

Antiques

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Diplomatic Overtures In Fine Porcelain

Gift giving is the timely subject of "Fragile Diplomacy: Meissen Porcelain for European Courts." The show, an examination of early German porcelain as a diplomatic tool, is ambitious and dazzling. Some 300 objects made between 1710 and 1763 — pristine carved and modeled white vases, gilded teapots, animal-encrusted hunting cups and bowls decorated with bouquets of flowers — fill three floors at the Bard Graduate Center Gallery in Manhattan.

"The notion of gift giving resonates," said Maureen Cassidy-Geiger, a Meissen scholar who is the curator of the show. "People who are not necessarily interested in porcelain are fascinated by gifts among royals."

Beginning in 1711, August II and his son August III, each in turn elector of Saxony and king of Poland, combined diplomatic overtures with porcelain gifts from their royal factory in Meissen (in present-day Germany).

"Meissen gifts were sent only to royals until 1740," Ms. Cassidy-Geiger said. "At the time there was a mystery about the earliest European porcelain wares. They were very exclusive and captivated anyone who received them."

The exhibition includes porcelains of every size: tiny snuffboxes; immense covered tureens; complete services for tea, coffee and chocolate; allegorical statues; garnitures of vases; statues of saints; and elaborate clock cases. Some are in the shapes of silver pieces. Others are affixed with small sculptures of flowers or animals. Still others have gilded ormolu mounts. The purpose of each gift is not necessarily clear today, but each demanded a response at the time of its presentation.

Was the porcelain meant to reinforce Saxony's identity? To solidify political alliances? To reconcile a troubled relationship? To demonstrate superiority? To encourage a parent to marry a child to a Saxon prince? To express gratitude?

Europeans have prized (and tried to copy) imported Chinese porcelain since the 16th century,



PAULS-EISENBEISS COLLECTION/HISTORISCHES MUSEUM, BASEL, SWITZERLAND

The Three Graces in a Meissen porcelain from 1746.

er the secret of its formulation until 1708, when an alchemist working under the patronage of August II, an ardent collector of Chinese porcelain, found the missing ingredient: kaolin, a fine clay made of decomposed feldspar, available in a mine in Colditz in Saxony. Combined with other elements like alabaster, and fired at high temperatures, kaolin makes a translucent, pure white and glassy porcelain.

By 1710 a patent was issued for the establishment of a Royal Porcelain Manufactory at Meissen. By 1711 the first piece of Meissen was sent as a diplomatic gift to King Frederik IV of Denmark.

"This was a wholly new material, and the Saxon kings were using it to great advantage because no one else had it," Ms. Cassidy-Geiger said. "Porcelain objects were a complete novelty. They were display pieces, not functional wares, and esteemed. They were well preserved because they were always particularly valued."

When August II died in 1733, August III continued the practice

death in 1763, after which the Sèvres factory in France gained more prominence than Meissen.

The exhibition is organized geographically. The ground floor focuses on Meissen gifts to the Danish and other German courts; the second floor, on gifts to Italy, Austria and Sweden; and the third floor, on gifts to England, France and Russia. This coincides with the chapters of the thorough and excellent catalog, which focus on Meissen gifts by recipient country.

Certain gifts, especially portraits of monarchs, were simply made for purposes of propaganda. For example, Meissen made small sculptures of August II in Roman dress and of August III in Polish court dress to send abroad.

Other gifts were of a religious nature, sent to deeply religious rulers. Many pieces were never intended for daily use.

One table service definitely meant for at least occasional use is the magnificent "St. Andrew" service that August III sent to Empress Elizabeth of Russia in 1744. It includes a centerpiece

Hermitage in St. Petersburg. Part of it has been reassembled on a table in the exhibition. Set with candlesticks with real beeswax candles, allegorical porcelain figures and a centerpiece depicting a miniature landscape, complete with a folly and parterre in sugar-paste, the display is meant to be the re-creation of a royal dessert table as it would have appeared in the mid-18th century. It is a splendid sight, the only Meissen dessert service to survive with its full set of figures.

Most of the colorful pieces carry the St. Andrew cross and the Russian two-headed eagle. Tureens have lids with artichokes. Tiny putti sculptures dance around the candlesticks. Each plate has a different flower painstakingly painted on its center. Sugar sculptures add to the gaiety. Hosts will be inspired.

"Fragile Diplomacy" runs through Feb. 10. The gallery at Bard, 18 West 86th Street, will be closed today through Monday and from Dec. 24 through Jan. 1.

Expensive Egg for Sale

Nearly all the important Fabergé eggs are known to Fabergé specialists, but not every single one. On Wednesday Christie's London will auction an unrecorded egg, the so-called Rothschild Fabergé Egg, signed and dated "K. Fabergé 1902," in its Russian sale.

The gold-mounted, pink-enamelled egg, which sits on a pink base, was a gift from Béatrice Ephrussi (who was born a Rothschild) to Germaine Halphen after Ms. Halphen became engaged to Ms. Ephrussi's younger brother, the banker Edouard de Rothschild. The egg is unusual in that it has both an automaton and a clock. On the hour, an automaton cockerel pops up out of the top, flaps its diamond-studded wings and briefly sings.

"To have both is very rare, but rarer still is the fact that this egg basically stayed in the same family for 100 years," said Alexis de Tiesenhausen, the international director of Christie's Russian department.

Christie's sold the last Fabergé egg that came up at auction for nearly \$10 million in 2004. The estimate for this one is \$12 million to \$18 million.