

# Sèvres Porcelain

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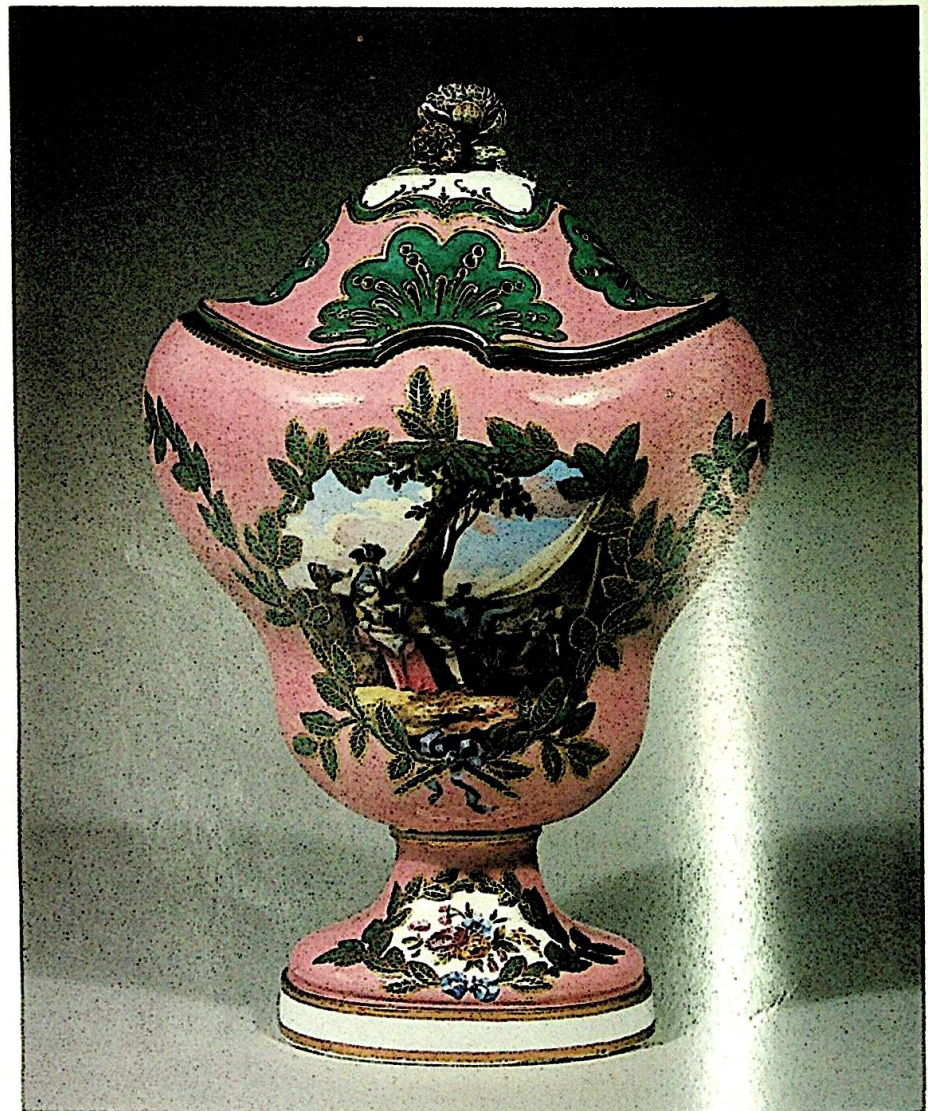
Why is it that novelists from Disraeli to those represented on airport bookstalls today use Sèvres porcelain to evoke a heroine's face or a rich interior? They cite Sèvres as a kind of shorthand, presupposing the reader is familiar with what it is and what it has apparently come to represent: a character eating off a Sèvres plate is immediately recognisable as a man of taste and wealth. Few porcelain factories have such popular appeal, except perhaps the figures (or 'figurines') of Meissen, so one wonders what is so special about Sèvres. An instant mental picture probably conjures elaborate vases, brilliant ground colours miniature painted scenes, luscious gilding, and associations with Louis XV (*Plate 1*) and his mistresses Madame de Pompadour and Madame du Barry, and with Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette. It is visually bold and exciting, and titillating to the imagined delights of royal life in pre-Revolutionary France. But this is only part of its story.

