

# Meissen and the Antique

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### III. Meissen and the Antique

The following pages might well be better headed *Taste and the Antique*, to borrow the title of Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny's entertaining account of the decline and fall of appreciation of the classical sculpture unearthed since the Renaissance. In a way this essay is a detailed footnote to Haskell's work, which is essential reading for anyone at all interested in the neo-classical «Contouren» produced from 1785 to 1792 by Elsasser. These copper engravings embrace what Gustav Klemm, an early director of the porcelain collection in the Japanese Palace in Dresden, categorised in 1834 as «in part copies of existing Antique groups and statues, in part figures in the taste and style of the Antique.»<sup>1</sup> Of the 176 prints here illustrated, some 55 are concerned with his broad definition of the Antique; but, since many of them include pairs of figures, the proportion of the total is a good deal higher than appears at a cursory glance.

Haskell devotes many pages to the various materials used for copying classical sculpture, including amongst them pottery and porcelain.<sup>2</sup> He stresses the importance of those remarkable glazed white figures produced in the 1740's at the Marchese Riccardo Ginori's factory at Doccia, outside Florence. These were based on the classical marbles assembled by generations of the Medici family in the Uffizi, and so readily available. The size of some bears comparison with the large animals made by Kirchner and Kaendler for the furnishing of the Japanese Palace in the early 1730's. As an example, the Doccia Amor and Psyche group of 1745 was 90 cm high, whilst the Medici Venus measured 132 cm.<sup>3</sup> Some heads of the Roman Emperors were life-sized; Hadrian's head measured 35 cm. It is probable that the figures were made from casts rather than after drawings of the originals.

Other noteworthy classical reproductions came in their hundreds from that great industrial enterprise established by Josiah Wedgwood in the factory named Etruria. This was in 1768. In 1769 was produced the first «Etruscan» vase (Greek pots were then believed to be Etruscan), of a new, hard and black material named black basaltes.<sup>4</sup> Of the same material were made in the 1770's library busts of classical authors, followed by a host of reliefs in a variety of wares, including the popular jasper-ware. At the other end of Europe, in Rome, in the Via Pudenziana, Giovanni Volpato established in 1785 a factory devoted to the production of reduced models of classical sculpture in both porcelain and a variety of creamware.<sup>5</sup> In the second Naples factory of Ferdinando IV large presentation services were painted with «Etruscan» motives and mod-

elled in the same style; these included a service presented to George III in 1787.<sup>6</sup>

One could point to many instances of minor European porcelain factories producing replicas of Antique statues, in order to make at least a pretence of being fashionably involved in *le goût grec*. France, so long the leader of fashion in the arts as well as in dress, literature and gastronomy, had little need to exaggerate its dependence on the neo-classical movement in its ceramic industries, so far ahead of the Meissen factory was Sèvres considered to be. It preferred a gentler Louis XVI style to full-blooded imitation of the Antique. Nevertheless, Sèvres, inventor of biscuit porcelain, did as early as 1766 produce a small version of the Medici Venus, of course in its characteristic slightly yellowish *pâte tendre* biscuit. Amor and Psyche followed in 1769, the Callipygian Venus in 1768; all of these earlier in date than the first of the Meissen Antique groups, the Cupid and Psyche of 1770.<sup>7</sup>

After this rehearsal of some European factories' success stories in climbing on the band-waggon of neo-classicism, it might be thought that Meissen's contribution to the revival of classical learning was negligible. But in fact the re-

Fig. p. 12:

Elsasser's «Contour» of a vase modelled by Schönheit in 1782 as part of a garniture of five to stand on Neuber's chimney-piece (see p. 39, N. 106). See pl. 5.

Plate 5:

A Chimney-Piece of Meissen porcelain and hardstones, designed by Schenau for the Grines Gewölbe in order to display the virtuosity of the celebrated hardstone artist, Johann Christian Neuber. The contour fig. p. 16 is one of the outside vases of the Chimney-Piece. (Reproduced after Friedrich H. Hofmann, *Das Porzellan*, Berlin 1932, fig. 565.)

Plate 6:

Watercolour of a table clock (see p. 29, N. 57). It is possible that this clock corresponds with an entry in January 1776 of Acier's Work Notes: «L'arrangement d'un vase d'après Mr Schenau dans le goût antique, pour faire une pendule, coupé et donné aux mouleurs, le moule est marqué f. 39». The number «39» would then be an error for «36». Such errors, as has already been shown, do occur occasionally. It is of interest that the same Louis XVI style clock was also made without the seated Amor of both drawing and «Contour». (*Werksarchiv of the Meissen factory*).

