

# Interior Decoration and War Trophies – the Porcelain Table Services of Frederick the Great of Prussia

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## Introduction

In 1740 Frederick the Great inherited the Prussian royal throne from his father, becoming king of an established, quite wealthy middle sized country among the states forming the Holy Roman Empire. Trade and handycraft were well-developed, even if they could not be compared with the economic power of the neighbouring state Saxony. Frederick had visited Saxony as Crown Prince, and having admired their porcelain factory, had tried from the beginning of his reign to introduce one to his Prussian workshops. For years he failed involving the wrong people.

However, history offered him another opportunity: during the second Silesian war (1744-45) the Prussian army occupied Saxony and the king confiscated the Meissen manufactory's storeroom. Not only hundreds of figures, vases, garnitures and tea services were packed and sent to Berlin, but also several complete table services of different sizes and decoration. Some white, some painted, mainly with flowers, and one example was decorated with the *yellow lion*. This pattern, originally inspired by a Japanese Kakiemon motif, had been reserved for the Saxon court. None of these services sent to Potsdam and Berlin can be found today, nor can they be found in the inventories of the Prussian silver vaults.

Most of these services must have been given away as gifts as the Royal Court was still using silver or gold for the table. These metals were still more important than any other material, symbolising the eternal shining of the sun and moon, and signifying wealth and treasure. Frederick had inherited about ten silver and one silver gilt table services. In 1741 he added a solid gold service as a manifestation of his new position in Europe as victor of the first Silesian war. After the

second Silesian war in 1746, he ordered another silver service which was used for the first time in 1747 for the opening of The Sanssouci Palace in Potsdam. Most of these silver services, along with the one in gold were melted down in 1809 to pay the Prussian debt to Napoleon.

When in 1751 the first Prussian porcelain manufactory was founded in Berlin by a merchant called Caspar Wilhelm Wegely, the King still didn't own a complete porcelain table service to serve the first two courses and dessert. Frederick disliked Wegely's products and didn't support the manufactory by ordering porcelain. In 1756 the third Silesian war, better known as the Seven Years War, started and Wegely couldn't escape the economic pressure and had to close his workshops in 1757. However, during the war, another merchant, Johann Ernst Gotzkowsky, following the king's wishes founded another porcelain manufactory in Berlin in 1761. He was much more successful as Saxony was still occupied by the Prussian army and he arranged for some highly specialised workmen from the Meissen manufactory to come to Berlin. Again, the king didn't order any table services from Gotzkowsky although he may have bought some other wares.

Frederick the Great explored other possibilities staying several times in Meissen from 1760 to 1762, and as head of the occupying power in Saxony, he was in fact owner of the manufactory. A very important factor was that he lived in a house near the Cathedral and the manufactory and was a neighbour of Johann Joachim Kaendler, the famous chief modeller in Meissen. They must have discussed porcelain a lot and Kaendler loved this situation because the Prussian king (although it was war-time) commissioned many new models



based on his ideas, giving Kaendler an opportunity to earn extra money. This is, where the thrilling story of Fredericks' table services begins.

### Frederick as a designer of porcelain

The first commission, handed over to Kaendler in the spring 1760, was a small service to be presented to the king's close friend and art teacher, the philosopher Jean Baptiste de Boyer, Marquis d'Argens. In a letter from Meissen to Potsdam, Frederick asked the Marquis, if he would like to have some porcelain in lieu of his apanage as he lacked funds due to the ongoing war. Of course the Marquis could not refuse and answered, he would be very flattered by a dinner service and that he would love to use it the moment his majesty returned home having won the war. He promised to invite Frederick to his house for a philosophical meal.

Frederick, noting these last words, invented his own list of instructions using some aspects from the Marquis' book on scepticism. First he ordered, that the tureens should have an inscription. He chose a phrase by Aristotle's *Dubium initium sapientiae (est)* (to doubt is the beginning of wisdom). Then he added four emblems representing music, architecture, sovereignty and geography. In the centre is a pair of balanced scales – all four aspects are of similar importance. These refer to the king, showing the balance between his passions (music

Figure 1. Part of the first Meissen table service made for and partly designed by Frederick the Great model "preussisch-musikalisches Dessin" (Prussian musical design). Meissen, 1760.

