

# PACHYDERMS AMONG THE PEONIES

THE NORTHUMBERLAND SERVICE AT ALNWICK CASTLE

By T. H. CLARKE

VISITORS to Alnwick Castle cannot fail to notice in the dining room two notable services of Meissen porcelain. One, the earlier in date, has rather startling decoration of animals and birds flanked by swags of flowers. The second has fable subjects after La Fontaine. Pieces from both services can be seen in the Washington exhibition, "The Treasure Houses of Britain", but this article deals only with the earlier one, known as "the Northumberland Service", of which 108 pieces remain. Its history is interesting but incomplete. Sir Charles Hanbury Williams (1708-59) was appointed envoy to the Saxon court in Dresden

in 1747. He had been a minor Whig politician, a satirist of note and a close friend of Henry Fox (later Lord Holland), then secretary-at-war. Shortly after his arrival in Dresden he had been presented by Augustus III, King of Poland and Elector of Saxony, with "a set of china for a table of thirty covers", and later with a dessert service. Delivery was spread over several years; eventually both dinner and dessert services were sent to London and put on display in Henry Fox's home in Kensington, Holland House. Fox wrote to Sir Charles a little prematurely in June 1748: "I will put all your China in the Gallery over your Apartment at Holland

House where nobody shall ever go but to see it."

A list sent to Lady Caroline Fox on October 6, 1748, totals 377 pieces. To establish that of these 377 pieces of Meissen porcelain the 108 still at Alnwick form a part—a major part—one must turn to circumstantial evidence. At Alnwick, together with the surviving porcelain, there is a folio volume in which are bound a series of 19 contemporary watercolour drawings of each type of vessel, with inscriptions in German (Figs 3 and 4), and, of equal interest, a detailed description in English of each piece (except of the plates, which are missing). Watercolours and description tally approximately with the list sent to Lady Caroline. Further evidence that the services are one and the same is supported by copies made at the Chelsea factory around 1751. Exactly how the service got to Alnwick is for the moment unresolved. It is just possible that it was acquired by the 1st Duke of Northumberland in a raffle in 1756. More likely, it entered the family by later purchase or inheritance, possibly in the latter half of the 19th century.

There are two rare features of this "Grand Service for the Table of Dresden porcelain": the painted decoration and some of the shapes. The English description of the service, piece by piece, reading rather like a detailed sale catalogue (which may well have been its intention), is something apparently unique at this period, and also a literary joy. The title runs: "Embellished with Paintings in Miniature Every different Piece being adorn'd with the representations of divers Animals, Flowers and Insects."

As can be seen from the illustrations, the flower painting is magnificent. Most pieces have swags of flowers, tied at the foot with ribbons of different colours, framing a strange variety of birds and beasts: tame, wild, exotic or mythical. This juxtaposition of large pachyderms, for instance, with delicately enamelled garden flowers totally different in scale is at times almost ludicrous. Yet such is the brilliance and vitality of the colour and invention, contrasting with the whiteness of the Meissen paste, that the general effect is one of astonishing grandeur: a masterpiece of Baroque imagination.

It would appear that the early pieces of this service were ordered by a client who never took delivery, and so, in a sense, Augustus III was palming off on Sir Charles a service or part service already in stock in the factory's warehouse; but he added considerably to what had been completed. The added pieces can be identified by a later type of flower decoration and a rather paler palette. The early pieces can be dated around 1745, for we find in the factory's record that Johann Joachim Kaendler, Meissen's undisputed master sculptor, had already modelled in September 1742 a soup tureen and cover that can be identified with the large oval tureen in Figure 1: "A Terrin or Marmite, 18 inches high," according to the description already referred to, "upon the Cover for the handle a Partridge sitting on



1 and 2—TERRIN OR MARMITE AND CENTREPIECE FROM THE NORTHUMBERLAND SERVICE, OF ABOUT 1745-46





3 and 4—TWO OF 19 WATERCOLOURS, CONTEMPORARY WITH THE SERVICE, WITH GERMAN INSCRIPTIONS. Their presence at Alnwick was an important clue to the identification of the service

Asparagus, Colly-Flower, Cucumbers & Lemons Oranges." Although modelled in 1742, this particular tureen with its decoration of fighting animals was not made until about 1745, or perhaps a year later.