Plate 7:

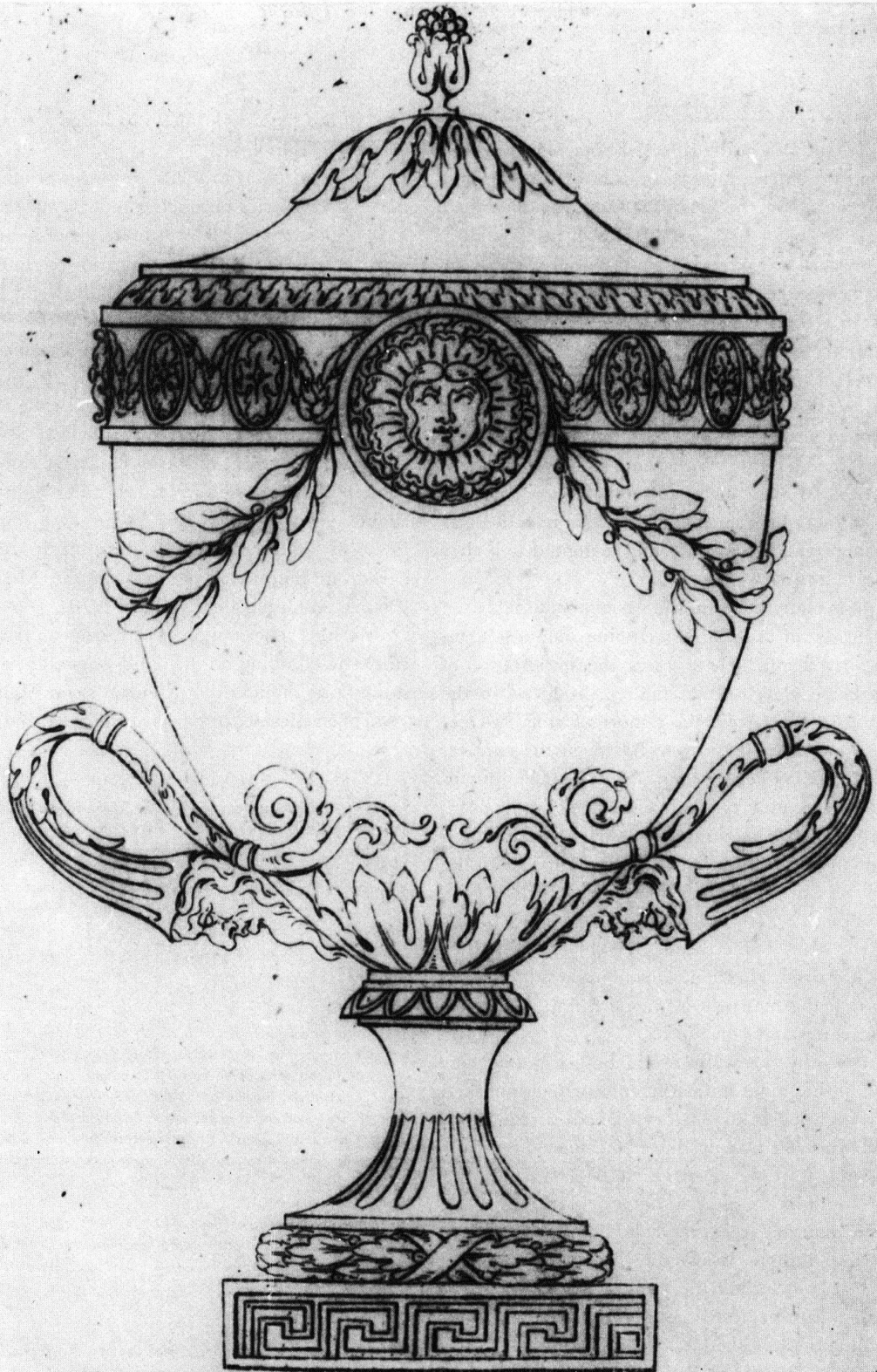
Drawing of the three Graces (See p. 44f., N. 141), a familiar and popular subject, which was modelled by Jüchtzer after a pencil drawing by Schenau. The completed biscuit model was exhibited in Dresden in 1785 (*Werksarchiv of the Meissen factory*).

Plate 8:

Biscuit group of the Three Graces, modelled by C. G. Jüchtzer in 1784. Victoria and Albert Museum.

