

The Porcelain Museums of Meissen, Germany

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

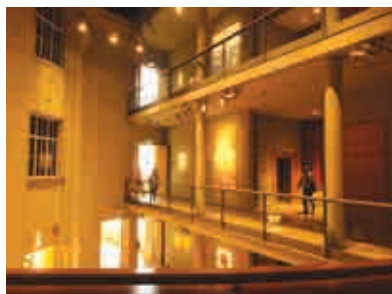
Meissen is a world-famous porcelain brand and it was in this town that a European finally discovered the secret of Chinese porcelain. The fascinating story of Johann Böttger is told elsewhere in this issue and, not surprisingly, is the subject of Meissen's two museums – Albrechtsburg Castle (at Domplatz 1) and a 20-minute walk away, the Meissen Porcelain Factory Museum (at Talstrasse 9).

Meissen is best approached by train from Dresden (a 30-minute trip) or Berlin (three hours) – a perfect day trip from either city. Begin at the Albrechtsburg Castle, often described as the town's 'Cinderella Castle' with its fanciful turrets and hilltop location. You can't miss it; it's like stepping back 500 years.



The Albrechtsburg Castle

The town itself could be described as a 'Hansel and Gretel' village with its storybook Saxon inns and cobbled streets. The castle's transformation by Frederick Augustus I (1670-1733), into a laboratory and subsequent porcelain factory is a story in itself, but today it is a museum that records the history of the noble Wettin families from the 15th century (when two brothers, Ernst and Albrecht of Wettin, decided to transform a former fortress – built in 929 by King Heinrich I – into a residence), as well as Böttger's tormented years failing to turn base metals into gold before discovering the composition and other secrets of porcelain.



The main gallery of the Meissen Factory Museum

The castle's awe-inspiring architecture is today testimony to the financial and cultural achievements of the time. The master builder, Arnold von Westfalen, commissioned by the Wettin brothers in the 15th century, created a residential castle with magnificent vaulted halls and grand spiral staircases. The brothers ruled jointly, which perhaps explains the castle's palatial proportions.

European history came alive for us as we wandered in jumbo-sized felt slippers over priceless parquet floors through room after room, many exhibiting portraits of the northern European brides who came to cement strategic alliances to ensure Saxony's future. As you wander through the many galleries of gilded murals, it is easy to lose yourself in the castle's history, forgetting that this was the birthplace of European porcelain – until you arrive at a series of ultra-

modern displays and interactive boards. They invite visitors to experiment, as Böttger once did, with varying proportions of China clay and silica, firing temperatures and clays – often with disastrous results! Turn the corner and discover a gallery of showcases of some of the Chinese porcelain and *dehua* pieces Böttger used as his models, plus some of his earliest results. The castle is open daily. There's also a small museum shop and café.



Portrait of Hedwig in Albrechtsburg Castle

Descend from Albrechtsburg Castle and follow the signs to the Staatliche Porzellan-Manufaktur Meissen factory. The factory opened in 1710 and has been producing world-famous porcelain ever since. The mural in the main entrance illustrates the series of Meissen trademarks (crossed swords) used throughout its history to thwart counterfeiters.



Interactive exhibition at the Meissen Factory Museum

There are demonstration workshops with public tours and audio guides in 14 languages, plus exhibition halls that cover Meissen's 300-year history with representative porcelain from its collection. And of course, there's an outlet and museum

shop, the latter with a disappointingly small selection of reference books on porcelain. For these, you're better off at the bookstores of Dresden or Berlin, but the outlet was bursting with Japanese and Korean tourists buying tea-sets and vases when we were there.

Unlike the generous display of Meissen ware at the Albrechtsburg Castle, the exhibitions at the porcelain factory had few historical pieces on display. A true porcelain enthusiast would be better off visiting the British Museum or the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, which display numerous Meissen pieces, or simply enjoying the castle on the hill behind.

Patricia Welch and Maura Rinaldi visited Meissen together this past spring.

All photos by the author