

THE SAMSON HOUSE IN PARIS 1845-1980 AND ITS IMITATION WARES

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IN 1849, EDMÉ SAMSON, A PORCELAIN DECORATOR who also worked in bronze, was working under the name of « Samson jeune » in the Temple district of Paris.

Around 1864, he went into partnership with his son Emile and they subsequently took part in the international exhibitions held in Paris in 1867 and 1878. The critics were so impressed by their skill at imitation, that they warned collectors to be on their guard. Hoping to master all stages of ceramic production, Emile Samson became a manufacturer and in 1879 built a porcelain factory in Montreuil-sous-Bois, on the eastern outskirts of Paris. Products were displayed and sold in Paris in the *rue Béranger*.

This period marked the beginning of Samson's success. Workers reproduced an enormous amount of porcelain and faïence, French as well as foreign. They copied famous pieces, mainly from French and English museums. Some museums showed an interest in Samson pieces, the South Kensington Museum (later the Victoria and Albert Museum) in London, for instance, bought twelve Samson pieces in 1892. The Samsons found inspiration in the great private collections of their time, such as those of Frédéric Spitzer or Gustave Dreyfus and sometimes they also copied pieces illustrated in specialist literature.

The Samsons bought old pieces to use as models and these constituted the 'Samson collection'. After the originals had been reproduced they were often sold and the money helped to buy new, genuine pieces.

In the late 19th century Emile's son, Léon, further developed the factory which now employed up to a hundred and twenty five workers. He diversified production by creating a workshop for enamels – mainly painted enamels and champlévé enamels – and a studio for terracottas.

The last of the Samsons, Pierre, took over the directorship in 1923 but by then times had changed. Tastes were not the same, profit-making had become essential and workers were less skilled. In spite of these difficulties, Pierre Samson rejected the idea of any sort of partnership.

During the Occupation, the factory was confiscated by the Germans, although the Samson family recovered it after the war. It now only produced porcelain but the quality was declining.

The firm was sold in 1964 to Christian Richardière.



Figure 1: Terracottas (top: two sphinxes; bottom: *L'Escarpolette*, after Clodion)

There were only 25 workers left. In spite of a prestigious, mostly American, clientele, Richardière closed the factory after trying some innovations. He sold off exhibition models in porcelain and faïence¹ at auctions in London and Paris. He transferred old moulds and master models to different ceramicists and destroyed the rest.

The factory was closed in 1980 and demolished. Only three wood kilns have survived, on the *rue de la Revolution*. One of them is inscribed in the *Inventaire Supplémentaire des Monuments Historiques*.

To differentiate between their different productions, the Samsons registered several marks, some of which derived from the letter 'S'. All may be under or over glaze and sometimes they are engraved. But, if the client so wished, there was no mark.

I do not think the Samsons were fakers. They were involved in restoration and may have privately replaced some missing elements on wares. In the case of complete pieces, they quite officially sold reproductions for the price of reproductions. They cannot be

held responsible where unscrupulous middlemen have tampered with pieces, perhaps by scratching out the mark, by removing it with hydrofluoric acid, or by replacing it with another, over the glaze.

The Sèvres archives have recently acquired about a thousand glass negatives, fascinating documentation from which I have been able to work. These photographs of Samson wares must have been taken

Louvre has terracotta examples in its reserve collection.

The Samsons have produced various kinds of Italian faïence, reproducing 16th century as well as 18th century Italian examples. The soup-tureen (*fig.2, right*) reproduces a Pasquale Rubati piece with Imari decoration. One of these tureens has been in the collection of the Castello Sforzesco Museum, Milan, since 1875



Figure 2. Italian faïence in the style of Clerici (left) plate, 13½ inches (34 cm) and Rubati (right) soup-tureen, 14½ inches (37 cm)

before 1940 and, obviously, when we use the name «Samson» we have no idea under which of the Samsons a piece was produced.

They produced much terracotta sculpture in imitation of 18th century examples. These were very fashionable in France after 1850. Quantities of Falconets, Pajous, Houdons and Clodions were all produced. Clodion's work seem to have been the main source of inspiration for Samson workers. This is not surprising since «Clodionomania» reached its peak in France in the 1870s, after the publication of Thirion's illustrated monograph on the sculptor. Several of his sculptures were also seen in major exhibitions. *L'Escarpolette*, also known as *La Bascule*, belonging to the Baroness James de Rothschild, was, for example, shown in the «*Exposition Retrospective de l'Art Français*» in 1900². Samson's version though was (*fig.1, bottom*) a crude reproduction, lacking any elegance.