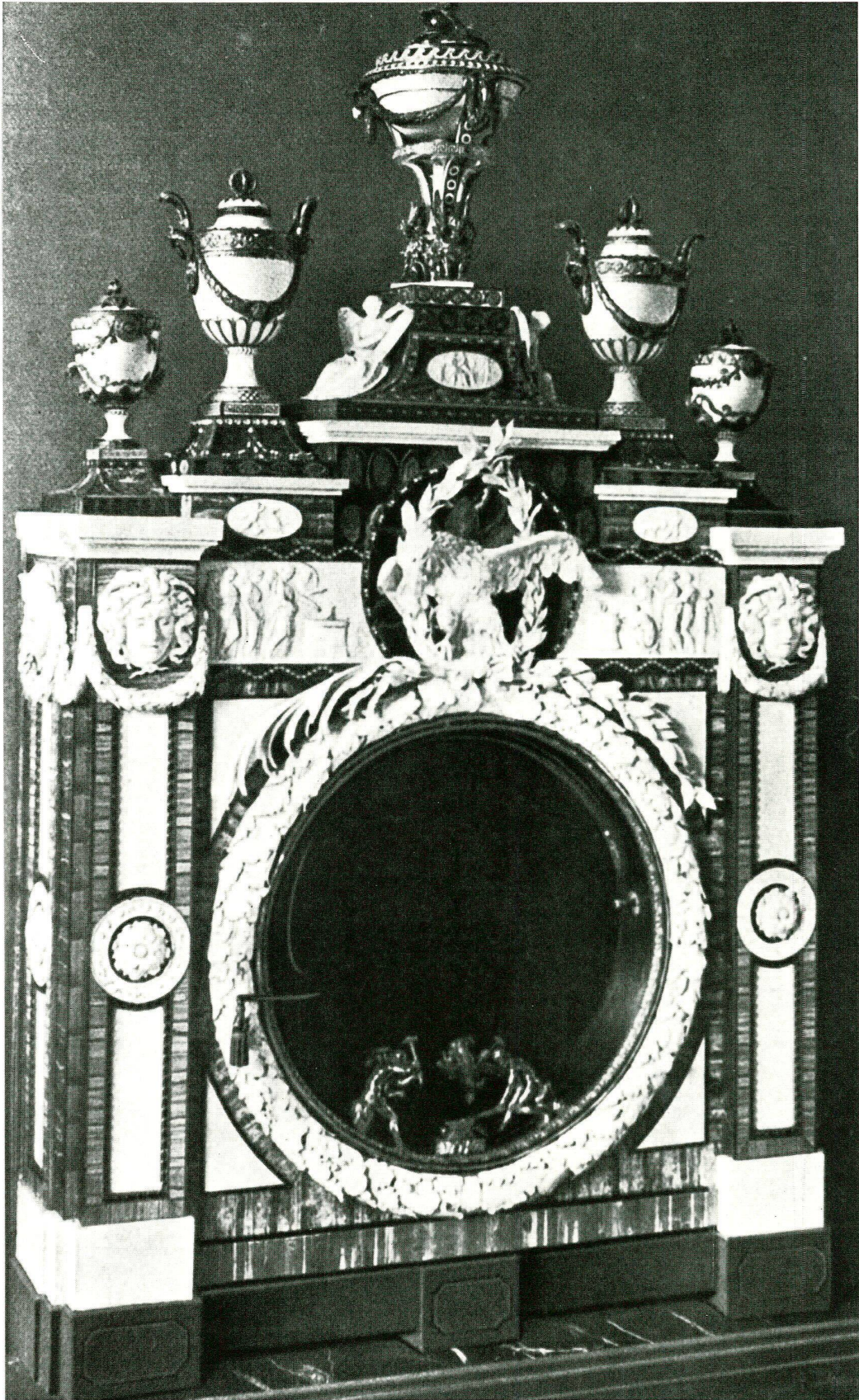
Plate 9:

Elsasser's «Contour» of the group modelled by Schönheit in 1787, called *The decisive choice* (*Die entschlossene Wahl*). See p. 51, N. 185.