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and architecture) and his civil duties. To understand this interpretation, one has to examine the details and debate them deeply. It is only through discussion and thinking that one is able to come to this solution – a process, which is the main method of the philosophy of scepticism.

Fascinated with this new opportunity of designing tablewares, Frederick combined the virtuosity of forms and colours with meaningful symbols and iconography and immediately ordered two porcelain services for his own use. These services, he knew, could never be melted down when money was scarce particularly during an expensive war. On the first two services he kept the idea of emblems, but they had to be applied by a different technique, not painted, but in relief: on each plate three cartouches showing raised flowers, two showing musical instruments and one as an allegory of war. Not much is known about the first version of the services, ordered in 1760, which was painted with flowers and a green mosaic border (Fig. 1). Some years ago an impressive part of the service appeared at auction from an English country house, bought by the family in the early 19th century.



From this we learn, that only 13 different compositions of flower bouquets were used and always done in the same colours and insects, thus proving that the manufactory had designs even for these quite "boring" rococo flowers.

The second service from the same model, ordered in 1761, is of much more importance. The records tell us of the king's ideas. He wanted the service to be made in the same shape as the Saxon prime minister's service, the famous

Count Brühl. Whenever Frederick stayed in Dresden during the war, he did not take residence in the Dresden Schloss, as would be normal for the ruler of an occupying power. He preferred the much more comfortable Palais Brühl. There he must have seen or even used a service which at that time was even more famous than the Swan Service, the so called *Brühlsches Allerelei* (Brühls this and that). It is easy to see, how the shape was adopted for Frederick's new service. The king's



Figure 2. Part of the second Meissen table service made for Frederick the Great, now known as the Moellendorff service model "preussisch-musikalisches Dessin" (Prussian musical design). Meissen, 1761.

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second condition of manufacture was that only one colour should be used together with gold and that this should be the special red, "which is reserved for the Saxon ruler". This of course meant the Red Dragon Service. Both elements, form and colour, were taken from the services of his Saxon enemies and added to Fredericks' own idea of emblems for music and war in relief, which of course referred to him as both musician and king (Fig. 2). The design now called

*Preussisch-musikalisches Dessin* (Prussian musical design, by using Prussian as an equivalent for war) was developed by Frederick Elias Meyer, who later moved to the Gotzkowsky manufactory in Berlin in 1761, together with Peter Reinicke. The painted design was done by Karl Jakob Klipfel, who arrived in Berlin in 1763. An interesting aspect is, that this was the first porcelain service for the Prussian court, which served as both a dinner and dessert service. Plates with pierced rims for dessert were first used for the Brühlsche Service to make a difference between the first two courses and the dessert.

From a report by chief modeller, Kaendler, we know that in 1762 the king ordered another service for which he wanted a completely new design. This was to be called the Japanese Service and was destined for the Chinese House in Sanssouci. It is very important to understand the nature of this building before looking at the service. The Chinese House is a garden pavillion at the foot of the hill, on which the kings' summer house, Sanssouci, was built (from 1745-

