

Porcelain as Sculpture: Medium, Materiality, and the Categories of Eighteenth-Century Collecting

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The story of porcelain's beginnings in China, the institutionalization of its production under imperial authority at Jingdezhen, the role it played in several major early modern global economies, its rise to the *ne plus ultra* of ceramics in eighteenth-century Europe, and the complicated history it has had since: all of this regularly attracts attention both scholarly and popular.¹ To summarize its significance, it may be enough to note, following the historian Robert Finlay, that porcelain was the first truly global commodity.² It was a medium for objects of local significance and also for international exchange across multiple regions of the world in a complex web of cultural and economic interaction. Porcelain's appeal to Europe is well known, but it was also a major import product for south and southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, New Spain, and of course it circulated in China itself. The European "discovery" of porcelain at Meissen and the subsequent development of European manufactories, as well as the commercialization of porcelain production at heritage houses like Meissen and Sèvres, are likewise understood as standard components of our history of eighteenth-century collecting. And as the scholarship of Maureen Cassidy-Geiger has demonstrated, porcelain was of central importance to international diplomacy, as it commonly served as diplomatic gifts between European monarchical courts.³ We may then surmise from this brief

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- 1 I would like to thank Malcolm Baker and Inge Reist for prompting me to think anew about porcelain after several years' hiatus, and to the audiences present at the symposium held at the Center for the History of Collecting for sharing their observations. Further thanks to Livia Frescobaldi and Elisabetta Mari in Tuscany for guidance with objects in the now sadly closed Doccia Museum, Sesto Fiorentino, and to Ragna Petrak for assistance with locating materials in the State Archives of Saxony. Appearing just as this essay went to press is the most recent issue of *The French Porcelain Society Journal*, 8 (2020), edited by Diana Davis, Oliver Fairclough, and John Whitehead, on the topic of "Ceramics as Sculpture."
 - 2 Robert Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 5–12.
 - 3 Maureen Cassidy-Geiger, ed., *Fragile Diplomacy: Meissen Porcelain for European Collections, ca. 1710–63* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 3–23.



FIGURE 7.1 Porcelain Cabinet, Charlottenburg Palace, Berlin, 1706
 PHOTO: BPK BILDAGENTUR/ART RESOURCE, NY

description of porcelain history that the medium's place in the classificatory systems that structured the arts in the eighteenth century is confidently secure.

Yet I would hesitate to claim that. Well studied though it is, porcelain's significance to eighteenth-century collecting practices is surprisingly difficult to characterize. To locate porcelain within a putative history of ceramics, and therefore of the decorative arts, gives the interpreter one view of its importance. To understand it as part of a broader history of art gives a different one. The problem arises out of modern art-historical classifications, which privilege influence within specific media rather than across them, and this in turn results in academic specializations and bias in which some kinds of art are understood to bear profound meaning while others do not. A parallel problem existed in the eighteenth century: what defined the boundaries of "art" was in transformation, and porcelain found itself implicated in the period's redrawing of artistic hierarchies. At the root of the problem is the ontological status of the art object. In a sense, there is no good reason not to describe a room like the Porcelain Cabinet at Schloss Charlottenburg in Berlin (fig. 7.1) as a sculptural

collection.⁴ It brings together three-dimensional objects and arranges them in a carefully conceived display, the purpose of which is to draw attention to the objects' aesthetic qualities, characteristics that these items share with other kinds of three-dimensional objects. Yet few of us would call this a sculpture collection.⁵ My goal is to map out this situation to show how porcelain almost became a high art, namely sculpture, at an early moment in its European production. Eighteenth-century collections moved closer to transforming porcelain into sculpture than at any time since, but we shall see that in porcelain's seductive materiality lay both its potential to reach that goal and its limitation. Matthew Martin has described this ambivalence as rooted as the "ambiguous place of the porcelain medium in sculptural aesthetics," the origins of which he locates within issues of originality and authenticity that complicate porcelain's status as art.⁶ The difficulty of pinpointing exactly what is an original and what a copy in porcelain became one reason why we now think of it as a "decorative" art, separate from sculpture, but, as we shall see, it was not the only one.

Let us put that concern aside for a moment and turn instead to another, namely porcelain's materiality, as this is central to the issues at hand. One component of a work of art's materiality is in fact its medium. It matters enormously whether a painting is made in oil, tempera, or acrylic. The possibilities that each medium allows, as well as the limits that it proscribes, are essential components to a work of art and should play a role in its interpretation. But once a work of art has been made, its medium becomes incorporated into the broader materiality of its culture, which is better described as how medium creates the status of the artwork as a thing that interacts with other things to form a specific material world. This material world is forever in flux and within a material world different materialities interrelate, harmonize, clash, or otherwise inflect how individuals understand the world. Imagining how an object fits within the philosophical, ethical, perceptual, and economic structures of a given moment is one way to understand its materiality, which produces a much broader and to my mind more exciting way of explaining an object's

4 For which see Guido Hinterkeuser, "Die Wohn- und Prunkräume Sophie Charlottes und Friedrichs I. im Schloß Charlottenburg: Zu Programmatik, Ausstattung, und Nützung," *Zeitschrift des deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft* 59/60 (2005–2006): 243–268.

5 A point made in the introduction to this volume: Malcolm Baker, "Variety and Ambiguity: What Do We Mean by a 'Sculpture Collection'?"

6 Matthew Martin, "Models and Multiples: Eighteenth-Century European Porcelain Sculpture" in *The Challenge of the Object/Die Herausforderung des Objekts. Proceedings of the 33rd Congress of the International Committee of the History of Art (CIHA), Nürnberg, 15–20 July 2012*, eds. Georg Ulrich Großmann and Petra Krutisch (Nürnberg: Verlag des Germanischen Nationalmuseums, 2014), III: 944–948.