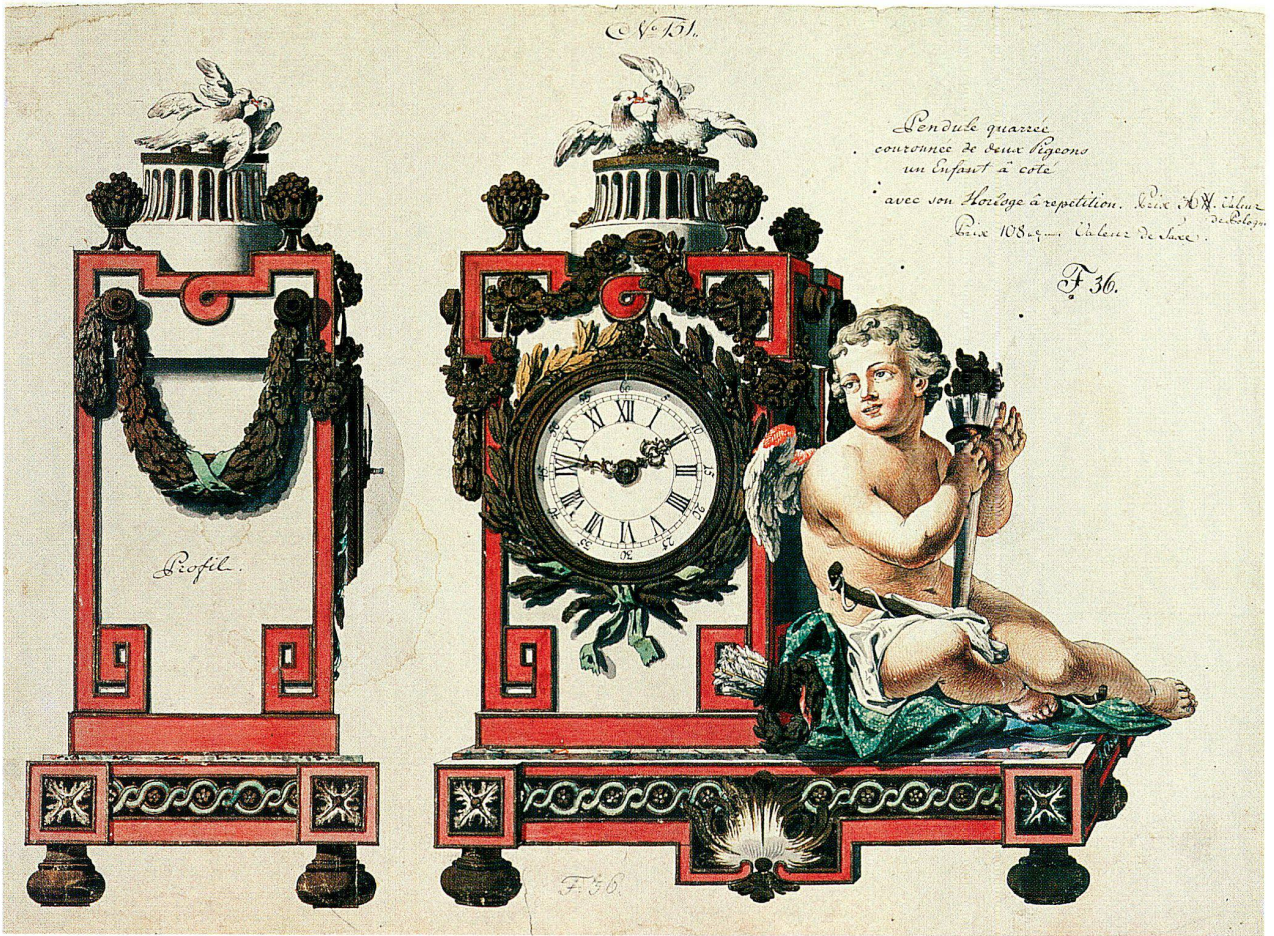


13 Zoll hoch. G. 99.

















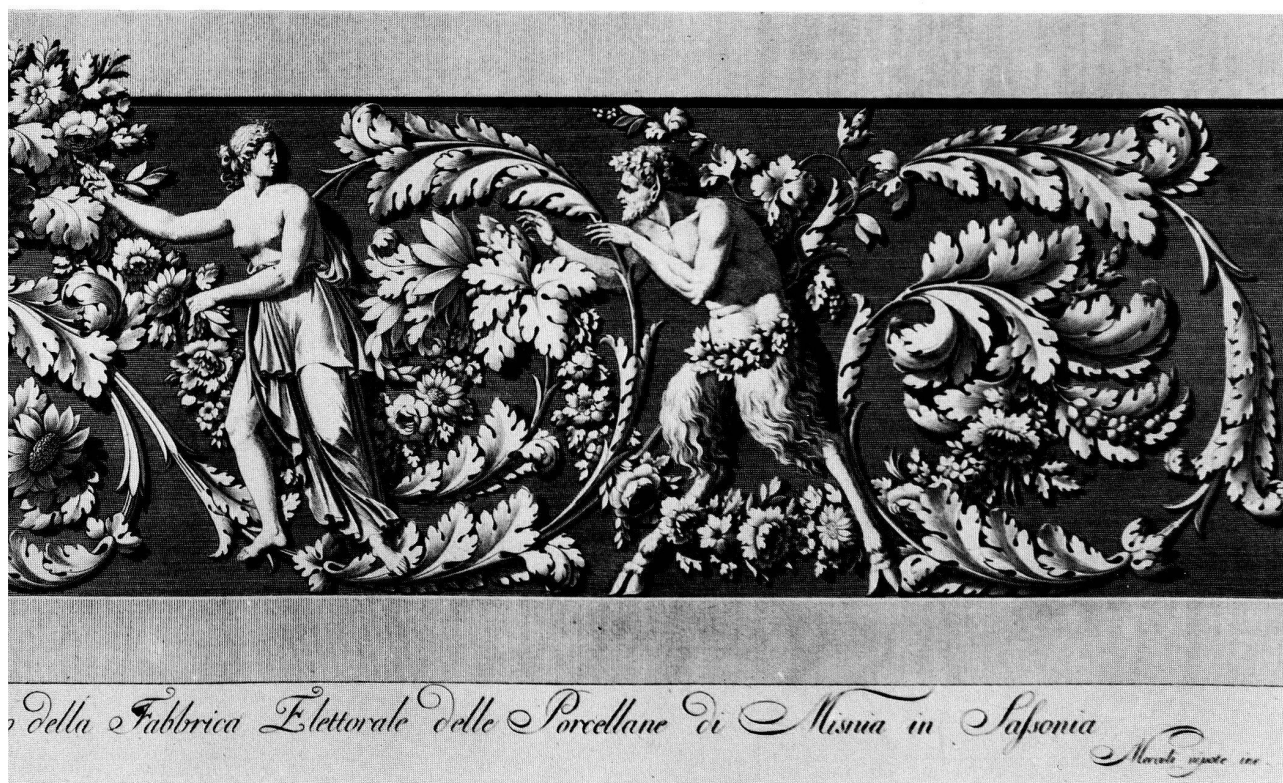








*Fregio ornato all'Autore dall'All.<sup>mo</sup> Sig. Cristiano Guglielmo de Steinauer, Direttore  
Giuseppe Allertollini incis. e sculp. 1755.*



*The frieze in neo-classical taste by the celebrated Italian designer of architectural decoration, Giocondo Albertolli (1742—1839), is dedicated to a high official of the Meissen factory, Christian Wilhelm Steinauer. The latter is described in the legend as «Direttore Primario della Fabbrica Elettorale delle Porcellane di Misnia in Saxonia».*

*Dated 1788, the engraving comes from Albertolli's *Alcuni Decorazioni di Nobili sali et altre ornamenti*. It shows how far the «gout grec» had penetrated the upper echelons of the Meissen factory. Not that Steinauer had a particularly savoury repu-*

*tation. He was accused by a later technician of the factory, Heinrich Gottlieb Kühn, in an unpublished history of the factory (*Geschichte der Königl. Sächsischen Porzellanmanufaktur, 1710—1833*), as «a bankrupt merchant» (*Bankrott gewordener Kaufmann*) and one of the directors responsible for the decline of the factory. Steinauer had been appointed Oberkontroller with particular responsibility for financial affairs in 1780; in 1796 he was privileged to become an arcanist and third commissioner a year earlier. But he did not get on with the Russians, who had him dismissed in 1814.*

*Whether Steinauer ever made use of Albertolli's design is not recorded.*





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verse is the truth. Meissen cannot be considered in isolation from Dresden, 20 miles away up the river Elbe. The Electoral court of Saxony was, at least in its upper echelons, more sophisticated than is sometimes imagined. Opera flourished, baroque architecture seldom had princes so lavish in their building activities as Augustus the Strong and his son. Pictures were collected, above all by Augustus III, and antiquities were a passion with his father. Not perhaps so great a