

Bustelli's creations

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We must return to an earlier age for another vignette of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. In 1568, even before Italian comedians journeyed to France, Hans Fugger of the renowned Augsburg family of bankers and merchants, had arranged for a company of four players, the troupe of Maestro Jacopo da Venetia, to travel to Castle Trausnitz, overlooking the town of Landshut, original seat of the Dukes of Bavaria. The reigning duke had assigned the castle to his twenty-years-old son Wilhelm on the latter's marriage in Munich to Renata de Lorraine. More actors were brought to Landshut in time, and soon Castle Trausnitz had its own resident company of Italian comedians. Between 1577 and 1578, only a year before he succeeded to the Dukedom and was obliged to move permanently to the Munich residence, Wilhelm commissioned magnificent *trompe-l'œil* frescoes to be painted on the walls and ceilings of a newly-constructed staircase and a council-chamber (destroyed by a fire in 1961) of the castle, depicting in perfect illusion characters of the *Commedia dell'Arte* in action. These frescoed walls represented the most extensive pictorial record of the Italian Comedy as it was known in central Europe in the third quarter of the 16th century²². Throughout the latter part of the 16th century, and in the 17th

and most of the 18th centuries, troupes of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, but latterly more often players of the *Théâtre Italien*, roamed across the Continent, to Bohemia, Hungary and Poland, to Scandinavia, and via Flanders to England, from France to Spain and to Germany.

Finally, around the 1780's, the fires slowly died. In Italy, the realistic Venetian dramatist Carlo Goldoni (1707–1793), author of more than two hundred and fifty plays, forcibly hauled the Comedy into the legitimate theatre, his ritualized and inflexible plot constructions replacing improvisation. The players were enjoined to adhere closely to Goldoni's written texts. For him the impromptu character of the *Commedia dell'Arte* was nothing but undisciplined buffoonery – even though he adopted many of the characters and incorporated basic *Commedia* situations into some of his plays.

A lonely voice of protest was raised by Count Carlo Gozzi (1720–1806), another Venetian, who wrote a satirical poem against Goldoni in which he defended the virtues and traditions of the *Commedia dell'Arte* and the highly coloured and bold originality of its jesters. But it was a lonely voice indeed, and little was left by the 19th century but the Punch-and-Judy shows for the children²³.

Bustelli's Creations

The journeys of itinerant *Commedia dell'Arte* troupes from Italy to Bavaria was one of the earliest in Europe, although France became the Italian comedians' second home inasmuch as in that country they achieved the status of accredited companies at Court quite early and were allotted prestigious theatres as their permanent bases. The Bavarian rococo, in which Franz Anton Bustelli played an indisputably important part, was distinguished by its particular vivacity and pronounced asymmetry of forms, as can also be seen in the carvings and sculptures of Straub and Günther. Bustelli's art shows extraordinary bravura. The bodies of his figures twist and turn in rapid movements and show a variety of feelings in their gestures and facial expressions. To this must be added an amazing interplay of rococo scrolls on bases and supports with the flowing, well-defined drapes of the clothes, presenting a fine grace not found elsewhere in eighteenth century porcelain modelling. Under these sharply defined drapes we find real human bodies, and it becomes evident that the artist had a thorough grounding in sculptured anatomy. At his death, his meagre belongings included a number of anatomical *academy studies*, an in-

dication that at some time in his young days he must have undergone first-class tuition in anatomical sculpture¹; but where and by whom will remain unknown.

Bustelli modelled emotion, be it dignity or delight, ecstasy or sorrow. Here we see deceit or avarice, there elegance and humour. Lovesick dandies and frenzied blusterers pursue scheming belles; mirthful pranksters create situations of mistaken identity and of intrigue, with much gesticulation and accomplished mimicry. F. H. Hofmann has pointed out that Bustelli endeavoured to arrange his figures in pairs or groups with a direct relationship one to the other, thus entering into the spirit of the improvised antics of his actors in a world of light-hearted illusion. He must also have been aware that, in his century, porcelain figures were created as «theme» decorations for the dinner table, not as objects to be displayed in a cabinet or a vitrine. His figures are his own creatures, imagined and matured in his mind, and in his heart. It is this which makes his comedians unique works of art in porcelain, standing head and shoulder above all else produced in the second half of the eighteenth century. Like all other modellers in the first century of European porce-

