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Autor: Clarke, T.H.

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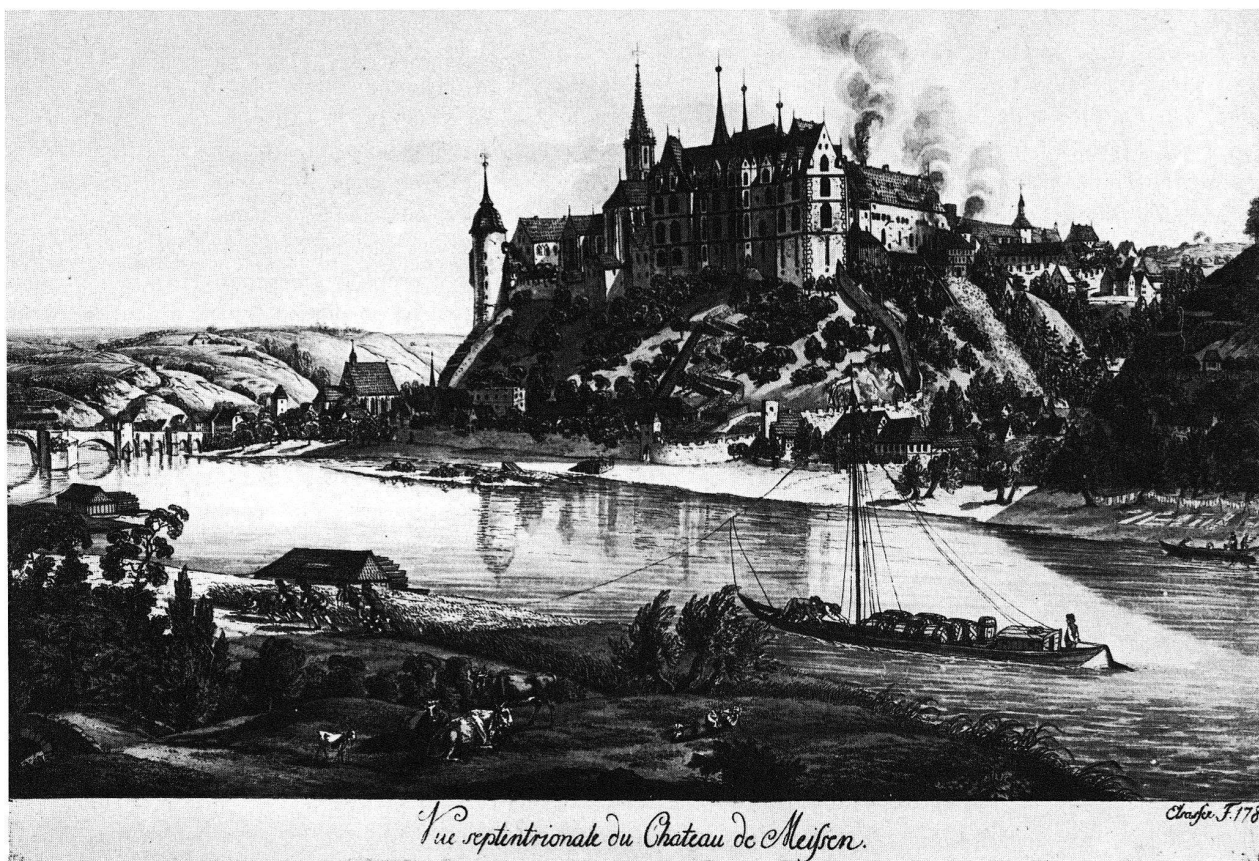
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Johann Joachim Friedrich Elsasser's Engravings
of the «Academic» and Marcolini Periods, 1785—1792
OR
«Contouren» von Johann Joachim Friedrich Elsasser

T. H. Clarke

I. *Friedrich Elsasser and his outline engravings of the Marcolini Period*

The Kunstbibliothek in W. Berlin has the following entry in the *Katalog der Ornamentstich Sammlung*, Vol. II, Berlin 1939: «4225. Contouren von allerley Figuren, Vasen und Gruppen aus der Meissner Porzellan-Fabrik. In den Jahren 1785—1792 in Kupfer gestochen von Joh. David Elsasser, Vorsteher des weissen Korps. Titel (Abschrift des handschriftlichen Titels in der Meissner Porzellanmanufaktur), 153 Bl., mit den Fabriknummern bezeichnet (im ganzen sind 176 Bl. gestochen worden).» This is accurate with one major exception: the engraver was not David Elsasser but his son Friedrich, as the following paragraphs will show.