passion as Augustus the Strong had for his porcelain factory, for some ten years the only one in Europe to make porcelain in the Chinese manner, that is, in a hard paste differing only slightly from the Chinese. That Augustus the Strong's antiquities should one day be harnessed to the output of the Meissen Factory was inevitable. But this development was unfortunately a slow affair. An attempt will be made to trace this connection, a theme apparently never fully explored.

It was a dictum of Johann Winckelmann<sup>8</sup> that is in part responsible for giving Meissen — and indeed all European porcelain — a bad name. In a paragraph in his celebrated and fundamental work on classical sculpture, his *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (Dresden 1764), written in Rome, he interpolates an attack on the poor use made of the «schöne Materie» porcelain, comparing it unfavourably with the Roman masterpieces of glass. He continues by stating that out of this new material nothing has

been created worthy of being called a work of art (*Kunstarbeit*). Then comes the celebrated phrase describing porcelain figures as «ludicrous dolls»: even more insulting in the German, «lächerliche Puppen». It should, however, be mentioned that these two words are usually taken out of context, and that Winckelmann actually wrote that «most porcelain is made in the form of ludicrous dolls.» This does just allow for the fact that even Winckelmann admitted that there were some porcelain figures that were not too bad; generous praise, perhaps, from a dedicated classicist. Perhaps he was recalling the Meissen Italian comedy figures and the so-called «crinoline» groups by Kaendler, whom he probably knew before he left Saxony for Rome in 1755. Or possibly he was excepting those Meissen figures in the palace of his protector, Cardinal Alessandro Albani.<sup>9</sup> But what he was not aware of was that from the beginning, at the time of the invention by Böttger of his red stoneware or jaspis-Porzellan in 1709, classical busts and reliefs were already in production.

