Porcelain, Old and New

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Porcelain, the magic word that puts a gleam of acquisition in the eyes of almost every American in Germany, was accidentally discovered at Meissen in 1709 by Johann Friedrich Boettcher, a young alchemist who was seeking a method to produce gold for his avaricious master, King August the Strong of Saxony.

Prior to Boettcher's accidental discovery, the secret of making porcelain, known to the Chinese almost 1,000 years earlier and perfected by them in the 15th and 16th centuries, had eluded the Western artisans despite repeated attempts to solve this mystery.

Since his discovery, Germany has become the home of the European true or hard-paste porcelain industry and today German porcelain is universally admired and collected by persons of all races and circumstances. It appears in countless forms—from great chandeliers to miniature buttons, from magnificent table services to humble ashtrays, from life-size statues to small, artistic figurines. The development of porcelain has captured the fancy of nobles and commoners throughout the centuries.

There had been a long search throughout the western world for food and liquid containers which were low heat conductors, easy to clean, nonporous and free from the taint imparted to food by earthenware and metal vessels. Porcelain satisfied all these requirements. There is little wonder, therefore, that porcelain was hailed with great enthusiasm in western Europe. It was referred to as "white gold" and was considered a semi-precious material upon which the master modelers and decorators could exploit their talents for the benefit of the noble and rich.

KING AUGUST THE STRONG was an ardent lover of porcelain and like many other rulers of that day he had almost bankrupted his kingdom through the acquisition of Oriental porcelain (china). Boettcher's discovery at Meissen resulted in the establishment of the royal Meissen factory, which he managed until his death in 1719.

Now, with his own factory, the king seized the opportunity to enhance his prestige and replenish his treasury. He determined to keep his prize a secret and every precaution was taken to prevent the secret from falling into the hands of others interested in opening competitive factories. The Meissen employees were sworn to "secrecy to the death," and deaf and dumb workers are reputed to have been employed and held in virtual confinement to prevent the secret from escaping the walls of the factory.

Threats, bribery, alcohol, seduction and other devices were used to obtain the magic formula. Although constant vigilance was maintained, the secret escaped and Samuel Stoezel, a former Meissen workman, founded a factory at Vienna in 1718. A number of other factories were established in Germany and neighboring countries during the middle of the century with the aid of porcelain artisans who sold the secrets.

Porcelain production soon became the vogue, and every prince aspired to own a factory. As porcelain was...
primarily produced for the nobility and their rich friends, no expense was spared in making the finest products. Each factory employed the ablest modelers and decorators in order to excel, and this accounts for the exceptionally fine quality of early porcelain, which is so ardently collected today. The best specimens rank with classical paintings and sculptures as a collector’s joy.

Each of the Eight Major 18th Century German factories, which will be described briefly in the order of their establishment, employed outstanding artists and strove to excel, with the result that each made its artistic contributions. Generally, the best period of the factories was during their first 30 to 50 years of operation, particularly during the rococo period, which offered a style of modeling and decorating particularly adapted to porcelain. The finest porcelain was being made in Germany about the time George Washington was surveying the wilds of America, and almost a half century before Napoleon’s armies marched across Europe.

The artistic quality of porcelain began to decline toward the end of the 18th century when the factories began competing on a commercial basis, and the former high standards have never again been equaled. Consequently, connoisseurs are interested in pieces made during the best periods of the factories and spend much time and money to obtain them.

The porcelain factory at Meissen, now in the Soviet Zone of Germany, was Europe’s first and is still the most important of the old German porcelain factories. It has operated continuously as a royal or state factory since its establishment in 1710. It has had its glorious days and its periods of depression and decline, but it richly deserves its international fame for outstanding productions over a long and interesting period.

The best period of Meissen extended from 1720 to 1760. After Boetticher’s death, August the Strong secured the services of a number of leading artists, including Johann G. Hoeroldt, who proved to be the most renowned porcelain painter of all time. He and his associates are famous for their paintings of oriental characters, chinoiseries and flowers, and later the beautiful baroque and rococo decorations of court scenes, landscapes and harbors. In 1731, Johann J. Kaendler was engaged as chief modeler, was soon acknowledged as a master and became the inspiration of many porcelain artists throughout Europe.