FIGURE 7.2 Japanese Palais, Dresden, exterior view

PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA COMMONS, CREATIVE COMMONS CC0 1.0 UNIVERSAL
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social importance than simply to describe its medium. Probably in your mind at this moment is the question of how we designate a thing. This is a major philosophical problem that I will not attempt to solve in this essay, but let me say with great circularity that we know a thing is a thing because we encounter its materiality.⁷

Porcelain's special, seductively reflective materiality was of course one aspect of what made for its attraction to the eighteenth-century marketplace. It is also, paradoxically, what made porcelain difficult to understand as sculpture, even when it was used for figural modeling that directly mimicked the sculptor's art, an issue that will be addressed below. Nowhere do we encounter the confusion about porcelain's materiality more than in the earliest attempts to collect and display it. This is clearly apparent in the most famous ceramics display of the early eighteenth century, albeit one that did not survive for long and is known today only through preparatory drawings: the porcelain collections displayed in the Japanese Palais in Dresden at the order of the Polish-Saxon Elector King Augustus the Strong (1670–1733, fig. 7.2). The Elector's place in the history of European porcelain is of course singular. Augustus was so fascinated by Asian porcelains that he pushed local philosopher/artisans Walter Ehrenfried von Tschirnhaus (1651–1708) and Johann Friedrich Böttger (1682–1719) to

7 Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *The Object Reader*, ed. Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins (London: Routledge, 2009), 113–123.

recreate hard-paste porcelain in Saxony, leading to the development of the Meissen manufactory and subsequently to all European porcelain production. Augustus amassed staggering amounts of porcelain, both Asian and European, and his collection numbered 35,000 discrete objects in royal holdings by 1735.⁸ As an aside, there may be a direct connection between this famous collection and the Prussian one at Charlottenburg mentioned above. Scholars have proposed that Augustus only became interested in creating such an enormous collection of porcelain after visiting Berlin in 1709, where he traveled to form a military alliance with Prussia and Denmark against the threat of Sweden in the Great Northern War. While in Berlin, he visited Charlottenburg and certainly saw the porcelain cabinet there; he may have had it in mind when commissioning designs for his porcelain displays in Dresden.⁹ This would suggest that Augustus understood the close association between porcelain and power that Charlottenburg had established. He later sent his chief architect Matthias Daniel Pöppelmann (1662–1736) to Berlin specifically to study the porcelain cabinet there, and upon returning Pöppelmann was then put to work at the Japanisches Palais.¹⁰

The Japanisches Palais is not a palace in the usual sense. Its name was something of an afterthought, as it was originally called the Holländisches Palais, to immortalize the European nation whose trade with Asia was responsible for so much porcelain finding its way onto the continent.¹¹ Augustus acquired it in 1717 and supervised its renovation over two decades. It was never a courtly residence, as the term *Palais* implies, but instead a gigantic showplace to be used for receptions, ceremonies, and diplomatic visits. The building's history has been well studied, notably and most recently by Cordula Bischoff, Ulrich Pietsch, and Samuel Wittwer, who have imparted much knowledge to our understanding of its genesis and function.¹² Here I shall emphasize two aspects of its design. The first concerns the way in which the display of the royal

8 Gerhard Röbbig, *Cabinet Pieces: The Meissen Porcelain Birds of Johann Joachim Kändler, 1706–1775* (Munich: Hirmer, 2008), 37.

9 Samuel Wittwer, *The Gallery of Meissen Animals: Augustus the Strong's Menagerie for the Japanese Palace in Dresden*, trans. John Nicholson (Munich: Hirmer, 2004), 18 and 46.

10 Wittwer, *Gallery*, 44.

11 For which see Karina Corrigan, et al., *Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015). On the influence of the Dutch on the arts of Asia, see Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann and Michael North, eds., *Mediating Netherlandish Art and Material Culture in Asia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014).

12 Wittwer, *Gallery*; Cordula Bischoff and Ulrich Pietsch, eds., *Japanisches Palais zu Dresden: Die Königliche Porzellansammlung Augustus des Starken* (Munich: Hirmer, 2014).

porcelain collection was conceived; the second is the range of objects on view and how they might be classified as sculpture, decorative art, or something else.

Although the documentary record for the Japanisches Palais is rich, our understanding of exactly how its displays were arranged is imperfect, as its interiors were dismantled around 1770.¹³ We know something of its possible appearance from an extensive collection of drawings produced by Saxon court architects, each of whom grappled with issues of how to present the elector's porcelain in the most appealing manner. The first drawings come from Pöppelmann's studio. In one of several drawings for the project dating to before 1730 showing a display of porcelain objects in the palace's upper story, the patterning and the arrangement of objects are remarkably close to the porcelain cabinet at Charlottenburg (fig. 7.3).¹⁴ Ornate shelves and pedestals are arranged across the surface of the wall. Resting upon them are porcelain vases, tureens, and some small animal figurines. Also sketched into the design are Asiatic *pagodes* (smiling Buddha-like figures), smirking masks, candle sconces, and tendrils of purely ornamental filigree. These function to incorporate the objects displayed to form a rich and fantastic Asiatic theme. In this respect, Pöppelmann draws from the well-known wall display templates provided by Daniel Marot (1661–1752) in his highly influential *Nouvelles Cheminées faites en plusieurs endroits de la Hollande et Autres Provinces* of 1703 (fig. 7.4), a graphic compendium of various furniture and interior designs that includes arrangements for several ideal porcelain cabinets.¹⁵ Marot's images influenced the display of porcelain and other precious objects in noble interiors across the eighteenth century, particularly in Germany. One should note two things about these early images. First, prints like Marot's indicate that displays were conceived to permit the inspection of individual objects and that the room displays mixed porcelain with other kinds of rare luxury goods. Indeed, as Bischoff has shown, the term *cabinet chinois* could refer to any room in which precious objects were housed, including many non-Asian items, and in fact the distinction between porcelain, lacquer, and mirrored cabinets remained hazy

13 Röbbig, *Cabinet Pieces*, 37. The Dresden Kunstkammer already contained 16 pieces of porcelain in 1595. The collection grew in the late seventeenth century, after the Thirty Years War, but collecting increased exponentially in the 1710s. It expanded through purchases from the open market, gifts both from within Saxony and through international exchanges, and of course the creation of new porcelain objects at Meissen. Wittwer, *Gallery*, 17.