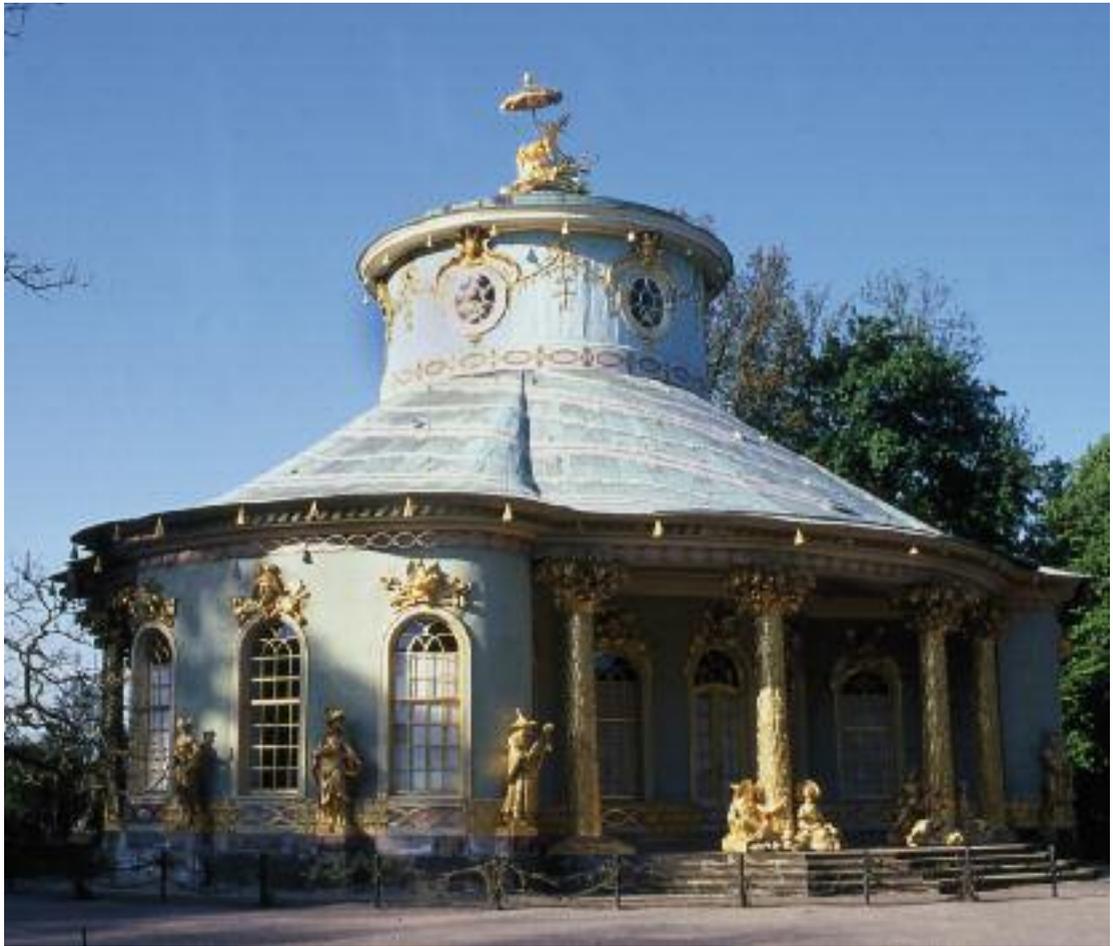


Figure 3. View of the Chinese House in the Gardens of Sanssouci at Potsdam built by Johann Gottfried Buring as summer dining room for Frederick the Great, 1754-1757.  
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1747) (Fig. 3). The style of The Chinese House is inspired by a famous pavillion in Luneville, at the court of Stanislaus Leczinsky. It was designed by court architect, Johann Gottfried Buring and begun in 1754 before the Seven Years War though its interiors were only finished right after the war in the mid 1760's. It was a summer dining room, with its own kitchen close by, surrounded by a chinoiserie rococo garden with hedges, small rivers, snake walks and huge porcelain vases. At first sight, it looks like a rococo fantastic garden building with its gilded limestone figures, columns in the form of palm trees and a figure on the roof. This is a mixture of the Greek God Hermes and the Chinese philosopher Confucius. His european face is more than just a symbol of intellectual union between Asia and Europe. Hermes got his caduceus stick

from Pan, presenting him with a flute. Coincidentally, a very famous flute player and composer lived nearby. Frederick now looking down from his *Olympus* Sanssouci at his alter ego, the wise philosopher on the roof of the Chinese House. So far the house can be seen as a reference to Frederick's wise government, but on closer examination, many details contradict this inadequate interpretation. The figure on the roof has an umbrella, an asian symbol of social dignity, which he holds in an eastern direction. So the famous *ex oriente lux*, the good and wise Confusian light from the far east, is blocked by the umbrella. Further down, we notice that the foundations of the building seem to be made of feathers and the Chinese heads over the windows, resting on cushions like trophies turn into a monkey band in the interior. The frescoes in the cuppola mainly depict monkeys and parrots. As we know, these particular animals are great imitators without understanding.

