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Introduction

*T*here is something magical, collectors and holiday hosts agree, about porcelain. It is the finest, whitest, and most difficult to make form of ceramics, and it enraptured Chinese emperors long before the first pieces made their way to Europe in the fourteenth century. For four centuries, European royals and rich merchants cherished their imported porcelains, and entrepreneurial craftsmen mixed endless concoctions in the hopes of cutting in on this lucrative luxury trade. When a desperate Saxon alchemist finally hit upon an approximation of the Chinese recipe, his vessels were dubbed “white gold”: and in the small Saxon town of Meissen, in the heart of Europe, an industry, and obsession, was born.

The book tells the story of Europe’s reinvention of porcelain and concludes with the state of the fine ceramics industry today. It is a rich and complicated adventure, in which we not only visit lavishly decorated palaces but also linger in blisteringly hot craft workshops and spartan working-class homes. Though actual porcelain objects in all their splendor and strangeness play a central role, the focus is really on the people who made, marketed, and purchased them, whether they were princes, or peddlers, or middle-class housewives. While originally its uses were purely ornamental and decorative, over time, porcelain became a kind of “plastic,” one that could be molded to please any palate or pocketbook. A number of large-scale manufactories—some state sponsored, many not—offered busts of Frederick the Great and Napoleon, as well as Zeus and figures from the *commedia dell’arte*, classicizing toast racks, and “orientalizing” inkwells. Centuries later, under the Nazi regime,

one whole factory devoted itself to SS paraphernalia. Porcelains were made to imitate Parian marble, lapis lazuli, or, as in the case of the many dolls' heads made from the mixture, human flesh. And then there were the less visible uses of porcelain: in telegraph insulator tubes, in doorknobs and floor tiles, in false teeth. Across three centuries, from the eighteenth to the twentieth, in its central European birthplace *porcelain* has been a word to conjure with, and an everyday part of life. This, then, is the story of the rich and complicated lives people and porcelain have shared—down to the present moment, when the European chapter of this tale, at least, seems to be drawing to a close.

When I began this inquiry, I conceived of it as a part of my work on the modern afterlives of classical antiquity and the biblical Orient. My eye was caught by the spectacular confections that fill German (and non-German) decorative arts museums and so many exquisitely illustrated and researched exhibition catalogs. I owe most of what I know about porcelain as an art form to these sources.¹ In those pages I discovered a world of vast diversity—of styles, of objects, of uses—and began to be intrigued by the business history side of the story: who were these manufacturers, and who bought all this stuff, from squirrel-shaped teapots to semipornographic porcelain pipes? How were Rembrandt's masterpieces reproduced on tiny teacups, and just how did Meissen—originally founded by King Augustus II—survive and even flourish during the era of East German communist rule? Intrigued, I pursued my interests by delving into manufactory histories and then archival documents, and as I turned this material on my historian's wheel, I increasingly found that I had a wonderful means to tell a story about people, about states and markets, and about the changing nature of work and consumption over the last three centuries. This was, perhaps most importantly, the story of the struggle between a long-surviving mercantile economy and the arrival of new forms of capitalist production and management, and the story of the transformation of an aristocratic obsession into a bourgeois necessity—and finally into an unloved white elephant. Much more than describing the imagery and artistry of porcelains, I discovered I wanted to tell these wider stories, stories that offer us a fresh way not only to grasp porcelain's unique and

fascinating trajectory, but also to narrate German and central European history as a whole.