Despite the prejudice of a Winckelmann writing with the strength of someone converted to classical, and above all Greek art (which he had never himself seen), there is plenty of evidence to show that from its very beginning, even before the invention of porcelain, Böttger and his associates were fully aware of classical sculpture. In fact Meissen can claim to have produced for sale Antique heads and reliefs before even Winckelmann was born. There is ample evidence that Böttger produced series of heads of the Roman Emperors, both in the round and as bas-reliefs.<sup>10</sup> Few have survived to our knowledge, though doubtless many remain to be discovered. Heads of Augustus and of another Emperor called Vitellius, still exist: also another of Proserpine. No reliefs have been found; they are mentioned in 1711 as «Kayser Kopff glat in Bassio». Amongst objects in a classical manner is a head of Apollo, derived from the Bernini group in Rome.

Apart from the latter we do not know what were the sources of these Böttger red stoneware busts and reliefs. Possibly casts already in the Electoral collections, or perhaps drawings brought back from Italy by such sculptors as Paul Herrmann (1673—1732) who returned to Dresden in 1705. No classical figures are known in early Böttger porcelain, and indeed none for a considerable time, although it would have been feasible for Kirchner or Kaendler to have produced figures as large as the birds and beasts made for the Japanese Palace. Further, Augustus the Strong became interested in making yet another collection, of antique marbles, so that there would have been material at hand to act as inspiration for the Meissen modellers. It is perhaps worth listing in brief the growth of the Saxon Antikensammlung. From Frederick William of Prussia Augustus bought the finest marbles in

Plate 12:

Fig. 12: Pompeo Batoni (1708—87), *John the Baptist*, formerly in the Staatsgemäldesammlung Dresden, but destroyed in the war.

Fig. 13: Pompeo Batoni (1708—87), *Maria Magdalena*, formerly in the Staatsgemäldesammlung Dresden, but destroyed in the war.

Fig. 14: *The Penitent Magdalen* is one of the most popular subjects to be copied onto porcelain plaques. This example is from the Berlin factory.

Fig. 13: *Elsasser's Contouren of the figures «Mary Magdalen»* (see p. 41, N. 125) and «*John the Baptist»* (see p. 52, N. 188).

the Brandenburg Collection in the years 1723—26. A little later was acquired a series of busts of Roman Emperors from the collection of Canon J. B. Bellori in Rome. But the outstanding purchases were of parts of the collections of Prince Agostino Chigi and of Cardinal Alessandro Albani, both in 1728. The Court surveyor and architect Baron Le Plat, who had already helped to design some large Böttger stoneware vases and was later to become Director of the Electoral Collections, was despatched to Rome to handle the negotiations. In this he was successful after much hard bargaining, shipping his marble treasures via Leghorn to Amsterdam; and from thence probably by the Elbe up river to Dresden.<sup>11</sup>

A further addition of particular interest was that of three marble figures of women from Herculaneum, presented to Prince Eugen of Savoy, against all the strict regulations of the Viceroy, by Prince d'Elbeuf. On Eugen's death, Augustus managed to buy them from the heiress in 1736.

In addition to these marbles of varying quality in the *Antikensammlung*, there would have been available to the Meissen modeller, if the production of classical figures had been contemplated as early as the 1730's, reproductions of classical sculpture in other mediums — bronzes, terracottas and above all plaster casts. Of these there was a small group in the Electoral collection, and, at a later date, others bought by the father of the celebrated neo-classical painter, Raphael Mengs, especially for the use of his son.<sup>12</sup> But it was not until later in the century, in 1784, that the Elector Frederick Augustus III was able to make a major acquisition in the purchase of the same Raphael Mengs personal collection of casts. Mengs had died in 1779; the casts, containing both classical and baroque examples, were bought from Mengs sister, Madame Maron. Ninety-six cases, carefully packed, were shipped from Rome, arriving in Dresden late in 1784.<sup>13</sup>

Housed first in a large room in the Brühl gardens, the casts were eventually displayed in a specially constructed gallery below the electoral paintings. The opening was on 24 August, 1794, a date just after the Elsasser «Contouren» had been completed. A catalogue was made in 1831 by the keeper of the cast collection, Johann Gottlob Matthäi, a man who had long been connected with the Meissen factory as modeller. The catalogue contains 744 items of supposedly Antique sculpture, with a few modern pieces included; to these were added ten more from the Electoral or rather by now royal *Antiken-Cabinet* in 1828: before then housed with the antique marbles on the first floor of the Japanese Palace. There is little doubt that the Mengs casts were extensively used by Meissen modellers, in the second half of the 1780's and later; it is then that

most of the «Contouren» are of Antique or related subjects.