Sphinxes like those reproduced (*fig.1, top*) frequently appear on the art market. One has her hair in a pony-tail and the other under a kerchief; they reproduce originals, thought to have been portraits of Mme de Pompadour, that stood in the gardens of her *château de Ménars* in the Loire valley. Other 19th century factories probably also reproduced them. The

but both pieces are so close a match that one wonders if the Samson photograph is of an original or a copy.

The plate captioned, in Samson's words, *assiette Milano bleu* (*fig.2, left*) is very similar to a Felice Clerici plate in the Gianetti collection in Saronno, near Milan³.

Blue, polychrome or gilded Delft – gilded being the more prestigious – were very fashionable at the end of the 19th century. In the foreword to the December 1978 Samson sale, expert Georges Lefèvre, discusses Samson's choice of Delft. He found the gilded pieces to be impressive, true examples of ceramic virtuosity, proving, if proof were needed, the high technical standards and skillful production methods at Montreuil.

No white Delft, tiles, decorative plaques or plates appear in the Samson photographs. Instead there are tulip-vases, bird-cages, sculpted animals, tureens, zoomorphic butter-dishes, sugar bowls and a large number of decorative pieces. Samson has copied traditional Delft decoration and, here again, the most difficult techniques such as gilded Delft, imitating Japanese Imari pieces in blue, green, red and gold (*fig.9, left*).

Pierre Samson claimed his reproductions of old blue and white Delft cost about the same as the genuine pieces because the originals were not very valuable. On the other hand, the price difference was enormous in the case of gold or polychrome Delft. Samson



Figure 3. Near-eastern style faïence

reproductions often cost up to ten to twenty times less than the originals.

Even though Samson reproductions of Delft are often remarkable and, generally speaking, of good quality, the finish is not always so good. The lids are frequently too small, the necks too narrow and certain productions combine several originals. Samson is said to have been successful in copying the Delft bodies, although the reproductions are heavier. Whatever the case, expert Jan Boyazoglu thinks Samson reproductions of old Delft are the most alarming.

Looking to the East. The Samsons have, as a rule, reproduced very expensive and sought after wares, some Persian, more of them Turkish Iznik and a few from Kutahya.

Turkish pottery, now called *Iznik*, was known to collectors before Persian wares. The acquisition, between 1865 and 1878, by the Cluny Museum of a collection of 532 ceramics belonging to Auguste Salzmann, French consul to the island of Rhodes, boosted imitations.

The bottle (fig.3, top left) reproduces an original water bottle, dated 1520, that was in the South

Kensington (later Victoria and Albert) Museum, London. Another water bottle with a long neck and spout, (fig.3, top right), copies a model in the collection of Lord Leighton (the original belongs to the circle of Musli and dates from the first half of the 16th century). The upper part of the spout is, however, different and the Samson model is too stiffly drawn, the hawthorns too symmetrical. The footed-bowl, described by Samson, as «with one hundred and twelve carnations» (fig.3, bottom left) has been copied from a mid-16th century example, decorated with hawthorns, carnations and tulips. The original, here again from the circle of Musli, is today in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Taking French faïence next. Samson reproduced faïence from Marseille, Moustiers, Sceaux and the east, although the production of Rouen and Nevers, seems to have been the most important. In the case of Rouen, let us not dwell too long on the copying of classic Rouenese decoration, or on the difficult *à l'or niellé* technique and just keep to a few exceptional pieces.

Samson copied the busts of the four seasons, attributed to Pierre Chapelle and produced by Nicolas Fouquay's factory c.1740 (fig.4). Spring is represented by Flora and winter by Pluto. They have coarse and



Figure 4. Pluto and Flora with a table-fountain in the middle. Rouenese imitations.

rather vulgar expressions. The models for them are in the Louvre, which has a complete series of the originals from the collection of the Duke of Hamilton (except for Apollo, which is in the Victoria and Albert Museum). Pierre Samson said in an interview that he also made the corresponding stands, but we do not have any photograph of them. A series of four busts has belonged to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, since 1923 and may be by Samson. They all bear a spurious underglaze mark *Faict à Rouen 1647* above a fleur-de-lys. The date is impossible, but, if it can be proved that the Boston busts were really made by Samson, then the very cautious opinion I have given as to their authenticity would be somewhat challenged.

The table-fountain with two dishes (fig.4, centre) copies a very rare shape. It is inspired by a fountain, now in the ceramics museum in Rouen, signed *Borne 1738*. Samson's version seems rather good, in spite of dry, unoriginal painting and some ill-proportioned components, such as the overly large female heads.