It was not until Kaendler’s genius was joined with that of Hoeroldt that Meissen porcelain attained its maximum variety, grace and beauty and reached the peak of its fame around 1750. These two great artists enjoyed a long and successful career together and the period from 1731 to the beginning of the Seven Years War in 1756 is known as the Hoeroldt-Kaendler period. This was the golden age of Meissen and its creations included a large variety of figurines, dinner services, candelabra, desk sets, animals, birds and vases of all kinds.

There has always been considerable confusion, especially among Americans, as to the difference between Meissen and Dresden porcelain. Since the Meissen factory is only 14 miles from Dresden, Meissen porcelain is frequently thought of as Dresden and vice versa, but there is a definite distinction. Porcelain is not manufactured in Dresden, though several factories are located nearby. Enormous quantities of white porcelain are bought by Dresden firms only for decorating, marking and resale throughout the world as “Dresden china.”
Few of the Dresden decorating establishments have produced artistic porcelain, but all enjoy the prestige of their location. The word "Dresden," therefore, is a generic term which applies to any piece of porcelain painted in the city or its environs. On the other hand, there is only one Meissen factory. Meissen set the European pattern of hard-paste porcelain and left the print of its influence on the factories which followed.

The second hard-paste porcelain factory, which is considered a German enterprise, was founded at Vienna in 1718 by Claudius du Paquier. It was operated as a private concern until 1744, when it was taken over by the Austrian state. Under John J. Niedermeyer, chief modeler from 1747 to 1784, it produced a variety of graceful figurines and groups, including shepherds, lovers, hawkers, hunters, musicians and all manner of allegorical and Biblical characters, primarily in rococo style, clean and fresh, with pale brown, violet and yellow predominating.

Konrad Sorgenthal, who directed the factory from 1784 to 1805, is responsible for the characteristic richly decorated dinner and tea services, vases and plates inspired by Greek, Roman and Egyptian models in neo-classical style. The artistic production of Vienna declined in the 19th century and the institution closed its doors in 1864 after operating for almost a century and a half.

WITH ROYAL PATRONAGE, the third German porcelain factory was established at Hoechst, now a suburb of Frankfurt, in 1746. Its best period of artistic production was from 1767 to 1779, when the modeling of the great young sculptor, Johann P. Melchior, received popular acclaim. Melchior's figurines and groups were warm, animated and often sentimental. They included religious subjects, children, pastoral and harvest scenes and mythological characters supported on grassy mound or moss-covered rock bases.

The early figures were painted in pink, blue and spotted patterns, while the later productions were in darker colors. Like the other old factories, Hoechst pro-

(Courtesy, Museum fuer Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg)
is best known, but his productions do not compare with those of Meissen's Kaendler, Nymphenburg's Bustelli and Hoechst's Melchior. Fuerstenberg is primarily known for its vases and useful porcelain produced in rococo or neo-classical fashion between 1760 and 1790. The factory passed into private ownership in 1876 and is still operating with a favorable reputation.

With the support of Prussian King Frederick the Great, a merchant named Wegely operated a porcelain factory in Berlin from 1751 to 1757. His efforts failed and another factory was opened by Gotzkowsky in 1761. Frederick's chief ambition was to make Berlin porcelain equal to or better than Meissen, so when Gotzkowsky ran into financial difficulties, Frederick bought the factory in 1763 and continued it as a royal enterprise. It is now known as Berlin or KPM (Koenigliche Porzellan Manufaktur).


Although Frederick was successful in his wars and was able to force Meissen and other artists to work in his factory, he never achieved superlative quality. The figurines modeled by the brothers Friedrich E. and Wilhelm C. Meyer (1761-1785) are interesting and attractive, but Berlin's greatest fame is associated with its useful wares, especially dinner services. The factory has operated continuously to date, but since the Berlin plant was practically destroyed during World War II, its principal production is now carried on at Selb in Bavaria.