Of about the same date, 1745-46, is the centrepiece or *plat de ménage* in Figure 2. It is in the form of a shaped, double-handled large oval dish on which a basket for lemons and four cruets once stood. Only the mustard has survived, having at some time been separated from its companions and ending up in the Ernst Schneider Bequest at Schloss Lustheim, outside Munich. The painting is curiously described as "a Rinoceros, after Life"; an absurd remark, since clearly it is ultimately derived from Dürer's woodcut of 1515. The flower painting is here at its best. These are based, at least in part, on the folio volumes of the Regensburg apothecary Johann Weinmann, whose *Phytanthoza Iconographia* of 1737-45 was a vast compilation of hand-coloured engravings of plants; incidentally, the young Ehret was one of the underpaid engravers.

Such flower decoration at Meissen superseded the oriental flowers or *indianische Blumen* of the 1730s; it was called either *Holzschnittblumen* (literally, woodcut flowers) or sometimes *ombrierte deutsche Blumen* (shadowed German flowers). "Botanical" flowers of this type gave way gradually from the mid '40s to a looser type of naturalistic European flowers; and it is this type of *deutsche Blumen* that is to be found on many of the dinner plates added to the service in the late 1740s, pointing to the conclusion that this Northumberland or Hanbury Williams service is of a composite nature, made over a period of about five years.

It needs stressing that the 18th-century painter on porcelain almost always depended on a graphic source; he did not compose anything elaborate of his own invention, but copied what he was given by the head of his painting *atelier*. The sources were either prints (woodcuts, etchings, copper engravings) or drawings. This service is remarkable for the eclecticism of its sources, in particular of the zoological motives. Dürer has already been mentioned, but from later in the century the Flemish printmakers such as Abraham de Bruyn (1540-87) and Adriaen Collaert were much used. Some of the insects, used to conceal flaws in the porcelain material, have even been traced to Jakob Hoefnagel (1573-1636), who in 1592 published a set of engravings, *Archetypa Studiorum Patris*, after drawings by his more famous father, Georg Hoefnagel (1542-1600).

But the main source was the contemporary Augsburg artist, Johann Elisa Ridinger (1698-1767), who enjoyed international respect, in particular as the creator of numerous sets of prints connected with hunting; he had a fine touch with hounds of many species. His prints, bound together, can still be found in the libraries of the English and French landed gentry, and of course all over Germany. One



5—MILK BASSING OR COMPOTIER, WITH A FAT-TAILED SHEEP. "This unlikely creature is a Near-Eastern animal"



6—ONE OF THE MIDDLING DISHES "AN UNICORN". In 1745 unicorn's horn was available from Pharmacists



example is a "buck hound couchant tied to a thong" on the side of one of the smaller tureen covers; the handle is formed as a pheasant. Another example of enamel decoration after a Ridinger print is on one of the compotiers or "Milk Bassings", shown in Figure 3, not from the porcelain but from a watercolour drawing which accompanies the service. The fact that these drawings are inscribed in German, and include the price or value in thalers is an indication that Hanbury Williams must already, while still in Dresden (he was re-appointed twice to that Baroque capital), have conceived the idea of possible sale on retirement from foreign service.

The English description of this piece is headed "A stag chased leaping over a tree". The original print is titled *Rehe Bock flüchtig*. Another "Milk-Bassing or Compotier" has a fat-tailed sheep, possibly after Ridinger (Fig 5). This unlikely creature is a Near Eastern animal, and not "an Indian sheep trailing his Tail on a Cart", as the writer of the description would have us believe. It is described by Dr Alexander Russell in his *Natural History of Aleppo* (1756) as having a tail so heavy that to prevent injury a thin board is fixed to it, sometimes with small wheels.

The service includes a series of 16 large circular dishes, varying in size from 12½ to 16in. in diameter. One of "the middling Dishes" (Fig 6) is painted with a fabulous animal: "an Unicorn grazing." So described, it seems that the writer in 1745 or so must have believed in its existence; and well he might, for unicorn's horn was available at the more expensive pharmacists, as well as its substitute, the rhinoceros horn, at half the price. The style of painting animals as though stranded on a minuscule island is typical of this service: the "Inselstil" of the art historians.