Dresden was by no means unique amongst the German courts in boasting of a collection of casts. Earlier in the field were Cassel and the famous collection of the Elector Palatine, Carl Theodor, in his *Antikensaal* in Mannheim, visited by Goethe in 1769. Goethe himself bought a head of the Laocoon at Frankfurt in 1773.<sup>14</sup>

We are running slightly ahead of the main narrative in this discursion on the prevalence of casts. But it does show how any porcelain factory could have had models for figures of antique interest ready at hand. Long before the publication of Winckelmann's works in the 1760's, the appreciation of the heavily restored remains of Antiquity (whether they were Greek or Roman or even Etruscan was not known until Winckelmann began his serious studies) was not rare. Even Johann Joachim Kaendler was fully aware of the interest in such matters. On 15 December 1738 he wrote a long memorandum<sup>15</sup> on various matters, of which the last paragraph, no. 42 (proximity was a common fault, then as now), makes the suggestion that for 30 to 40 thalers the factory could acquire a number of small plaster figures — «Roman», he calls them — as an aid to the teaching of young modellers. He mentions specifically the Apollo, «die Griechische Venus, den Hercules, den Lacon mit seinen Söhnen, die Ringer, den Claudiateve, den Mercurium, die Leda, den Atlantem und so weiter.» Whether it was the intention to copy these in porcelain is ambiguous.

There is no ambiguity in the suggestions of Francesco Algarotti (1712—1764), an international connoisseur who advised both Frederick the Great and Augustus III on the purchase of paintings, a patron of contemporary Venetian painters and an influential if shadowy character.<sup>16</sup> On his return from a journey to Russia he passed through Dresden in the summer of 1739. Some six months, then, after Kaendler's memorandum, Algarotti strongly advised the Meissen factory to produce glazed white porcelain «versions of antique reliefs, medallions of emperors and philosophers» and figures of «the most beautiful statues, such as the Venus, the Fawn, the Antinous, the Laocoon sufficient to adorn all the cabinets and desserts of England». From the short period of time between Kaendler's and Algarotti's suggestions, it almost looks as though they were in league to bring pressure to bear on the authorities. But it was all talk and no action.

Most of the earlier groups and figures reproduced by the «Contouren», both contemporary and classical, were glazed, coloured and gilt; some were left in the white. But it was soon realised that the ideal material for the imitations of marble antiquities was biscuit porcelain, invented at Vincennes where it was first marketed on a small scale



in 1751. Not that Vincennes and its successor Sèvres (1756) had initially any intention of using this new material with its delicate yellowish tinge and agreeable soft paste for anything except models by Boucher and Falconet; it was not until 1768 that the earliest classical figure was produced, and a few more in succeeding years.

But the Meissen factory thought along different lines. When Elsasser visited Paris in 1764 after the Seven Years' War on a combined recruiting and commercial espionage mission, he was very impressed by the new (to him) material of soft-paste. He had certain practical reservations, namely that Sèvres biscuit, because of its slightly uneven surface was inclined to gather dust and so had to be protected by glass domes: something which doubtless riled his tidy German nature. Nonetheless, on his return to Meissen Elsasser strongly advised that experiments should be started to try to imitate the Sèvres biscuit. By 1766 a

passable paste had been developed, but was not used commercially until the mid-1780's. It never, unfortunately, succeeded in emulating the soft-paste biscuit of Sèvres.<sup>17</sup>

Fortunately the hard and brittle-looking nature of Meissen biscuit never excluded the continued use of glazed and coloured figures and groups. For example, Jüchtzer's splendidly large group of *The Three Graces* of 1785 was produced in biscuit and in glazed and coloured versions.<sup>18</sup> Later, it seems that most of the Antique figures were made of biscuit porcelain — as they still were in 1906. Unfortunately it is impossible to distinguish between biscuit and glazed figures in the «Contouren», because Elsasser must have made drawings for his outline engravings in the «weisse Stube» or «Corps», which dealt only with figure production in the raw, unfired material.

