Hillwood Studies

SÈVRES DURING THE REVOLUTION: A YELLOW SERVICE WITH BIRDS

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Since its founding in 1738, the Vincennes-Sèvres porcelain factory has produced some of Europe's finest porcelain objects. By the middle of the 18th century, the factory—which had moved to Sèvres in 1756— was one of the most prestigious of its kind in Europe. Its reputation has endured through changing political regimes to the present.

Although the factory operated under royal patronage during its first 40 years, it often confronted serious financial problems. However, none were as grave as those that occurred during the French Revolution. In 1789, one of the factory's accounting clerks wrote to the Count d'Angiviller, who was ultimately responsible to the King for the Sèvres factory:

The more I reflect on the state of affairs, the more convinced I am of the necessity of reducing the production by at least one third.... Paris is gradually becoming exhausted. The wealthier classes have left to cultivate cabbages in their states.... The nobles of the Court are ruined.... No one pays us; there are hardly any sales now.[1]

These words vividly describe how fragile the political and social situation was and how the national crisis permeated the realm of the factory.

By 1790, the factory's management had raised the question of selling it to pay debts. But Louis XVI decided to keep Sèvres running at his own expense.[2] The revolutionary years brought many changes at Sèvres. The National Assembly decided that the factory would not be disposed of along with other royal holdings. After the fall of the monarchy, the National Convention decreed that the factory, "one of the glories of France," should be preserved. In spite of its royal patronage, and although it produced luxury objects, the revolutionaries thought it could be a commercial asset. This policy, however, did not reconcile the politically divided forces inside the factory. Anarchy and political revenge prevailed.

New regulations dictated by the National Convention were introduced regarding the administration of the factory. Most were implemented and soon abandoned. Dismissals of directors and workshop chiefs and political denunciations among workers created a climate of discontent and distrust. But production did not stop. In the midst of this chaos, some of Hillwood's pieces were being decorated and fired in the enamel kiln. The spirit of the new era can be fully appreciated in the yellow service decorated with birds on display at Hillwood.

The partial service includes six plates, two square dishes, and two saucers. The plates and the square dish each have a bird in a land-

Fig. 1
Plate, 1794. Inscribed on the back, "Moineau de L'isle de France"

Fig. 2
Detail, marks on reverse of plate in fig. 1

scape in the center; each saucer has three medallions with birds; and all the borders have yellow grounds decorated with dark maroon friezes with stylized motifs of classical inspiration (fig. 1). The service is not unique. Several yellow services with birds and borders of this same type were produced from 1791 to 1795.[3]

One sign of the times is the system used to mark the pieces. Some pieces in Hillwood's service bear the royal cipher— crossed Ls enclosing dates of the Old Regime. Others are marked with "R. F." (for République Française) and the word "Sèvres" in script. Some have a combination of both marks. These marks are intriguing, particularly when the old and new marking systems are seen together (fig. 2).

Since 1753, when the factory was still at Vincennes, the mark had been the royal cipher with successive letters to indicate the date of manufacture, that is, A for 1753, B for 1754, and so on. This system continued in use for some months after the execution of Louis XVI on January 21, 1793. Then, in July of the same year (the second year of the Republic), the minister of interior wrote to Antoine Regnier, director of the factory, that the mark should be replaced at once with a new mark with the name "Sèvres" and the letters "R. F.". The minister also ordered that the crossed Ls be removed from the completed porcelain at the factory. Regnier replied that the new mark would be used but that it was too dangerous and too costly to remove the out-of-date marks from the completed porcelain.

