

RUE DE CHARENTON
PARISIAN WHITE EARTH IN THE ENGLISH MANNER
1743 - 1749

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Figure 1. Two girandoles. Varnished white earth. Rue de Charenton, Paris. 18th century, c. 1745. Height: (22,5 cm). Private collection.



Figure 2. Chinese couple with basket. Varnished white earth. Rue de Charenton, Paris. 18th century, c. 1745. Height: (20 cm), Length: (23 cm). Private collection.

FANCIERS OF CERAMICS IN EUROPE ARE ALL FAMILIAR with the name of *Pont-aux Choux*. It designated an excellent parisian factory of the second half of the eighteenth century, founded to provide competition for the *salt glazed pottery* then being made in England.

The purpose of this article is to discuss its origins and the first seven years of its existence, from 1743 to 1749. The establishment, which was soon to become *the Manufacture de la rue Saint-Sébastien*, faubourg Saint-Antoine in Paris, or the *Pont-aux-Choux factory*, was in fact the *manufacture royale de terre blanche*, originally located on the *Rue de Charenton*, quite close to the Bastille.

Let us begin with some observations touching upon the french term *faïence fine*. Strictly speaking, *faïence* is an opaque earth, whose colour ranges, when fired, from red to beige. It is further covered with a glazing, made opaque by the addition of tin, which lends it the characteristic whiteness, originally intended to imitate the appearance of far-eastern porcelain.

Faïence fine is in no way related to *faïence proper*,

since it is made from a fine earth, opaque and naturally white, but covered with a transparent lead glaze, which allows the white of the earth to show through, without conferring upon it the translucent quality of porcelain. It is, consequently, a form of glazed pottery. The term *faïence fine* was added to the french vocabulary of ceramography in 1841, by Alexandre Brongniart, the famous director of the Sèvres factory and author of that valuable work, the *Traité des Arts Céramiques* (1841-1844). I prefer the designation of *glazed white earth*. This is in harmony with the various english denominations: white salt glazed pottery and cream ware, in which the word *faïence*, which designates a different technique, does not appear.

In France, around 1740, despite the *arrêt de prohibition*, dating from 1701, English *salt glazed pottery*, produced in Staffordshire, was increasingly successful.

It was probably quite cheap, and its white colour reminiscent of the *blancs de Chine*, already much prized by lovers of ceramics. Indeed, it competed to such a degree with french ceramic production, that the *Conseil de Commerce* decreed, in 1740, a strict application of the prohibition touching upon its importation into France¹.

This English rivalry was nonetheless, beneficial to French ceramics, since it led, in 1743, to the creation of one of the most remarkable European factories: *the Manufacture royale de terre blanche de Paris*.

A royal license

On the 30th of July in 1743, Claude-Humbert Gérin obtained a royal license to “*establish a factory of earth in the English manner, in the city of Paris, to the exclusion of all others for six leagues around*”.² This license was to extend over a period of ten years, and it was stipulated that Gerin would mark his work with a *fleur-de-lys*.

Claude-Humbert Gérin, a native of Burgundy, where the Bourbon-Condé were governors, came from Chantilly. Originally a carpenter, he was a probably

initiated to the techniques of ceramics by the director and porcelain maker of the manufactory, Cicaire Cirou, who had come there from Saint Cloud. In 1740, Gérin left Chantilly with a painter and a turner, the brothers Gilles and Robert Dubois, to establish, at Vincennes, the soft-paste porcelain factory which would later enjoy such outstanding success. And, it was certainly in Vincennes that Gérin managed to discover the secret of white earth in imitation of that produced in England. So, just one month after having obtained the royal license, Gérin and the Dubois brothers left Vincennes and settled in Paris, in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, on the *Rue de Charenton* (September 1743). Associating themselves with the *faïence* dealer Edmé Serrurier, into whose premisses on the rue de Charenton they moved, Gérin and the Dubois brothers began their production of *white earth*. A wood merchant, Adrien Pierre Mignon



Figure 3. Milk or cream pot with lid. Varnished white earth. Rue de Charenton, Paris. 18th century, c. 1745. Height: (12 cm) Private collection.

soon completed the team.