The Frankenthal factory was established in the town of that name near Mannheim in 1755 by Paul A. Hannong with the permission of Elector Karl Theodor, who bought the enterprise in 1762. The factory, which closed in 1799 after operating for only 44 years, is best known for its figurines and groups modeled by Johann W. Lanz (1755-1761), Johann F. Lueck (1758-1764) and Karl G. Lueck (1760-1775). Most of its pieces, both figurines and useful wares, were excellently modeled and decorated in rococo style. Its best items are eagerly sought by collectors.

Ludwigsburg, the last of the eight major German factories, was founded in 1750 in Ludwigsburg, 12 miles north of Stuttgart, by Karl Eugen, the luxury-loving Duke of Wuerttemberg. It had no real excuse for existence except to increase the magnificence of the duke. Although its production does not compare with that of Meissen, Nymphenburg, Frankenthal or Hoechst, miscellaneous items designed by Gottlieb Riedel (1759-1779) and the figures of Johann C. W. Beyer (1760-1767) are extremely interesting and attractive. Quality and production declined after the death of the duke in 1793 and the factory closed in 1824.

As the factories of Hoechst and Frankenthal operated for only a short time and closed before 1800, and Ludwigsburg soon thereafter, original items from these establishments are necessarily antiques. However, old models of these factories as well as Vienna and some of the enter-
prises which are still operating, particularly Meissen, are frequently copied and similarly marked by modern factories. With experience it is possible to distinguish the comparatively poor copies from the genuine masterpieces. All of the old major factories, as well as most of the minor ones, bear the names of the cities in which they were established, and many of the trade marks are symbolic of their home cities or their royal patrons.

IN ADDITION TO THE EIGHT major factories, at least 20 minor or small factories were established in German provinces during the latter half of the 18th century. These included Ansbach (1758-1860), Kelsterbach (1761-1802), Ottweiler (1763-1775), Fulda (1765-1790), Kassel (1766-1788) and Gutenbrunn (1767-1775), of which Ansbach and Fulda are the most outstanding. During this period a number of commercial factories were also established in the forests of Thuringia, where there was an abundance of raw materials and fuel. The principal ones are Gotha (1757), Kloster Veilsdorf (1760), Volkstedt-Rudolstadt (1760), Wallendorf (1764), Limbach (1772), Ilmenau (1777), Gera (1779) and Rauenstein (1783), all of which are reported as operating to the present date.

Some of these smaller factories were started by princes, but a majority were established as private commercial enterprises producing wares which could be sold at a profit in competition with other factories. Because of commercial emphasis and the fact that most of the minor factories opened after the general art of porcelain had fallen into decline, no great artistic contribution was made by them. For the greater part, they followed the production methods and styles of the older factories; however, some turned out original high quality products.

Germany and Austria and their former territories have a large number of porcelain factories which originated in the 19th and 20th centuries, some of which have an international reputation for the manufacture of good quality utilitarian and decorative items. Although little artistic or historical importance can be attached to products of the more modern establishments, amateurs and collectors and especially dealers are usually interested in the role they have played in satisfying popular demand and stimulating general interest in porcelain.

Most of the approximately 200 porcelain factories in Germany established in the 19th and 20th centuries are concentrated near the source of raw materials in the central part of Germany, primarily in North Bavaria, Thuringia, Saxony and Silesia. The products of these factories, some of which were established more than 100 years ago, appear in abundance in many of the antique shops of Germany and other countries. Amateurs will be impressed with the choicest pieces.

The best products of the well-known factories of Sitzen- dorf, Rosenthal, Schumann, Hutschenreuther and Heinrich, for example, are attractive and tempting. In addition, some of the leading decorative establishments of Dresden and manufacturers of Altwasser, Passau, Plauen, Potschapel, Rudolstadt, Selb and other cities have produced utilitarian and decorative porcelain of good quality.

Despite the attractive appearance of many of these pieces, they lack the painstaking workmanship of the master modelers and decorators of the 18th century and have limited appeal to connoisseurs. Some of the famous old factories, including Meissen and Nymphenburg, are still operating and producing large quantities of porcelain in great variety for domestic use and export.

