The Spaghetti Eaters

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Among the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s noted collection of eighteenth-century porcelain figures are three small sculptures, one of which was made at the Capodimonte factory, near Naples, and the others at Buen Retiro, outside Madrid, that depict characters from the commedia dell’arte eating spaghetti. Each piece portrays the character Pulcinella, alone or with one or more companions.

No commedia dell’arte character is more closely associated with food than Pulcinella. He appears to have been invented in 1628 by the Neapolitan actor Silvio Fiorillo, while another actor, Andrea Calcese, called Cuiccio, was known for refining the role. The character was introduced to France, where he was known as Polichinelle, by Giovanni Briocci at the end of the seventeenth century. In England he was called Punch. The extraordinary circumstances surrounding Pulcinella’s birth are described in a l’azzio, or comic interlude, recorded by Adriani di Lucca in 1734: “Pulcinella explains to Coviello that he was born before his father. When Coviello says this is impossible, Pulcinella replies that while his father was walking in Toledo, he fell asleep and barely missed being run over by a carriage. A passerby screamed at him, ‘You must have been born yesterday!’ Since this happened a year ago, Pulcinella maintains that he must have been born before his father.”

Pulcinella was a Neapolitan valet, a companion to Arlecchino (Harlequin), and, essentially, a man of the people. Lazy, cunning, and licentious, he was good-humored on the surface but had a short fuse and a volcanic temper, frequently responding with a brutal blow of club or foot rather than a clever exchange of words. Pulcinella acted entirely in his own self-interest, was contemptuous of the social order, and had little time for placating his masters. His gluttony was legendary. Pulcinella’s favorite foods were spaghetti, macaroni, and gnocchi, which he consumed in vast quantities whenever possible.

In a painting by Alessandro Magnasco (1667–1749) in the collection of the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh (Figure 1), Pulcinella is shown lounging at a kitchen table eating spaghetti with his hands. His sizable belly attests to his past greed. Seated around him are other slothful servants, including several smaller Pulcinellas, who take their ease amid the squalor. Pulcinella is dressed in a loose tunic and baggy pants, a generic outfit for the zanni characters of the commedia that was popularized in the engravings of Jacques Callot (1592–1635) and no doubt worn by many commedia dell’arte actors in the seventeenth century. By the eighteenth century, Italian Pulcinellas were always depicted in this costume, with the addition of a tall felt hat and a hunchback. Although no complete Pulcinella costumes from the eighteenth century are known to have survived, there is a white felt hat typical of the type worn by Pulcinella in the theater wardrobe of the castle at Český Krumlov, in the Czech Republic (Figure 2). Pulcinella’s name, which literally means “young turkey or chicken,” is closely identified with his mask, which featured a beaklike nose. This distinctive mask and costume are seen frequently in the paintings of Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo (1727–1804) and in his series of drawings depicting the tragicomic life of Pulcinella, Divertimento per li ragazzi. They also appear in engravings by Georg Friedrich Schmidt (b. 1712) after drawings by Giovanni Domenico’s father, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696–1770).

Curiously, in France and England an entirely different costume, derived from sixteenth-century livery, evolved for this character. There, his huge abdomen was covered by a peascod-bellied doublet with quilted padding, the original purpose of which was to protect the wearer against assassins. The doublet’s pointed front was based on armor designed to repel musket fire. Instead of baggy pants, Polichinelle, or Punch, wore short, tight trousers that ended above the ankles. He did, however, retain the Italian hunchback and beak-nosed mask.

The Metropolitan’s Capodimonte group (Figure 3), known as The Spaghetti Eaters, shows Pulcinella clutching his stomach with one hand and a clump of spaghetti or macaroni with the other, while Colombina (Colombine) comforts or encourages him. It is difficult to ascertain whether Pulcinella is testing the
spaghetti to find out if it has finished cooking or whether he has already eaten half the pot and can force down no more. He has flung off his hat, which rests on the ground; Colombina holds a strainer in her right hand. A famous lazzo recorded by Antonio Passanti in Naples in 1700 describes how Pulcinella would smell a dish of macaroni and praise its aroma, making all kinds of ridiculous analogies.7 The pose of Colombina, with her arm around the shoulders of Pulcinella, both of them leaning over the cooking pot, is reminiscent of a painting by Giovanni Domenico Ferretti (1692–1768), Harlequin as Glutton, at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida (Figure 4). Here, however, the brutish Harlequin is shown shoveling food into his mouth with his hand. Not only the poses but also the physiognomies of Ferretti’s characters are reminiscent of those of the Capodimonte group; the three-dimensional figures make sinuous movements despite their massive proportions.8 The Capodimonte group is attributed to the modeler Giuseppe Gricci (1700–1770), a Florentine who had been sculptor to Charles VII Bourbon (1716–1788),

Figure 4. Giovanni Domenico Ferretti (Italian, 1692–1768). *Harlequin as Glutton* (from the *Disguises of Harlequin* series), 18th century. Oil on canvas, 38¼ × 50 in. (97.1 × 127 cm). John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art (Art Museum of the State of Florida), Sarasota, Museum purchase (SN 64/8)