14 Sächsisches Staatsarchiv, Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden, Bestand 10006 Oberhofmarschallamt, Japanisches Palais, Cap. 02, Nr. 15, Bl. 26k/2. Here I follow Wittwer's dating of this drawing to before 1730; *Gallery*, 43.

15 Collected alongside Marot's other ornamental prints in Peter Jessen, ed., *Das Ornamentwerk des Daniel Marot in 264 Lichtdrucken nachgebildet* (Berlin: Wasmuth, 1892).

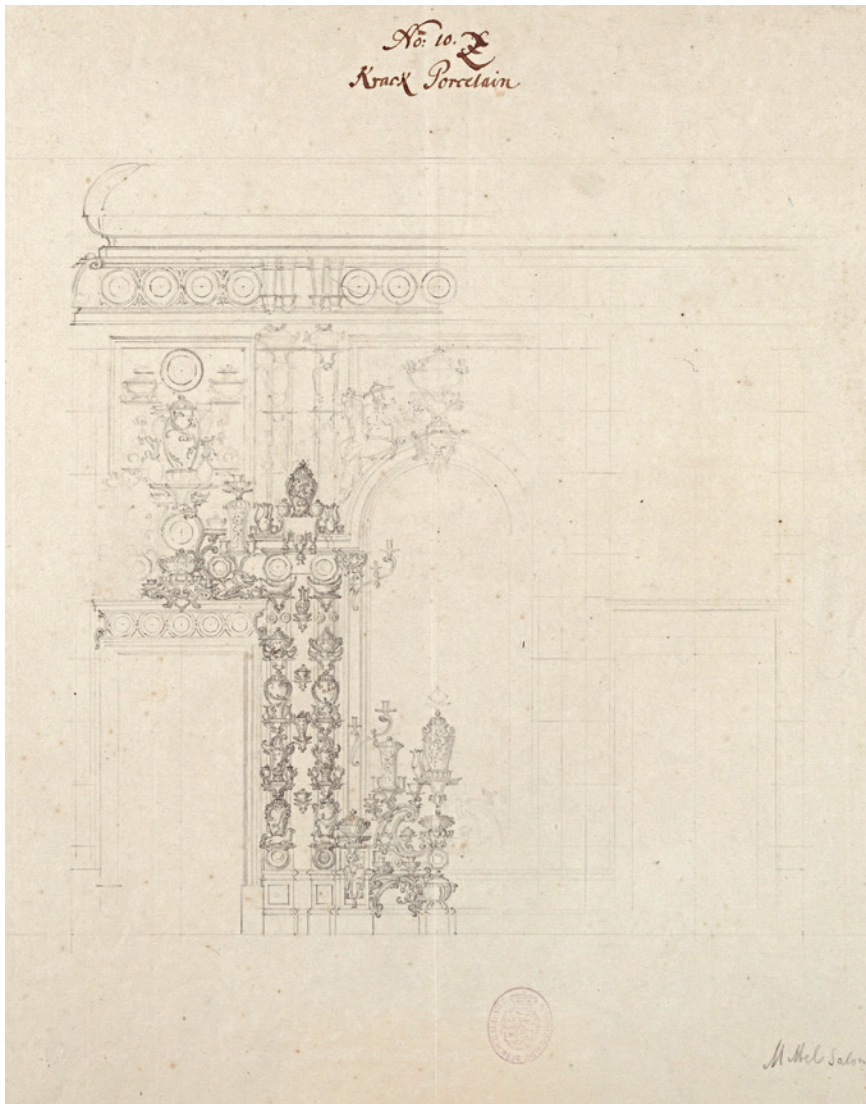


FIGURE 7.3 Attr. Matthäus Daniel Pöppelmann, Design for a wall arrangement in the Japanisches Palais, Dresden, before 1730

PHOTO: SÄCHSISCHES STAATSARCHIV, HAUPTSTAATSARCHIV, DRESDEN

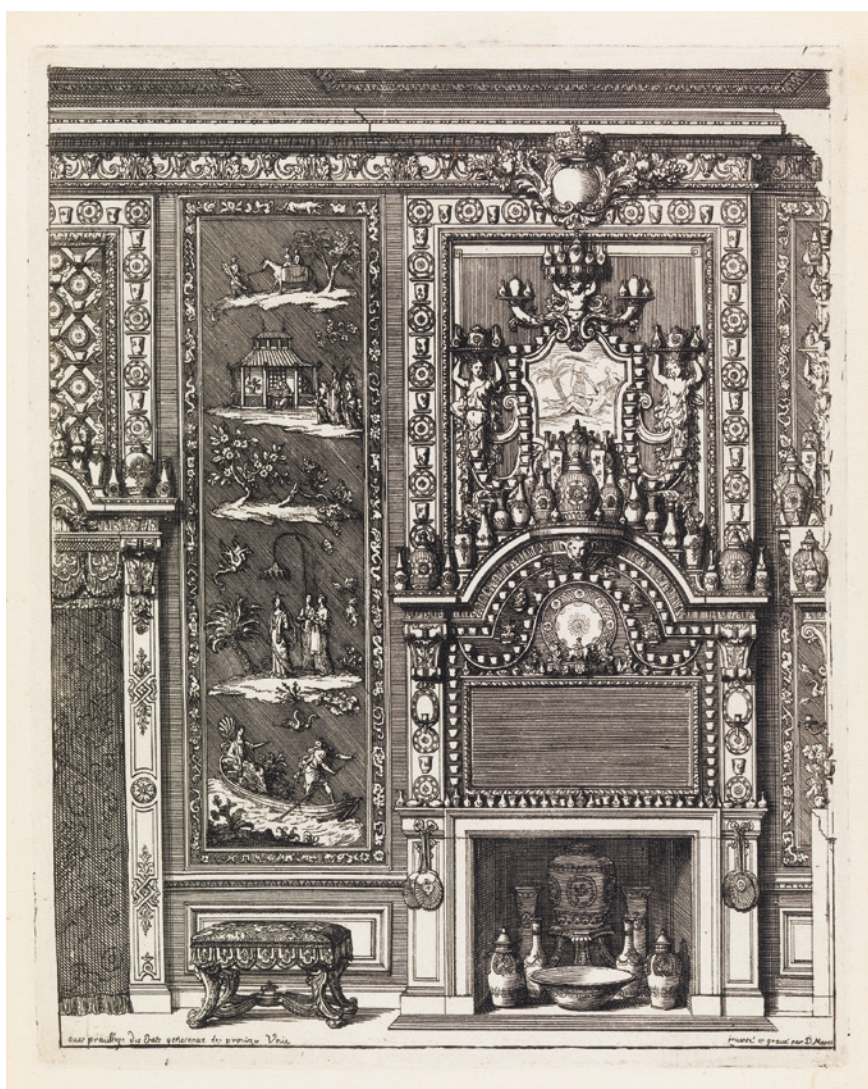


FIGURE 7.4 Plate from Daniel Marot, *Nouvelles Cheminées faites en plusieurs endroits de la Hollande et Autres Provinces*, 1703

PHOTO: COOPER HEWITT, SMITHSONIAN DESIGN MUSEUM/ART RESOURCE, NY

during the early eighteenth century.¹⁶ Neither was a separate room a prerequisite. Designs for fireplaces with exotic objects displayed over them in this manner assumed the name *cheminée à la hollandaise* to reference the international trade system behind them as well as to suggest in miniature what grander spaces like the Japanisches Palais achieved on a larger scale.¹⁷ Second, at this moment, in the decades immediately after 1700, porcelain tableware and vessels were not often used for their ostensible purposes, that is, as containers or tableware.¹⁸ Porcelain was too precious and its materiality too special for it to be sacrificed to the perils of daily, or even periodic, use.

Pöppelmann's design positions the porcelain objects as components of the interior architecture, largely as fixed entities. In a sense, then, porcelain here asserts its presence through its purely formal qualities, alongside whatever elements of setting might be implied through figural elements surrounding them. Porcelain needs to be seen as part of a whole. Whether we can call this a display of sculpture, however, is not so clear, although one might note that it operates here more like architectural sculpture in that it adorns a space as part of a decorative program. Insofar as architectural sculpture might be conceived as a sculptural collection, so too might that designation apply to this room. And insofar as the porcelain objects were figured here primarily to be seen, and seen within a decorative patterning, they might come closer to sculpture than they otherwise would.

There is another aspect of Pöppelmann's design worth noting. Early porcelain rooms share a common intellectual space with another early modern room for collecting, namely the *Kunstkammer*, the room filled with exotic natural specimens combined with examples of man-made art. By the eighteenth century, the *Kunstkammer* and *cabinet chinois* had diverged to become two separate architectural types, but they shared a common heritage. Man-made and natural objects combined more equitably in the *Kunstkammer*, but these two qualities were unified in the cabinet through porcelain's seductive materiality. Both the *Kunstkammer* and *cabinet chinois* engaged the exotic, the

16 Bischoff, "Spiegel-, Lack-, oder Porzellansammlung," 16.

17 Bischoff, "Spiegel-, Lack-, oder Porzellansammlung," 16. There are interesting ripple effects of these displays into other areas of European society. Martin Engel has examined a 1732 inventory from the household of a middle class merchant in Berlin, one Herr Hübner, who owned a sizeable collection of porcelain cups and figurines. His displayed these in his home around his fireplace, as *Kaminschmuck*, arranged in what was probably a simplified version of Marot's designs. Engel terms this a bourgeois variant of the noble porcelain cabinet. Martin Engel, "Das Knobelsdorffsche Freihaus in der Leipziger Straße. Studien zu Berliner Hausbesitz und Wohnkultur im 18. Jahrhundert," *Jahrbuch des Landesarchivs Berlin* (1997): 38.

18 Wittwer, *Gallery*, 46.

Kunstkammer through its display of natural specimens from distant regions of the globe, the porcelain cabinet through the exceptional qualities of porcelain itself. Moreover, both rooms organized knowledge; the *Kunstkammer* drew attention to the mysteries of design, while the *cabinet chinois* translated that mystery into cultural and geographical terms. The two kinds of rooms, as well as the displays they contained, dialogued with each other conceptually well into the eighteenth century. One could say that the porcelain cabinet is a kind of updated *Kunstkammer*, one in which its partly empirical, partly wondrous connotations are metaphorized in porcelain's materiality. This would imply that collecting porcelain crystallizes (in some sense literally) multiple strains of collecting that had previously been found in *Kunstkammern*. If that is true, then the displays in the Japanisches Palais can be understood as parallel to those of the Grünes Gewölbe, Dresden's singularly impressive *Kunstkammer*, as the porcelain display in the former evokes similar sorts of associations through a newly available and highly alluring material.¹⁹

The sharp-eyed observer may have noticed that Pöppelmann's design is somewhat old-fashioned for 1730, and apparently that is also how it looked to Augustus the Strong, since he was evidently not fully satisfied and sought alternative designs from other architects. One was the French-born Zacharias Longuelune (1669–1748), active in Dresden, who produced a series of drawings for the palace's interior around 1735. Not only do these designs rearrange the porcelain objects, updating them in a way then understood as the French manner, but they also imply a different conception of the porcelain object as a material entity. This is particularly noticeable in one of Longuelune's drawings for a room on the palace's ground floor (fig. 7.5).²⁰ Worth bearing in mind is that, as with many eighteenth-century architectural drawings, this one represents several options for the patron and is not intended as a view of any actual wall segment. Rather, it provides insight into the concept behind porcelain's display as Longuelune understood it. In it we once again find porcelain arranged in patterns on the wall's surface and also on pedestals, as in Pöppelmann's drawings, but something important has changed. The balance between wall ornament and object has been rethought, with the porcelains given greater presence and emphasis. Indeed they become the primary component of the wall's decoration, not one component among many. The result is

19 Röbbig, *Cabinet Pieces*, 31–32. The Grünes Gewölbe is itself an eighteenth-century reconfiguration of a sixteenth-century collection. For this process, see Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, "A *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the Unmaking? The *Kunstkammer* in the Age of *Bel Composto*," in *The Eloquent Artist* (London: Pindar, 2004).

20 Sächsisches Staatsarchiv, Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden, Bestand 10006 Oberhofmarschallamt, Japanisches Palais, Cap. 02, Nr. 15, Bl. 18c.

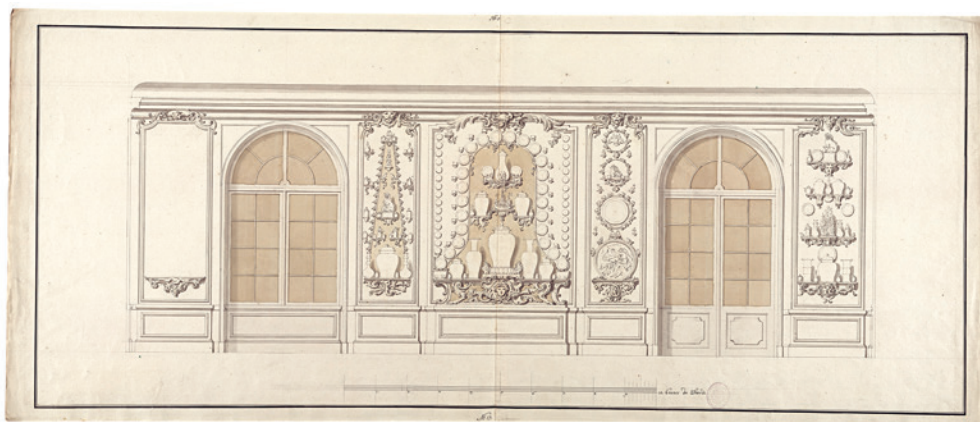


FIGURE 7.5 Zacharias Longuelune, Detail of a drawing for a wall arrangement in the Japaneseisches Palais, Dresden, c. 1735

PHOTO: SÄCHSISCHES STAATSARCHIV, HAUPTSTAATSARCHIV, DRESDEN

that individual objects are easier to apprehend as discrete pieces. Each object is allowed to make a connection with the viewer more directly on its own terms. We also know from a memorandum written by Longuelune around this time that there were practical considerations behind this arrangement. Longuelune wrote that displaying porcelains in this manner has the advantage of allowing the objects to be moved around, removed from their place on the wall and held, which activates the tactile dimension of their materiality.²¹ It further had the benefit of allowing new objects to be substituted for others according to the patron's wishes. That flexibility of display also reveals Longuelune's understanding of Augustus's collecting practices, since it indicates that the collection as a whole could be improved as novel and presumably better porcelain pieces were acquired. The porcelain objects are not fixed constituent parts of the room, as in Pöppelmann's arrangement but rather exist as individual pieces with their own independent value. They function more as components of a collection and less like architectural elements of the building.

Such flexibility of display invites consideration of whether portability brings these objects closer to sculpture. I would suggest that the ability to transfer objects in and out of the palace works against the idea that this was a sculpture collection. Of course much sculpture is portable, and small-scale sculpture, particularly bronzes, need not be understood as permanently affixed to

21 On the importance of tactility for small-scale sculpture, see Jörg Rasmussen, *Deutsche Kleinplastik der Renaissance und des Barock* (Hamburg: Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, 1975), 5.

any particular site. But the idea of porcelain objects being interchangeable according to the desires of a collector, detached from the wall and held in the hand, and at least theoretically usable for eating and drinking, combine to work against the idea that this was conceived as a sculptural display. The question of porcelain's ambiguous status clearly concerned Longuelune, who in the aforementioned text warned that the objects' portability worked against the collection being appreciated as art. The display needed to be handled with great care, he wrote, lest it take on "... trop l'air d'un riche magasin," that it look too much like a richly outfitted warehouse.²² This comment tries to deflect the criticism that collecting porcelain was a purely commercial endeavor, not an artistic activity, and implies that the collection was in some sense understood as falling between the two. Viewing its display needed to avoid the unwelcome conflation with "gawking at heaped-up goods", to use Barbara Maria Stafford's wonderful phrase, that characterized the haphazard buying practices of the uncrupulous collector.²³

In Longuelune's designs for the Japanisches Palais, I think we can locate his understanding that porcelain was sculpture with a difference, sculpture oriented toward merchandise. We find this concern arising again in the four sculptural roundels with which Longuelune proposed to decorate the palace's grand gallery: these were to represent allegorical figures of Painting, Sculpture, Geometry, and Chemistry. Porcelain combines all of them, since mastery of each is required to produce a porcelain object, and therefore it is a meta-art, one not reducible to the seemingly more straightforward category of sculpture. Another point is that porcelain as a material enables a sculptural experience in the space of a cabinet and not in great halls or galleries; it pushes the sculpture collection into more "intimate" contexts, with intimate referring here to a room's scale and not to conceptions of privacy or seclusion. However one interprets Longuelune's designs and written comments, he demonstrates in them that porcelain could transcend artistic hierarchies, but that this transcendence destabilized an easy divide between art and other categories of object.

