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In 1999 I saw a book review in the LA TIMES for a book on porcelain called the Arcanum. Porcelain is of no particular interest for me, but the review was so enticing that I bought the book. Such an interesting book! I sent it to all my relatives—and they agreed with me.

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Marco Polo, when he returned from China, wrote a book and he mentioned that in the city of Tinju clay was dug out of the ground, heaped in large mounds and allowed to weather for 30 years. By this time the earth was so refined that dishes made of it had an azure tint and a brilliant sheen. Later, Portuguese traders brought porcelain to Europe and sold it to goldsmiths who added gold or silver. (I'm sure many of you have seen castles which have a Chinese Room. Because porcelain was so expensive, the owner was showing off his wealth.) Europeans clamored for it and wished to be able to produce a similar product. Eventually this took place in 1708 in a factory in Meissen in Saxony in Germany. (Remember that the country of Germany was not formed until 1870 at the end of the Franco-Prussian War.) Here is the story:

Johann Böttger, living in Berlin (which was then the capital of Prussia), and although only 19, had a reputation of being an alchemist who had found the Arcanum or the method of turning base metal into gold. Augustus II, called Augustus the Strong, king of Saxony, heard about this. He had an insatiable appetite for amassing objects of beauty (both of things and women). In 1701 (almost 300 years ago) he spirited away this young man to Dresden, his capital, and set him up in an isolated castle workshop with 5 assistants, supplies, kilns, etc. Of course, Böttger did not know how to make gold—he had put on demonstrations which were rigged—and now he HAD to find the secret for making gold.

Three years went by—and no success. Afraid for his life, Böttger ran away; but the soldiers found him and brought him back. Because he had no alternative, the king forgave him. The man who ran the factory suggested to the king that it might be a good idea to try to make porcelain rather than gold because porcelain was more expensive. The king, always needing money, agreed. So the operation was moved to Meissen with 24 kilns and 16 pound bags of samples of all kinds of clay and rock, and all necessary supplies. It took one whole year just to set up the factory. The factory was really a prison which was guarded by soldiers to keep spies from entering and to keep workers from escaping.

Böttger used the scientific method, trying first one combination of ingredients heated to a low temperature, then raising the temperature a few degrees, then raising the temperature again, etc. writing down everything he did. Finally, he found the recipe for red stoneware that nicely imitated ceramics from Japan. Immediately, he produced cups for coffee, tea and chocolate. Sales soared! They were making money! The king was happy, but he still wanted white translucent ceramic like the product of China. In fact, he gave Prussia a whole regiment of dragoons: 600 heavily-armed cavalymen-- in exchange for 100 pieces of Chinese porcelain!!! (The men involved had no say-so at all!)

Finally, in 1708 the 27-year old Bottger created the brilliantly white translucent ceramic by using kaolin bought from a man in Colditz with whom a contract was signed so that he could not sell his clay to others.

At the 1713 Leipzig Easter Fair which attracted all rich people in Europe, new white porcelain was not only on display, but was also for sale! Everyone bought—and at very high prices. Bottger was still not satisfied because his porcelain had a slight yellowish tinge and he wanted one with a blue tinge, like the Chinese products.

The king still wanted the Arcanum—the recipe for gold—and demanded that Böttger put on a demonstration for him or else! Böttger agreed: he had two crucibles, one filled with copper and the other with lead. Then he added a mystery liquid to each and heated the crucibles to a very high temperature. Voilà! The copper had turned to silver and the lead to gold! This also was trickery, but the king was satisfied. He now released Böttger from his prison—with the proviso that he never leave Saxony! It was not much consolation for poor Böttger because he was now 37. His fondness for alcohol, the constant threats by the king, arsenic and mercury poisoning in his lungs, failing eyesight—all these had ruined his health. When the king announced his freedom, Böttger laughed like a madman. He soon died.

At the court in Vienna, an official named duPaquier decided to enrich himself by making porcelain and asked the Emperor for a 25-year monopoly—but asked for no money. This was granted. He kidnapped one of Böttger's assistants named Stölzel who was happy to join this venture and enrich himself. He knew the rock supplier and offered CASH which tempted the man to comply, in spite of his contract. Stölzel also knew the process. Soon they produced the first cup and saucer made outside of

Meissen. (This cup and saucer are today in the Arts and Industry Museum in Hamburg.) Now Stölzel needed a skilled painter and found Johann Herold, noted for his ability to paint Oriental murals. This man was really good—he painted the same oriental designs on porcelain that he had done on murals. Within one year Viennese porcelain was competing with Meissen. DuPaquier was doing very well. Then, unfortunately for him, Stölzel decided to return to Meissen. Before leaving, he vandalized the factory. That was the end of Viennese porcelain.