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Suggestions for the Amateur

ANYONE INTERESTED in collecting porcelain should realize that this has been the hobby of countless people in many parts of the world for more than two centuries. It is not restricted to persons of wealth, the
aesthetically trained or the sophisticated. However, almost anyone who develops an interest in porcelain and has good taste, a good eye, and is willing to do a reasonable amount of studying, consulting and observing, should soon be able to make creditable selections.

At the same time he will begin to realize that porcelain, which is only one segment of the whole field of ceramics, is so extensive in itself that it is desirable, if not necessary, to concentrate his studies on one particular aspect of this broad field. For example, some may desire to collect teapots of all shapes, sources and ages; others only figurines, while some may collect almost anything of a certain factory or mark, a specific period, or a definite style, color or composition. The opportunities for collecting porcelain are almost unlimited in Germany.

There is no direct or sure method for the average person to follow in achieving expert proficiency in a short time; but like all other hobbies, there are some basic criteria and practices which will be found helpful. The beginner should observe the following:

1. Acquire standard books, magazines and catalogs on the general subjects and add more specialized ones as interest and taste develop.

2. Study the photographs of famous pieces as it is impossible to see all of the originals. Glossy pictures of artistic porcelain can be purchased from museums or photographic agencies and most public libraries have books on porcelain containing illustrations.

3. Visit shops, exhibits, auctions, museums and private collections and learn to distinguish the good from the bad. The habit of close critical observation must be developed.

4. Study the porcelain factory marks. Although they are often an unreliable clue to identification, a working knowledge of them is necessary.

5. Buy a few representative authentic pieces from unquestionable sources and use them as a basis for comparison with the items sought.

6. Cultivate an acquaintance or friendship with persons who are interested and experienced in porcelain—collectors, dealers, exhibitors and, if possible, ceramic specialists in museums. They are usually willing to advise and some may take pride in actually assisting.

Table set in German fashion. Modern.
(Courtesy, Staatliche Porzellan-Manufaktur, Meissen)

THE OBSERVATION OF AT LEAST six factors will be found helpful in judging the quality and authenticity of a piece of porcelain.

1. The factory mark, usually appearing on the bottom of the piece, is a good clue but not a guarantee of the origin. Marks are generally reliable but some pieces are falsely marked, others are copies, while some have no mark at all. The principal trade marks—shown in the accompanying charts—may be helpful.

2. The body or paste of the material reveals its texture, degree of whiteness, translucency and general physical quality. A good piece is fine-grained, uniform in color, and reasonably free from defects. However, early Meissen and Vienna, and perhaps some other porcelain, have a green tone, are irregular in texture and translucency, and often possess light spots (called "moons" or "tares") when viewed by transmitted light.

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### Things Not to Do

1. Don’t buy anything for your permanent collection which is distasteful, since you have to live with it and beauty is the first criterion of every good collector.

2. Don’t purchase an article simply because it has the mark of a good factory. Inferior porcelain is still bad regardless of the mark.

3. Don’t acquire old pieces for the sake of their age, as antiquity adds little to the worth of an article unless it has historical or artistic value.

4. Don’t buy pieces which are materially damaged or poorly mended just because they are reasonably priced. The repair bill may increase the cost to that of a perfect piece.

5. Don’t buy pieces under poor light conditions unless willing to be deceived. Bright daylight is preferred.

6. Don’t rush or buy when in doubt. The dealer will usually reserve the piece for a short time while you are making your final decision.

### THE AMATEUR COLLECTOR

The Amateur Collector should make a round of visits to all antique shops periodically. Good pieces come and go and one never knows where or when he will run across a treasure. When dealers become familiar with your interest and taste they may be very helpful in locating and setting aside items which they believe will interest you.

It is only fair to warn the novice that good pieces of old porcelain from favorite factories command comparatively high prices. This is particularly true of figurines, which are often sold for large sums. One should realize, however, that old, artistic porcelain is very scarce and becoming even more so. As time goes on, it may be expected to increase in value. Thus, good quality antique porcelain bought at a fair price is considered a good investment.

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*Fulda. Food warmer with pastoral decoration. About 1775.*

(Courtesy, Museum fuer Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg)