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Autor(en): **Lane, Arthur**

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Porcelain Figures and other work by Giacomo Boselli of Savona

by Arthur Lane, London

Giacomo Boselli, alias Jacques Boselly or Borelly, has long been one of the most elusive figures in eighteenth century ceramics. It is still generally believed that he began his career as a *faïencier* at Marseilles, and subsequently migrated to Savona, on the Ligurian coast west of Genoa, where he owned an important factory. W. B. Honey gives him a notice under both headings in his *European Ceramic Art etc., a dictionary* (London, 1952). Carelessly written in black or brown enamel, his «signature» is quite often seen as a mark on faïence painted in the predominantly crimson, emerald green, and black *petit feu* colours beloved of Marseilles, Strasburg, and other French faïence factories in the second half of the eighteenth century (Fig. 1). Less often it appears on cream-coloured ware of English Wedgwood type (*terraglia* or *faïence fine*), with decoration painted or transfer-printed over the glaze (Fig. 2, 5). A set of three «signed» vases in an English private collection shows Boselli using a technique not hitherto recorded of him: they are of white earthenware (*faïence fine*), painted in high-temperature colours under the glaze, with sketchy landscapes and figures of a type that had been most popular with the Savona *faïenciers* in the first half of the eighteenth century (Fig. 4). There is documentary evidence that Boselli also made unglazed biscuit porcelain, and a fortunate discovery by Mr. David Goldblatt of London enables me to publish here, for the first time, two examples of Boselli's glazed porcelain figures (Figs. 3, 6).

It is small wonder that Boselli's versatility has proved so embarrassing to students of ceramics that some of them have even doubted his *bona fides*, and in this short notice I can only hope to define the problems he has left us to solve.

First, do we really know that he worked at Marseilles? So far as I can trace, the earliest reference to him as a Marseilles potter appears in Baron J. C. Davillier's *Histoire des faïences et porcelaines de Moustiers, Marseille etc.*, Paris, 1863, p. 103. Davillier quotes a memorandum drawn up by the Chamber of Commerce of Marseilles on December 1, 1761: «L'importation que les Genoïs font de leurs faïences en Languedoc et en Provence, d'où elles se répandent dans le reste du royaume, est véritablement ruineuse pour les faïenceries de ces deux provinces, et pour celles de Marseille.» It appears that the potters of Genoa and Savona were taking advantage of a loophole in the customs regulations which enabled them to export their wares to southern France without paying the appropriate duty. In January 1762 the Versailles government and the Intendant of Provence corresponded about the complaints of workmen in the Marseilles faïence factories, who objected to the excessive number of apprentices employed, and the payment of wages in faïence instead of money; they claimed that this depreciated the quality and value of the faïence, «et fait passer les ouvriers à Gênes». Here Davillier made an intelligent deduction; he knew two faïence vases, pain-

ted in a style resembling that of Marseilles, and signed in French «Jacques Boselly Savonne 1779 24 septembre». Surely Boselly must be one of the Marseilles workmen who emigrated to Italy. Later French and English students, including the present writer, have so far accepted Davillier's conjecture as an established fact. But it is significant that in his monumental work *La faïence et la porcelaine de Marseille* (Paris-Marseille, 1912) the Abbé G. Arnaud d'Agnel was unable to quote a single French document in which Jacques Boselly's name was mentioned (though one Laurent Borelli, potter, worked in Aubagne after 1531, and a Joachin Borelly became apprenticed to the Marseilles *faïencier* Joseph Gaspard Robert in 1761).

Even the correct form of Boselly's name has been in doubt. The «signatures» on the base of his productions could all be in his own hand; they are carelessly written, but the third letter is often quite clearly an «s», never certainly an «r». The earliest recorded with a date reads «Jacques Boselly 1773 28 mai»; the same name appears with «1774 25 Aprile»; with «Savonne 1779 24 septembre», and with «a 1 aprile» and «1780» (on a pair of large vases formerly in the Clainpanain collection, illustrated by Arnaud d'Agnel, p. 432). In similar writing are the Italian forms «Giacomo Boselly Savona 1791 a 1^o Giugno», and «Giacomo Boselli» without a date. The French form with two dots over the «y», is far commoner than the Italian.

What evidence concerning our potter has come to light in Italy? Thanks to the recent research of Professor G. Morazzoni, a good deal (G. Morazzoni, *La maiolica antica ligure*, Milan 1951, pp. 36-42). He was born at Savona in 1744, son of Giuseppe Boselli, owner of a kiln and descendant of a noble family which had moved from Bergamo to Savona in the middle of the sixteenth century. In 1768 Giacomo was admitted as a Master to the potters' guild; and after a prosperous career, with various honourable awards, he died in 1808. In 1798 he had taken into partnership a rival potter, Giuseppe Rubatto (born 1752, died 1825). And so, if Boselli had ever left his native city to work at Marseilles, it must have been before 1768. Morazzoni admits the possibility, but points out that the Marseillais style and technique of his faïence might equally well have been transmitted by French artists who had come work for him at Savona. We may add that so young a man, and a foreigner, could hardly have owned a factory in Marseilles: nor would he regularly have signed his name on wares painted by him in the factory of another potter. The signed pieces must all have been made at Savona after 1768.

In fact it is now time to discard «Jacques Boselly of Marseilles» as a myth. Davillier's inference from his signature, that he was a Frenchman, has proved incorrect. There are two possible reasons why Boselli should write his name in French on wares made at Savona; first his desire to evade the foreign customs duty in

passing them off on the French market; and second, his hope of misappropriating some of the high esteem accorded to the superior French faïence in eighteenth-century Italy. At least one other Italian potter pretended to be French – the «Monsiur Rolet» who signed his name thus on a faïence lamp in the Victoria and Albert Museum, made at Urbino in 1773¹; he appears to be identical with the G. Antonio Maria Roletti whose wandering career as a potter is also recorded at Milan and Turin.

Boselli's faïence is apparently not now common in France, but numerous examples in Italian collections are illustrated by Orlando Grosso (*Mostra de l'antica maiolica ligure*, Genoa, 1939) and by G. Morazzoni (*La maiolica antica ligure*, Milan, 1951). Changing from rococo to neo-classical in style, the shapes have a picturesque untidiness that distinguishes them from the Marseilles wares; the colours, too, are harsher in contrast, the drawing less accomplished. If Davillier had seen more examples he would surely have recognised their Italian characteristics².

At present far too little is known about Italian cream-coloured ware in the English (Wedgwood) manner. That made by Baccin at le Nove, and by Del Vecchio and the Giustiniani family at Naples, is often of very good quality. Lady Charlotte Schreiber relates in her *Journals* (London, 1907, Vol. I, p. 7) that at Genoa in 1869 «we were shown... Queen's ware cups very coarsely painted in red landscapes. On two of these the name of Jacques Boselli had been supplied, and we were assured they were specimens of 'Savona' although two others of the set had the name 'Wedgwood' impressed in the glaze. I confess that the name was rather faint so that the ingenious foreigner might be excused from expecting that it would escape ordinary inspection. But the mark was quite strong enough to be clear to anyone initiated.» Boselli's versatility in exploiting other people's ideas had aroused scepticism even earlier; his compatriot T. Torteroli wrote in 1856: «This same Boselli obtained from the English and French factories their discarded porcelain, and having had them restored by the worthy Sordo, who retouched them with great mastery, resold them much to his own profit» (Tommaso Torteroli, *Intorno alla maiolica savonese*, Turin 1856, p. 21). Since Lady Charlotte Schreiber no one has reported seeing another marked piece of Wedgwood decorated and signed by Boselli. I cannot myself share W. B. Honey's apparent disbelief that Boselli himself made cream-coloured ware in considerable quantity. Two typical signed cups are illustrated here (Fig. 2) painted in brown-red, and on pieces illustrated by Grosso and Morazzoni the decorations include figures painted in polychrome. The signed plate, Figure 3, is of special interest in that the English process of transfer-printing has been adopted for the arms of Pope Benedict XIV Lambertini (1740–58); these are in brown-red, and the border pattern painted in red, green and black.