When the interiors were planned, Frederick and Catherine the Great of Russia corresponded regarding their enthusiasm



for Chinese things in Europe. Both of them making fun of people dedicated to the fashion for Chinoiserie without having been to Asia themselves. In Catherine's and Frederick's letters, these people just imitated, without understanding. The "amusement" and criticism of Chinoiserie, which influenced the Chinese House, can also be seen in the design of the table service made for it.

Frederick gave Kaendler a silver plate as a basis for the shapes he wanted setting out three conditions. Firstly, he wanted the service to look *antique and muschelicht*, which can be vaguely translated as *antique*, or *old fashioned* and *shell-like*. This meant a combination of the classical and

Figure 4. Dessert plate from the first "Japanese service" for the Chinese House at Sanssouci. Meissen, 1763. Prussian Palaces and Gardens Foundation Berlin-Brandenburg

rococo, breaking the rules like the decoration in the Chinese House. Consequently, the service had rococo-scrollwork in puce and the pierced sections of the dessert plates were in the old-fashioned *Bandelwerk* style. (Fig. 4)

The second condition was, that the rim should be painted with yellow mosaic and the inner part of the rim with blue, so that, as Frederick explained the "yellow would be heightened", making it more intensive. Yellow was well known as the



Figure 5. View of the interior of the Chinese House with a dessert table presenting parts of the first Japanese service.) Prussian Palaces and Gardens Foundation Berlin-Brandenburg

Chinese Emperors' colour and it is easy to understand why Frederick adopted this in his theatrical scenery. (Fig. 5)

Thirdly, he insisted that *Indian* (meaning exotic) animals were painted on all items of the service, since exotic animals were an important part of Chinoiserie decoration. However, not all beasts and birds on the service were painted after existing species, for example the porcupine. On close inspection, there are fantastic mixtures of different creatures: a dog-shaped body with rabbit ears and webbed feet for swimming. At Meissen all animals painted up to that time were either copies or interpretations of asian mythological beasts, taken from lacquer and porcelain paintings, or zoological illustrations, like those on the Northumberland service. Never before had they had free compositions in the European style. These animals made fun of the fashion for having a menagerie with lots of highly exotic beasts, underlining the purpose of the Chinese House parodying the fashion for pagodas in gardens of the time. These animals are definitely exotic and close to caricatures. The third service, designed by Frederick was devoted to classical mythology, the so called *Vestunen-Service*, but little is known about this.

After this, four large services made of three new styles partly designed by Frederick, were commissioned between 1760 and 1762 as well as at least six other court services made of existing models and decorated in a more traditional style with birds or flowers.



Figure 6. Tureen from a service for Frederick the Great, now known as the Schwerin service model "Französische Form" (French shape). Meissen, ca. 1762. Prussian Palaces and Gardens Foundation Berlin-Brandenburg

### Changing to KPM

In 1763, after the end of the war, Gotzkowsky went bankrupt. The king decided to buy his porcelain manufactory in Berlin, which now became KPM, *Königliche Porzellan-Manufaktur* (Royal Porcelain Manufactory). Two years later Frederick the Great introduced a law forbidding the import of luxury goods from Saxony to Prussia, in order to protect the sale of his own wares. Consequently, he could no longer order missing pieces in Meissen to complete his stock. That is why the very first tablewares produced in Berlin for the king were just additional copies of Meissen porcelain. This can be seen in the context of a service made for him in Meissen in 1761 from a model called *Französische Form* (French shape). (Fig. 6) The Berlin workshop therefore produced completions in 1764, 1766 and around 1780. As the additional items always only copied the pattern, but with slight variations of colour shades and styles, these completions show the development of flower painting in Berlin at this time very well. The first copies cannot be distinguished from the Meissen ones, which is not



Figure 7. Platter and cover from Frederick the Great's service for the Palace in Breslau model "mit antiques Zieraten" (with antique ornaments). KPM Berlin, 1767.  
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surprising, because the painters were still those who had moved two years ago from Meissen to Berlin. The 1780's copies look quite different as their flowers, are done very accurately and academically.

