

The Masters of Versailles: Louis XIV and Louis XV

Were they porcelain lovers?

By Caroline Carfantan



The Hall of Mirrors of the Palace of Versailles © EPV / Thomas Garnier

When Chinese porcelain reached Europe, it fascinated the rulers and aristocrats because the material itself was unknown and the porcelain pieces extremely hard to procure. The first recorded piece of porcelain to have reached Europe in the 14th century is believed to be the Fonthill Vase. According to Michèle Pirazzoli-T'Serstevens, (*La céramique chinoise en Italie, XIIIe-début du XIVesiècle*, p78) it was presented in 1381 as a gift by the king of Hungary to the king of Naples and was later recorded as part of the collection of the Grand Dauphin, the son of Louis XIV. The Grand Dauphin was an avid collector of porcelain as were many members of the royal family. The inventory of Louis XIV (king of France from 1643 to 1715) was over 3,000 pieces, mostly Chinese. The king would drink his broth from a large Chinese porcelain cup with golden handles. But was Louis XIV a porcelain lover? Not really... when the court moved to Versailles in 1682, the flamboyant, 700-plus room royal residence, most of his porcelain collection ended up in storage. He was a politician and a businessman above all.

In 1664, 60 years after the English and the Dutch, Louis XIV and his finance minister Colbert decided to launch the French trading company, *la Compagnie Cie des Indes Orientales*. The goal was purely mercantile: having a direct supply of luxury goods from Asia and preventing English and the Dutch-imported Asian goods from draining French coffers. The king's role as protector of the arts meant supporting French artists' and craftsmen's creations through royal

orders, a role seen as more prestigious than being merely a collector of Asian lacquerware and porcelain. Even though Louis XIV had the largest collection of all his court's members, only a few of his porcelain pieces were displayed in his private apartments.

While no one could compete with the royal porcelain collection of Louis XIV, during his reign many noblemen became avid collectors of Chinese porcelain. This was mostly owing to an increase in the amount of porcelain reaching Europe in the 18th century, which resulted in a major price drop, making it more accessible.

Among the pieces in high demand in France at the time were armorial ones, either in porcelain from China or local, glazed earthenware known as *faïence* from French manufacturers. The 'passion' for armorial plates was directly



French royal armorial porcelain bidet
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linked to Louis XIV, not because he was using them for his dinner parties, but because he wanted to maintain a clear distinction between noble families who were 'gentlemen' versus those who had only lately acquired their titles via purchase (nobility in title only), strengthening his policy of a strict social hierarchy at the court of Versailles. This allowed him to keep the nobility penned up, to prevent them involving themselves in politics.

In the 1660s, he required all nobles to produce documentation proving lineage going back at least 100 years. His policy towards the nobles was also a means of improving the state's finances since during his reign over 50,000 titles were sold. Another financially driven decision that passed in 1694 was the royal order imposing the registration of coats of arms not only for noble families, but all families of a certain 'rank' known as the 'money nobility'. Many heraldic designs were specifically created for this registration. For many recently ennobled country gentry or members of the bourgeoisie, one of the ways to display social status and rank was armorial dishes and plates. Many ordered them from local *faïence* manufactories because of shorter delivery times and more affordable prices. However, those who could afford it, opted for made-to-order porcelain pieces from China.

This 'fashion' to display one's heraldry explains the abundance of armorial pieces from this period – many of them often fanciful and impossible to identify. Special orders were also made when guests of high rank were expected, as for example the recorded order in 1720 by Mademoiselle de Valois for the expected visit of the Princess of Modena (Queen Consort of England, Scotland and Ireland) to the castle of Nevers. This glazed earthenware set of *faïence* adorned with her coat of arms included, "two dozen plates, four bowls, two octagonal bowls, a large octagonal bowl, two pots with three octagonal plates, 12 chamber pots". The last item, an armorial chamber pot, may sound like the odd one out, but it was not an uncommon request at the time. While the *Compagnie des Indes Orientales* was under the governance of Louis XIV and later Louis XV, neither of them had private orders fulfilled by the *Compagnie des Indes Orientales*, but for one exception – made to order armorial



A view of the Palace of Versailles from the Petit Parc © EPV / Thomas Garnier

porcelain vessels with the coat of arms of Louis XV, but not in the shape and for the purpose one would expect.

In 1733, Louis XV commissioned 12 royal armorial bidets. This first order was delivered between 1735-1737. The bidets were most likely intended for his royal residences. One can assume that he was pleased by what he had received since in 1738 he ordered a whole armorial porcelain dinner service. There is no record of the list and number of pieces ordered but in general a service would be made up of at least 112 pieces, probably more if it was for the king himself. In 1740 the royal porcelain was shipped from China on two separate ships to prevent the whole royal cargo from being lost in the event of a shipwreck.

Most of the royal porcelain collection consisted either of gifts or made-to-order pieces bought from Parisian decorative arts dealers known as *marchands merciers*. Louis XV is believed to have bought several pieces from renowned dealers such as Hébert and Duvaux. However, only one piece, today known as the *Fontaine à Parfum* and part of the 2014 exhibition *La Chine à Versailles* can be traced back to his personal collection. It is a crackled *truitée gris* (trout grey) glazed celadon vase with a porcelain lid. The vase is embellished with bronze-gilt work in the *rocaille* style and was made to order in France while the vase was from Jingdezhen, China, dated to the Qianlong period. Two gilt-bronze animals enhance the decorative elements – a swan with wide-open wings, whose beak is the fountain's faucet and a crayfish on top of the lid. Gilt-bronze mounts were very fashionable in France in the 18th century since they harmonised with a room's other pieces of furniture, those with metal elements – clocks, dressers, wall lights, chandeliers and many more. They were also a display of wealth as gilt-bronze mounts on this scale were rather expensive.

While neither Louis XIV nor Louis XV was overly fond of Chinese porcelain and preferred to support the French *faïence* and later the porcelain industry, their policies and tastes nevertheless played a significant role in influencing what was produced by French artisans and manufactories, sometimes having French art imitate Chinese art, or in the adaptation of oriental materials to French tastes.



Fontaine à Parfum Louis XIV, Versailles, Musée National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon © RMN- GP (Château de Versailles) / Daniel Arnaude

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