

FRAGILE DIPLOMACY

Meissen Porcelain for European Courts

November 15, 2007 – February 11, 2008

The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture



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Those who strive to obtain the good graces of a prince are accustomed to come before him with such things as they hold most precious, or in which they see him take most delight; whence one often sees horses, arms, cloth of gold, precious stones, and similar ornaments presented to princes, worthy of their greatness.

—Niccolo Machiavelli (1469–1527), *The Prince*

From November 15, 2007, to February 11, 2008, The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture is presenting *Fragile Diplomacy: Meissen Porcelain for European Courts*, a unique exhibition of rare 18th-century Meissen gifts, many of which are on view in the United States for the first time. The exhibition, curated by Maureen Cassidy-Geiger, curator of The Arnhold Collection, Dresden/New York, has on display nearly 300 objects loaned by leading institutions and private collections in this country and abroad, including the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg; the royal collections of Denmark and Sweden; the Albani Diocesan Museum, Urbino, Italy; and several major collections in Germany including the state art collections of Saxony, Hesse-Kassel, Berlin-Brandenburg, and Bavaria. Many North American collections are also represented, including the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art, Toronto; the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the New York Public Library, New York; the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford; and the Stout Collection in the Dixon Gallery and Gardens, Memphis.

The Background

Porcelain was first produced in Asia in the eighth century. By the 16th century, a small number of Chinese pieces had entered royal collections in Europe, and gifts of porcelain began to be exchanged between royal houses. In 1590, for instance, Grand Duke Ferdinand de' Medici (1549–1609) sent 16 pieces of Chinese porcelain to Elector Christian I of Saxony (1560–1591).



In Europe, the recipe for manufacturing hard-paste porcelain was first discovered in 1710 at the court of August II (1670–1733), elector of Saxony and king of Poland. The prestige associated with being the owner of the first porcelain manufactory in Europe distinguished the king and his court and Meissen porcelain quickly achieved the status of “white gold” in Europe.

Experimentation over several years led to the production of a repertoire of models that embodied the artistic and representational traditions of the court. Initial inspiration was provided by the thousands of Chinese and Japanese porcelains that the king had collected. Genuine Asian porcelains were copied faithfully in the factory’s so-called “red porcelain,” a high-fired red stoneware, as well as in the white porcelain introduced in 1713. Meissen porcelain also was used for small sculptures that imitated carved ivories in the Electoral Kunstkammer (princely collection of rarities and curiosities), and for vessels and vases modeled after examples in silver from the silver buffet or after the locally turned mounted hardstone objects so valued by the king. Meissen porcelain is as much of a collector’s item in the 21st century as it was when it was introduced more than three centuries ago—many of the most exemplary early pieces immediately became part of the historical royal collections in Denmark, Germany, Sweden, and Russia, where they remain today.

Meissen porcelain began to function as a diplomatic gift by the mid 1720s, when a number of porcelain pieces from the king’s own collection were sent to the king of Sardinia in 1725. Three large white vases from that gift as well as two lavishly decorated tea and coffee services are in this exhibition. Conceived as showpieces rather than as



functional objects intended for daily use, such services were sent in customized leather boxes with velvet interiors trimmed in silver or gold braid. One of these rare boxes has survived and is included in the exhibition.

Very quickly a standardized repertoire of gifts was developed, including table services, garnitures of vases, altar garnitures, toilette services, and the ever-popular tea, coffee, and chocolate services. Most often, painted coats of arms were used as decoration, as on the vases and the parts of the table service sent to the king and queen of Sweden in 1734. The extraordinary dessert service now in the Hermitage collection, sent to Empress Elizabeth of Russia in 1745, is the only Meissen dessert service to survive with its accompanying figures. It is exhibited here for the first time in America, in a historical display with table decorations by the food historian Ivan Day. The Meissen toilette service sent in 1747 to Maria Amalia, the queen of Naples, was painted with her coat of arms and with Watteau subjects in the green monochrome palette reserved for members of the Saxon royal family. It has been partially reassembled for this exhibition. Reciprocal gifts were customary, and the show will feature the amber chess set presented to August II by the king of Prussia in 1728 and one of the six parade saddles sent with Spanish stallions to Dresden by Louis XIV in 1715.