Berlin's bound volume is incomplete, as the description indicates. The remaining «Contouren» or outline engravings have been supplied by the Werksarchiv of the Meissen factory; these have the advantage in that most of them are either signed, dated or described in ink by the younger Elsasser.

It would seem that these outline prints, so typical of neo-classic artists like Flaxman, for example, have either been overlooked by ceramic scholars or perhaps not considered worth publishing.¹ With the latter point of view I am in total disagreement, for these seem to me to be the only prints of Meissen models published in the 18th

century, and for that reason alone are worth preserving and rescuing from obscurity. On the other hand their importance to the student of Meissen should not be overrated. These are not originals in any sense; they are not *Vorlage* for Marcolini figures and groups. They are engravings on copper *after* Marcolini models. In a sense they are like an illustrated catalogue of the most popular models made from 1764 to 1788, some 200 out of a possible total of about 1000². They must surely represent either what Elsasser personally preferred or what he considered the most saleable figures. In either case the «Contouren» form a fascinating study in current taste.

Apart from their interest as a reflection of the so-called «goût grec», these «Contouren» have other facets worth considering. In particular the prevalence of reproductions of classical sculpture — some quarter of the total — can be explored in the light of modern scholarship with Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny's brilliant *Taste for the Antique* (1981) as guide. They can also be enjoyed for their naïveté rather than for their subtlety. The Callypigian Venus, for example, no. H 40, is positively hilarious, at least to modern taste.

The attentive reader will have noted that two Elsassers have been mentioned in the opening paragraphs: «the younger Elsasser» and «Joh. David Elsasser, Vorsteher des weissen Korps». There is a certain ambiguity here, which has been resolved by the investigations of Herr Haude. It has become clear that the entry in the Berlin Catalogue is erroneous, and that the engravings here published were the work of the son, «the younger Elsasser», and not of the father. But we are told that father and son were so close to each other in the years after 1770 that confusion can be excused. An account of their careers, then, is essential in clearing up any doubts that may exist as to their respective activities.

The careers of the two Elsassers, names that rarely appear in Meissen literature, give us an insight into the practical workings of the factory. The father, Johann David Elsasser (1726—1804) was born in Ober-Gurke (now called Obergurig) in August 1726. On 22 April 1741 Johann David, then aged 14, was first employed as an apprentice mould-maker (*Formerlehrling*); incidentally, at the same time as Carl Schönheit, whom we shall meet again later in this essay. We know almost nothing of his activities in the next 23 years, until after the end of the Seven Years' War (1756—1763) and the near-collapse of the Meissen factory. David Elsasser then comes into prominence with the re-organisation essential for the survival of the factory. He must have spent the intervening years in perfecting his technical and organising abilities, for he never achieved any fame as a *Modelleur*, as he is described in Thieme-Becker.³

In June 1764 he was nominated one of the many members of the Meissen staff to travel abroad, both to find new markets, new techniques, new ideas and new modellers. In this task he was to prove a success. Setting out in June 1764 together with the painter Johann Christoph Hummizsch, he visited a large number of both German and French factories. In order to be able to buy samples of their wares, he was allocated a sum of 320 talers, which had all been spent after his early visit to Höchst.

In Frankenthal he persuaded Johann Friedrich Lücke to return to Meissen with a free pardon for having absconded in 1757. In Paris, where he and his colleague arrived late in July, he prepared an unusually detailed report, not only on Sèvres porcelain, but also on furniture, silver and stucco-work. His verdict, as regards style, was that the «so-called Greek taste henceforth has the upper hand («der so genannte Goût grec annoch die Oberhand hat»)». In his attempts to get hold of the secrets of the Sèvres ground colours — Meissen was particularly keen to obtain the colours «Rose, Couleur de Chair, bleu de roi und ein schönes grün» — he had little success. These and other colours as well as the French distinction in inventing new shapes for wares had made Sèvres the arbiter of European taste in porcelain. Meissen by now was not even in the second rank of successful porcelain undertakings. Elsasser particularly admired the soft-paste Sèvres biscuit, so suitable for «le goût grec»; and there is little doubt that his enthusiasm for this glazeless porcelain for figure sculpture helped to make Meissen experiment in it with some success. But neither Elsasser nor anyone else seemed to realise that the Sèvres ground colours would never have fitted the Meissen hard-paste material, just as Meissen biscuit never rivalled the French soft-paste material with its slight yellowish tone.