In keeping with this attempt to fuse porcelain's story together with the history of central Europeans since about 1700, this book does not pretend to be a commodity history of the sort that has taught us so much about the trades in coffee, tea, salt, sugar, and other transnational substances. Here, porcelain is featured, but firmly rooted in the wider context of economic and cultural developments, and treated as part of a network of other commodities, both those that competed with it (such as fine-grade earthenware, or faience, and much cheaper stoneware) and those that enabled its spread (such as coffee, tea, and etageres for its display).² By no means is this a truly transnational study, like the wonderful, related works of Robert Finlay, whose *The Pilgrim Art* tells the story of the earlier East Asian and Near Eastern traffic in porcelains, and of Erika Rappaport, whose work describes the British Empire's commandeering of the tea trade.³ I do, however, emphasize the reality that central European developments were very much shaped by consumption and production patterns elsewhere, including those in China, England, France, the Ottoman Empire, and the United States. Similarly, though informed and inspired by the now-extensive literature on material culture and consumption, most of which focuses on Britain, France, and the United States, I am not deeply concerned with porcelain as a "thing" or with theories of materiality.⁴ My method is rather guided by Daniel Roche's insistence that historians ought to pay more attention to "the real world of objects without high aesthetic value," and by Leora Auslander's advice that the best writing about material culture is that which "seeks to grasp how the large-scale transformations of the world are crystallized, reproduced, and changed in the small gestures of the everyday."⁵

This focus on porcelain and material goods generally is not an approach familiar to most historians of Germany, who, for understandable reasons, typically feel obliged to treat more serious, often political, subjects. While historians of Britain, America, France, and the Netherlands have shown us the great value and delight offered by histories of consumer goods, central Europeanists have been slow to devote attention to objects of minor aesthetic

value, or even to the history of consumption itself.⁶ Perhaps the presumption that a consumer culture did not exist even in West Germany until the 1950s—and arrived in other parts of central Europe only after 1989—has stifled interest in consumption in earlier periods.⁷ In Marx’s homeland, too, the *critique* of consumption has seemed more important to study than consumption itself.⁸ But times are changing. The study of food cultures—again mostly emerging from the United States, Britain, and France—is now attracting German historians as well, and innovative cultural histories have demonstrated the ways in which central Europe’s monarchies and regional states won nineteenth-century hearts and minds, partly through their inhabitants’ consumption of commemorative goods.⁹

Yet we still have a need for some close studies of courtly and urban consumption in the eighteenth century and especially for work that helps us understand the ups and downs of the transition from courtly to middle-class consumption across the “saddle period” of 1780 to 1830 or 1840.¹⁰ Even if consumption and material objects—as opposed to status, education, political party, or ethnicity—did not define central Europeans’ social roles until quite recently (and one may still debate how much of a part it plays today), it can nevertheless be held that consumer goods such as silk hats or porcelain have played an important role in shaping Germanness (as well as Czech and Hungarian identities, of which this author can say little but that they too need investigation). It would be wonderful to have studies of the Wilhelmine household as evocative and detailed as some of the recent works on the Victorian home.¹¹ I hope that this book may help to promote interest in this sort of inquiry for this region.

The biggest difference between this study and previous books on the subject, however, is that while it is partly a cultural history, *Porcelain* is also an economic and business history, one that illuminates German-speaking central Europe’s transition from a plurality of mercantile states to its imbrication in a globalizing capitalist economy. The book’s focus, then, is on porcelain as an *industry*, one in which German princes as well as private entrepreneurs from the outset have played a major role. Economic history, so profoundly important for understanding both cultural and political

developments, has been neglected by German and Austrian historians for some time and is in need of revival and reemphasis. By using some of its tools and rephrasing its questions, we can comprehend developments that still resonate strongly in our time. In the porcelain industry, for example, competition on price had already begun by the 1760s, and makers regularly committed what we would today call “industrial espionage.” Here we can see the special challenges faced by would-be private entrepreneurs in central European conditions, and how they responded—not always successfully—to the more advanced industrial societies to the west. *Porcelain* relates in concrete detail the particular history of central European industrialization and gives us a glimpse of the evolution of the highly skilled workforce and the elegantly designed consumer goods for which Germany, in particular, remains famous today. Economic histories do not need to be dry, and this one, it is hoped, makes it all the easier to understand the origins of the European consumer marketplace by coating the tale in the translucent splendor of porcelain.