There are several reproductions of Nevers pieces in

the Samson photographs. Some derive from well-known originals and seem to be good quality. There are dishes decorated with *blanc fixe* on a *bleu de Nevers* ground in a «Persian» style with birds, or, reproductions of statues like the *Vierge à la pomme* in white earthenware. The original, dated 1636, and signed by Denis Lefèvre who worked for the Conrade, is now in the Nevers museum. The main differences are in the inscription, higher and thinner in the Samson version and in Jesus's facial expression.

Samson has also copied many kinds of porcelain, such as St Cloud, Mennecy, Hoechst and Ludwigsburg, Meissen, Vienna and Nymphenburg, Frankenthal and Fürstenberg, Tournai, Chelsea, Derby and other English manufactures, Doccia, Capo di Monte, Buen Retiro and Japanese. Selecting from this vast panorama we shall consider a few pieces of Vincennes-Sèvres and Chinese.

Taking Sèvres first, let us begin with two biscuit examples, the first *Pygmalion*, an enormously successful model from an original marble by Maurice-Etienne Falconet. Samson's version (fig.5, top) is very beautiful. I have found no trace of the sale of a cast to Samson in the Sèvres archives, although in the 19th century the firm sold a great number of them to several porcelain producers including Samson.



Figure 5. Copies of Sèvres biscuits (top) Pygmalion (bottom : upper level, left to right) Love Disarmed, A Sacrifice to Fidelity and Love lighting his Torch from the Mirror of Beauty (lower level, left to right) Lesson to Love and Lesson from Love

The Samson medallions (fig.5, bottom) were made after Sèvres biscuit originals. We have kept records of them in the archives at Sèvres but the models have disappeared and we do not know about any originals in public or private collections. As a general rule, during the 18th century, bronze or ceramic medallions were popular as objects in their own right or as insets in furniture.

There are also, of course, a great number of well-known imitations of Sèvres vases. Let us ignore the strange object (fig.6, third from the left) although the three other vases in the photograph are interesting. On the right, according to the label, is a *Vase Elephant*, fond vert, coll. R. W. [Richard Wallace]. Among all the extravagant Sèvres 18th century shapes, this is perhaps one of the most bizarre. It is decorated with putti in the manner of Boucher and, in spite of the technical difficulty presented by such a vase, Samson has done quite well. The size is about the same as the Sèvres first size and the general shape is good. It must be said that Samson was allowed by Sèvres to take a cast. Restrictions concerned the painted decoration, with the putti lacking the elegance of those on the original, which has been in the Wallace Collection since 1890.

Figure 6. Vases in Sèvres style, 10 1/4 to 17 inches (26 x 43 cm)



The *Urne antique à oreilles* (fig.6, third from the right) was in the Alfred de Rothschild collection and was reproduced by Garnier in his *La porcelaine tendre de Sèvres*. The original is now in Philadelphia. Samson seems to have imitated the fanned ribbons decorating the reserve correctly. The *Vase myrthe* on the left is a bit further from the original. The shape is correct – Samson had a cast – and the size corresponds to the second size. The foot is lower, without the large section that normally links it with the body. For the most part, the reserve on the Samson vase has a narrow, oval shape, whereas the originals all have broader cartouches.

The tea or breakfast set (fig.7) shows a tray, long thought to be the *plateau Duvaux*, with other pieces designed earlier, an Hebert sugar bowl, a Calabre teapot, an Hebert cup and a *Pot à lait à trois pieds*. In 1992⁴, Ader-Tajan sold an authentic set decorated in the same manner with scrolls, cross-hatching, flower garlands and *rocaille* motifs. But the Samson interpretation is much heavier and more laboured. The central motif is more elongated.

As for glazed porcelain sculpture, I have chosen two outstanding examples.

The *Bouquet de la Dauphine* (fig.8, left) shows

Figure 7. 'Tête à tête genre Sèvres' (Sèvres-style breakfast set)

extraordinary technical mastery. The body of the vase is less ornate than the original, the flower arrangement more subdued and the two side groups are quite different. However, we can still see that the Samson workshops were skilled at producing flowers.

La Source (fig.7, right) is another superb piece. The original, also called *La Naiade*, and possibly the *Naiade colorée* in the Sèvres archives, is soft-paste. It has been in the Louvre since 1881, given by Mme Thiers, wife of the President of the Republic. The Samson example is slightly larger than the original. The lady's expression is a bit vapid, but, otherwise, Samson has overcome the difficulties of such a piece remarkably well.

The Samsons claimed to produce soft-paste, but this does not seem very likely. To improve the firm's financial state, Alexandre Brongniart sold off cheaply some of its stock of soft-paste blanks. Most were undecorated and were bought for very low prices by 'housepainters' who overdecorated them. Such was the job undertaken by the first Samson, Edmé.