Foiled in his commercial espionage, David Elsasser — for it is evident that he rather than Hummizsch was the moving spirit — was nonetheless to prove his worth in negotiations for a new modeller. After failing to employ a young sculptor, François-Nicolas Delaistre (1746—1832), he managed to persuade the French sculptor, Michel Victor Acier, to leave Paris for Meissen, under favourable conditions as to salary and pension. The intention was not only to introduce new models with a French and classicising trend, but also to have someone ready to take over eventually from Kaendler, who found some difficulty in adapting himself to the new style. Elsasser fortunately was able to find an intermediary in his dealings with Acier, a fellow-German J.-G. Wille, *graveur du Roi*; and an unusually unselfish and much-liked person. Wille notes in his *Mémoires et Journal*⁴ two dinners with «MM. Humitsch et Elsasser» on July 22nd and 25th 1764. A month later negotiations had proceeded so far that Wille and the two

Saxons went to visit Acier to prove his artistic abilities. Let Wille speak: «MM. Elsser, Saxon, et Acier, sculpteur, me sont venus pour prendre me mener à l'hôtel de Monville pour voir des ouvrages qu'y a faits, en terre cuite, ce dernier. Les directeurs de la fabrique de Meissen m'ayant prié pour cela au nom de cour de Saxe, je les ai examinés, et je le crois en état de remplir la place qu'il doit avoir comme sculpteur modeleur pour la fabrique. Je dois en donner mon certificat que j'enverra a M. Dietrich directeur de l'Academie de Meissen.»

In 1774 David Elsser was appointed *Vorsteher des weissen Corps* (Director of the White Corps); he was also appointed Hofkommisar and arcanist. What the function of the *weisses Corps* entailed is to be found rather strangely in an obituary of the factory's greatest modeller, Kaendler, who died in the following year, 1775. The footnote reads: «this Corps comprises the mould-makers, the turners, the repairers, the modellers, the sculptors and all other workers who have to do with the raw paste.»⁵ In other words, it dealt with figures and groups up until the moment that they were ready to be placed in the kiln. The «Contouren», then, seem to have been prepared when the figures were in an unfired biscuit state. This may account for the lack of inscriptions on the *Devisen Kinder* and also explain the reason for mere outline engravings; because there was nothing in the way of decoration to warrant a more complicated engraving technique.

1774 was also the year in which Graf Marcolini took over direct control of the Meissen factory. One of Elsser's duties was to soothe the susceptibilities of the ageing Kaendler, who was still producing figures and ambitious groups in plenty. Kaendler's natural jealousy of the Frenchman Acier was such as to make life difficult. Elsser's instructions were to allocate work fairly between the rival sculptors. On 15th September, 1774 each order was entered in a special book, from which Kaendler had the first choice and Acier the second. But this arrangement lasted only for a few months: on 18th May, 1775 Kaendler died, working to the last.

As for David's son, Johann Joachim Friedrich, Herr Haude, factory archivist, has recently uncovered valuable information. Appointed an apprentice (*Lehrling*) in 1770, he had been promoted to piece-work in 1774. In 1780 begins a strange two-year episode. On 1 February Friedrich Elsser, as we shall call him (his first two Christian names possibly given to him in honour of Johann Joachim Kaendler), applied for and was willingly granted leave of absence. This alone was unusual, to say the least, since the factory had always tried not to lose its best employees, and even threatened them with dire punishment (as in the case of von Loewenfinck, for instance). But, further, he was provided with a testimonial that during his ten years

work as a painter he had proved himself trustworthy and hard-working, so that the factory was pleased with his conduct and his work.⁶

Two years later, on 23 March 1782, Friedrich Elsser returns to Meissen like the prodigal son. At the request of his father, «Hof-Commisar u. Arcanist», Friedrich is appointed assistant to his father as «Vorsteher des Poussierer-, Former-, u. Dreher-Corps». The report continues that Friedrich in his absence from Meissen had devoted himself to painting, first in Vienna and then at the Ludwigsburg porcelain factory. Before he takes up his new appointment at the Meissen factory, he is to give a written account of the work he has done at the different factories and to report to higher authority on their successes and performance. For this young Elsser was to be rewarded by his more responsible appointment and too by the possibility of a holiday at full pay.⁷