Of course, there are many excellent economic histories of central Europe, and one might rightly ask: why does porcelain matter, as compared to iron, coal, steel, cotton, or beer, all commodities of greater consequence for the economy as a whole? Social historians might wonder why one should focus on employees in this semiluxury industry—who never numbered more than one hundred thousand—rather than on the millions of workers in other branches of manufacturing? Porcelain may have played a smallish part in gross national output, but it was a highly visible, mercantile product, for centuries mass-produced with large inputs of skilled artisanal labor but without the stereotypical steam-powered machines, making porcelain’s history a window on the trades and production practices of the Old Regime. Porcelain played a central role in putting the previously “backward” German states on Europe’s luxury-making map and, as one of the commodities first exported en masse, it helped to integrate the states that produced it into the wider global marketplace. Founded in 1710, Augustus II’s Meissen manufactory earned itself one of the first internationally admired “brand” names, and the strategies this and other mercantile makers developed to protect the

brand's reputation while also attempting to turn a profit foreshadow in remarkable ways the operations of luxury makers today. As a non-necessary consumer good, one associated primarily with women and family life, porcelain also takes us into the world of bourgeois self-presentation and individual (and especially female) choice, something impossible for historians of the coal or steel industries. And finally, the history of porcelain illuminates the many strategies state officials and business owners have attempted to tame the unpredictable capitalist marketplace, made more volatile by Germany's history of internal fragmentation, warfare, and dictatorship. Most economic histories do not emphasize the contingencies that make or break an entrepreneur, or an entire industry; this one—I hope readers will pardon the pun!—is all about that fragility.

Finally, perhaps the most unconventional aspect of this book is that its center of gravity lies not in the period usually identified as the heyday of central European porcelain production, the eighteenth century, but in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹² Many connoisseurs regard this period as one that—aside from a few Jugendstil masterpieces—produced only “flea market trash.”¹³ But it is in the post-1800 era that the history of the porcelain industry offers us real insight into the very long afterlives of mercantile economies and of forms of craft production, even as capitalist markets and mass production begin to take hold. Of course, porcelain is much too frail a foundation on which to build a comprehensive history of political and economic developments in Germany and Austria since about 1700. But time and again fascinating moments in this history flash past, illuminating in new ways familiar developments such as the rise of the nation-state and the ravages of the Great Depression, the power of cartels and the increasing centrality of advertising. I hope readers will be convinced that while there are other stories to be told through porcelain, the history of this industry tells us a great deal about the peculiarities of central European capitalism that have shaped German and European culture and economic development down to the present day.

At the end of this story, however, we find ourselves at a crossroads, at which porcelain and central Europeans seem to be parting ways. In the last

thirty years, and especially since the economic downturn beginning in 2008, the European porcelain industry has entered a period of severe crisis. This has to do partly with global competition and the relentless pressure underselling exerts on small, artisanal businesses, and partly with the lapsing of state subsidies for the arts and crafts. But lifestyle changes are also afoot, and for younger Europeans and Americans—many of whom are growing up without porcelain in their lives—the magical ambience of “white gold” has almost entirely vanished.

My own biography illustrates just how recently this special commodity lost its international allure. Although I grew up in a middle-class Californian household, from the time I was small I knew that one used the “fine china” for holidays and that grandmother’s porcelain figurines were to be admired only in their glass cabinet. When I married, I picked out a “china” pattern—in my case, a Viennese Secession pattern made by a Japanese firm—and now we use that set only for guests and holidays. We store our own motley collection of other porcelain pieces in my husband’s grandmother’s breakfast; this includes some coffee cups hand painted by my grandmother and my great aunt, but no figurines (I have always disliked those). All are terribly dusty and neglected; I suspect my children have never even noticed them. We eat our meals from mismatched earthenware dishes—some of them printed with the ubiquitous “blue willow” pattern, and others made by the Welsh Portmeiron factory. Had we come from more affluent families, or families with central European heritages, we might have chosen, or inherited, porcelain pieces made by Meissen, the oldest and most prestigious, German manufacturer, or Rosenthal, the masterful adapter of modern designs. Had we been married not in 1989 but in 2009, we might not have put any “china” at all on our wedding registry. Americans have traditionally cared less about the quality of their tableware than Europeans have, yet until very recently, porcelain was very much part of our cultural and economic history too. *Porcelain* thus ends with a poignant question: Has this story, which began with an alchemical miracle at Europe’s heart, and eventually embraced by so many, come to an end? I would hope not; but porcelain’s fate will be decided beyond these pages; perhaps, even, in the readers’ dining rooms.



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