<sup>1</sup> Klemm 1834, p. «Es sind theils Nachbildungen wirklich vorhandenen antiker Gruppen und Statuen, theils Figuren im Sinn und Styl der Antike...».

<sup>2</sup> Haskell and Penny, chap. XII, pp. 93—8.

<sup>3</sup> Giuseppe Liverani, *Il Museo delle Porcellane di Doccia*, 1967, pls. V and VI.

<sup>4</sup> W. B. Honey, *Wedgwood Ware*, London 1948, pl. 50.

<sup>5</sup> Hugh Honour, «Statuettes after the Antique: Volpato's Roman Porcelain Factory», *Apollo* May 1967, pp. 371—3.

<sup>6</sup> Angela Carola Perrotti, *Le Porcellane della Fabbrica Ferdinanda*, 1978, figs. 25—6 and 28—30 and the same author's *Le Porcellane dei Borbone di Napoli: Capodimonte e Real Fabbrica Ferdinanda, 1743—1806*, Exhibition Catalogue, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, 1986—7, esp. nos. 439—491.

<sup>7</sup> Bourgeois and Lechevallier-Chevignard, *Le Biscuit de Sèvres*, n.d. 1913, nos.

<sup>8</sup> Winckelmann 1764, Book 1, Chapter 2, Paragraph 29.

Winckelmann in the previous paragraphs had been writing on the use of glass amongst the Ancients, in particular of the more ornate techniques such as that used on the Portland Vase. He then in para. 29 branches off without any historical justification on a petty attack on the misuse of the modern material, porcelain: «Wie unendlich prächtiger müssen nicht solche Geschirre (of glass) von Kennern des wahren Geschmacks geachtet werden, als all so sehr beliebten Porzellengefäße, deren schöne Materie bisher noch durch keine ächte Kunstarbeit edler gemacht worden, so dass aus so kostbaren Arbeiten noch kein würdiges und belehrendes Denkbild eingepreget gesehen wird. Das mehreste Porzellane ist in lächerliche Puppen geformet, wodurch der daraus erwachsene kindische Geschmack sich allenthalben ausgebreitet hat.»

<sup>9</sup> See Lesley Lewis, *Connoisseurs and Secret Agents in Eighteenth Century Rome*, London 1961. Albani had lost a Meissen service in a fire in 1760, p. 198.

<sup>10</sup> Ingelore Menzhausen, «Das rothe und das weisse Porcelaine,» in *Johann Friedrich Böttger: die Erfindung des europäischen Porzellans*, Leipzig, 1982, pp. 223—4, figs. 142—4.

<sup>11</sup> Most of the paragraph is derived from the introduction to Hermann Hetner's *Die Bildwerke der Königlichen Antikensammlung zu Dresden*, Dresden 1856.

<sup>12</sup> Haskell and Penny 1982, p. 80.

<sup>13</sup> Matthäi 1831, pp. IV-VIII, for this and the following paragraph.

<sup>14</sup> Haskell and Penny 1982, p. 80.

<sup>15</sup> Seyffarth 1981 (pub. 1982), p. 189; and Ingelore Menzhausen, «Das klassische Meissen», Cologne 1983, p. 69. The full text, from Seyffarth is as follows: «42. Ist noch beyläufig mein ergebnstes Ansuchen, dass wenn die Fabrique 30 bis 40 Thaler wollte dran wenden, dass die Römischen Gipss-Statuen, welche man ins kleine von trefflichen medern copiret hat, als den Appollo, die Griegische Venus, den Herculem, den Lacon mit seinen Söhnen, die Ringer, den Claudiateve, den Mercurium, die Leda, den Atlantem und so weiter, hierher geschaffet werden sollten, wornach man trefflich studiren, besondes aber die noch unerfahrene Jugend dadurch zu informiren gleichsam als in einer Academie ich wohl ohne eiteln Ruhm so viel versichern wollte, dass eine hohe Commission nachgehends innerhalb kurtzer Zeit einen solchen effect sehen sollten, was ich der Fabrique zum grössten Nutzen denen vielen jungen Purschen wollte beybringen, dass selbige aufs trefflichste was erlernen sollten, weil sie besondere Lust darzu bezeigen, überlasse übrigens alles Einer hohen Commission reifflichen Überlegung, wobey gehorsamst ersuche, meine geringe Schreibe-Arth bestens zu pardonieren. Meissen den 15 Decembris anno 1738. Johann Joachim Kändler, verpflichteter Modell-Meister bey der Königlichen Porcelaine-Fabrique.»

<sup>16</sup> Haskell, *Patrons and Painters*, 1980, pp. 347—60.

<sup>17</sup> Walcha 1968, p. 35 and Walcha 1973, chap. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Rückert 1977, pl. 151.