

2026 Mansion Docent Training

Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens

Sèvres French Porcelain Notes Using SFP Framework

Some Main Ideas about French Porcelain

Europeans did not know how to make true hard-paste porcelain until the early 1700s. The fact that the formula for porcelain and the methods for producing were “state secrets” led to a craze for porcelain and countries to fiercely compete to develop porcelain factories.

Over time Sèvres, which became the royal French manufactory, became the principal creative influence in porcelain in Europe.

French porcelain can tell us much about the theater of the dining table, toilette, and other elite social practices of the 1700s, as well as about the France’s dissemination of French style and cultural prestige on the international stage.

Style

What do these objects’ appearance reveal about the people who made and used them?

- For Marjorie Post’s collection: turquoise and pink wares are favorites, mostly soft-paste, 1740s-1820s
- Rococo (curvy), neoclassical (straight-lined)
- The 1700s is “The French Century” – richest in Europe, Paris center of luxury goods (nobles under Louis 14th had to buy luxury goods as social responsibility and became an economic driver); its decorative arts are coveted by Europe
- Diversity of shapes
 - Speaks to complexity and extravagance of dining traditions and desire for new/novel/collectible (like cups/saucers – lots of examples; lots of color and decorations)
- Diversity of colors...fads for colors/patterns/decoration: new yearly colors introduced
- At first Sèvres is imitating Asian and Meissen porcelain, later it develops its own signature style
 - The goal was to produce wares with a more Western sensibility: perspective, narrative, naturalism
- Hallmark Sèvres style (body, color, decoration)
 - Body: creamy, milky-colored porcelain
 - Could have a “reserved” white space for polychromatic paintings
 - Color: saturated, bright, lots of diversity
 - Ground: could be all one color or decorated with patterns (like pebbled, fretwork, etc.)
 - Decoration: gilding, paintings, and designs
- Paintings – reflect what was in people’s heads. They were thinking about: emblems of Enlightenment (musical, artistic, science like birds), mythological (cupids), pastoral (idealized country life, flowers), scenes from life (what did people do), military encampments
 - Flowers – most widely used motif
- Some pieces resemble the precursor shape in silver (broth basins, stew pots, trays)
- Sometimes incorporated into other household objects (by *marchand-merciers*) – tables, clocks, candelabras
- Uniformly decorated tableware ensembles, services (for all those courses!) – first time
- Biscuit – fired but not glazed and then polished to look like white marble
- After the French Revolution, the style changes: scientific (birds) and symbols of republican spirit

Function

What purpose did it serve? Literally? Figuratively? Who used it?

For Marjorie Post

- Visual complement to her elegantly decorated rooms
- First purchases in 1920s setting up home in NYC and French is style of her times, and then collected piecemeal over her life
- Used in her entertaining as what you ate off of
- For display

Who originally used?

- Aristocrats, the court, wealthy (prior to Revolution), kings Louis 15th & 16th
- Nobles obliged to purchase “as a good citizen” to support French luxury industries
- Post Revolution – looked to foreign dealers/customers (lost domestic market)

Literally

- Utilitarian...Tablewares for dining, at both grand functions and personal meals
 - At toilette – small tea/coffee pots, cups/saucers (*cabaret sets*), *ecuelles* (covered broth basin with tray)
 - Banquets...à la française...services for multiple courses, each course set on table then cleared by servants – meant a LOT of dishes used (about 5 courses: stew; big meats; sides; more sides; dessert)
- Ornamental...home furnishings...vases, potpourri containers, unglazed sculptures, cups and saucers for display
- Gifts
 - Diplomatic gifts
 - Devotional gifts...the art of gift giving...rebus cups
- Commemorating current events (Ben Franklin cup, French Revolution)
- A major part of the French luxury goods economy
 - Economic boost to French economy

Symbolic

- Sign of your wealth, good taste and social standing
- Showing you are “au courant” – showing off you have the newest
- For Cultural Prestige on International Stage...nationalistic pride
 - Exporting French taste (ex. Cameo service ice cup...ties to Catherine the Great/Russia)
 - Purchases by foreigners: ambassadors, rulers, aristocrats, princes
 - National pride/preeminence – we France figured out how to make porcelain and compete with Meissen and Chinese imports
 - Diplomatic gifts
 - Sales at Versailles by king

Production

How was it made? Who made it?

- The factory
 - About 1740 began at Vincennes, then moves to Sèvres in 1756
 - Unlike other European factories, it does NOT begin under royal/noble patronage; it is begun by financiers/bankers
 - Becomes Royal Manufactory of Porcelain in 1753
 - Still producing today and can go visit!
- Can compare the fiercely competitive European development of formulas for porcelain in 1700s to the 20th-century space race and current development/competition within technology industry
- Formula for porcelain
 - Soft-paste was first type of production (a “work-around” because of not having kaolin, a type of white clay)
 - Pros: pleasing ivory white body vs. stony white of hard-paste; absorbs colors that hard-paste couldn’t, and colors are deep and beautiful
 - Cons: not malleable, difficult to prepare and fire; breaks during firing (costly)
 - Takes at least 4 firings: biscuit; lead glaze; painted decoration; gilding
 - Hard-paste introduced in early 1770s (kaolin found in Limoges in 1768; soft-paste kilns closed in 1804)
 - Takes at least 3 firings, as its glaze could be fixed in first firing (skip biscuit-only stage)
 - Didn’t require as thick an application of gold
 - Colors are different from soft-paste’s – softer and more mid-range tones
 - Fire at higher temperatures (can now make a tea kettle of porcelain)
- Collaborative effort: painters, potters, designers, chemists, gilders, firing/kiln workers, sculptors, famous artists like Boucher
 - Diversification of painters: highest paid are figurative
 - With a table service, uniformity of painting style was needed; with “one-offs” (individual tea cup/saucer) painters could show off individuality and unique skills
- Role of women
 - A few painters were women – Madame Knip
 - Influenced by taste-makers’ support...Madame de Pompadour, important customer
 - For use by women: during toilette, for nursing mothers
- Fakes exist...re-decoration of Sèvres pieces or intentional production of fakes
- Always competition in the marketplace: Asian; Meissen; then Parisian factories