This account could explain in part the coexistence of pieces retaining the old mark and pieces bearing the new set of marks. But how can it be explained that some pieces, a year or even a year and a half after the change, still bear the old marks? One answer is that Regnier, in his reply to the minister, clearly said that changing the marks would jeopardize sales abroad because foreigners were used to the old mark.[4] Some art dealers also had reservations about the change. In 1794, a dealer named Empaytaz observed:

The employees have received orders not to let any pieces out without having put on them first the attributes of liberty. This is an excellent measure for the nation, but if it continues to be applied in this manner, it will become impossible to export these wares, because this type of merchandise is unsellable abroad.[5]

This concern would explain why some pieces are marked with the crossed Ls and date letters QQ or even RR when officially the alphabet system concluded with the date letter PP in 1793. In this light, it is clear that foreigners were accustomed to the crossed Ls and might refuse to buy pieces not bearing them. The revolution was mostly of concern in France, so it is not surprising that commercial interest came first. The factory cared more about selling porcelain than adhering to the new political correctness. Sèvres had lost its main source of clients— royalty and nobility— so its survival depended almost exclusively on the purchases of dealers and foreign clients, who did not want to be bothered with revolutionary stories.

Examination of the factory's sales records suggests that Hillwood's pieces were part of a service sold to Citizen Speelman in October 1795. The original service included 100 plates, 12 compotiers, 6 cups and saucers "étrusques," and many other pieces.[6] A year earlier, the factory sold an identical service with a "frise étrusque" to the dealer Empaytaz in exchange for food that was in short supply in Paris.

The term "étrusque" appears in the factory records to describe either a particular shape or a type of decoration. Whatever its significance, the term reflects the prevailing taste for antiquity. A crucial

step toward the wide acceptance of the "Etruscan" style occurred in 1785 when the collection of vases known as "étrusques" assembled by the collector Baron Vivant Denon, French ambassador to Naples, was acquired by the king and deposited at Sèvres.[7] This collection gave porcelain artists a new opportunity to research and copy firsthand pieces from antiquity. An erroneous notion of describing Greek figural vases as Etruscan was firmly rooted in the 18th century. Many, including Denon, knew of the misconception, but the term continued to be used widely. The service for the queen's dairy at the Château de Rambouillet (1786) was the first directly inspired by "Etruscan" shapes.

The service sold to Citizen Speelman included "6 tasses et soucoupes étrusques." These cups are not part of Hillwood's set today, but they must have been of the same type as the ones designed for the Château de Rambouillet.[8] Despite the novelty of some pieces, others repeated the shapes established since the beginning of the factory.[9]

The fantastic decorative schemes typical of Sèvres— full of lively arabesques, ribbons, and clusters of flowers— were lost in the revolution. A more austere program of decoration was better suited to the republican spirit. But the new designs, practically devoid of the gold enhancements so prominent in Sèvres wares from the Old Regime, cannot be read exclusively as a product of the taste of the era. They had practical origins as well. The financial situation at Sèvres was deplorable. Workers not only were not paid but were starving. In this precarious situation, on May 15, 1793, Regnier asked workers to remove the lavish gold decoration from large pieces and substitute platinum, which was abundant in the factory. The Ministry of the Interior approved, as it wanted to turn the gold into currency.[10]

Another peculiarity of the Hillwood service is that some pieces are soft-paste while others are hard-paste. Other services dating from this period seem to share this characteristic. Workers probably used blanks of both types from the large amount of stock in storage because the factory's need to economize was a top priority.[11]

The birds in the center of the decorations on the Hillwood pieces are taken from the *Histoire Naturelle des Oiseaux*, by Buffon (figs. 3, 4).[12] Each piece is inscribed on the back with the name of the bird or birds represented on the front. This novelty has the unmistakable imprint of the teachings of the *Encyclopédie*. The factory archives still have the volumes of Buffon's work that the painters used, engraved by Martinet. Notations on the illustrations made by the workers indicate their frequent use.[13] Engravings were the most common source of inspiration, and the factory produced many services with birds after Buffon.[14]

Fig. 3
Plate, ca. 1794.
Inscribed on the back,
"Perruche à front
rouge du Brésil"

The four painters who collaborated on Hillwood's service were Bouillat the father, Tandart the elder, Pierre Massy, and Etienne Evans. Several pieces also bear the mark of Fumez in dark maroon, the same color used to paint the Etruscan friezes on the pieces. The

Fig. 4

Engraving from Comte de Buffon, *Histoire Naturelle des Oiseaux*. (Photo by Alex J. Rota, courtesy Department of Library Services, American Museum of Natural History)

use of this color suggests Fumez as the painter of this part of the decoration. In the records for the enamel-firing kilns, the name of Weidinger, a gilder, is next to the name of the painters involved in the decoration of Hillwood's pieces, indicating that he was responsible for the application of the gold bands.