lain, Bustelli disposed of engravings and drawings which factory administrators collected in order to provide subject matter for their artists. He himself left behind at his death in his personal effects a collection of 288 engravings, which were subsequently handed over to join the factory's collection. We do not know what these engravings were, but some of his figures and their costumes, representing traditional Commedia dell'Arte characters, indicate that he must have had access to such works as the *Théâtre Italien* by Evariste Gherardi, one of the best-known interpreters of Harlequin in the 17th–18th centuries, published in Paris from 1694; and to the engravings by Joullain père after Jacques Callot in the *Histoire du Théâtre Italien* by the equally famous actor and manager Louis Ricoboni, known as Lelio (cf. Bibliography). Illustrated in figure 4 is a typical company of the *Théâtre Italien* as it might have appeared on the stage of a German theatre. It should be pointed out that this is not a troupe of original Commedia dell'Arte characters, as the title of the engraving seems to indicate, but rather actors who have adapted the Italian impromptu comedy to the French taste since their re-establishment in a permanent Paris home, the Hôtel de Bourgogne. From there, these «Italian» troupes spread eastwards into Germany. Going from left to right, we do in fact discover a relic of the ancestral 17th century Commedia, the figure of Trivelino, an early forerunner of Mezzetin. We then discern Scapin, Pierrot, Harlequin and Isabella, who seems to have stepped straight out of a Watteau painting²⁴. In the shadows behind is a vague figure, which may or may not be a Capitano, followed by a guitar-strumming Mezzetin, then Harlequina, Scaramouch and the Dottore. In front of them the unlikely couple: *old Pantalone flirting with the youthful Columbine, a group which was modelled in porcelain both at the Vienna factory and by J. J. Kaendler at Meissen*. This engraving by Christoph Weigel was pieced together from several series of earlier engravings and etchings, some of them of unknown provenance. It shows the ten core-characters of a company of Franco-Italian players. To this core could be added the eleventh name of Octavio, one of the lovers in a standard comedy, known to have existed since the latter part of the seventeenth century.

Of the eighteen actors and actresses to be discussed here, and shown in the Nymphenburg sales lists, seven bore names not generally current in the early literature on the Commedia dell'Arte, although used fairly often in the derivative theatre of French provenance. Recent research has shown that actors with these stage names existed in some of the troupes coming out of France and were depicted by eighteenth century French and German engravers. The seven players in question are Anselmo, Corine, Leda, Lalagé, Julia, Lucinde and Donna Martina. It was thought that Bustelli might have come across these names when watching a visiting French company performing in Munich and that

he had adopted their «labels» for his figures. That this assumption is unlikely to be the right one became evident in 1959, when a Munich art dealer, Alois Schmid¹⁴, acquired four engravings originating in the Augsburg workshop of Martin Engelbrecht (1684–1756), two of which bore Bustelli's handwriting and signature in pencil. The modeller's text on one sheet includes the date of 3rd October 1756, and the signature is almost identical to the one shown in figure 2. These sheets must have been amongst the possessions left by Bustelli at his death. The use of German script, with a few lapses into Latin lettering, and of a Bavarian dialect word for «repairers' modelling tools» (*posier beinelln*), reinforces the belief of some researchers that Franz Anton Bustelli might well have been born into a Ticino family long settled in Bavaria or elsewhere in southern Germany.

Two of the engravings depict a central scene – three string musicians around a table (fig. 5), and a dinner party of four people (fig. 6) – which is framed by rococo scrolling, and this in turn is surrounded by a group of standing actors of the Italian Comedy.

The engravings provide the key to the names given to the Nymphenburg figures, presumably by Bustelli, in the factory's price list of 1767. In the first (fig. 5), ten of the eleven actors illustrated bear the names of Bustelli comedians; two of them are the missing Corine and Julia. In the second group (fig. 6), a further five characters can be identified. They are, apart from Columbine, the elusive names of Anselmo, Lalagé, Lucinde and Donna Martina. Of the seven missing names, only Leda is not shown. It should also be noted that two of the regular Comedy actors, Isabella and Pierrot, are not represented on these two assemblages.

A study has shown that these two Engelbrecht engravings are really assemblages compiled from several earlier series of individual engravings²⁵, but it is not known if Bustelli owned any of those. It is therefore impossible to determine whether he adopted the names for his figures from these two Engelbrecht sheets or from the single-figure engravings, some of which will be illustrated below. He took the names of the players from these prints, not the postures nor their attitudes shown in the illustrations. Where it applied, however, he clad his characters in the original costumes which had come down from the time-honoured Commedia dell'Arte or the follow-up *Théâtre Italien* – thus Pantalone and Scaramouche, the Dottore, the Harlequina, and of course Pierrot – but even then, he allowed his artistic creativeness to run counter to established tradition and dressed up Mezzetin in the patchwork habit of a Harlequin, as opposed to the customary jacket, cloak and knee-breeches of vertically-stripped linen, and the floppy cap that goes with them. For the other figures, postures and movements might have been inspired in the first place by an engraved model, some of them to be shown further on, but the artist gave each one of