In 1744, Gérin presented the royal authorities with several requests. He asked permission to produce articles in other colors than white, *...in red, marbled yellow and such other colors as they [Gérin and Serrurier] deem suitable...* and to have his products sold outside the frontiers of the realm by representatives of his choice. And finally, he called for a total ban on the importation of competing earthenware from England.³

Gilles and Robert Dubois and Claude-Humbert Gerin, were three men of strong personalities: ambitious, enterprising, daring and adventurous.

The Dubois brothers withdrew in December 1745⁴ and moved to

Valenciennes, in the north of France, in order to set up another – and apparently unsuccessful – *terre blanche* factory, before taking part in the creation of the porcelain factory of Tournai. This departure was followed by that of Gérin, one year later (July 1746). He returned to offer his services to the Vincennes factory.

The remaining partners, after 1746, were Mignon and Serrurier with a team of workmen, working under their orders, which was enlarged in 1749. The factory

was then transferred to the Rue Saint-Sébastien, near the Pont-aux Choux and it was under the charming name of the *Manufacture de Pont-aux Choux* (or “Cabbage-Bridge Factory”) that they made their definitive entrance into the history of French ceramics.

Long before that, however, the promising success of the royal factory of the Rue de Charenton had excited many other ambitions.

The Montereau factory

The famous faïence and porcelain maker, Jacques Chapelle, who also got his training in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine and worked as a modeler at the Vincennes factory, before 1745 worked, at that time, in the Rue de Charenton factory, with Gérin and the Dubois brothers. He later teamed up with a Parisian *marchand-faïencier*, François Le Mazois.⁵ Chapelle and Le Mazois, first set up business near Fontainebleau (at Le Plessis-Chenêt). Then, early in 1748, they moved to the town of Montereau, where they developed a new type of kiln. One of the associates, an Englishman named John Hill, had spent six months in England, taking note of the techniques used in producing *salt glazed pottery*. He, thus, learned that the earthenware was placed “*in an oven, and, the fire having reached the desired heat, a specially prepared salt is thrown through the upper vent of the oven. It turns into a white smoke which glazes and varnishes all the*



pieces in a single firing. In England, this is known as fumigation”.⁶

And, in 1749, after 4,000 potteries were impounded, Le Mazois obtained permission to keep his round oven in the English manner as well as a ten year license to produce white pottery fired and glazed in the English manner, and also to produce red, black and marbled pottery, with the obligation to mark it with the letter M.⁷

In any event, the royal factory of the Rue de Charenton certainly presented a superior quality, which could compete effectively both with English pottery and with its imitations in France, including that of Montereau.

A material

According to the chemist Jean Hellot (1685-1766), who became a member of the Académie des Sciences in 1735 and of the Royal Society in London in 1740, English eighteenth century *white earth pottery* was composed of a fine powder of lightly humidified calcined flint. The glaze was made of common salt, dissolved in water.

This technique for making so-called English *white earth potteries* was painstakingly set down by Jean Hellot in one of his famous recipe-notebooks, now preserved by the archives of the Sèvres factory. It was reportedly revealed to him in October 1751 by a certain Mr. Woutters, recently come from England.⁸ The recipe,

Figure 4 Pair of bottle coolers. Varnished white earth. Rue de Charenton, Paris. 18th century, c. 1745. Height: (15.5cm) Private collection.

believed to date from 1751, appears too recent for us to identify it with that of the Rue de Charenton elaborated in 1743, nearly ten years earlier. But according to another text copied by Jean Hellot, Gérin describes his experiments in Vincennes in the following terms: “*I sought to discover the secret of the English earth. I found it, and having received a royal license, I went to put it into practice in the Faubourg Saint Antoine, where I remained for two and a half years[...]*”.⁹

We also know that this white clay came from the vicinity of Montereau – and more specifically from a field called le *Champ Tortu*. Edmé Serrurier and Adrien-Pierre Mignon had, in 1747, signed an exclusive contrat with the owner of the land.¹⁰ In January 1750, François Le Mazois and Jacques Chapelle, directors of the Montereau and Sceaux factories, received exceptional permission to provide themselves with earth from the *Champ Tortu*. Another document also reveals, in 1753, that Jacques-René Boileau, director of the Vincennes factory, had, for some time, shown considerable interest in this highly desirable “*Champ Tortu*”.¹¹ Claiming ignorance of the exclusive rights of la Rue de Charenton, Boileau had, in fact, served himself at this



Figure 5. *Chocolatiere*. Varnished white earth.
Rue de Charenton, Paris. 18th century, c. 1745/1750.
Height: (45cm). Private collection.

site for several years... How many, we do not know. This earth clearly aroused a great deal of cupidity.

