

MEISSEN PORCELAIN: A GUIDE TO ONE OF EUROPE'S GREATEST PORCELAIN MANUFACTORIES

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We have always had a particular interest in porcelain and enjoy selecting pieces which sit naturally alongside our collection of antique furniture, sculpture and decorative arts. Few names in European porcelain are as important, or as immediately recognisable, as Meissen. For collectors of antique porcelain, Meissen represents a fascinating combination of technical innovation, artistic achievement and royal patronage, with a history stretching back more than three centuries.

Meissen was the first European manufactory to successfully produce true hard-paste porcelain and its foundation in the early eighteenth century transformed the European decorative arts. The factory went on to produce some of the most celebrated porcelain ever made, from highly decorated tablewares and vases to extraordinary animal figures and the celebrated models of Johann Joachim Kändler.

Today, antique Meissen porcelain remains highly sought after by collectors, with early Böttger porcelain, eighteenth-century Meissen figures, Kändler models and finely painted pieces amongst the most desirable examples.

The Birth of Meissen Porcelain

The story of Meissen begins with Augustus the Strong, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland. Augustus had an extraordinary passion for Asian porcelain and assembled a collection of thousands of pieces. Chinese and Japanese porcelain was enormously fashionable amongst European courts during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, but producing true porcelain in Europe remained an elusive secret.

Augustus was determined to discover how it was made.

The alchemist Johann Friedrich Böttger was brought under Augustus's protection and instructed to pursue experiments which might unlock the secret. Working with the scientist Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus, Böttger eventually succeeded in producing a white ceramic material which led to the development of European porcelain.

In 1710, Augustus established the Meissen porcelain manufactory at the Albrechtsburg Castle in Meissen. The location was carefully chosen partly because the production of porcelain was considered a valuable state secret.

The achievement was remarkable. Europe could now produce its own porcelain rather than relying almost entirely upon expensive imports from China and Japan. The discovery would have an enormous effect on European decorative arts and would eventually lead to the establishment of porcelain factories across the continent.

Böttger Porcelain

Some of the earliest Meissen porcelain is associated with Böttger himself and is highly prized by collectors.

Before the development of the brilliant white porcelain for which Meissen would become famous, Böttger and his colleagues produced a distinctive red stoneware. This was followed by the earliest white Böttger porcelain, produced from around 1709 onwards.

The early pieces are often comparatively restrained when set beside the exuberant porcelain produced later in the eighteenth century. Their importance lies partly in their place at the beginning of the history of European porcelain.

A fine example can be seen in the collection of the British Museum: a Meissen bowl dating to around 1723, made from early Böttger porcelain and decorated with painted landscapes and figures.

For collectors, these early pieces provide a direct connection with one of the most important technological achievements in the history of European ceramics.

Johann Gregorius Höroldt and the Development of Meissen Decoration

The next major development came with the arrival of Johann Gregorius Höroldt at Meissen in 1720.

Höroldt was an exceptionally talented painter and colour chemist who transformed the appearance of Meissen porcelain. He developed new enamel colours and decorative techniques, allowing the factory to produce porcelain with increasingly rich and vibrant painted decoration.

Höroldt became particularly associated with chinoiserie, reflecting the enormous European fascination with Asia during the eighteenth century. His designs included imaginary landscapes, figures, animals, gardens and exotic architecture, often contained within elaborate cartouches and surrounded by gilding.

The influence of China and Japan can be seen throughout early Meissen, but the factory did not simply copy Asian porcelain. Instead, its artists interpreted these designs through a distinctly European eighteenth-century lens.

Höroldt's work is therefore an important part of what makes early Meissen so interesting to collectors: it represents a meeting of Eastern inspiration and European invention.

Johann Joachim Kändler and Meissen Figures

For many collectors, the name most closely associated with Meissen figures and figurines is Johann Joachim Kändler.

Kändler joined the Meissen manufactory in 1731 and became its most celebrated modeller. His extraordinary ability to translate people, animals and scenes into porcelain transformed the possibilities of the medium.

Rather than porcelain being confined to plates, bowls and vases, Kändler treated it as a sculptural material.

His models included courtly figures, musicians, animals, mythological subjects and humorous scenes. His work captures the exuberance of the Rococo period and demonstrates an extraordinary understanding of movement and expression.

Among the most memorable examples are his animal figures. Meissen produced models of monkeys, birds, dogs and other animals, often with remarkably animated poses. A Meissen monkey attributed to Kändler and dating to around 1740 demonstrates the sculptural quality of these works.

Kändler also developed the famous Monkey Orchestra, a series of figures depicting fashionably dressed monkeys playing musical instruments. The subject belongs to the eighteenth-century tradition of *singerie*, in which monkeys imitate human behaviour in amusing and often satirical ways. The figures are wonderfully characteristic of the Rococo taste for wit, theatricality and fantasy.

These Meissen porcelain figures are amongst the most instantly recognisable pieces produced by the factory and remain highly desirable amongst collectors.

Meissen Groups

Meissen is particularly celebrated for its figural groups, which allowed the factory's modellers to create elaborate scenes populated by multiple figures. These compositions could depict mythology, the seasons, the arts, courtly life, musicians, lovers and everyday characters, often with an extraordinary level of detail.