4. TROUPE OF ITALIAN COMEDIANS. Engraving by Christoph Weigel, Nuremberg, c. 1723. Raccolta Teatrale del Burcardo, Rome.

his creations his own inimitable twist, steeped in the observances and conceptions of Bavarian rococo art. As for the materials of his costumes, he insisted that the painters of the figures simulated, under his personal supervision, the finest silks, brocades and damasks of the period. Going back to the first biographer of Bustelli in the 1920's, it is worth to quote here Hofmann's appreciation of his figures²⁶: «Bustelli achieved the artistic acme of his sculptural output with the comedy figures. Characters from the Italian Comedy, which

basically revolves around the amorous adventures of beautiful Isabella, daughter of old Pantalone, and her admirers Cynthio or Rodomondo, and the Capitano, provide themes which were plainly cut out for the language of lively gestures, the graceful twists and the swift movements of Bustelli's style.» There is no doubt that a Bustelli comedy figure can be seen from any angle with always renewed pleasure, for on each turn a different, bewitching aspect of movement and grace regales the beholder.



5. GROUP OF ELEVEN NAMED ACTORS of the Théâtre Italien, with moralizing verses in Latin and German. Engraving published by Martin Engelbrecht (1684–1756), Augsburg, 194×297 mm. Mid-18th century. Sign.: Cum Pr.Sac.Caes.Maj./Mart. Engelbrecht excud.A.V. Deutsches Theatermuseum, Munich.

Three mid-18th century production lists of Nymphenburg porcelain are recorded²⁷, of which the first, a stock-list at Neudeck Castle of 8 August 1755, is too early to be of interest here. The second is the Inventory of Moulds dated 1760⁵, which lists 1 *Harlaquin* and 1 *Harlaquinin*, as well as 16 *Stuckh Pantomim Figuren* (16 pieces pantomime figures). In 1760 Bustelli had completed the modelling of the larger Harlequin and Harlequina, as well as the complete standard-sized set of the sixteen comedy actors, but this list contained no additional information on them.

For a more detailed inventory we must go to the Price List of 1767⁶, printed well after Bustelli's death. Under the heading of *Figuren* it itemizes alphabetically all figures then available at the factory, amongst them, under the appropriate letter of the alphabet, seventeen comedians, many of them with the qualification of *Pantomim* after their name. Curiously, the figure of Pantalone is missing, although it must have been one of the characters included in the 16 *Stuckh* of the 1760 List. Heights are now given, in *Pariserzoll* (French inch = *Pouce*). The *pouce* was eventually stabilized at 27.07 mm, but

in the eighteenth century it could vary between 25 mm and 34 mm. Since the height of twelve comedy figures is given as 6 *Zoll*, one must tentatively assume that the Nymphenburg measure was situated around 33 mm. The compiler was evidently not informed very correctly: the bent figure of Anselmo is listed as being 7 *Zoll* high, whereas Columbine and Corine are 4 *Zoll*; no example of any comedy figure of a reduced size is known. It is quite possible that these mistakes crept in at the printing shop, the printer having no way of knowing what exactly was produced at the factory. The prices of the 1767 List also show some irregularities: fourteen figures are priced at 9 guilders *decorated* and 5 guilders *white*, whereas the too-high Anselmo and the too-small figures of Columbine and Corine cost 5 guilders decorated and 3 guilders white. Those prices were for first-rate merchandise; middle quality sold at two-thirds that rate, rejects were sold for a third.

A short word is needed with regard to our nomenclature of the Nymphenburg comedy figures: the names here used have been taken from the Inventory of Moulds 1760 and the



*Verba levis liquidos rivus spectanda theatris
Excitant; ut carent, seria quisquis amat.*
Cum Pr. Sac. Caes. Maj.

*Den eillen Zinn macht oft ihr Scherz u. Spiel viel Lachen,
Der aber ernsthaft ist, der merket ihre Tachen.*
Mart. Engelbrecht excud. 1771

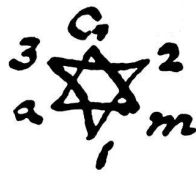
6. GROUP OF THIRTEEN ACTORS of the Théâtre Italien, with moralizing verses in Latin and German. Engraving published by Martin Engelbrecht (1684–1756), Augsburg, 194×297 mm. Mid-18th century. Sign.: Cum Pr. Sac. Caes. Maj./Mart. Engelbrecht excud. A.V. Deutsches Theatrumuseum, Munich.

printed Price List of 1767. In the first, *Harlaquin* and *Harlaquinin* are named as such, separately from the 16 *Stuckh Pantomin Figuren* listed below them. The reason for this is the fact that Bustelli modelled this pair in 1756–1757 and that they were, in no way, part of the series of sixteen modelled shortly afterwards, up to 1760. In the second list there are fifteen comedians – Pantalone is missing – in addition to *Arlequin Pantomin Figur* and *Arlequine*. We shall use the names of the fifteen characters as shown in the 1767 List in the belief that it was Franz Anton Bustelli who himself thus christened his creations, names on the whole still used in the literature on the subject. An exception has been made at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, kind providers of the colour illustrations of the magnificent figures of Harlequina, Mezzetin and Lalagé. In New York the first is named Columbine²⁸, whilst Mezzetin has become Harlequin and Lalagé is Columbine again²⁹. In order to avoid confusion, the alternative names will be acknowledged in the captions thus: MMA Columbine.