Sèvres is also one of the most researched porcelain factories in the world, largely due to its remarkable surviving (though incomplete) archives at the factory, run by the French State under the committed and helpful guidance of the Archivist. For many objects it is possible to tell the day on which they were handed to a painter, sent to the kilns or bought and by whom. To the uninitiated this may seem so easy as to be laughable as a form of research, but beware anyone who thinks five minutes with the documents will reveal all the answers. The complexity of what does survive and the infuriating gaps in the archives make the chances of discovery very uncertain. The documents also describe the artists' and craftsmen's

working conditions and pay, restrictions on their behaviour and the lung disease to which porcelain manufacture made them prone, and give an insight into their lives and families. The glorious pieces we picture today tend to make us forget the difficulties experienced by those whose skills command our admiration.

The factory was founded at Vincennes in about 1740, in 1745

and 1747 it received special royal privileges, in 1756 it moved to Sèvres and in 1759 was bought outright by Louis XV. It continued as a royal enterprise until 1793 when it was nationalized following the execution of Louis XVI. It made soft-paste porcelain until about 1769, then hard and soft paste simultaneously until 1804 when soft paste was abandoned as uneconomical. Its production ranged from the basic and useful to



*1 Pot-pourri vase (vase 'pot pourri Hébert), circa 1760, Sèvres soft-paste porcelain, height 36.7 cm. Probably bought in a garniture of five vases by Louis XV in December 1760. (The Wallace Collection, London C255).*



2 Vase (vase 'E de 1780'), dated 1781, Sevres soft-paste porcelain, height 47.5 cm. One of three vases in a garniture presented by Louis XVI to Prince Henry of Prussia in 1784. (The Wallace Collection, London C334-6).

the flagrantly extravagant, from tea cups and dinner services to vases of unsurpassed grandeur, and some of the more surprising objects included bidets, false teeth, tongue scrapers, wall-lights, wine-bottle labels, perfume burners and chimney pieces. Many pieces were bought by Louis XV and Louis XVI and their families or they were presented by the Crown as diplomatic gifts to foreign dignitaries (Plate 2). However, the factory's 'bread and butter' was the production of endless dinner services simply painted with flowers, and it was possible for the curate at Sevres and the factory's employees to purchase small inexpensive pieces. The sculptural rococo models of the 1740s and 1750s were superseded by neo-classical models from 1761, and the strident soft-paste ground colours were mostly invented between 1752 and 1757. The results have excited patrons and collectors in Europe and America ever since.

Nineteenth-century collectors generally failed to appreciate the glories of the very early, simpler, white-ground pieces of Vincennes (Plate 3). They preferred the richer vases of the 1750s and 1760s, especially if they had some royal association, as is shown by the

three greatest collections in the world, all in England: The Royal Collection, The Wallace Collection and The James A. de Rothschild Collection at Waddesdon Manor. For example, in the nineteenth century all ten known pot-pourri vases in the shape of a ship (the vase 'pot pourri à vaisseau' or 'en navire', (Plate 4) were in English collections (today five remain: four are in America and one is in France). This preference may explain the popular view of Sevres.

As with most works of art, the fascination for Sevres only partly depends on what individual pieces may tell us about their manufacture, uses, patronage collecting and royal associations. More exciting is the sheer delight of simply looking at and handling a piece. The famous elephant vases (vases 'à tête d'éléphant') may seem over elaborate, vulgar even when considered as a whole (as they did to the late Lord Clark), but a closer look at the details of modelling and decoration, especially the gilding of the hairs in the elephant's ears, is a revelation (Plates 5 and 6). It is this detailed approach that ultimately gives clues as to whether a piece is genuine or not, or whether it has been redecorated, the fate of thousands



3 Saucepan (poëlon 'à grains d'orge'), Vincennes soft-paste porcelain circa 1752, decorated at Sevres in 1759, length 32.6 cm. One of a pair, probably for warming a barley gruel (orge gruë) as reflected by the moulded decoration and the title of the model. Bought by Sir Richard Wallace in 1872, an unusual example of early Vincennes (although decorated in 1759) in a nineteenth-century collection. (The Wallace Collection, London C443-9).