Figure 5. Artist unknown. Vase, ca. 1750–60. Italian (Capodimonte). Soft-paste porcelain, H. 6% in. (16 cm), diam. 5¾ in. (14.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of R. Thornton Wilson, in memory of Florence Ellsworth Wilson, 1950 (50.211.266)

king of the Two Sicilies, for five years when he joined the new porcelain factory on the grounds of the royal palace at Capodimonte, as its director of modeling. The factory was founded in 1743, several years after Charles VII's marriage to Maria Amalia (1724–1760), the granddaughter of Augustus the Strong—king of Poland, elector of Saxony, and founder of the Meissen porcelain factory. It seems likely that Charles founded the factory in order both to promote commercial enterprises in Naples and to imitate Meissen's hard-paste wares.9 Contrary to Meissen practice, however, soft-paste porcelain (without kaolin) was made at Capodimonte.10

The earliest workers at the factory included an arcanist of Belgian extraction, Livio Vittorio Schepers (d. 1757), and his son Gaetano Schepers (b. 1715); a gem-cutter, Giovanni Caselli (b. 1698), who became the chief painter; Giuseppe della Torre (b. 1689), a miniaturist; and the modeler Gricci. Gricci's figures are distinctive, with small heads and heavy, exaggerated lower limbs. His groups show great sensitivity of composition and a wealth of unspoken emotion. Enamelled and gilded decoration is particularly
In 1759, Charles VII succeeded to the Bourbon throne of Spain, becoming Charles III. Unwilling to part with a symbol of his prestige, he made the extraordinary decision to uproot his factory at Capodimonte and transport it, complete with about forty workers and a supply of about five tons of raw materials for porcelain, to Madrid, where he established a new factory at the royal palace of Buen Retiro. The new factory made porcelain until the 1780s, when it fell into decline, eventually closing in 1808.

A second version of *The Spaghetti Eaters* was made at Buen Retiro in about 1780 and is now also in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Figure 6).


restrained, leaving the beauty of the modeling and the luminosity of the soft-paste porcelain plainly evident.

Porcelain sculptures were created by Gricci from the time of the factory's founding, and figures inspired by the commedia dell'arte, including a single figure of Pantalone (Pantaloon), are listed as early as 1744.11 Many more commedia dell'arte figures were created at Capodimonte, including two groups of three figures each, *Pulcinella, Pantalone, and Arlecchino* and *Colombina, the Doctor, and Arlecchino*; and a number of paired figures, including *The Spaghetti Eaters, Arlecchino and Colombina, The Doctor and Colombina,* and *Colombina and a Young Hussar*. Several single figures are also known, some of which may have been paired or been part of groups of three.12 Four single figures, representing Arlecchino, Mezzetino/Scapino, Scaramuccia (Scaramouche), and Pantalone, are in the Metropolitan Museum's collections. There are also two different versions of the Doctor and single, smaller figures of Gobbino and Pulcinella to be found in other museum collections.13 In addition, the commedia dell'arte served as inspiration for painted decoration on Capodimonte wares, such as a vase of about 1750 in the Metropolitan Museum's collection, which features three Pulcinellas (Figure 5).14

It shows Pulcinella feeding spaghetti to one of three small Pulcinellas; the children recall hungry baby birds in the nest being fed by one of their parents. The small Pulcinellas are dressed in miniature versions of the adult costume, just as in the painting by Alessandro Magnasco (Figure 1). Unlike the figures made at Capodimonte, this group is raised on a Rococo scrolled base, in the manner of a stage. The sculpture appears to have been made of a hybrid paste, close to a faience fine. It must have been produced about 1780, after the porcelain supplies brought from Capodimonte in 1759 had been exhausted, when Buen Retiro was obliged to turn to other materials for its products.

A single figure of Pulcinella eating spaghetti is also found in the Metropolitan Museum (Figure 7). He stands with his head raised and mouth open to consume the spaghetti that once dangled from his right hand but has broken off. A pepper appears to be tied to the breast of his loose, belted jacket, perhaps symbolizing his hot and unpredictable temper. To one side is a large container, presumably filled with spaghetti and covered with a cloth to keep it warm. A grater and a hunk of Parmesan cheese sit on the ground, as does a small carafe of wine. This figure was once thought to have been modeled at Capodimonte, but recent examination has shown it was fashioned by the same modeler as the Buen Retiro version of The Spaghetti Eaters. As the material of the single Pulcinella figure is soft-paste porcelain, it must have been made at Buen Retiro sometime between 1759 and about 1780.

The sculpture's pose, standing while eating spaghetti, is strongly reminiscent of that of two Pulcinellas in an anonymous eighteenth-century Italian painting in the collection of the Drottningholms Teatermuseum, Stockholm (Figure 8). The painting depicts a group of Pulcinellas desperately gobbling spaghetti while Arlecchino reaches for some with his slapstick and Colombina and Brighella run off with the wine.