The mark impressed into the paste of Bustelli's figures was the Bavarian shield of arms, 6 mm high, of a field of lozenges – the *Rautenschild*. On painted figures the lozenges were alternately painted blue and left white, thus representing the colours of Bavaria. The heraldic achievement then was *paly, bendy, argent and azure*. Used at Neudeck Castle from 1754, the mark was not always applied under the base; it was often in full view as part of the decoration. When the model was coloured, the mark was framed with a narrow band of gold. The impressed letters F. B. (Franz Bustelli) are known



IMPRESSED MARKS
On painted figures often outlined in gold



UNDERGLAZE BLUE
HEXAGRAM MARK³¹.

only on a few figures. Most figures have a number from 0 to 3, or a dot, impressed or scratched underneath the base³⁰. Between 1763 and 1767, the factory also used a cryptic mark, applied in blue under the glaze, which represented an alchemical sign for the Four Elements. This was a hexagram with letters and figures at the six points and probably a fancy of the worker J. C. Kilber, who had discovered the process of painting in underglaze blue. An Italian Comedy figure with this mark beneath the base is unlikely to have been produced and painted in Bustelli's lifetime, since he died early in 1763.

In his Catalogue of the European Porcelains at the Bavarian National Museum in Munich published in 1908³² F. H. Hofmann, then the curator of porcelain, first listed ten figures which we now know to be Bustelli's Italian Comedians. At that time, they were enumerated under the heading *Modelled by Franz Bastelli 1754 to 1765*. Hofmann had not yet recognized a Reading Girl (Corine) as a comedian, and only tentatively ascribed a Rococo Lady (Lalagé) to the Comedy. A Gentleman of the Italian Comedy (Octavio) turned out to be a putative *Capitain Italien*, whilst Julia is called a Dancer of the Italian Comedy. Isabella is described as Columbine, and a figure (Anselmo), again only doubtfully attributed, is said to be based on *Ricoboni's* Narcisin de Malalbergo. Fifteen years later, Hofmann knew Franz Anton Bustelli's right name, and by the time his history of the Nymphenburg factory appeared in 1923, he had found the List of 1760 and the 1767 Price List in the archives, and had completed the extraordinary tour de force of correctly identifying all

sixteen figures against the names in the 1767 List³³, although he was not convinced himself of the flawlessness of his intuition.

To this day, we adhere to his nomenclature as well as to his pairing of the eight couples, which he arranged with four women actors standing to the right of the beholder, four to the left, thus composing a formation for dancers in a minuet or another such contemporary eightsome. In a display of interweaving bodies, each figure is rotating on its own axis, yet clearly attuned harmoniously to the movements of its partner by bearing, by body-language and, not least, by the flows and twists of its finery and accoutrements.

Hofmann believed in 1923 that with time his arrangements of the pairs would undergo some changes, especially if each name in the 1767 List could be ascribed with some certainty to one or the other of the sixteen figures. No such change has taken place in over seventy years, and as we have since come into possession of an increasing fund of engraved source material about the *Commedia dell'Arte* and the *Théâtre Italien* – material to which Hofmann did not have access in his time – we can only admire the unfaltering intuition with which he named and paired Bustelli's creations. Even in the few cases where no iconographical models have yet been found, Hofmann's attribution of a name seems to be borne out by the gestures and expressions of the porcelain figure.

Franz Anton Bustelli did not slavishly copy postures and costumes from engravings, as was frequently done by lesser modellers at other porcelain factories, neither did he work entirely without two-dimensional models, as was once believed. It is true that his style is unmistakably his very own, which does not preclude the use of engravings and other iconographic material as primary inspiration. In the absence of a list of the 288 sheets which he left behind, we shall attempt to gather here some possible sources for his comedians from the extensive material now available, and compare them with the modeller's creations – emphasizing however that these attributions strictly represent only the writer's opinion.

Harlequin & Harlequina

Bustelli's outstanding models of Harlequin and Harlequina are not in the series of sixteen Italian Comedy figures named in the 1760 and 1767 Lists. They were produced earlier and surviving examples of these two are much rarer still than those in the series. Whether these are the reasons why they have been largely ignored in recent literature on the subject

of the comedy figures is difficult to assess, yet they represent the artist's first foray into the rumbustious world of the strolling players, and for that reason become an integral part of this study. They were modelled in an unusual size for porcelain figures of that period, being more robust and 1 cm to 2 cm higher, than the subsequently modelled series.