

Call for papers

Sacred Ceramics – Devotional Images in European Porcelain



MEISSEN FIGURE OF THE VIRGIN IMMACULATA
Probably modelled by Johann Gottlieb Kirchner, c.1730-33
Courtesy of E & H Manners, London

The extensive sculptural output of Europe's first kaolinic porcelain factory, the Saxon Meissen manufactory, has long attracted the attention of art historians. The large-scale animal sculptures executed so early in the factory's history for the Japanese Palace, impress both for their technical ambition, and as evidence of the genius of Johann Joachim Kändler in capturing the liveliness of his animal subjects. But there is a significant area of Meissen's sculptural output that has not to date received sustained attention: the sculptures on religious subjects produced during the reigns of Augustus II and Augustus III. Works such as Kändler's *Death of St Francis Xavier* of c. 1738–40 and the large *Crucifixion* group of 1743, represent some of the most complex sculptural works ever produced at Meissen. Yet these, and related works, have only relatively recently begun to be studied in detail (Antonin 2010; Leps 2020).

Despite this relative neglect, it is clear that Meissen's religious sculptures played an important role in the projection of power at the Saxon Polish court. In part this was political: the conversion of Augustus II and Augustus III to Catholicism was necessary for them to be eligible for election to the crown of Poland. The marriage of Augustus III to the Catholic Maria Josepha of Austria also suggests much loftier political ambitions on the part of the Wettin electors, with the imperial crown clearly a potential prize. Signalling the Saxon court's Catholicism was a vital political exercise and Meissen's religious sculpture played a central role in this project (Cassidy-Geiger 2007).

But there are indications that a more complex cultural phenomenon lay behind the creation of porcelain devotional images. The pioneering work of Baxandall on limewood sculpture of the Renaissance has drawn attention to the deep significance that medium can hold in the conception and creation of devotional sculpture (Baxandall 1980). We suggest that a similar phenomenon may have been at play in the creation of porcelain religious images. The 1712 letter penned by the Jesuit Father François Xavier d'Entrecolles not only conveyed to Europe first-hand knowledge of Chinese porcelain production at Jingdezhen, it also construed access to this knowledge as a triumph of the Jesuit global mission – the successes of the Jesuits in China made the secret of kaolinic porcelain available to the Catholic princes of Europe. Porcelain's alchemical heritage was also not without significance: success at the alchemical enterprise had always been deemed a *donum dei* (Principe 2013). Only with God's blessing could the experimentalist succeed. These factors could lead to porcelain assuming a sacral character in Catholic court contexts. Devotional images in European porcelain exploited these cultural associations of the medium itself.

Of course, Meissen was not the only European porcelain factory to produce sculpture that employed counter-reformation iconography. The Doccia factory of Count Ginori – himself a natural philosophical experimentalist – was responsible for outstanding religious sculptures in a Florentine Late Baroque manner (Biancalana 2009), while Catholic court manufactories across the Holy Roman Empire – Vienna, Höchst, Fulda, Nymphenburg – produced devotional images in porcelain. Even factories in mid-eighteenth-century England – Chelsea and Derby – produced sculptures employing Catholic devotional imagery (Martin 2013). In each instance, cultural-political motives for the creation of these images can be reconstructed.

This one-day conference aims to investigate this neglected area of eighteenth-century European porcelain production. Topics for 20-minute papers to be presented at the V&A South Kensington on 30 September 2025 might include, but are not limited to:

- Who were the artists and patrons involved in these sculptures' creation?
- What sources informed their production?
- How did these sculptures function in private and public contexts?
- What significance lay in the use of porcelain, or other ceramic mediums, to create devotional images?

To submit a paper proposal please provide:

- An abstract of 200 words
- Biography of up to 100 words

Please send proposals by **30 April 2025** to the convenors Dr Matthew Martin, University of Melbourne (mmartin1@unimelb.edu.au) and Rebecca Klarner, University of Leeds (fhrlmk@leeds.ac.uk). Speakers will be informed of whether their proposals have been accepted by mid-May.