To conclude, the *Paris white earth pottery* is clearly different from the *salt glazed pottery*, which it had originally been created to imitate. While the latter may strike one today as a trifle cold, the former can fascinate one with its warm and creamy complexion... It really does seem that the copy was an improvement on the original...

An inventory

In 1747, one year after the departure of Claude-Humbert Gerin for Vincennes, an inventory was made of the stock of the factory on the *rue de Charenton*.¹² This inventory reveals that the stock of the factory and warehouses, at that time, included about 8,000

Fig. 6 *Jardiniere a bulbes*. Varnished white earth.
Rue de Charenton, Paris. 18th century, c. 1745
Height: (17 cm) - Length: (34,5 cm)
Private collection.



Figure 7. *Porte-montre*. Varnished white earth.
Rue de Charenton, Paris. 18th century, c. 1745
Height: (36 cm). Private collection.



Figure 8. Reverse of the *porte-montre*

potteries. Table-ware and *cabarets* make up an overwhelming majority (over 83%).

A study of the estimates, shows that the objects were, on the whole, of modest value: Four pounds for a pagoda (*chinois branlans*, in the French description); £1.23 for a tobacco pot; £8 for a dozen plates; £2 for a teapot... A *Venus*, on the contrary, was estimated at £42; certain pots-pourris £60; fountains £36, or girandoles (fig. 1), £10; watch stands, £24; tureens, £18, an so forth.

It therefore appears that the factory on the *rue de Charenton* produced two types of objects: some, familiar in shape and relatively inexpensive, intended for daily use; others, more unusual and expensive ornamental objects conceived for the cognoscenti (fig. 2).

As established usage demanded through out the eighteenth century, the production of "*pièces de forme*" invariably embraces tableware, objects for the dressing table, and decorative pieces.

Thus, plates and dishes, cups and goblets, milk and water jugs, gravy-boats and jam-pots, tureens, bowls, vases or *bouquetières* all have shapes conceived to satisfy the expectations of collectors and users of the period.

The Chinese Manner

Stylistically, the traditional *goût chinois, de rigueur* in the European decorative arts of the period, is apparent in this new type of Parisian ceramic production. The pieces are, at times, smooth with a simple raised border, at times, decorated with reliefs known as *broderies*,

according to the terms of the 1747 inventory (fig. 3). This term certainly refers to the Chinese blossoming branch motif in relief, which the Saint-Cloud factory was the first in Europe to use a soft-paste porcelain with historic success (fig. 4). In any event it is difficult to distinguish with any certainty the objects decorated with *broderies* or other forms of decoration of the first period of the *Rue de Charenton* and those of the second period of the *Rue Saint-Sébastien* (Pont-aux-Choux). Anyway, the indications provided by the 1747 inventory are too concise to allow a definitive chronological classification of the objects known to us today. It appears logical that the evolution should have been slight from one year to the next, and from one street to the other, and that from about 1749 to 1759 – since the *Rue Saint Sébastien* perpetuated what had been done on the *Rue de Charenton*, before to 1749.

It appears, on the other hand, that the *rice grain* decoration – which the French texts of the period refer to as "guilloché" – may have been produced on the *Rue de Charenton* and consequently appeared before 1750. This decoration was derived from the so-called secret decoration imported from China (fig. 5).

Is also apparent the Far-Eastern influence in the execution of admirably modeled statues depicting figures with pseudo-Asian features and clothing. The facial expression is particularly lively and moving. It sometimes appears related to certain period bronzes – particularly those of the famous bronze-maker Jean-Joseph Saint-Germain – as well as to a charming variety



Figure 9. Bust of Louis XV. Varnished white earth. Rue de Charenton, Paris. 18th century, c. 1745. Height: (57 cm). Private collection.

of terra cotta figurines.

Rocaille expression

The rocaille vein appears to have given the factory's modelers the opportunity to show off their talent. Indeed, the perfect ductility of the *terre blanche de Paris*, its excellent resistance to firing, the fluidity of its lead glaze, allowed for an extremely subtle and daring ornamentation (fig. 6). All the resources of rocaille form – curves, counter-curves, undulations, volutes, twisted and sinuous forms evoking the fluidity of the underwater realm and the profusion of the vegetable kingdom – were of course thoroughly exploited by the modelers, cast asymmetrically in a perfect symmetry (fig. 7 & 8).