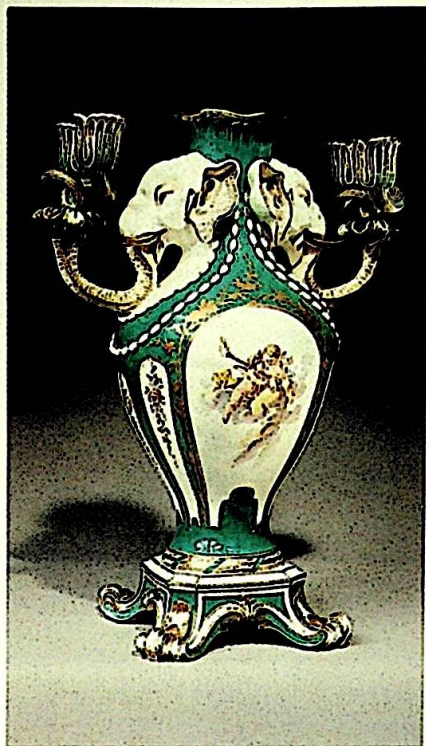


4 Pot-pourri vase (vase 'pot pourri à vaisseau' or 'en navire'), circa 1761, Sèvres soft-paste porcelain, height 44.1 cm. All ten known examples of this model were in England in the nineteenth century. (The Wallace Collection, London C256).

of pieces of Sèvres. It seems that Disraeli's heroine of 1844 was in fact compared to a portrait on a redecorated piece, an ignominious tribute to her, but evidence of the enduring problem of identification.

One area of Sèvres production has been imitated less than others: early hard paste of the 1770s and 1780s. The advantages of hard paste included easier firing, with less sagging and cracking in the kiln, but it failed to take the traditional ground colours that had become synonymous with Sèvres. When Catherine II ordered her sumptuous dinner service in 1776, she wanted it in the latest classical style. The factory delighted in the opportunity of making hard-paste models with sculpted caryatid figures which would have been impractical on soft paste, but to its dismay Catherine insisted on the turquoise-blue ground colour which would only take on soft paste. It embarked on the service in soft paste devising a new paste for the task but firing hazards meant that 3,000 pieces were necessary to achieve the required 800 of sufficient quality, the caryatids were so often damaged in the kiln that the losses added 300 *livres* to the cost of each piece on which they appeared, and each of the ten ice-cream coolers (*Plate 7*) was valued at 3,600 *livres* when usual examples were 360 *livres* each (an average flower painter earned about 10 *livres* a week).

Such costs were prohibitive, so the factory tried to deflect the popularity of its familiar ground colours by introducing novel alternative decoration for use on hard paste. At first the ground remained white and new techniques included the use of silver, but it tended to tarnish so was replaced by platinum, and by applying gilded outlines to enamelled scenes and flowers (*Plate 8*). Then bizarre grounds were introduced to imitate tortoiseshell, lapis lazuli, agate and wood. There was also a revival of chinoiserie on hard paste, chiefly in painted decoration but also in



5 Vase with candle holders (vase 'à tête d'éléphant'), dated 1756, Sèvres soft-paste porcelain, height 37.6 cm. One of a pair, described by Lord Clark in 1958 as 'ridiculous and slightly vulgar'. (The Wallace Collection, London C246-7).



6 Detail of plate 5, showing the fine modelling, painting by C.-N. Dodin and gilding, in particular the gilded hairs in the elephant's ear.



7 Ice-cream cooler (seau 'à glaces') from the service made for Catherine II of Russia, dated 1778, Sèvres soft-paste porcelain, height 23.7 cm. The urn kept ice-creams or sorbets cool in a porcelain liner inside and was filled, together with the high-sided cover, with crushed ice. (The Wallace Collection, London C474-9).



8 Tray (plateau 'Paris'), dated 1779, Sèvres hard-paste porcelain, length 48 cm. The tray of a tea service (déjeuner 'Paris') with the white ground and chinoiserie scenes outlined in gilding, decoration associated with the early years of hard paste at Sèvres. The Wallace Collection, London C407-13).

moulded flowers which were sometimes highlighted in silver on a brown ground. Original though such decoration was, it found little favour with nineteenth-century collectors who were happier with soft-paste ground colours (especially rose which was mistakenly associated with Madame de Pompadour) and painted cherubs, children and scenes after Boucher. As a result, the redecorator busily fulfilled their wishes.

The popular, novelist's view of Sèvres shows how one can enjoy visualizing the factory's products without any idea of its history and archives. But reading the word 'Sèvres' and dreaming of the luxuries of pre-Revolutionary France is as nothing compared to the thrill such porcelain gives to the eyes and to the hand.