The two previous paragraphs, in combination with the sudden departure from the factory of both father and son with full permission and remaining on full pay, this in July 1790,⁸ can only mean that something out of the ordinary had happened to the advantage of the two Elssers. On the face of the scant evidence it looks as though this must have been the reward of successful commercial espionage. In the case of the father, David, this dates back to 1764—1765; in the case of the son it is more recent, 1780—1782. But there must have been more to it than stealing industrial secrets: what it was will probably remain for ever unknown.

David Elsser was paid his salary until his death at the age of 77 on 4 April 1804.⁹ The son, Friedrich, had to give up his pension on being appointed a Customs receiver in Herrnshtut on 19 May 1794. He had obviously remained in close and good contact with the Meissen factory, certainly until the completion of his «Contouren» in 1792.¹⁰

There are two reports in the Werksarchiv of the Meissen factory of importance in giving us details of young Friedrich Elsser's (*Herr Elsser jun.*) activities as an engraver. The first is dated June 1785¹¹ and reports that the Director of the White Korps (the writer has left out the all-important word *assistant* director: it is this omission which has led to confusion), Herr Elsser jun. has, with permission of the senior directors, already begun to engrave on copper some groups und figures, which formerly were made as drawings for certain foreign amateurs. 50 examples will be made of each in 4to with indications of size and model number. By the end of June 1785 four had been delivered and paid for.

Friedrich Elsser continued with this work, even after he and his father had left the factory in July 1790; which shows that he must have remained on good terms at least with the staff of the White Korps. For a further report of

May 1792 records the delivery on 3 May of the last batch of the copper-engraved figures, vases and groups. In all 176 sheets had been delivered, at a cost of 7 Thaler 16 Groschen making a total of 1349 Taler und 8 Groschen. The report concludes that many of the copper plates were placed in the factory archives; none, unfortunately, have remained there.¹²

The drawings of Meissen models referred to in the report of June 1785 were, one must presume, made by modellers and their assistants as a way of earning extra money, as well as to fulfil a need for those too poor to buy the porcelain figures. One can in imagination see these drawings, probably in watercolour, simply framed on the walls of many a bourgeois home, or even perhaps in a grander setting such as the home of Leopold III, Prince of Anhalt-Dessau (1740—1817) at Schloss Wörlitz: a cultural centre including the architect Erdmannsdorff or the pedagogue Basedow. We have been made aware of this enlightened

group since the Schallaburg exhibition of selected themes from the DDR.¹³

Whether any of these drawings of Marcolini porcelain have survived I do not know. There cannot have been many of them made, judging by young Elsasser's intention of making only 50 copies of each «Contour». Since the scheme took seven years to complete there must be very few sets of 176 engravings to have survived. They were not made in any haste; an average of just over two a month is slow by any standard. One knows only too well how hard it is even to preserve each Heft of the KFS, delivered at the rate of from one to three a year, to understand the difficulty of anyone striving to preserve each issue of a few prints at a time over seven years, and that at a time which included the outbreak of the French Revolution. Then, finally to have the complete set bound in one or two volumes is to ask for the impossible. Hence, to my mind, the advisability of publishing now the «Contouren» in full.

¹ My attention to the Elsassers and the «Contouren» was first drawn some decades ago by note 312 in Karl Berling's so-called *Festive Publication* published in 1911 in honour of Meissen's bi-centenary. I have used in this article the Dover re-print of the English version, unless otherwise stated. My re-discovery of the «Contouren» was pure chance; in fact I was looking in the Berlin Kunstbibliothek for chinoiserie prints. Likewise it was chance that led me to find the missing prints in the Meissen Werksarchiv. I was travelling by coach from Dresden to Meissen during the tercentenary celebrations of Böttger's birth in 1981. My neighbour turned out to be the new Archivist, Herr Haude; he produced the missing prints within minutes of arriving at the Meissen factory.

² The earliest «Contour» is A. 75, dating from about 1764; the latest is J. 88, dateable to 1788—89.

