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Press Kit

6 February 2020

Meissen • Porcelain Follies

Hidden Treasures from Swiss Collections

Musée Ariana, 7 February to 6 September 2020

Exhibition preview: Thursday, 6 February 2020 at 7pm

Musée Ariana

Swiss Museum for Ceramics and Glass

10, avenue de la Paix

1202 Geneva - Switzerland

Press visit on demand

Press kit available under “Press”: www.ariana-geneve.ch

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INTRODUCTION

This exhibition is a chance to immerse yourself in the great adventure of the discovery of porcelain in Europe. A thousand years later than in China, the first object fashioned from this precious material saw the light of day in Meissen (Germany), at the start of the 18th century, after many sometimes incredible and certainly dramatic turns of events.

Swiss public and private collections are real treasure troves. This is true for porcelain in general and for Meissen ware in particular. Revealing the wealth of the often unseen private heritage is the aim of this project, for which numerous collectors have agreed to entrust items from their extraordinary collections to the Musée Ariana. As a counterpoint, and to illustrate the permeability between artistic disciplines, a set of engravings from Geneva's Cabinet des arts graphiques enriches the discourse.

The focus is on the very beginnings of the manufactory and its main protagonists - like Böttger, Höroldt and Kändler. Besides the exceptional pieces on show, a whole slice of art history is brought to life for visitors. It tells how, out of passion, greed or opportunism, men embarked on the quest for this grail, the discovery of the "white gold" of porcelain, at the risk of losing their fortunes and sometimes even their sanity.

HIDDEN TREASURES FROM SWISS COLLECTIONS

The eight Swiss collections assembled here present the history of Meissen porcelain. Though the selections and viewpoints may differ radically at times from each other, they are always underpinned by a requirement for aesthetic and scientific quality. The development of each collection is then the concern of its creator.

Most of the collectors have focused on specific themes and groups produced at the Meissen manufactory: pug dog figures for one connoisseur, chinoiserie pieces for another, and the *Brühlsches Allerlei* service for yet another. Passion is always a driving force behind the creation of such collections. This holds true here for everyone and was so especially for Pierre Darier († 2018) who demonstrated his profound interest in the world of Meissen through the acquisition of remarkable pieces from the *Swan Service*.

This project has not only benefited from the support of private collectors but also from that of two Swiss museums. The Historische Museum Basel and the Bernisches Historisches Museum are indeed the custodians of highly important collections. The former notably holds the one assembled by Hans Rudolf Christen (1924-2011), centred on pieces from dinner services, cups, teapots, saucers and plates of diverse inspiration. To the museum in Bern, Albert Kocher (1872-1941) bequeathed his collection spanning the range of objects made at Meissen, including figurines, dinner services and vases.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Meissen, a small fortified town on the banks of the River Elbe, was the stage for one of the West's greatest artistic adventures: the discovery of porcelain.

Ardently desired by the rulers of the time and coveted by all the nobility, Chinese porcelain was the focus of intense interest. Despite its high cost, the elite were still desperate to obtain it.

A pressing desire to solve the mystery of its production thus became increasingly felt across our continent, and more precisely in Germany. In the early 18th century – and so a thousand years after China – Europeans finally managed to discover the secret of this precious material, translucent, immaculate, resistant to scratching by steel and possessing an incomparable aura.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Augustus II, known as Augustus the Strong (1670-1733), the Sovereign

Augustus II, known as Augustus the Strong (1670-1733), Elector of Saxony and King of Poland, reigned over one of the most artistically and economically developed lands in the Holy Roman Empire. In 1700, he began to collect Eastern porcelain and dreamed of producing this "white gold" within his own territory. He wished to assuage his own "folly" or, as he called it, his porcelain "mania", to increase his personal prestige and for commercial reasons, wishing to attract investments into the very heart of his kingdom.

Johann Friedrich Böttger (1682-1719), the Alchemist and Walter von Tschirnhaus, the Scholar

Johann Friedrich Böttger claimed to have found the secret of the philosopher's stone (to turn base metals into gold). He was pursued by two sovereigns aware of the evident financial potential, Frederick I of Prussia and Augustus the Strong, finally being caught by the latter and held captive. But the alchemist proved incapable of finding the legendary formula. He only survived due to the intercession of Walter von Tschirnhaus (1651-1708), scholar and advisor to the Elector, who had the ingenious idea of redirecting the alchemist's research towards the discovery of porcelain, that material so dear to the sovereign. It took Böttger years of exhausting work in harsh conditions in both Dresden and Meissen, but in 1708 he succeeded in imitating Chinese red stoneware, then finally uncovered the much-coveted secret. In January 1710, Augustus the Strong announced the creation, in Meissen, of the first porcelain manufactory.

Johann Gregorius Höroldt, the Decorator

The arrival of Johann Gregorius Höroldt (1696-1775) in 1720 marked a turning point in the history of the manufactory. A painter working in Strasbourg and then in Vienna, he can be regarded as the originator of the painted decoration of Meissen porcelain. The first designs, influenced by Eastern models, were succeeded by subjects of his own invention, the famous *Chinoiseries*. Inspired by an idealized vision of China, these were hugely successful, being found on tableware as well as on *objets de vertu* or ceremonial pieces. European motifs subsequently emerged in the form of landscapes, hunting and pastoral subjects, seascapes, or scenes of gallantry in the manner of the French painter Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721).