In 1719 the Emperor's niece married the heir to the Saxon throne. The festivities in Vienna were outstanding. In Dresden Augustus planned even more extensive festivities for the bridal party when it arrived. He built a Porcelain Palace for the newly-weds. There were porcelain decorations wherever possible and each room featured a different color of porcelain, but the pièce de résistance was an upper gallery 170 ft. long filled with a porcelain zoo!!! In order to make such large items as animals of porcelain, he needed a sculptor and found a good one named Kaendler. Within weeks he made eagles 2 meters high with outspread wings for the king's menagerie.

In the meantime, the painter Herold had lost his job when the factory in Vienna closed, so he went to Meissen and asked for a job. He showed some of his samples and they were sent to the king. The king was so delighted that he allowed Herold to become a free-lance or independent contractor who would be paid piecemeal for each object he decorated and he set the price of his own work! *What a deal!*

By this time the Meissen factory was making porcelain with the blue tinge comparable with oriental ceramics. Stölzel and Kaendler and Herold worked well together, but Herold wanted more: the painter wanted the secret of making porcelain. His workshop was outside the castle-factory, and he finally got his workshop moved inside and made friends with the man who actually made the pottery. When that worker was dying, Herold tore some pages out of the book and hid them. During the next 10 years ^{Herold} he created a new kiln for making paint and 16 new colored enamels which have never been improved upon. Now there is competition between Herold and Kaendler. Kaendler created the forms and Herold painted them. But little by little Kaendler became more important. Kaendler designed shapes that needed little painting. For example, he created a huge set of tableware all in the shape of swans—in pure white, with very little decoration needed.

Kaendler even made a statue of the king on horseback life-size—from porcelain. Herold was pacified by receiving several titles such as Artistic Director of the factory. Shortly thereafter, Herold died at age 35. Notice that the chemicals he and Böttger breathed caused an early death for both of them

In 1732 Augustus was 62 and in poor health: 38 years of fast living had taken its toll. His capital, Dresden, was a beautiful city, his Porcelain Palace was taking shape as every day porcelain animals were being delivered to Dresden from the factory in Meissen, and the sale of porcelain was the biggest source of profit in all his kingdom! He wrote: All my life has been one ceaseless sin. When he died his son Augustus III became king. He loved art, jewelry and opera, not porcelain and pretty women.

In 1748 at the Peace of Dresden. Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, took over the factory: half for himself and the other half of the output was sold for revenue. Some of the workers left for other countries, but the factory managed to survive.

Two years later Sir Charles Williams, British Ambassador to the Saxon court, was invited to a banquet. He reported that there were 106 guests and in the middle of the table was a Meissen-made fountain 8 ft high, shaped to resemble the Navona Fountain in Rome and which had running rose water!!! The king gave to Sir Charles as a gift a Meissen-made set of 350 pieces of tableware and 166 figurines that he guessed would be worth 1,500 pounds. He commented that at that time 10,000 pieces of Chinese blue-and-white plates were worth about 100 pounds. What do you think Sir Charles did with the figurines? He lent them to the porcelain factory in Chelsea to copy.

When Augustus' daughter married the French dauphin, her father gave them a porcelain mirror over 3 meters high, heavily decorated. (This mirror was smashed by the mob during the French Revolution.)

In 1763 at the end of the Seven Years' War (which we in America call the French and Indian War and the war in which young George Washington took part, Prussia confiscated the porcelain in Meissen, Dresden and Leipzig to pay for the war.

Stolzel died at 78.

~~Herold died at 78~~, Kaendler died in 1775 after having been at Meissen 44 years.

Böttger, Herold and Kaendler live on in the porcelain still made in Meissen, but also in France, Italy, England and in other countries.

The author of this book, Janet Gleeson, has a degree in both Art and English and has worked at Sotheby's and later was the art and antique correspondent for House and Garden Magazine. Nowadays she is a free-lance author.

You might be interested in looking at part of my ^{Bavarian German} ~~Meissen~~ china set. If I remember correctly, I paid around \$100 for a complete set of service for 12 around 1960. And Martha has displayed some German porcelain

Do you have any questions