Mention of some unusual shapes has already been made. Certainly the most curious as well as the largest pieces in this unlikely service are the dish-covers, called in German *Glocken* or bells. Designed to stand on silver dishes, they were an essential feature of this particular service, which may originally have been a hunting or *Jagd* service, where the kitchens were likely to have been far removed from where meals were served. Indeed, Hanbury Williams complained of the luke-warm food at the hunting schloss, Hubertusburg. No other Meissen service is known to have had so many of these *Glocken*; not even Count Brühl's Swan service, made a few years earlier, can boast such a host of porcelain dish-covers. Later in the century they became a commonplace in the Berlin factory under the enlarged name of *Wärmeglocken*.

Of the 11 dish-covers, five are circular, 15 and 13in. in diameter; and six oval, even larger, at 17 and 15in. The watercolour in Figure 4 shows one of the "Large Round Covers of 15 inches Diameter.

The top is crown'd with a young Dove as big as life for a handle. . . on the one side is painted a Wild Sow with her Pigs". Here again the graphic source is Ridinger; *Eine Backe mit ihren Jungen*, published in 1736. The handle in the form of a bird is a special feature, not only of the dishcovers but also of the six smaller tureens.

These were modelled by Kaendler and his assistant Peter Reinicke in 1743 and 1744. They

were to have their influence on the early products of the Chelsea factory.

Of the 48 dinner plates in the Northumberland service (which might perhaps even more accurately be called the Hanbury Williams service), 44 are still at Alnwick; and of the 24 soup plates, there remain 22. The first are decorated in the same rather outlandish fashion as the pieces already discussed. Some are clearly later additions of 1748-50, since the flowers have lost their "botanical" appearance.

It was mentioned that Hanbury Williams sent both his ambassadorial gifts, the dinner and dessert services, to Henry Fox's home, Holland House, for safe keeping. At the request of Sir Edward Fawkener, secretary to the Duke of Cumberland, who had a financial interest in the Chelsea porcelain factory, Hanbury Williams gave permission to the "Undertakers" to "take away such Pieces as they may have a mind to Copy"; that is, pieces of his Meissen services.

That they did exactly this is confirmed not only by the existence of some rare copies in Chelsea porcelain, but also by a letter from Sir Everard, in which he wrote that "many imitations are made, as well in some forms as in painting". Also copied were the bird handles of the small tureens and dish-covers as independent figures as well as dishes and other pieces. Many remain to be discovered.

Finally, the soup plates. These differ from the rest of the service in that the rims have a continuous garland of closely interwoven flowers instead of the two swags, so fitting the shape more neatly. They differ even more markedly in being painted with birds instead of animals: ornithological birds, just as the earlier flowers are botanical (Figs 7 and 8). The engraved source of the two here illustrated and indeed of the remaining 20 is an English book, Eleazar Albin's *A Natural History of Birds*. This was published first in parts and then in bound volumes in 1731, 1734 and 1738. The first volume was reissued in 1738.

We know precisely when the Meissen factory got hold of a copy of the first volume of 1731; this was bought from the court bookseller, Herr Walther, on April 9, 1745. It was handed over formally to a master painter, Christian Gottlieb Hentschel, who very likely used it himself to paint the Northumberland service.

It should be mentioned that each piece of porcelain is marked with the Meissen factory's symbol, the crossed swords in underglaze blue. Most pieces have, too, the impressed numerals of the workman responsible for its turning or moulding. The Northumberland service is a witness to the last years of Meissen's supremacy in the European market for such luxury products as porcelain; a position it soon lost to Sèvres and rival German factories.

Illustrations: By permission of the Duke of Northumberland.



7 and 8—ENGRAVING FROM ELEAZAR ALBIN'S *A NATURAL HISTORY OF BIRDS*, WITH (Below) A MEISSEN SOUP PLATE c 1745-46 BASED ON THE SAME DESIGN, "THE GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER". The 18th-century painter on porcelain almost always depended on a graphic source