Johann Joachim Kändler, the Modeller

Noticed by Augustus the Strong, Johann Joachim Kändler (1706-1775) was appointed as the manufactory's chief modeller in 1731. A sculptor by training, with a rich and vast cultural knowledge and a keen interest in nature, he was the key figure in the development of statuary at Meissen. In his hands, a whole fabulous universe sprang into being. Through him, the spirit of the Baroque - theatrical, inventive and luxurious – reigned supreme at the manufactory.

KEY DATES IN THE HISTORY OF THE MANUFACTORY

1701 Johann Friedrich Böttger (1682-1719), a young alchemist, claims to have discovered the secret of the philosopher's stone. Pursued, he flees. He is captured by soldiers of Augustus II, known as Augustus the Strong (1670-1733), who imprisons him in Dresden.

1704 The collaboration begins between Böttger and Walter von Tschirnhaus (1651-1708), with the aim of solving the mystery of making porcelain.

1706 They achieve their first success: imitation of Yixing stoneware.

1707 The secret of making hard-paste porcelain is at last discovered, partly thanks to the addition of kaolin in the production process.

15 January 1708 Böttger records the first European firing of porcelain in his laboratory notebook.

1708 Following on from the discovery, several years earlier, of a kaolin deposit in the region of Saxony, another extraction site is found in the vicinity of Meissen.

6 June 1710 Augustus the Strong issues a decree announcing the creation of the Meissen manufactory. From then on, research continues in order to improve the porcelain paste and extend the colour range.

1714 Böttger regains his freedom.

1717 A spectacular exchange takes place between Augustus the Strong and William I, King of Prussia: 600 of the former's soldiers for 151 pieces of Chinese porcelain.

1719 The secret is not kept hidden for long by Meissen. One man acquainted with it, Samuel Stöltzel (1685-1737), sells it in Vienna, where a manufactory is then set up. Böttger dies after years of toiling in difficult conditions.

1720 Stöltzel returns to Meissen, discouraged by the lack of means of the newly-created manufactory in Vienna. To safeguard his life, he brings with him the talented artist decorator Johann Gregorius Höroldt (1696-1775). Höroldt improves the decoration of the porcelain and devotes himself to expanding the range of colours.

1731 Johann Joachim Kändler (1706-1775) is employed as a modeller at the manufactory. He first concentrates on the creation of the porcelain menagerie, alongside Johann Gottlieb Kirchner (1706-1768), for Augustus the Strong's Japanese Palace, and then devotes himself to the world of figurines.

1733 Death of Augustus the Strong. Kändler is appointed as master modeller.

1735 The statesman, Count Heinrich von Brühl (1700-1763), is named director of the manufactory.

1756 The Seven Years' War begins. The activities of the manufactory come to a temporary halt. This setback enables other manufactories to become established in Europe. The second half of the century is dominated by the Sèvres manufactory.

1775 Death of Höroldt and Kändler.

PARTNERSHIP

Galerie Röbbig München

This project has benefitted from a partnership with the Röbbig München gallery and in particular from the invaluable cooperation of Alfredo Reyes and Sarah-Katharina Andres-Acevedo.



Amaverunt Foundation



EVENTS

Guided Tours

Guided tours on Sundays 9 February, 1st March, 5 April, 3 May, 7 June and 6 September at 11am, on Sunday 17 May at 2pm
(free visit)

Guided tours on request

In French, English, German or Italian
(Fee payable at time of booking)

Themed Tours

Sunday 15 March at 11am *The incredible adventure of the discovery of porcelain*
Sunday 26 April at 11am *Invention and virtuosity for ever more brilliant decoration*
Sunday 14 June at 11am *Meissen figurines: a fabulous world*
(free visit)

Guided Tour for Teachers

Wednesday 19 February, 2pm
Pre-booking required

Workshops

Ceramic Rendezvous

Porcelain painting workshops (adults and children/families)
Sundays 23 February, 29 March, 28 June and 6 September 10.30 am – 1 pm or 2 pm – 4.30 pm
Fee 35.- / 30.- CHF, payable on registration, places subject to availability

Philosophical Rendezvous

La Porcelaine au siècle des Lumières (Porcelain in the Age of Enlightenment). In French
Sunday 26 April 11am – 12.30pm or 3pm – 16.30pm
Free, places subject to availability

Memory Game Rendezvous

Bring your grandparents (or parents) to the museum!

Enjoy testing your memory in this visit-workshop-game combined.
Sunday 31 May, 10.30am – 12.30pm or 2 pm – 4.30 pm
Fee 10.- CHF, places subject to availability

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Musée Ariana

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10 Avenue de la Paix, 1202 Geneva
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Open Tuesday - Sunday 10am - 6 pm, closed on Mondays

Admission fees

12 / 9 CHF; Free admission for under 18s and on the first Sunday of the month.
On all other Sundays: buy one admission ticket, get one free

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