The many volumes of diplomatic correspondence that have survived and are held in the state archives of Saxony demonstrate that every gift marked a specific diplomatic intent, though the gift enclosures signed by the king spoke nothing of politics. Four of these documents, penned by the king's ministers and initialed by him, are on view.



Indeed, Meissen snuffboxes began to replace the ubiquitous gold snuffboxes usually presented to ministers and high-ranking officials.

The status of Meissen as a diplomatic gift reached its zenith in 1750, when an enormous mirror frame, pier table, and matching gueridons were sent to the king's daughter, Marie-Joséphé, the dauphine of France, to celebrate the birth of her first child. With the outbreak of the Seven Years' War in 1756, the Meissen manufactory slowly ceded its dominant role to its French competitor, the royal manufactory at Sèvres. During the war, however, when the Meissen manufactory was occupied for a time by Frederick the Great, he continued the diplomatic gift tradition by presenting his ministers and his mother with gifts of Meissen porcelain, many of which are featured in this show.

Images

Inside left to right:

Tea service on a silver-gilt support

Meissen porcelain, ca. 1723–24

Silver: Augsburg, Johann Engelbrecht, ca. 1728–33

Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

Toilette service with the Habsburg arms

Gift to Empress Wilhelmine Amalia in 1740

Meissen porcelain, 1740

Munich, Residenzmuseum

Chess set

Gift from the king of Prussia to August II in 1728

Amber, wood, gold foil

Königsberg, ca. 1725–28

Grünes Gewölbe, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden

Photo: Jürgen Karpinski

Parade saddle, one of six presented with horses by Louis XIV to August II in 1715

Red silk embroidered with silver, on wooden form with stuffed linen cushion and leatherwork, Paris, 1715





The Catalogue

A richly illustrated catalogue published by the Bard Graduate Center and Yale University Press accompanies the exhibition. One of only a handful of publications devoted to the subject, this is the first survey of its kind to consider the diplomatic gift tradition at the court of Saxony under the two kings of Poland, August II and August III. Thirteen scholarly essays, written by a team of international experts, bring to light new archival discoveries concerning politics, diplomacy, and porcelain production at Meissen. Maureen Cassidy-Geiger introduces the subject while the historian Eugene Kisluk illuminates the politics behind the porcelain diplomatic gifts. A discussion of the diplomatic gift tradition in Dresden in the 16th and 17th centuries precedes individual essays on the porcelain gifts to Austria, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Russia, and Sweden.



Images

Cover

The Three Graces, representing France, Saxony, and Poland/Lithuania

From the table decoration mounted in Dresden for the wedding of Marie-Joséphette to the dauphin in January 1747
Meissen porcelain, 1746

Pauls-Eisenbeiss Collection, Historisches Museum, Basel
Photo: Jürgen Karpinski

Outside left to right:

Tea, coffee, and chocolate service in its original fitted box
Gift from August III to the king of Sweden in 1734

Meissen porcelain, 1733–34
Nationalmuseum, Stockholm

Standing cup with figure of Minerva on the cover

Meissen porcelain, 1735
Metropolitan Museum of Art

Covered vase with gilt metal mounts (back cover)

Meissen porcelain, modeled by J. J. Irmingier, after a design
by Raymond LePlat, ca. 1715

Gift from August II to the king of Sardinia in 1725

Private collection, New York
Photo: Sotheby's

Related Programs

An array of lectures, panels, and other offerings will be presented in conjunction with *Fragile Diplomacy: Meissen Porcelain for European Courts*. For further information, please call 212-501-3011 or e-mail programs@bgc.bard.edu.

Exhibition Tours

Group tours of *Fragile Diplomacy: Meissen Porcelain for European Courts* may be scheduled Tuesday through Friday between 11:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., and on Thursdays until 7:00 p.m. Reservations are required for all groups. For further information, please call the Bard Graduate Center Gallery at 212-501-3013 or TTY 212-501-3012, or e-mail gallery@bgc.bard.edu.

Location

The Bard Graduate Center is located at 18 West 86th Street, between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue, in New York City. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Thursday from 11:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Admission is \$3 general, \$2 seniors and students (with valid ID), and free on Thursday evenings after 5:00 p.m. For further information about the Bard Graduate Center and upcoming exhibitions, please visit www.bgc.bard.edu.

Support

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Upcoming Exhibition

Spring 2008 *Shaker Design: Out of this World*



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