted from a chandelier or candelabrum. We know of no others that retain their original candle sockets, whether in metal or porcelain. It is entirely possible that these fixtures originally had porcelain bobéches.

A pair of thirteen-inch vases à panneaux (Figure 21) is especially interesting for the pastoral scenes of the principal cartels, depicting young goat-herds. Such subjects are not usual for Dodin, who appears to be the artist, but the attribution

Fig. 25. Jade-green vase à flacon, 1772. Height 13 1/2 inches
is strengthened by a vase datemarked for 1761 at Waddesdon Manor. Signed with Dodin's mark, it shows an adult shepherd with his dog and sheep in a wood.

In these two pieces we may have our earliest examples of a color new to Sévres, the rich, dark, almost Mohammedan bleu-de-roi. Unlike the pastel colors that were applied directly to the body and often produced a subtle fluctuation of tone, this was an enamel painted over the glaze and consequently much more uniform. The note of "perfectionism" goes hand in hand with increasingly neoclassical allusions in the shapes and ornamental details of bleu-de-roi vessels.

Only one vase in the collection (Figure 22) is a definite myrtle-green. It is ovoid, with white and gold handles in the form of spouting dolphins, surmounted by a gilded cover simulating a gushing fountain. There is a temptation to associate this with the birth of the Dauphin in 1781, but the model is mentioned in the Sévres archives as early as 1757. Although there are no marks, the color and the painted decoration suggest a date close to 1765. The dolphins may be an allusion to Venus: witness the seaside view and the trophies of the medallions.

The principal cartel, undoubtedly by Dodin, shows a cupid reclining on a rose-pink robe spread upon a rocky shore. He holds a classical Greek rudder in his right hand, and a plumb line in his left. A cup and saucer of 1772 in the Victoria and Albert Museum (466 and A-1921) repeat the scene. The painting there is by Chabry fils, apparently derived from the same source as Dodin's. The other side of our vase displays military and nautical attributes topped by a helmet with a wyvern crest.

Scenes of camp life introduce a new theme on a large vase à culots (Figure 23) and a smaller pair, all of about 1765 to 1770. In the former an exciting dueling scene takes place, while in the latter soldiers drink toasts and converse with vivandières. The exquisite clarity bespeaks the hand of Morin and is supported by signed examples of similar subjects in the Wallace Collection.

Fig. 26. Apple-green vase à bandes (two views), about 1770-1775. Height 13 inches
A turquoise-blue vase à culots dated 1771 (Figure 24) has upswept strap handles festooned with gilded oak swags. This is a rare example of a fully marked Dodin work. Here he has chosen a picnicking family, frolicking upon an improvised seesaw. The subject suggests Fragonard’s l’Escarpolette, and is found again with minor variations on an apple-green vase of 1768 in the Royal Collection. The second medallion, sketchy, depicts a rugged landscape with two figures on a bluff overlooking a waterfall.

A pair of superb jade-green vases (Figure 25) is distinguished by loops of gilded cording set cured by ferrules. The gilded laurel festoon continues inside the neck; it is a mark of exceptional quality. Inscriptions within the foot establish the date as 1772 and identify Dodin as the figure painter. The oval cartels meticulously portray youths and maidens fishing and catching birds. The gilded cord across the top unexpectedly interrupts the painted scene. It is repeated on the reverse where trophies of hunting, fishing, and gardening dangle from bowknotted blue ribbons. In the Royal Collection at Buckingham Palace the three figures in the birdcatching scene with modifications in the setting and the costumes occur on a bleu-de-roi vase dated 1776 and signed by Dodin.

M. Verlet, in the Art Quarterly for Autumn 1954, says: “The very rarity of those pieces permits us to vouch with a great deal of probability that these two vases of the former Hillingdon Collection were delivered in 1772 to Madame Victoire, daughter of Louis XV. A mention in the account books seems to fit them: ‘Mme Victoire. Décembre 1772. 2 vases flacons verd pastoralle. 432 . . .865 l.’”

In our quest for decorators’ names, the medallions on the verso become key pieces of evidence. The trophies are so characteristic of their author that they need no signature. The decorator is Charles Buteux ainé, who between 1756 and 1782 painted imaginative groupings into which he wove delicate arabesques of berried vines. A cup and saucer bearing his mark (an anchor) in the collection of André Delombre at the Sèvres Museum, and a pair of square bulb pots at the Victoria and Albert Museum confirm this trait. Another documented example of Buteux’s work is a pair of vases described by Howard C. Rice, Jr. in the Summer 1957 Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The likeness of the military and nautical subjects on the dolphin vase to the hunting and gardening attributes of the corded vases and the shields and weapons of the bleu-de-roi tasseled vases justifies their attribution to Buteux.

The inventiveness in such trophies and floral motifs is inexhaustible. Absolute duplication is virtually never found. This makes it tantalizing to speculate upon the sources of design used by the Sèvres artists. They may have used plates akin to the one from Pierre Ranson’s 6e. Suite de Trophées de Chasse that was reproduced in our February 1960 Bulletin.

A pair of spade-shaped vases with strap handles (Figure 26) have brilliant apple-green grounds. Although not dated they belong stylistically to the first half of the 1770s. On the front of each, an oval miniature by Dodin (confirmed by his mark), in the manner of Boucher, depicts a pair of young lovers in a wooded setting. In one, a youth in a yellow-green coat arrives for a rendezvous with a seated maiden; in the other a shepherd entertains his sweetheart by playing a flute. On the reverse sides are oval panels painted with luxuriant clusters of variegated blossoms. Only one other pair of vases in the collection shares the vital distinction of

Fig. 27. Bleu-de-roi jardiniere, about 1770-1775. Height 4 3/8 inches
carrying the flower painter’s mark. We are fortunate indeed in having these signed examples from the hand of Prévost ainé (1754-1783).

Eleven examples in bleu-de-roi bear a series of fascinating quayside scenes by the master Morin. Almost all are signed with his initial or with the monogram of the gilder Le Guay. They range in date from 1770 to 1775.

Outstandingly successful in its balance of pictorial and decorative interest is a jardinière (Figure 27) with the lingering serpentine lines of a Louis XV commode. The bustling figures on the wharf are perfectly scaled and adjusted to the proportions of the whole.

Upon the shoulder of a vase bearing bisque portrait reliefs of Louis XVI and his queen (Figure 28), gilded infants kneel to adjust great swags of laurel that drape majestically from the oval portraits. The laurel appears again in relief upon the “jeweled” cover and in the gilding on the spreading foot. The courtly effect of such sumptuous detail in blue and gold and white is subdued by the sunlit dock scene—a glimpse through an oval “window” into another world.

The composition on the opposite side—of rushes, an oar, a spyglass, and other nautical attributes—is equally refreshing. Surely this is by Petit, whose related work, fortunately signed, may be observed on the plinth of Falconet’s Baigneuse in the Wallace Collection. A branch of dark red coral, sometimes in association with a conch shell overflowing with water, is virtually his “signature.” Petit’s collaboration with Morin is documented in a fully marked vase à culots in the Red Drawing Room at Waddesdon.

The relationships among the decorative porcelains of the Kress and of other great collections serve to remind us that the unwritten history of Sèvres is preserved in piecemeal fashion wherever examples of the ware survive. To fit each part of the picture into the whole, however, we need to identify the “handwriting” of key individuals who, although masters in their own right, collaborated in a total production amazing for its harmony and consistency.

Fig. 28. Bleu-de-roi vase (two views), with bisque portraits of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette, about 1770-1780. Height 15 ¼ inches