One of the reasons that Longuelune's design looked the way it did is perhaps because the Japanisches Palais was to contain a space in which porcelain approached sculpture more boldly. This was the celebrated gallery of Meissen animals, modeled by Johann Joachim Kändler (1706–1775) and counting among them some of the most celebrated examples of ceramic art. They are legendary, notable for their beauty and for the technical achievement they represented

22 Wittwer, *Gallery*, 264–266.

23 Barbara Maria Stafford, *Artful Science: Enlightenment Entertainment and the Eclipse of Visual Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), xxvi.

for the emergent European porcelain industry. The animals were intended for a special wing of the palace, a separate set of galleries from those just examined. We know very little about how they were arranged, but the sheer number of them – around eighty survive today – and the diversity of their subjects suggest a full, busy installation intended to impress and awe.

The animals' large scale tested the limits of Meissen's abilities. Records show that Kändler and his assistants labored to perfect procedures that would allow porcelain to survive firing at this scale and with this level of detail. Viewers have long noted that these objects push porcelain into the realm of sculpture; they actually are sculpture in the purest classical sense of a three-dimensional figural likeness intended for observation and contemplation. Worth noting is that Kändler was trained as a sculptor.²⁴ But we should also recognize what these objects communicated when placed in galleries in the same building as porcelain plates and vases considered above. The animals' inclusion in the Japanisches Palais encourages the collection as a whole to be considered a sculptural one. They were housed on the palace's second floor, in rooms only accessible once the visitor had perused a range of cabinets filled with other kinds of object, ones with formal and functional analogues to more humble kinds of ceramics. After seeing those, the visitor would arrive in the Kändler galleries and see that Meissen had pushed the limits of his understanding of what porcelain could do by transforming it into sculpture. Meissen ingenuity had therefore enabled porcelain to become sculpture. This echoes the ideological structure underpinning a longstanding European fantasy, namely that other parts of the world, in this case China, created wonderful things through technological skill, but only Europe could use that knowledge to make art. Furthermore, the Kändler animals invite several paragone-like procedures from their viewers, prompting them to judge Meissen objects against other kinds of ceramic; with marble (which like porcelain relies on whiteness, much beloved in eighteenth-century aesthetics, to achieve its effects); or between porcelain and bronze, the closest analogue for objects of this intermediate scale. In these comparisons, porcelain is intended to come out ahead, not least because many of the Kändler animals were painted with bright colors. This simple addition responds to a longstanding criticism of sculpture, namely that it could never attain the realism of painting because it so often is monochromatic. It is precisely porcelain's materiality that achieves this complex set of artistic, social, and philosophical resonances. Nonetheless, even though the Kändler animals

24 Röbbig, *Cabinet Pieces*, 14. Kändler apprenticed with a regionally born sandstone sculptor, Johann Christian Feige, who had worked at the Zwinger Palace and designed the altar-piece of the Dresden Frauenkirche.

invite the idea that they are a collection of sculptures – indeed, it is hard to see them any other way – whether they transform the Japanisches Palais in its entirety into a sculptural collection, is less secure. Perhaps they do, or perhaps they simply show that some porcelain could become a collection, yet not all. The range of objects made of porcelain in Dresden therefore could work against the material being understood as sculptural, and this again destabilizes the idea that it was a sculptural collection. Gerhard Röbbig has also made this point, arguing that the Japanisches Palais porcelain holdings do not meet the criteria of a collection, be it of sculpture or of anything else, simply because the objects were not amassed according to consistent aesthetic principles.²⁵ To that I would say that the one thing that binds the objects in the Japanisches Palais together is in fact porcelain's materiality and not an overarching aesthetic scheme.

We might then ask whether the Japanisches Palais was influential in advancing porcelain's popularity and broader claim to artistic significance. The obvious answer is yes; it was renowned in its time and served exactly the function that the Saxon-Polish court wanted it to, astonishing visitors and aggrandizing through art Dresden's claim to be a power of the first order in European society. But whether it served to change notions of what comprised a sculptural collection, and whether porcelain could become the preferred medium for such a collection – there the answer would have to be that it did not. In the wake of Meissen's success, several other eighteenth-century porcelain manufactories took up the possibility that porcelain could be a medium for sculpture. This trend is especially visible in Italy and was carried furthest by the manufactory of Carlo Ginori at Doccia, Sesto Fiorentino, near Florence, an important early porcelain manufactory with roots in the Du Paquier manufactory of Vienna. Ginori made the sculpturalization of porcelain a major industry project, one prime example being a version of the famous Medici Venus. Reduced-scale bronze versions had been made for different viewing environments and in 1702 a large-scale bronze was produced by Massimiliano Soldani-Benzi (1656–1740) and a slightly smaller porcelain version was made by Ginori around 1747–48 (fig. 7.6).²⁶ This particular design was reproduced in at least five different sizes intended for different kinds of collections, each of which required the figure's body parts to be fired individually before assembly into the final product, the joins cleverly disguised by the figure's choker, armbands, and loincloth. This

²⁵ Röbbig, *Cabinet Pieces*, 31.

²⁶ For the relationship between the 1702 bronze and the Ginori porcelain figure, see Tomaso Montanari and Dimitrios Zikos eds., *Making Beauty. The Ginori Porcelain Manufactory and its Progeny of Statues* (Florence: Mandragora, 2017), 112–15.



