Colossal for the Medium:
Meissen Porcelain Sculptures

CARL CHRISTIAN DAUTERMAN
Associate Curator of Western European Arts

Those fortunate enough to have visited Dresden before World War II will perhaps remember crossing over to the right bank of the Elbe to see the Royal Library ("Visitors Conducted at 1 P.M. Sharp; 50 Pf.") with its Japanese Garden. Designed by Matthäus Daniel Pöppelmann as a “Dutch Palace” in 1715, it was purchased in 1717 by Augustus the Strong, Saxon elector and Polish king, who employed the same architect to convert it into a “Japanese Palace,” or shrine for porcelain.

Augustus planned to decorate the ground floor of his palace with Chinese and Japanese porcelain, grouped schematically according to color. Not only had he himself been Europe’s most extravagant purchaser of these wares, but the accusation had even been made that China had become the “bleeding bowl” of Saxony. This was an allusion to the vast sums that Saxons were expending on Oriental porcelain, for the Elector and his court were supporters of two burgeoning fashions: that of tea and coffee drinking, and that of equipping their palaces with the “porcelain rooms” so indispensable to early eighteenth century décor.

But the upper floor of Augustus’s palace was to be his justification for this zeal: he planned to devote it to a display of products made at his own manufactory at Meissen, which had succeeded in developing the first true, or hard-paste, European porcelain, and he envisioned the combined collection as a kind of competitive exhibition, in which the porcelains of Meissen would be measured against their Oriental analogues. His plan included a chapel with full-scale figures of the apostles and a great gallery of lifesize birds and animals.

Mammoth porcelains had long been an obsession with the Elector; the story is often repeated that he traded a regiment of his best dragoons with the King of Prussia in return for forty-eight oversized blue and white Chinese vases. As owner of the Meissen factory, he was in a position to commission full-scale figures of birds and animals having no precedent in European porcelain. Moreover, he possessed in Dresden a well-stocked menagerie and aviary, where his sculptors could find ideas without limit. Available records indicate that the early orders for large birds and animals included exotic species like the elephant and pelican, as well as domestic creatures such as foxes.

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Frontispiece: Detail of the Meissen porcelain group shown in Figure 4

On the Cover: Detail of The Bathing Pool, by Hubert Robert (1733-1808), French, 1777-1784. Oil on canvas, 68¾ x 48¾ inches. Gift of J. P. Morgan, 17.190.29
and owls. It is said that, of the entire collection, only the elephant and rhinoceros were not done from life.

The Japanese Palace series of animals and birds represents the most grandiose undertaking ever attempted in porcelain sculpture. The medium was infinitely more workable for cabinet specimens like those the Meissen factory had produced before embarking on this project, such as squatting Chinamen about four inches high and even smaller figures of gesticulating dwarfs, modeled after engravings by Jacques Callot. In the life-size animals, the material was pushed dangerously close to its limits, and the challenge of producing figures of such extraordinary size involved many difficulties. Porcelain as a sculptor's medium is unpredictable in its behavior in the kiln. Demanding temperatures up to 1450 degrees centigrade, it is prone to warp and crack during firing. To minimize this disadvantage, Meissen developed a special paste richer in China clay; but, in spite of this, unsightly firecracks could not be eliminated. The odds in favor of successful firing were inversely proportional to the size of the piece.

Of the several sculptors engaged for this project, the first was Johann Gottlob Kirchner, who began his career in 1727 but was dismissed the following year for being "flighty and frivolous." During this short stay his production included a series of masks, some clock cases, and, it is believed, a sizable portrait bust of the court jester, Fröhlich. One other object traced to him at that time is the ambitious fountain now in the R. Thornton Wilson Collection at the Museum (Figure 1). Designed to hold rose water for the convenience of guests at a banquet, it marks a transition between the ewer and basin of Renaissance days and the finger bowl of modern times. It is a sculptural composition in three parts. The uppermost section consists of an Atlantean figure supporting a reservoir in the form of a deep shell. His left foot rests upon the head of a dolphin, fitted with a silver dragon-head spigot. The supporting shaft of shellwork and rockery is braced by figures of a satyr and satyress. They seem concerned lest the whole collapse upon their infant, who slides headlong toward a great shell basin painted with chinoiseries (described elsewhere in this issue). This elaborate composition is the most ambitious sculptural piece produced at Meissen up to that time.