The Samsons always boasted that they faithfully reproduced the different bodies of authentic pieces and



Figure 8. *The Bouquet de la Dauphine and The Source*

had a collection of ceramics samples in order to study them. However, they often used a hard-paste porcelain which, says Antoine d'Albis, frequently has a very particular yellow colour when seen under an ultra violet lamp.

A number of objects were enriched with bronze-mounts. We have papers and commercial directories from the end of the 19th century in which the Samsons describe themselves as “makers of bronzes, chiselled and gilded in the old manner”. It was probably true at the time, although Christian Richardière, who took over the factory in 1964, has never heard of this type of production.

The Samson production of Far Eastern, mostly Chinese, ceramics was immense. Samson's Chinese production was, for the most part, very commercial and one generally feels that Samson wanted to give their clients value for money. These Samson products have a *horror vacui* shunning simplicity. The modelling often lacks strength, the shapes are too stiff, the figures too dramatic and the proportions not Chinese at all. Several motifs, such as *lambrequins*, were much favoured by the Samsons, but are overused and are too big. Here one senses a western hand at work, much less fluent than the Chinese. Motifs found on small vases or on plates might appear on large vases and, sometimes, the Samson workers mixed decorative motifs or shapes.

Some specialists find the body of Samson Chinese porcelain too grey and on occasion containing curds. It is a rather pallid porcelain. The enamels are often

quite good, even if they are cruder than Chinese enamels. Nevertheless, along with the complete inventions, crazy or funny, depending on your point of view, some models do succeed in deceiving a lot of people.

In the Samson documentation, there are many trumpet-vases, cylindrical vases, large jars (easy to assemble in garnitures for chimneys in the western fashion) and so-called ‘mandarin-vases’; also stools, lanterns (with or without open-work) gourds and ginger-jars. There are some crackled celadons and a little *famille noire*, very much in favour around 1900 and which brought record prices at auctions. Mostly though there are polychrome vases of *famille rose* and *famille verte* type, from the Yongzhen and Qianlong periods. Collectors were particularly keen on these large, decorative pieces, especially with bronze mounts, around 1910. It was only later that they began to collect earlier ceramics.

Samson obviously drew inspiration from what constituted the great collections of the day, such as the famous Grandidier collection, shown in the Louvre from 1894 to 1939 and then transferred to Guimet. Samson also copied pieces belonging to du Sartel, Siegfried Bing or the Duveen brothers. As always, public collections were also used. Never shirking a challenge, Samson reproduced vases close to 4 feet (1.2 m) tall. When authentic, these large decorative pieces are rare on the market but even reproductions can bring fairly high prices. A pair of Samson vases over 3 feet (94 cm) tall, for example, was sold by Sotheby's, four years ago, in the Margrave de Bade's sale for almost £12,000.



Figure 9. (left) ‘Potiche’ with flowers and butterflies, Samson gilded Delft, 20½ inches (52 cm) and (right) ‘potiche bleu fouetté’, Louis XVI-style mounts, 22¼ inches (57 cm)

There is a Samson Chinese vase (fig. 9 right) on which the difficult *bleu soufflé* ground is mixed with *famille verte* decoration. The lid is not, of course, at all Chinese. A pair of very similar vases was sold by Tajan, last December. It was catalogued as dating from the first half of the 19th century but without any information as to the place of its origin⁵.

It must be said that the Samsons have also reproduced sculptures of Taoist characters such as Lao Tseu, Buddhists such as Pu Tai, Kuan Yin or Lohans, legendary figures like the Twins or profane figures or animals such as Fo dogs.

We cannot conclude without acknowledging once again the achievements of these outstanding craftsmen, whether ceramicists such as the Samsons, Bourdois and Bloch in Paris, the Herend manufacture in Hungary, or those working in the related fields of metalwork or furniture like the Maison André, the Beurdeleys, Henry Dasson... all of them at the turn of the 20th century. All continued to use the old techniques,

combining their skills with profit-making. It was, it must be said, a time when the distinction between authentic and fake was not as rigid as it is today and was acceptable to imitators.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Jean Loup Charmet, photographer, after proofs by Jean-Claude Vaysses from glass negatives in the Archives of Manufacture Nationale de Sèvres.

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NOTES

1. Drouot 18 XII 1978 ; Christie's 24 V 1971, 17 XII 1979, 24 IX 1979, 3 III 1980, 16 V 1980.
2. Now in the Museum of Toledo.
3. Bought by a Milanese antique dealer in 1933.
4. Hôtel George V, 18 XII 1992.
5. They were estimated at 70,000-80,000 francs and were sold for 10,000 francs.