At the beginning of the 1790s, in spite of the political turmoil, the factory's production of service wares reached its peak for the century.[15] Thankfully, a number of service wares of the same pattern as the Hillwood pieces survive.[16] The republican government deserves credit for protecting the factory, but above all, it was Sèvres's well-deserved reputation for extraordinary craftsmanship and design that kept it in business.

Notes

1. Quoted in Edouard Garnier, *The Soft Porcelain of Sèvres* (London: J.C Nimmo, 1892), p. 15.

2. Ibid., p. 16. See also Garnier, *La Porcelaine Tendre de Sèvres* (Paris: Maison Quantin, [1891]), pp. 15–16.

3. The first service was produced in 1791 and sold to a dealer named Empayiaz in September 1795. A small service was sold in December 1792 to Monsieur White. In February 1794 a third service was sold to Citizen Duriau for Citizen Auguste Jullien. In October 1795 a large service including teawares was purchased by Citizen Speelman. I am indebted to Tamara Préaud, archivist, Manufacture Nationale de Sèvres, for making these sales records available.

4. For a full account, see both letters reproduced in X. de Chavagnac and M. de Grollier, *Histoire des Manufactures Françaises de Porcelaines* (Paris: A. Picard et fils, 1906), pp. 244–45.

5. See Chavagnac and de Grollier 1906, p. 222.

6. Manufacture Nationale de Sèvres Archives, registre Vy 12, folio 67, verso: "Le 6e Brumaire de l'an quatre au Citoyen Speelman Service fond Jonquille, oiseaux Buffon." I am indebted to Tamara Préaud for this information.

7. For a full account, see "Aux Origines du Neoclassicisme à Sèvres," *L'Estampille, L'Objet d'Art*, December 1991, pp. 52–66.

8. See M. Brunet and T. Préaud, *Sèvres: Des Origines à nos Jours* (Fribourg: Office du Livre, 1978), figs. 286–89.

9. See also two monteiths ("seaux crénelés"), part of a yellow service that belonged to Pierpont Morgan, now in the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Conn. These pieces are also marked with the date letters *RR* and the word *Sèvres* and *R.F.* See Comte de Chavagnac, *Catalogue des Porcelaines Françaises de M. J. Pierpont Morgan* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1910).

10. See Chavagnac and de Grollier 1906, pp. 215–16.

11. I am indebted to Antoine d'Albis and Tamara Préaud for these observations. Soft-paste and hard-paste workshops coexisted at Sèvres until 1804, when soft-paste porcelain ceased to be produced.

12. Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1701–88) was a French naturalist appointed keeper of the Jardin du Roi and of the Royal Museum in 1739. There he began to collect materials for his *Histoire naturelle*, which had several editions, illustrated with beautiful plates. The nine volumes of birds were published between 1770 and 1783.

13. The particular edition used at Sèvres was *Histoire Naturelle des Oiseaux* (Natural History of Birds), vols. 1–9 (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1770–1786). Information kindly supplied by Tamara Préaud.

14. The first such service was produced in 1779, much of it purchased by the Comte d'Artois. See Jeffrey Munger, *The Forsyth Wickes Collection* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1992), cat. no. 151, p. 202.

15. For the factory's activity during the 1790s, see David Peters, "The Decoration of Late Sèvres Porcelain in the Bowes Museum," *Burlington Magazine*, May 1991, pp. 306–11.

16. Two monteiths are in the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Conn. Two other monteiths, two bowls, and two fruit coolers were sold at Sotheby's, London, July 7, 1970 (lots 45–47). Two oval chestnut baskets and their trays, two fruit coolers, and two platters were sold at Sotheby's, New York, April 23, 1977 (lots 71–73). Several teawares were sold at Drouot, Paris, February 24, 1992.