One is tempted to imagine that the most remarkable items may have been derived from models provided by Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier, one of the best and most prolific French rocaille ornamentists. Indeed, the similarities between the works of the masters and those executed in ceramic form – particularly in white earth – appear quite striking at times.

The Rue de Charenton and silversmithing

Thanks to the testimony of Nicolas-Julien Bellejambe, turner and modeler at the *Rue de Charenton* since 1743 when the Royal Factory opened there, we

know that Claude-Humbert Gerin, and his partners had found desirable to mold certain items directly from pieces of silverware. This technique of molding on silverware was, at first sight, a new one.

As the worker Nicolas-Julien Bellejambe wrote in February 1768¹³:

“... over twenty-five years ago [and thus since 1743] he was working in said [white earth] factory... and had begun making white earth goblets for sale and retail to the public, and later to make moldings on the silverware entrusted to him...”. The ambitions of the *Rue de Charenton* directors were considerable, as the results have demonstrated and they were never disappointed.

The Rue de Charenton, Luneville and East of France Production

The surviving busts of Louis XV raise a number of questions. The 1747 inventory mentions the presence, in the warehouse, of a “bust of king” and of seven “busts of king and queen” with no further particulars.

The factory of the *Rue de Charenton* was not the only one to turn out these royal effigies at that period. They were also to be found in Tournai porcelain and in Chantilly porcelain, in particular, and one of these, made after a model by Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne and dated 1745, can be seen in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Which of these ceramic statues came first? (fig. 9).

In the inventory made in 1747, the estimated value of the king's busts range from £11 to £18 – surely a modest sum for this sort of work; a simple pot-à-oille is estimated £11 in this same document. The bust is 57.5cm high, which makes it the most imposing of the pieces that have come down to us. It is hard to understand why such an important item was not given a separate description and a higher estimate in this inventory.

Finally, the factory of white earth of Lunéville, in Lorraine, claims, without actual proof it would seem, that these busts were produced there. Researches must also be pursued in Lorraine.

The Rue de Charenton and the French soft-paste porcelain factories between 1743 and 1749

In addition to links with Saint-Cloud and with Chantilly one cannot ignore the close connections between the *Rue de Charenton* factory and Vincennes (fig. 10). For one thing, the two establishments were quite close geographically. For another, the same individuals and authorities in matters of ceramics succeeded one another there between about 1740 and 1750: the discoverer of the white earth technique, Claude-Humbert Gerin, the painter, Gilles Dubois, the turner, Robert Dubois, the modeler, Jacques Chapelle, and the sculptor, Louis Fournier.

What mutual influence may there have been between these two factories, both of which were successively



Figure 10. Trois caisses à fleurs. Varnished white earth. Rue de Charenton, Paris. 18th century, c. 1745. Height: (12,5 and 14cm). Length: (27and 35 cm) Private collection.

royal factories?

The comparison, between these factories, however, does not apply to the material: the royal white-earth of Paris was opaque while the royal porcelain of Vincennes was translucent.

NOTES

1. Arch. nat., F12/87, p. 304 - 305
2. Arch. nat., F12/90, P 453
3. Arch. nat, F12/91, 4 février 1744.
4. At that point they retroceded their shares to Gérin who, in turn retroceded those he held in the Vincennes factory.
5. Arch. nat, Minut. cent. des Not., LXXXVIII, 970, 20 December 1745.
6. Arch. nat., F12/96.
7. Idem
8. Arch. man. Sèvres, Y51, Hellot's notebook, 1 May 1753, pp.26-27. See Dragesco, Bernard, *English Ceramics in French Archives*, London, June 1993, p. 6.
9. Arch. man. Sèvres, Y59, pp.26-27.
10. Arch. nat., Minut. cent. des Not., LXXXVII, 982, 31 december 1747.
11. Arch. nat., Minut. cent. des Not., XXVIII, 333.
12. Arch. nat., Minut. cent. des Not., LXXXVII, 981, 30

september 1747. The famous Parisian merchant jeweler Edmé François Gersaint was summoned for the occasion but only supervised the inventory of the personal belongings of the late Madame Serrurier.

13. Arch. nat., Y15071.

A SHORT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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