Although sculptures inspired by the commedia dell'arte were made at almost every European porcelain factory during the eighteenth century, these examples from Capodimonte and Buen Retiro (essentially an Italian factory transposed to Spain) are among the few to show the characters eating spaghetti or similar fare. It is striking, for instance, that in German portrayals of commedia dell'arte characters with food, that food is usually a sausage. Most likely this was because spaghetti, a popular Italian dish, and its theatrical use by the commedia dell'arte were little known outside Italy during the period. Instead, actors may have adapted their comic routines to suit the local palates of their audiences, and these subtle transformations may be traceable in porcelain sculpture.
NOTES

5. My thanks to Edward Maeder for this information. For more about the costumes worn by characters of the commedia dell’arte, see Meredith Chilton, Harlequin Unmasked: Commedia dell’Arte and Porcelain Sculpture (New Haven and London, 2001). A figure made at the Bow factory in England that is now in the collection of the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art, Toronto (ibid., no. 13), is dressed in this second style of costume for Pulcinella, or Punch.
6. The Metropolitan Museum’s Capodimonte Spaghetti Eaters was formerly in the Otto Blohm collection and has been published in Robert Schmidt, Early European Porcelain As Collected by Otto Blohm (Munich, 1953), no. 406, pl. 107; Yvonne Hackenbroch, Messen and Other Continental Porcelain, Faience and Enamels in the Irwin Untermyer Collection (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), fig. 211; and Alessandra Mottola Molino, L’Arte della porcellana in Italia (Busto Arsizio, 1977), vol. 2, fig. 183. Similar examples are in the Museo Correale di Terranova, Sorrento, and the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg. My thanks to Jeffrey Munger for this information and for generously sharing other details and his opinions on the Capodimonte and Buen Retiro figures acquired by Clare Le Corbeiller during her tenure at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
7. See Gordon, Lazzi, p. 22.
8. The relationship between Ferretti’s and Gricci’s work is noted in Angela Carola-Perrotti, Le porcellane dei Borbone di Napoli: Capodimonte e Real Fabbrica Ferdinandea 1743–1806, exh. cat., Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples (Naples, 1986), pp. 151–56, where The Spaghetti Eaters is compared with another Ferretti painting in the same series, Harlequin as Rejected Lover.
11. Ibid., p. 13.
12. See Angela Carola-Perrotti, “Giuseppe Gricci, Sculptor at Capodimonte,” in Hugh Morley-Fletcher, Early European Porcelain and Faience as Collected by Kijs and Edward Pfleiger (London, 1993), vol. 2, pp. 8–14, where she argues that the single figures of Mezzetino/Scapino could have been paired with a figure of the Doctor (the version in the Museo Civico Gaetano Filangieri; see n. 13, below) or been part of a group of three with the Doctor and a single figure of Colombina.
13. The repositories of the figures mentioned in this paragraph are as follows: Pulcinella, Pantalone, and Arlecchino, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg; Colombina, the Doctor, and Arlecchino, Museo Teatrale alla Scala, Milan, and the Pfleiger collection (see Morley-Fletcher, Early European Porcelain, vol. 2, p. 28); Arlecchino and Colombina, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (1982.450.14); The Doctor and Colombina, the Pfleiger collection (see Morley-Fletcher, Early European Porcelain, vol. 2, p. 20); Colombina and a Young Hussar, Museo e Gallerie Nazionali di Capodimonte, Naples (DC 331); Mezzetino/Scapino, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (1982.450.8) and Museo Teatrale alla Scala; Pantalone, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (50.211.263); Museo Nazionale della Ceramica Duca di Martina, Naples (1820), Museo Civico Gaetano Filangieri, Naples (270), and the Pfleiger collection (see Morley-Fletcher, Early European Porcelain, vol. 2, p. 16); The Doctor, Museo Civico Gaetano Filangieri (298); smaller Pulcinella, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (C.64.1950), Museo Civico Gaetano Filangieri (265), and Museo Nazionale di San Martino, Naples (23327); Gobbo (similar to Pulcinella but distinguished by the flat hat), Museo Nazionale di San Martino (23326). Arlecchino is found twice in The Metropolitan Museum of Art (1982.60.283, 50.211.262).
15. My thanks to Jeffrey Munger and Clare Le Corbeiller for this information. Examinations of the figures with shortwave ultraviolet light were conducted by Jeffrey Munger in 2001.
16. This attribution was proposed by Angela Carola-Perrotti during a visit to New York in 1994 and confirmed in a recent examination by Jeffrey Munger and Clare Le Corbeiller.
17. One exception is a Vienna State Period figure of Pulcinella, now in the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art, Toronto, which shows him holding a container that is most likely filled with gnocchi. This figure is based either on a sculpture by Orazio Marinelli (1643–1720) in the gardens of the Villa Delicosa, near Vicenza, or on an engraving that was a common source for both. See Chilton, Harlequin Unmasked, no. 8.