Other models, too, like the pierced dessertplate from the *Brühlsche* service, were copied and added to a Meissen dessert service. Also, the Meissen model used at court in Potsdam and Berlin for every day services – the so called *ordinary service*, with underglaze blue flowerpainting, was completely taken over by KPM and still reproduced for the court or other nobles well into the 19th century.

From 1765, when Frederick ordered the first complete service in Berlin, until his death in 1786, he had bought a total of 21 large court dinner and dessert services for all his

residences (in addition to his gold and 14 silver services). He owned more porcelain services than any other ruler in Europe.

#### KPM services

When the first Berlin table service was delivered to the king in 1765, he started to give away his Meissen ones as much coveted gifts to friends and important personages (e.g. the second service from the *Prussian Musical Design* painted in iron red was presented to General Möllendorff). All Meissen services were replaced. This was not only a question of taste or fashion, but much more than a question of economics. These orders, which Frederick (not like the Saxon rulers) always paid for (2,000,000 Taler during his reign), were an important financial support for the manufactory. It was also a perfect advertising tool. The first service, made in 1765 and today known as the *1. Potsdam Service*, was destined to be used in the Neues Palais, built right after the war. Its interiors are what we now call the climax of *Friderician* rococo interior

and famous artists like the Hoppenhaupt brothers did the designs.

The service modelled by Frederick Elias Meyer follows this style. Bundles of waving rocailles flow from the rim to the centre of the plates, like they did above the table on the plaster ceilings of the palace. The decoration is dominated by light brown mosaic spandrels and rich gilding. Ribbons of flowers hang on this lattice work like real blossom in the gardens outside the castle climbing the trellise. The moving elegance and festive brightness of this service belongs without any doubt, to the most wonderful German rococo porcelain services. It demonstrated to Europe that after a hard and exhausting war, Prussia was still blossoming.

Two years later, the king ordered a second version of the very same model for dinner and dessert, but with more colours: the green and naturalistic colours replaced the gold. It was delivered to the New Palace, and was used for less official occasions or for eating in the garden. The king liked it so much, that he ordered a copy to present to his brother in law, the Margrave of Brandenburg-Ansbach. When it became out of fashion, king Frederick Wilhelm II presented the 2. *Potsdam Service* in 1796 to the Prussian governor in Warsaw.

Simpler decorated versions of this model were ordered too, e.g. for the Berlin Schloss. The manufactory then repeated an ornamental gold border, that was taken from a Meissen service.

In 1767 the Berlin manufactory introduced a new model, called *With Antique Ornaments*. Nowadays, it does not look very antique, but it can be understood, when we remember, that Frederick didn't take up the new neoclassical style that was appearing everywhere in Europe. Here the artists mixed at least some antique elements among the rococo-forms where the rim is done in the form of a bundle of sticks *Liktoren-Bündel*

The king had three services from this model: in 1767 the first version with blue mosaic was done for the palace in Breslau/Silesia. (Fig. 7) The dining room there was devoted to the goddess Flora giving the theme for the service. Large, light flowers sparkling with nuances of colour and shade dominating the decoration. The centrepiece is a figure of Flora with putti. Again, we find a direct relationship between the decoration of the service and the room it was made for. This could not have happened, if the architects, or the king himself, hadn't given detailed instructions to the manufactory.