³ Information on the Elsassers is scattered in many standard works on Meissen porcelain. In particular in Berling 1900, p. 115; Berling 1911, p. 73, note 312, p. 180; Thieme-Becker; and especially Walcha, 1973.

⁴ Wille 1856, vol. I, pp. 262, 264 and 531. J.-G. Wille (1713—1808), born a German, worked in Paris since 1736. Engraver and dealer in prints, pictures and coins, he was universally liked. He had much influence on German engravers and painters, particularly on the Meissen designer of figures, Schenau.

⁵ The duties of the *Vorsteher des weissen Korps* are neatly summarised in the obituary of J.-J. Kaendler which appeared in the *Neue Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste*, 1776, vol. 18. The writer notes that Kaendler was appointed «Direktor des sogenannten weissen Korps» in 1730. A footnote adds: «Dieses Corps begriff die Former, Dreher, Pussirer, Verputzer, Bildhauer und alle übrige Arbeiter unter sich, die mit rohen Mass zu thun haben». See also Berling 1911, German edition, p. 161.

⁶ WA I Ag 49, Blatt 58, 1. Februar 1780 «... So wird ihm nicht nur der gebethene Abschied hier durch ertheilet, und er seiner bey gedachter Porcelaine-Manufaktur geleisteten Pflicht hinwiederum entlassen und davon losgezählet, sondern auch das Zeugnis ertheilet, dass er, während den Zehen Jahren, als so lange er bey der Manufaktur als Landschafts-Maler engagirt gewesen, sich dergestalt treu, fleissig, gehorsam und unverdrossen bezeiget, dass man mit seiner guten Ausführung und Arbeit durchgehend wohl zufrieden gewesen...»

⁷ WA I Ab 59/115 «Zu folge höchsten Rescripte aus Dresden, den 23. März c.a. 1782 ist Joh. Joachim Friedr. Elsasser, auf Ansuchen seines Vaters des Hof-Comissär u. Arcanist auch Vorsteher des Poussirer-, Former-, u. Dreher-Corps, demselben zum Assistenten in gedachter Vorsteher Funktion zugegeben worden. Es hat sich derselbe eigentlich der Malerey gewidmet, set dem April 1780 die Manufactur quittiret und sich bald in Wien bald anderswo aufgehalten, zuletzt aber bey der Porcelän-Manufactur in Ludwigsburg Dienste angenommen, von da er am 16ten dieses zur Übernehmung seines Vorsteher Amts wiederum zurückgekommen. Ehe er dasselbe antritt, wird er zuvor die Aufträge, die ihm bey der Besuchung verschiedener Fabriken gemacht worden, ratione ihres Erfolgs und Ausführung niederschreiben um sie hohen Orts übergeben zu können. Daher wohl auch der hohe Posten und die möglichkeiten eines Arbeits-urlaubs bei voller Bezahlung.»

⁸ The official report of departure of the two Elsassers, father and son, is brief. WA I Ab 68/87, Juni 1790 reads as follows: «Vom 18, (Jni) an haben die beide Elsasser Vater und Sohn, den Ihnen von Sr. des Herrn Directors Excellens conendirten Urlaub die Manufaktur nicht zu besuchen, angetreten und zwar mit Beybehaltung ihres Tractaments». The words «nicht zu besuchen» is a strange way to announce either a dismissal or extended leave. Berling (1911, p. 80 and note 312) comments: «Zu welchem Zweck dieser Urlaub, während dessen ihre Gehälter aus

Meissen fortbezogen, erteilt worden war, liess sich nicht mehr feststellen».

⁹ WA I Ab 84: «1804 4. April, der Hof-Commissär und vormalige Arcanist Johann David Elsasser, er brachte sein alter auf 77 Jahr, 8 Monat, und genoss monatl. 34 Rt. 17 Gr. 4 Pf. Tractament bis an seinen Tod».

¹⁰ To show the riches of the Meissen *Werksarchiv*, how every piece of paper has been preserved, I cannot resist including the following: «WA Ab 72/112 Mai 1794. Der bisherige Vorsteher Adjunktus des Weissen Corps Johann Joachim Friedrich Elsasser jun. zeigt in Beilage No. 112 unterthänig an, dass er auf höchsten Befehl Sr. Churfl. Durchl. zum G(e)leits- und Zoll Einnehmer in Herrnhut ernannt worden. Er ist am 19. May d.J. dahin abgegangen, dessen Gehalt von jährl. 200 rT. fällt mit dem 1. Juni d.J. der Manufactur Casse anheim».

