

Introduction to the "Contouren" of Elsasser, 1785-92

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IV. Introduction to the «Contouren» of Elsasser, 1785—92

Of the 176 copper engravings recorded by Elsasser as having been delivered between 1785 and 1792, the dates of the Meissen figures and groups can be approximately fixed according to a new system of numbering introduced in 1764. This system combines a capital letter with Arabic numerals from 1 to 100; against these model or mould numbers has been set the number of engravings by Elsasser executed within these dates:

<i>Approximate dates of Meissen manufacture</i>		<i>Quantity of Elsasser «Contouren»</i>
From 19 July 1764	A 1—100	3
From May 1766	B 1—100	0
From March 1768	C 1—100	2
From August 1770	D 1—100	14
From June 1772	E 1—100	5
From 1774	E 61 f.	12
From August 1775	F 1—100	50
From 1778	G 1—100	19
From 1783	H 1—100	34
From 1787	J 1—100	35
From 1791	K 1—100	

The size of the blocks varies from 19.2 cm by 15.3 cm to 20 cm. by 16 cm. Each full page is roughly 23.8 by 19 cm.

In the Kunstbibliothek, Berlin, the paper is a mixture of thin and thick. In the Werksarchiv the paper is almost always thin and of Dutch origin.

Each «Contour» has the measurement of the figure in Zoll incorporated in the engraving. A Saxon Zoll in the eighteenth century measured just under one English inch (.0235 metre as against .0254 metre). The model or mould number is also given: an invaluable aid to dating the original issue of the figure.

The majority of prints come from W. Berlin. Those from the Werksarchiv of the factory in Meissen usually have the additional advantage of bearing the monogram and sometimes the title of the subject and date in the hand of Elsasser.

Since Graf Marcolini was appointed to his post as head of the Meissen factory on 20 August 1774, and since only about 24 prints antedate his appointment, virtually all the «Contouren» except for about 12 % are outline engravings of the Marcolini Period: which justifies calling this essay an account of the Marcolini Period rather than of the Academic Period (1764—74) in addition.

The notes in part V give not only the titles of the groups and figures as far as can be deduced from printed sources, but also certain comments and references to literature on the particular group or figure. These are not intended to be in any way complete (there are many blanks waiting to be filled in), but may be found helpful to anyone wishing to pursue the matter further.

The most valuable part of this section is the use made of the *Arbeitsberichte* of Kaendler, Acier and Schönheit, material for the most part here published for the first time. For the privilege of incorporating the descriptions of the models by the sculptors concerned, I once again am indebted to the directors of the *Werksarchiv* at Meissen. The extracts are given in the original language: French in the case of Acier, German for Kaendler, Schönheit and Jüchtzer.

Many readers may think the descriptions and references too long. But I like to think that these notes may well be considered essential in years to come, when Meissen porcelain of the last third of the eighteenth century may be studied in as great detail as is that of the first half of this century.

The most verbose of the entries are those of the Frenchman, Acier, from 1775—80. Although Acier was employed since 1765, his reports of the first ten years have either been mislaid or, as has been suggested, were never made; perhaps as a Frenchman he was excused this tiresome bureaucratic effort. Schönheit is terse and precise. The extracts show that neither Acier nor Schönheit were notable for the accuracy of their spelling or punctuation. No attempt has been made to make corrections.

The Work Notes, where they refer to figures engraved by Elsasser, give us the precise dates of creation, descriptions of the work, which are sometimes not easy to decipher in their sentimental allegories, and, perhaps of greater moment, the names of the sculptors. Some of the assumptions made by Karl Berling in 1911 are corrected. But there remain a small number of instances where the sculptor is still in doubt, and even the subject depicted lacks a title. Close study of the Meissen sculptors' notes reveal much more of interest. For example, it is possible to watch the career of Schönheit, starting as an assistant to Kaendler, and then on the latter's death in 1775 transferring his allegiance to Acier, now the head modeller, to whom he refers with an air of reverence as *Herr Modellmeister*. And when the latter retires in 1780, Schönheit becomes an independent modeller in his own right.

Another aspect of the *Arbeitsberichte* only becomes clear

when they are read in their entirety, although in some of the following notes this can be observed on occasions. This aspect has to do with the numerous entries referring not to the creation of new models so much as the preservation of older ones. More than half the entries refer to the «repairing» of past models. This has two advantages to the Meissen scholar. One is that it shows the comparative popularity of a model, when the moulds have worn out after over-use; the second is that it is clear that popular models of the Kaendler baroque period of the 1740's were re-issued with new or rather «repaired» moulds thirty or forty years later. This is a warning for the collector to be aware of such practices, and may help him avoid buying the later rather than the earlier issue.

To illustrate these points a random sample is given, first of figures and groups directly connected with the Elsasser engravings. The closer the date of the «repaired» figure to its original date of creation, the greater the success of the model. Unfortunately I am not aware of how many examples of a figure could be successfully produced from the original moulds; nor have I seen such information published. When a series of figures is copied or «repaired» within a few years, such as the Christophe Huet *Cris de Paris* of 1753 and the *Affenkapelle* of the same year, the success of the initial issue is obvious; but with the Marcolini period it is not so easy, even with the benefit of hindsight, to tell what will succeed and what will, commercially, prove a flop.

The one exception was the series of *Devisenkinder*, which proved to be a «best-seller» from the first. Modelled by Acier from June 1755 to January 1778, the moulds were wearing thin by March 1789, when Schönheit began to «repair» nos. F. 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 14; and probably the other six also (there is a page missing in his notes).

Other figures and groups to have been repaired within a short time of their original issue were the following:

F 31 Two children playing badminton. Modelled by

Acier June to August 1775. «Repaired» by Schönheit in May 1781. The lapse of only six years between the first and second issue is unusually short.

- D.92 Gardening group by Acier, May 1772; «repaired» by Acier in May 1778.
- D.93 Another gardening group by Acier, June—July 1772. «Repaired» by Acier in December 1780, one of his last tasks, as he retired at the end of the year.
- D.94 Three figures under an apple-tree, Acier August 1772. «Repaired» by Schönheit March 1781.
- D.97 Gardening group, Acier November—December 1772. «Repaired» by Schönheit December 1781 —January 1782.

It should be noted here that there are often slight alterations of detail — a neo-classical base instead of a late rococo one — on the «repairing» of a group. The «Contouren» can sometimes be of help here in differentiating between original and «repaired».

Many other instances of re-worked moulds are mentioned in the notes that follow.

Although it forms no part of the Elsasser engravings, it is just worth mentioning a few of the earlier Meissen groups and figures that were «repaired» in the Marcolini period, as a helpful warning to the collector. Acier, for example, made new moulds in 1772 for the set of Liberal Arts of the 1750's and for the Silenus group of the late 1750's, as well as an earlier goat; their model numbers he records as 1715—18, 2724 and 1604 respectively. Schönheit was responsible for a revised edition of the golden oriole (*Pirol*) in late 1782, for the large set of Continents of c.1745 in September 1783, also for the Senses (models 1742—1745) in 1784. A careful analysis would reveal the dates of many more models of the Kaendler period of the 1740's and 1750's.