A second version from the same model, was delivered to the king in 1768. The red mosaic border and slightly different style of flower painting varies, but we do not know which palace it was made for:

The third variation, finished in 1770, was made for the Potsdam City Palace (demolished in 1958) with border sections painted in bright yellow. The flower painting now seems somehow to be harsher. The shades are no longer done in different colours, but in the same tone, and the contours are graphic. The dessert plate shows a fully pierced border and the gold sections look more like gilded furniture mounts than porcelain. The idea of the basket-like looking dessert plate was copied from the Meissen service of French shape which Frederick had bought eight years previously. This service was used in a very famous room, the Bronze Hall. All ornaments on the walls were not made of gilded wood or plaster but of gilded bronze and attached to the boiserie, exactly like mounts on a piece of furniture. The impression was sharper than similar decorations cut in plaster and might be the reason why the painting and shaping of this service is so harsh looking without any gentle areas of shading.

Much more important than these services and even better connected with its room was the KPM version of the *Japanese Service* which replaced the same named Meissen



Figure 8. Dessert plate from the second "Japanese service" for the Chinese House at Sanssouci model "Koenigsglatt"

KPM Berlin, 1769.

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ensemble in the Chinese House in 1769. We do not know exactly why this happened but it was at the time that a good friend of the king, who had served for a long time in the Prussian army and lived close to Sanssouci, left Potsdam. Lordmarchal Georg Keith went back to his ancestral home in Scotland. He and Frederick had often had dinner in the Chinese House and probably the table service, they had had so much fun using, now served as a goodbye present. All known items from this service, which appeared within the last few decades, have been offered on the British market. The decoration of the second, Berlin service had nothing to do with the first one: there, as we have seen, the connection to the room was done on an intellectual level, now it was the aesthetic aspect which dominated. (Fig. 8) The pieces show painted chinoiserie groups, taken from prints by Watteau and Huquier but mainly Boucher. These elegant figures and the three dimensional figure on the centre-piece, are stylistically close to the paintings on the ceiling and the gilded limestone sculptures around the Chinese House. The model of the dinner service was called *Neuglatt*, and the model for dessert had an additional rim, looking like a flower chain. This motif was taken from a Meissen model, namely the Vestunen-Service, which Frederick had designed himself. That's why the Berlin manufactory named the model *Königsglatt* or *Neuglatt with Kings Border*. The same chain-like element can be seen painted on the roof of the Chinese House, so that the aesthetic connections between Frederick's table services and their rooms were again highlighted. Looking at these details we can easily appreciate the king's passion for porcelain services and how his direct influence on their colourful decoration created an overall artistic concept.

Even if the taste and style during those 21 years of KPM

service production for Frederick the Great changed a little bit and the decorations were more and more reduced in colour or even executed *en camaïeu*, the tight aesthetic relationship between shape, theme and the colours of services and rooms they were destined for, continued. A good example from the late services, the so called mythological service, is one with brilliantly painted mythological scenes, delivered in 1783 and ordered for use in the *Neue Kammern* (New Chambers), an orangerie opposite Sanssouci palace, which was turned into a guest-house with banqueting halls in the 1770's. One of the main halls was decorated with gilded reliefs by John Davis and John Lorenz Rantz, depicting love stories from the metamorphoses by Ovid. The manufactory used prints illustrating Ovid as well, copying them in only one colour, iron red. This warm tone somehow mirrors the gilded reliefs, so that people sitting at table were surrounded by stories from antiquity wherever they looked.

One year before his death, Frederick ordered a service which was only finished and delivered after he died. It had an underglaze blue ribbon on the rim and gold laurel woven around it. This decoration is no longer a genuine Prussian style, only the flower painting is typical of this period in Berlin. The design takes elements from French porcelain, but elements, that were fashionable almost 15 to 20 years earlier. The glorious period of German rococo was now definitely over; and the king, whose taste had not only furnished almost 12 palaces and apartments and influenced some 25 porcelain services, was tired after 46 years of reign. What he left to the world is more than just famous buildings and gardens, splendid art collections or delicate aesthetic programs: it was his *Friderician Rococo* style. All we need to study this empire of taste is a couple of dinner plates. What a compliment to the great art of porcelain!