¹¹ WA I Ab 63/117, Juni 1785. Endlich ist anzumerken, dass der Vorsteher des weissen Korps Herr Elsasser jun. mit hoher Direktorial

Genehmigung einige Gruppen und Figuren, wovon bisher Zeichnungen für die auswärtigen Liebhaber gemacht worden sind, in Kupfer zu stechen angefangen hat. Es werden von jeder Gruppe 50 Abdrucke in 4^{to} mit Angabe der Höhe derselben und der Nummer der Forme schwarz abgeliefert, wofür derselbe 4 rth. 16 Gr. erhält. Bis ende Juni sind deren 4 abgeliefert und bezahlt worden.

¹² WA I Ab 70 Rapport Mai 1792 100. Am 3ten überreichte Herr Elsasser jun. die letzte Lieferung seiner von ihm mit hoher Direktorial Bewilligung seit dem Jahr 1785 in Kupfer gestochenen Figuren, Vasen und Gruppen. Es sind überhaupt 176 Blatt gestochen, welche zu 7 Thaler 16 Gr. 1349 Thaler 8 Groschen betragen. Sämtliche Kupfer-Platten sind im Archiv der Manufaktur beygelegt.

¹³ *Barock und Klassik: Kunstzentren des 18. Jahrhunderts in der deutschen Demokratischen Republik*, Schallaburg 1984, Part III.

II. Notes on the Marcolini Period and brief biographies

This is not the place for a detailed study of the period from 1774 to 1811, when Graf Marcolini was in charge of the Meissen factory. For an account of this period — at present so out-of-fashion with collectors but rapidly becoming a favourite with the art historian — the interested reader is referred to the standard works on the Meissen factory: the two Berlings of 1900 and 1911, the Zimmermann of 1926 and in particular to the more recent work of the late Otto Walcha, archivist of the factory, whose article in *Keramos* of April 1968 and, even more cogent, his posthumously published book, *Meissener Porzellan*, of 1963, together form a detailed account from original documents of this neglected period of the factory's history.

Many collectors of early Meissen think of the Marcolini Period as a homogeneous style. The fact that it was usual for the crossed swords of Meissen to have a star, also in blue, added between the hilts of the swords, during the years from 1774 to 1811 tends to confirm this imaginary unity of style.¹ In fact, there was a mixture of styles — Louis XV, Louis XVI, «goût grec» and the universal Empire style at the end. It is this aspect that is brought out by Elsasser's outline engravings. No one pretends that this period marked the height of Meissen's achievements: the Seven Years' War put paid to Meissen's supremacy. Both the contemporary market as well as today's collector, be he private or a museum director, prefers novelties of other factories and styles: Fürstenberg, Höchst, Nymphenburg and the lesser S. German factories. It is a truism that the earliest years of any porcelain factory, before production

had become stereotyped, are those that the collector most prizes. Meissen was already some seventy years old. Nonetheless there are aspects of late eighteenth century Meissen production which are worthy of study, both aesthetically and above all as a more or less unexplored chapter in the history of taste — or of lack of taste.

The post-war period from 1764 to the second post-war period of 1814 form a continuous episode in the factory's history, embracing both the so-called Academic or «dot» period with the long Marcolini Period. In figure production these fifty years saw two styles or moods curiously entwined, a sort of eighteenth century *Historismus*; as can be seen by glancing through Elsasser's «Contouren». The first style was not so much an innovation as a continuation of French rococo influence, which had been growing even before the introduction of Christophe Huet's drawings for models of the *Cris de Paris* in 1753. This French influence was epitomised by the appointment of a minor French sculptor, Michel Victor Acier, in 1764. This mediocre sculptor remained, alongside the ageing Kaendler, who found it difficult to adapt himself to the newer styles, the leading modeller of the factory for his contract period of fifteen years: not a day over.² Supposedly a practitioner of «the new style», to my mind he shows very little of the classifying influence characteristic of the Louis XVI style, but continued to produce figure sculpture in a rather feeble fading out of the Louis XV style, itself a civilised and restrained rococo which lacked the exuberance of, for example, South German rococo. Acier's subject matter