FIGURE 7.6
Medici Venus, Ginori Porcelain
Manufactory, Doccia, c. 1745–
1750. Museo di Doccia, Sesto
Fiorentino, Italy
PHOTO: MUSEO DI DOCCIA,
SESTO FIORENTINO/ARRIGO
COPPITZ

was not a unique object; Doccia produced additional copies of ancient Roman sculptures, including busts of emperors and celebrated multifigure compositions like the Laocoön, along much the same lines.²⁷ The idea was that small-scale porcelains could take over a share of the market for smaller sculptures traditionally held by bronzes, small-scale sculptures attractive to the eighteenth-century art-buying public and especially to those with an appreciation for classical antiquity.²⁸

Porcelain was likewise seen as rivaling sculpture in more monumental settings. An example of this comes from the English context: a grave monument

27 Johann Kräfner, ed. *Barocker Luxus Porzellan: Die Manufakturen Du Paquier in Wien und Carlo Ginori in Florenz* (Munich: Prestel, 2005), 394.

28 Rasmussen, *Deutsche Kleinplastik*, 12–13.

in Worcester Cathedral that commemorates the Anglican Bishop John Hough (1651–1743). Erected in 1747, it was designed and sculpted by Louis-François Roubiliac and was his first major commission of this type. Substantial documentary records survive that detail its genesis. In a letter about the monument written by Sir Theophilus Biddulph and dated 7 May 1745, there is mention that a large bas relief for it was to be produced in “Chelsea China,” that is, out of the porcelain made at the recently established Chelsea Manufactory.²⁹ This would have had the effect of mixing porcelain, marble, and other stone in the same work of art, thereby claiming the new ceramic medium as essentially sculptural and, further, inviting the kinds of comparisons also generated at the Japanisches Palais. Using porcelain for the Hough monument would also have produced interesting optical effects. Now in a darker setting due to nineteenth-century restorations, originally the monument was illuminated by sunlight from untinted windows, which would have enabled fine details to be visible in the carving and would have reflected brilliantly off any porcelain included in the design.³⁰ In the end, however, no porcelain was used in the final monument. The relief is there, but it is made of marble. This happened probably because Roubiliac and his advisers eventually came to understand the technical challenges involved in firing what would have been an unusually large ceramic plaque. Like the Kändler animals, this would have been an ambitious challenge for Chelsea and probably beyond their immediate ability. But the Hough monument shows that the concerns about porcelain’s relationship to sculpture recurred in different geographical settings, in other words, that it was not just a Saxon concern. At Meissen, Doccia, and Chelsea, we find different variations on the challenge of imagining porcelain as a sculptural medium.

As the century progressed and European manufactories began to produce porcelain in larger amounts, alongside the continued importation of porcelain from Asia, the medium began to lose some of its allure. Contributing to this was porcelain’s continued (and, indeed, expanded) use as a material for dishes, cups, and vases, which linked it to areas of culture not firmly understood as spaces for the high arts. I think it best to understand this not through changes in the marketplace or in consumer taste, but rather once again through the idea of materiality. The medium of porcelain remained more or less the same, but its materiality changed. By this I mean that the settings in which porcelain was apprehended changed, and this altered its meanings and its significance as

29 David Bindman and Malcolm Baker, *Roubiliac and the Eighteenth-Century Monument: Sculpture as Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 279–280; Elizabeth Adams, *Chelsea Porcelain* (London: British Museum Press, 2001), 35–36.

30 Bindman and Baker, *Roubiliac*, 282.

a material.³¹ These changes had the cumulative effect of confirming porcelain's location in the decorative arts and emphasizing its place within the realm of ceramics and not in the increasingly separate category of sculpture. Such distinctions may not have held true in all contexts of display, of course. The amateur's *cabinet* could have included porcelain and small sculptures intermingled in ways that would not have been permissible in royal or publicly prominent commissions like those addressed above. Private collections may have allowed the line between porcelain and sculpture to be blurred in ways we cannot easily recognize today. Yet the general trend is clear: porcelain had its sculptural moment in the middle of the eighteenth century. The materiality that gave it that opportunity also eventually created its exclusion.

We can trace this change through various later eighteenth-century comments about porcelain as a medium for art. Matthew Martin has noted that porcelain fell afoul of eighteenth-century art critics.³² It became more difficult to subsume porcelain into emergent discourses of art-historical originality and singularity, as well as narratives of genius and creativity that would become standard in academic art history, as a central ideological distinction between "art" and "commodity" became the norm. Porcelain's origins in manufactories gave it the whiff of the mass-produced commercial product – or, to use Longueune's term, merchandise – and in the context of industrialization that began in the later eighteenth century, this worked against its status as a high art.³³ We can also detect the rumblings of this change in the specific history of the *Japanisches Palais*. In 1769–1770, most of the porcelain collection was moved to the building's cellar and its former spaces on the upper floors were filled with the state collection of antiquities, the royal coin cabinet, and the library. As well as the obvious demotion represented by this change, it exemplifies a shift in thinking as well: porcelain was once a sculptural medium, or potentially such a medium, but became a dated curiosity relegated to the palace's secondary spaces.

What would have happened, one wonders, had porcelain's critical fate not taken this turn? There are several possible answers to this question, but the most interesting glimpse into an alternative history comes again from Dresden, namely an important but unrealized commission that would have

31 Howard Coutts has suggested that the 1771 publication of *L'Art de la Porcelain*, by Nicolas-Christian de Thy, Comte de Milly, was the precipitator of this change, as it made detailed descriptions and illustrations of porcelain's production techniques available to a wide readership. *The Art of Ceramics: European Ceramic Design, 1500–1830* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 194.