Two years after his departure, Kirchner was summoned back to work at Meissen and invested with the title of Modellmeister. The Elector's collection had already outgrown the Japanese Palace, and a portion had been transferred to the Tower Room of the Royal Palace. But Augustus seems to have grown impatient about the lack of animal sculptures, especially since the efforts of another modeler, Johann Christoph
Lücke, had proved unsatisfactory. Kirchner thus became the first accomplished sculptor to be charged with directing the artistic aspects of Meissen’s production. This pioneer role established a division of labor still observed in European porcelain factories. The “model-master” was responsible for providing original designs not only for sculpture but also for utilitarian wares. He worked out his ideas in wax or modeler’s clay, since the porcelain clay lacked the necessary plasticity. His finished models were turned over to the molders, who made plaster molds from them and then cast reproductions in porcelain clay. Frequently a composition required multiple molds, for heads, arms, legs, or other projecting parts. In such cases the models were cut into
sections by the molders, and after the pieces were cast a third group of specialists, the repairers or assemblers, undertook to fit the separate parts together, correcting any imperfections that required attention. At this point the piece was fired, then covered with glaze, refired, painted, and, as the final step, fired again. It was the model-master’s duty not only to produce the original model but to oversee all these stages of its production.

Between 1730 and 1733, Kirchner created a dozen or so remarkable large figures, including various apes and monkeys, a hulking bear, and a marvelous Bolognese dog. This animal, happily represented at the Museum among the gifts of R. Thornton Wilson (Figure 2), is a particularly speaking rebuttal to the frequent criticism that his work shows dull flatness and avoidance of deep shadows. Here is a snarling, spiky creature with a disposition as explosive as the flamelike tufts of hair radiating from his face. The dog is exceptional among Meissen animal sculptures in exhibiting the use of the purplish mother-of-pearl luster developed by the factory’s first director, Johann Friedrich Böttger, and employed so effectively in the frames of Meissen chinoiserie miniatures. Luster has been boldly applied to the collar, which is enriched with gold borders and crosshatching.

Kirchner’s second stint at Meissen was not fated to be of much longer duration than his first. In 1731 a sculptor in his mid-twenties appeared who was soon to displace him. This was Johann Joachim Kaendler, a pupil of the court sculptor Benjamin Thomae. Kaendler came to the attention of Augustus through his sculptures for the Grunes Gewölbbe, another royal rebuilding project at Dresden. On being engaged for the Meissen manufactory, he was instantly assigned to the Japanese Palace project. In his first year he completed at least six life-size figures of eagles, owls, and other birds, and collaborated with Kirchner to create several ambitious white animal sculptures, including an elephant, a rhinoceros (from a woodcut by Dürer), and a bison attacked by a dog, all several feet in length. These were only a foretaste of Kaendler’s amazing energy and versatility.

It soon became apparent to Kirchner that he was working with a giant, with whom he could not compete and whom he certainly could not master. Therefore in 1733 he resigned, ostensibly to take over the sculpture studio of his recently deceased brother. In spite of his inadequacies, Kirchner deserves to be recognized as the first to force the new European material, hard-paste porcelain, into fully sculptural forms.

Kaendler was immediately made Modellmeister, a post he occupied until his death in 1775. From his beginnings in large animal figures, he later turned to modeling small figures, each eloquently expressive of the robust character of the baroque or of the nervous, fragile quality of the rococo. Our understanding of the esprit of the eighteenth century would be less complete without these little masterpieces, in the creation of which he was so prolific.

In April of 1732, Augustus had stepped up his demands for sculpture by issuing his Specifications of Porcelain required . . . for the New Front Gallery. These called for 214 “animals of all kinds, large and small” and 218 “birds of all kinds in various sizes.” By August of that year Kaendler had completed the model for an Angora goat group to be “left in the white”–glazed but unpainted–that stands at the pinnacle of his

animal statuary. Through the generosity of Mrs. Jean Mauzé, a splendid example of this exceedingly rare composition has recently come to the Museum (Figure 4).

The sculpture, depicting a mother goat suckling her kid, is charged with energy, tenderness, and elemental symbolism. The recumbent pose of the adult animal establishes a rapport with the earth that feeds her, and from which she in turn nourishes her young. The moment is that fleeting one when the mother has just recovered from the surprise of having her frisky infant fling himself eagerly across her flank, and the kid is beginning to assume an expression of blissful satisfaction. His infantile, gangling legs are in sharp contrast to his mother’s sinewy limbs, which accentuate the fullness of her body in their bony slenderness. Her alertness is further conveyed by the perky angle of her ears and her nervously flicking tail. As she turns her head fondly toward her offspring, she displays in her uplifted stare and caressing tongue the tolerance shared by all warm-blooded creatures for their young.

The goat group is a magnificent example of Kaendler’s ability to make a virtue of the physical disadvantages inherent in his material. He began by coalescing the two animal forms into a fabric that bespeaks the semifluid quality of clay, every contour leading the eye back to the center of the composition. Even the inevitable firecracks seem to have been anticipated in the bold and simple manipulation of the surface, for they blend with the deep and wavy furrows in the shaggy coat of the mother. To minimize the grayness of the paste, the heavy white glaze has been delicately blued. Where it has been allowed to accumulate thickly in the hollows, it lends an almost imperceptible aquamarine tint to the thinner glaze covering the rises. The result is a gleaming white sculpture, neither glass nor stone, yet combining the qualities of both to entice the eye to rove across or even penetrate its surface.
This subject could hardly differ more from other contemporary Meissen compositions, with their avoidance of sentimentality about nature: dogs rending the limbs of stags and bison or fighting among themselves, or birds of prey standing in almost heraldic attitudes of triumph over their victims. Violence, harshness, grotesqueness, or ludicrousness—all common to the porcelain menagerie—are avoided here to invest a familiar barnyard animal with aspects of nobility.

An impressive example of such stark realism in porcelain is the terrifying “long-eared” owl lent by Mr. Wilson (Figure 5). It represents the hand of still another sculptor, Johann Friedrich Eberlein, who assisted Kaendler from 1735 to 1749. Here the piercing eyes, the open beak, and the half-fluttering wings serve to reinforce the cruelty of the grip with which the predator clamps upon the neck and leg of the limp little bird under his feet. Nor do the flesh-pink dappings of the underparts mitigate the sinister effect of the black bars and streaks in the brown plumage of the head and wings.

Even Augustus seems to have recognized the impracticality of turning out his large sculptures for the general market. At any rate, they were created almost exclusively for his Japanese Palace, to bolster the prestige of Meissen. When the Elector died in

1733, his scheme for large porcelains gradually languished and in the early 1740s was set aside (though Kaendler was still working on a great equestrian statue in 1753). Examples left in the white are especially scarce. A few duplicates in the Royal Porcelain Collection, which Augustus had begun, were sold or exchanged many years later, and today may be found in Madrid, Vienna, Sèvres, London, and Leningrad. Even as late as 1920, a great sale of objects from the Saxon state collections contained two life-size white sculptures of goats—a female suckling her young, and her mate, a recumbent buck. A careful comparison of our sculpture with the illustration in the sale catalogue makes it eminently clear that “lot 195” is the very group that Mrs. Mauzé has enabled visitors to the Metropolitan to enjoy. The evidence lies chiefly in the firecracks and the irregular line made by the glaze along the base, which are identical in the illustration and in our piece.

Only two other goat and kid groups are known to us. Located in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, one is not too remote from its companion figure, a buck, now at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (Figure 3). Happily, a second example, now at the Zwinger, survived the bombing of Dresden in 1945. Exactly three examples of the goat and kid group were recorded in 1734 as having been completed for the Japanese Palace. It is therefore possible that the total production of this model has survived; the claim cannot be made for many of its fellows.

It is recounted that by a fateful coincidence the Royal Porcelain Collection, which had been dispersed for its preservation in 1942, was returned to Dresden for a single night in 1945. En route to a new place of safety, the motor caravan transporting the porcelains put up in the shelter of the walled gardens of the Zwinger, rather than continue on the road after dark. It was precisely on this night, February 13, that Dresden, which until then had gone unscathed, was bombed. In a single stroke two-thirds of the porcelains were reduced to scattered sherds, among them an undetermined number of figures from the Elector’s “white zoo”—a sad postscript to the story of the enthusiasm of Augustus the Strong and the skill of his artist-craftsmen.

REFERENCES


William Bowyer Honey Dresden China (London, 1934) pp. 70-76, pl. XX.


Robert Schmidt Porcelain as an Art and a Mirror of Fashion (London, 1932) pp. 58, 60, 188, 193, 277-79.

5. Owl with dead bird, modeled by Johann Friedrich Eberlein (1696-1749). About 1735. Height 20½ inches, width 11¾ inches. Lent by R. Thornton Wilson, L 57.32