The development of these groups was closely associated with Johann Joachim Kändler, whose appointment at Meissen in 1731 marked an important new chapter in the factory's artistic development. Kändler brought an exceptional understanding of sculpture to porcelain, creating figures which were lively, theatrical and full of movement.

Among the most appealing Meissen groups are those depicting couples and courtly figures, often surrounded by flowers, baskets, musical instruments and other Rococo details. Allegorical groups representing the four seasons were also particularly popular, with each season personified by a finely dressed figure accompanied by appropriate attributes.

Meissen groups can be particularly rewarding for collectors because they combine several of the qualities for which the factory is famous: finely modelled figures, intricate porcelain flowers, painted decoration and elaborate Rococo compositions. The finest examples have an almost sculptural presence and work wonderfully when displayed amongst antique furniture and other decorative objects.

Meissen Parrots

Among the most distinctive of Meissen's porcelain birds are its parrot figures. These colourful and characterful models became an important part of the factory's production, combining the naturalistic observation of exotic birds with the extraordinary decorative possibilities of porcelain.

Meissen parrots were produced in a variety of forms and colours, from single birds perched upon branches to pairs and larger compositions. Their brightly coloured plumage provided an opportunity for Meissen's painters to demonstrate their skill, with carefully applied enamels used to recreate the vivid greens, blues, reds and yellows associated with exotic species.

The popularity of parrots in eighteenth-century Europe reflected a wider fascination with the exotic. Wealthy European households collected rare plants, animals and objects brought from distant parts of the world, and the parrot became a particularly appealing subject for porcelain manufacturers. At Meissen, these birds could be transformed from curiosities into highly decorative works of art.

The best antique Meissen parrots are remarkable for the combination of naturalistic modelling and exuberant colour. Fine examples can make a strong focal point when displayed on a commode, console or cabinet, either individually or as a pair. For collectors of Meissen porcelain, they offer an especially attractive alternative to the more familiar figures and tableware produced by the factory.

These pieces are also a wonderful example of the breadth of Meissen's production. Alongside the celebrated Kändler figures and elaborate figural groups, the factory produced porcelain birds which remain highly desirable today for their colour, character and quality of modelling.

Why Collect Meissen Porcelain?

There are many reasons why Meissen porcelain continues to attract collectors.

Firstly, there is the history. Meissen represents the moment when Europe finally succeeded in producing its own porcelain, changing the course of European ceramics.

Then there is the sheer variety of objects produced by the factory. A collection might include an early Böttger stoneware vessel, a finely painted Höroldt chinoiserie bowl, a blue-and-white Onion Pattern service, a nineteenth-century Meissen vase or a highly sculptural Kändler figure.

The quality of the modelling and painting is another major attraction. The finest eighteenth-century Meissen can combine the delicacy of porcelain with the presence of sculpture, while the painted decoration ranges from restrained blue-and-white patterns to elaborate chinoiserie scenes, flowers and landscapes.

Meissen also has an important place within the history of collecting. During the eighteenth century, porcelain became a symbol of wealth, sophistication and cultivated taste, with European courts and aristocratic collectors competing to acquire increasingly impressive collections.

Meissen Porcelain in an Interior

One of the great pleasures of collecting antique porcelain is that it need not be confined to a traditional setting.

A pair of Meissen figures can sit beautifully on an antique commode, while a group of porcelain animals can provide an unexpected focal point within a more contemporary interior. A collection of blue-and-white Meissen can work equally well displayed on open shelving, within a glazed cabinet or arranged amongst books, paintings and other decorative objects.

At Patrick Moorhead Antiques, we particularly enjoy the way Meissen porcelain can be combined with antique furniture and

decorative arts. A finely modelled eighteenth-century figure can provide a striking contrast to the restrained lines of an English cabinet, while more elaborate Meissen pieces can complement the richness of French and Continental interiors.

Buying Antique Meissen Porcelain

When buying antique Meissen porcelain, there are numerous factors to consider. Date, model, painter, modeller, decoration, condition and provenance can all have a significant bearing on desirability and value.

The famous crossed swords mark is one of the most recognisable marks in European porcelain, but identifying Meissen correctly requires more than simply looking for a pair of swords. Marks changed over time and can provide valuable information when considered alongside the form, decoration and construction of an object.

The condition of antique porcelain is also important. Small areas of restoration can sometimes be expected in particularly old or complex pieces, but the quality of the modelling, rarity of the model and strength of the decoration should all be considered when assessing an individual object.

For serious collectors, reference books, museum collections and specialist dealers remain invaluable resources.

Meissen Porcelain at Patrick Moorhead Antiques

We are always pleased to offer carefully selected examples of Meissen porcelain alongside our collection of antique furniture, sculpture, mirrors, bronzes and decorative objects.

Whether your interest is in early Böttger porcelain, eighteenth-century Meissen figures, Kändler models, Höroldt decoration, Meissen animal figures or the iconic lidded vases, the manufactory offers an extraordinary field for collecting.

More than three hundred years after its foundation, Meissen remains one of the great names in European porcelain. Its finest pieces combine technical achievement, artistic invention and an extraordinary sense of character, qualities which explain why antique Meissen porcelain continues to be collected and admired today.

If you are looking to add antique Meissen porcelain, Meissen figures or eighteenth-century Meissen decorative objects to your collection, we would be delighted to assist and to discuss any pieces currently available through Patrick Moorhead Antiques.