32 Martin, "Models," 944.

33 Martin, "Models," 948.

firmly established the material as a sculptural medium. This was Johann Joachim Kändler's proposal to create a life-sized equestrian monument of the Saxon Elector to decorate the newly reconfigured urban area around Dresden's main bridge across the Elbe River, the Augustusbrücke. Mention of the project appears in Dresden court documents as early as 1731, when it was planned to represent Augustus the Strong, but discussions continued into the reign of his successor Augustus III (1696–1763).³⁴ Only much later, in 1751, was the project formally approved, allowing Kändler's work to begin. Yet even with that authorization, progress faltered. The monument required excessively large amounts of porcelain paste, an expanded staff of assistants, and extra space, for which a special new building was erected on the square next to Meissen Cathedral. The sheer number of molds required to cast the many subsidiary figures on the monument outgrew the manufactory's quarters, requiring Kändler to store them in his house, while also boarding extra workers alongside them.³⁵ Such an outlay of resources could not withstand the tighter budgets necessitated by the Third Silesian War, which began in 1756, and the project was scrapped.³⁶ Yet surely there were also technical and aesthetic reasons behind its failure as well.³⁷

Late eighteenth-century sculptural discourses frequently gave pride of place to the heroic and transcendent. The rococo delicacy of porcelain – its materiality – could playfully evoke such qualities in smaller objects, but in a larger construction like an equestrian statue a different effect was produced, and one probably less than ideally flattering to those in power.³⁸ Catriona MacLeod has suggested that porcelain came to convey conflicting meanings in later eighteenth-century German society, largely due to the material's lack of clear lineage back to antiquity, which put it at odds with the classical ideal held up increasingly as a model for new art.³⁹ Porcelain became further embedded into the category of *Kleinplastik*, or miniature sculpture, and thereby more firmly with associations of the intimate, the personal, and the feminine.⁴⁰ The

34 Otto Walcha, *Meissen Porcelain*, trans. Edmund Launert (New York: Putnam, 1981), 137.

35 Walcha, *Meissen*, 139.

36 One of the few physical legacies of this project is the Kändler's large-scale model of 1753 (in the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden); this is of the entire sculpture, including base and supplemental figures, and measures 1.40 meters (4.5 feet).

37 Walcha, *Meissen*, 140.

38 Ulrich Pietsch, *Die figürliche Meißner Porzellanplastik von Gottlieb Kirchner und Johann Joachim Kändler* (Munich: Hirmer, 2006), 31–33.

39 Catriona MacLeod, "Sweetmeats for the Eye: Porcelain Miniatures in Classical Weimar," in *The Enlightened Eye: Goethe and Visual Culture*, ed. Evelyn K. Moore and Patricia Anne Simpson (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 45–47.

40 MacLeod, "Sweetmeats," 50.

history of the equestrian statue of Augustus perhaps reflects an early realization that stone sculpture would continue to be the preferred medium for subjects of monumental character and scale, while porcelain would be better suited to objects for individual enjoyment. Had the project worked, however, it could have changed the character of the European city. We might imagine European capitals graced with large-scale public sculptural commissions in shiny white porcelain, gleaming in the sunlight, a perhaps bizarre image, but one not far from Kändler's vision of the 1750s.

Strange as this might sound, there were those who realized that porcelain was capable of much more than the uses to which it had been put. One such voice was none other than Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768), in whose celebrated *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* we find an argument in favor of rethinking porcelain's potential as a medium for art. This book was the first attempt to write a modern history of ancient art according to consistent scholarly principles. The original 1764 edition of the text makes no mention of porcelain, but at the time of his untimely death in 1768, Winckelmann was preparing a second, expanded edition of the *Geschichte*; this would appear posthumously in 1776 under the patronage of Prince Wenzel Anton Kaunitz-Rietberg (1711–1794), chancellor at the imperial court in Vienna and an ardent classicist. Kaunitz delegated the editorial work of this second edition, which was compiled from Winckelmann's sketches and notes, to the art theorist Friedrich Justus Riedel (1642–1785).⁴¹ In it, we find added to the original text the following paragraph concerning the aesthetics of porcelain.

How much more beautiful art connoisseurs of genuine taste regard such [ancient Greek] tablewares than the much-beloved porcelain, whose beautiful material has not as yet been ennobled through genuine artistry, so that such precious objects have not benefitted from worthy and perceptive imagination. Much porcelain is instead made into ridiculous dolls, which have contributed to the spreading of childish taste.⁴²

It should be noted that we cannot determine how much of this statement comes from Winckelmann and how much from Riedel; it certainly fits the general tone of Winckelmann's writings and its anti-rococo sentiment would seem

⁴¹ Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums: Erste Auflage Dresden 1764–Zweite Auflage 1776*, eds. Adolf H. Borbein, Thomas W. Gaehtgens, Johannes Irmscher, and Max Kunze (Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 2002), viii.

⁴² Winckelmann, *Geschichte*, 37. Contrary to MacLeod, 47, this passage does not appear in the 1764 edition.

to support a mindset like his. But reading it carefully reveals deeper claims. The author laments that porcelain is used only for making “ridiculous dolls,” which implies that he believes it could be used for other things, perhaps more heroic figures, but the vagaries of contemporary tastes have prevented porcelain from doing that. Winckelmann is open to the idea that porcelain could be a sculptural medium, but its materiality holds it back. The material itself has great possibilities, but the lack of “genuine artistry” on the part of porcelain’s designers and modelers is what has prevented it from advancing, and this artistry would only grow through increased contact with the classical artistic heritage. I wonder if porcelain’s whiteness, which suggests the same kind of purity and nobility that Winckelmann saw in white antique marble sculptures, was on his mind as the greatest untapped potential of porcelain’s materiality.

Winckelmann’s text expresses a sentiment that by the 1770s had become widespread and that recurs in discourses on ceramics today. Porcelain came to occupy a different cultural space than marble, wood, or bronze sculpture. Whether a collection of porcelain can be understood as a sculptural collection therefore depends on many variables: its historical moment, the collector’s preferred terminology, its modes of acquisition and organization, and not least the techniques of display used to present it. Perhaps an expanded understanding of sculptural collections will enable scholars to chart the historical patterns that gave rise to our modern distinctions among the arts. And perhaps we can find in these eighteenth-century examples moments when porcelain could have become something quite different from the teacup medium known today.