In his *Le porcellane italiane* (Milan-Rome, 1935, p. 205-210) Morazzoni quotes notices that appeared in the Genoese journal *Avvisi* for 1787, 1790 and 1794, describing dessert-services with figures in biscuit porcelain made by Boselli for ceremonial occasions. These have apparently not survived, and there is no proof of Boselli's responsibility for a few biscuit figures or groups incised with the names of various modellers («Ermenegildo Silici fecit 1779; «Giuseppe Ferrari F. 1782»; «B. G. 1782, 15 Giugno») Morazzoni stated that on Boselli's very rare glazed porcelain fi-

gures the flesh-tones were left unglazed and painted in oil colours by his wife; but he was unable to illustrate a single example. Moreover, his information appears to have been drawn from a manuscript history of ceramics deposited in the Genoa Public Library about 1870 by the local antiquary Maggi – a work described by another modern writer as a «*noto zibaldone*»!

It is therefore very satisfactory that by permission of Mr. David Goldblatt I am able to illustrate for the first time two authentic signed figures of Boselli's glazed *pâte-tendre* porcelain (Fig. 3, 6); a girl dancing with castanets in her right hand, 21,8 cm. high, and the companion boy offering flowers, 23,5 cm. high. The paste is apparently a frit-porcelain, very coarse in grain, and slightly yellowish. The close-fitting glassy glaze has a rough surface and has dried up or been absorbed in places, especially on the folds of the sleeves. A dull yellow enamel on the hats has dried in a similar way. The rockwork bases are conspicuously painted in turquoise with black and yellow-ochre streaks – a treatment reminiscent of painted faïence. Elsewhere the colours are sparsely applied. A rather thick, dry, brownish red enamel is stippled on the cheeks, elbows, and between the fingers – the last a mannerism known also on Doccia porcelain; on the boy's coat is a diaper of thin horizontal red streaks. Other colours are rose-crimson, opaque pale blue, emerald green, and a cold sepia-brown used on the hair. Patches of sand adhere under the bases, whose edges are only partially glazed: Fig. 3 shows the internal supporting struts, and the inscriptions, painted in brown-black, «*jacques Boselly / joeseppe Raibaud*».

According to Morazzoni, who does not quote his source, the well-known Savona faïencer Giuseppe Rubatti (1752-1825) entered partnership with Boselli in 1798, and the figures must therefore have been made between then and Boselli's death in 1808. It is amusing to see Rubatti's name also gallicised. He cannot be identified among the potters mentioned in Arnaud d'Agnel's book on Marseilles – though a François Roubaud was a master-potter in Aubagne in 1714 (p. 517); another François Roubaud was apprenticed to Honoré Savy at Marseilles in 1768 (p. 146); a Ribaud family moved from Nevers to the Saint-Jeandu-Desert factory near Marseilles (p. 206); and Gaëtan Reibotty was in 1769 a painter in Larchier's Marseilles factory (p. 124).

Mr. Goldblatt acquired his figures in Paris, and they are almost certainly the pair described by Arnaud d'Agnel (p. 510) as in the Dobler collection in 1912; a group of five figures by Boselli in the same collection has since disappeared. A single large figure of a gardener, signed *Jacques Borelly*, was shown in the Exhibition *La porcelaine française de 1673 à 1914* at the Pavillon de Marsan in 1929 (*Catalogue* No. 1391, possession M. Gilbert Lévy). And a whole series of Boselli figures, very similar in style, were illustrated by Grosso in *Mostra de l'antica maiolica ligure*, Genoa, 1939, pll. CLVIII, CLIX. Grosso described them as «*plastiche imitante la porcellana*». Morazzoni, who had probably not seen the objects themselves, reproduced Grosso's illustrations in his own *La maiolica antica ligure*, 1951, pll. 141, 142, implying that they were of faïence. Neither writer mentions any marks. Most of the figures were in the collection of the late Nino Ferrari, now dispersed. I think it highly probable that they are of soft-paste porcelain like those belonging to Mr. Goldblatt. If that is so, between 1798 and 1808 Giacomo Boselli of Savona made a distinctive and original contribution to European porcelain. His large-limbed, awkward peasants may be lacking in grace; they compensate for this by their brimming vitality, in a vein best known to us through that typically Italian institution the *Commedia dell'Arte*.

¹ B. Rackham, *Catalogue of Italian maiolica*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London 1940, No. 1264.

² E. Tilmans, *Faïences de France*, Paris 1954. Fig. 130 publishes as by Borelli a typical Sceaux tureen (a similar emblem in the Victoria and Albert Museum has the C. S. mark).