

RÖBBIG · MÜNCHEN

Frühe Porzellane · Kunsthandel



TWO FAIENCE PARROTS

Circa: 1753

Höchst, before 1753

Wheel mark and decorator's "IZ"
for Johannes Zeschinger (b. 1723)
H. 20.5 cm

In the eighteenth century porcelain was used as the medium for a range and diversity of small Baroque figures far greater than would have been possible in traditional materials such as wood, ivory, or cast metals. Occasionally, the example of porcelain was followed in the technically somewhat simpler field of faience. Porcelain's abundant repertoire of forms was particularly rich in animals, especially in Meissen, as Carl Albiker showed in his book *Die Meissener Porzellantiere* of 1935. In the chapter "Das Tier in der Neuzeit" Albiker gave an exemplary account of the art historical roots of the animal figure, which remains a standard survey today. The Baroque porcelain menagerie features a great number of birds, amongst which the exotic parrots hold a special place.

The present text sees the grateful task of providing an introduction to this pair of faience parrots being gladly undertaken by an art historian. As the parrot figure with mushrooms growing on the tree stump bears the wheel mark and the decorator's sign "IZ," it is clear that it was made at the porcelain manufactory of Höchst in the electorate of Mainz. This must also be true of its companion piece: Although it is unmarked, the very fact that the two bear the same decoration makes it unthinkable that it can have been made anywhere else.

The Höchst manufactory was founded in 1746 and in its first years produced “only” faience. The artistic director of Höchst’s foundational period, Adam Friedrich Löwenfinck, called these products “Fayence-Porzellan,” using a double term that shows his special familiarity with the technical differences between these two forms of ceramics. This comes as no surprise, as he had once been an apprentice in the painters’ workshop at Meissen, where he will have gained a knowledge of porcelain; and he will most probably have acquired his knowledge of the faience technique at Fulda following his defection from Meissen in 1736. Löwenfinck’s greatest artistic achievement at Höchst was that he took the customary blue monochrome and extended it to match the range of colours he had got to know as an apprentice under Höroldt at Meissen. As a result his directorship at Höchst saw the manufactory producing faience wares decorated in much the same way as contemporary Meissen or Vienna porcelain. As a result faience from Höchst differed in appearance considerably from the faience produced at the same time in the manufactories near Höchst such as Hanau or Frankfurt. This is the key to the term “Fayence-Porzellan” and explains why Löwenfinck was entirely justified in coining it.

After having produced only faience in the first few years after the foundation in 1746, from 1750 onwards Höchst also produced porcelain and practised the two techniques alongside one another in the same manufactory until 1756, though the faience production was not officially terminated until 1758.

The letters “IZ” on one of the present parrots were the mark of the painter and decorator Johannes Zeschinger, who left Höchst in 1753 in order to seek his fortune at Fürstenberg. This helps us with the dating: the pair must have been made before 1753.

At this point it may be noted that the year 1756 saw the Höchst enterprise suffer its first bankruptcy, which led to the imposition of shorter working hours. By this time Löwenfinck was no longer at Höchst, having left in 1749 to move on to Strasbourg.

Now we must consider who is to be credited with the modelling of the present parrot figures. The first decade of Höchst’s existence saw four modellers working at the manufactory on the Main in the electoral prince-archbishopric of Mainz. The first name to be mentioned in this connection is that of Gottfried Becker, who most likely came to Höchst with Löwenfinck in 1746. The other three names are Simon Feilner, Carl Vogelmann, and Johann Christoph Ludwig von Lücke. After having worked at Meissen, Lücke appears not to have come to Höchst until 1750 and, like Vogelmann and Feilner, only made models for execution in porcelain. Gottfried Becker is thus the only one who comes into question. However, this attribution is not made solely on the basis of process of elimination, as Becker learned his trade under Kaendler and thus had been present in person at the coming-into-being of many of the Meissen animal models. This being the case, we may confidently name Gottfried Becker as the modeller of the Höchst faience animal figures, most of which were parrots (see Reber 1986, pp. 50ff.; Rückert 1990, pp. 102, 119, 171–74; Reber/Ohlig 2002, pp. 32ff.).

The parrots are both seen sitting on tree stumps. The fact that the figures are the same size and display the same colour scheme marks them out clearly as a pair. The backs are in blue and the breast feathers in a delicate pink that fades downwards to an uneven white; on the wings we see more powerful shades of blue, for the coverts, and also yellow and grey sections. Particularly striking are the large fields around the eyes, which in themselves are rather small and seem to be looking out somewhat questioningly at the beholder! The tree stumps are growing out of green ground and are painted in eye-catching browns. One notable feature of both figures is a striking degree of disproportion between the bird and its perch, for such a well-developed tree stump ought realistically speaking to be considerably bigger and most especially broader at the top than the parrot that is perched upon it. This, however, was clearly not a matter about which Becker was greatly concerned. On the other hand, it should also be noted that similar natural forms are also found on faience tableware, with spouts and handles of teapots, for instance, modelled as branches (see Reber 1986, pp. 85ff.).

As the present parrots are examples of just one of more than twenty Höchst parrot models, they form part of a remarkably large ensemble. Could the size of the ensemble perhaps reflect the fact that parrots are such

gregarious creatures in the freedom of their natural habitat?

Similarly, we have to ask why parrot models were produced in such a relatively large number at the Höchst manufactory while none were made at the other manufactories in the area, which around 1750 included the older manufactories founded in the seventeenth century, Hanau and Frankfurt, and also those that were about the same age as Höchst or a few years younger, namely Offenbach, Kelsterbach, and Flörsheim. From Flörsheim, which was founded in 1765 and interestingly was also in the electorate of Mainz, we do know a model from around 1780 of a parrot perched on a ball. In passing, it is worth noting that the Flörsheim manufactory was founded because of the termination of faience production at Höchst—in accord with the mercantilist principles of the time the Prince-Archbishop wished to discourage his subjects from buying faience from “abroad,” which in strict terms of borders and customs also meant Frankfurt, Offenbach, Hanau, or Kelsterbach (see Oppenheim 1962, pp. 76ff.; Schafft 1977, pp. 102–07). The Flörsheim parrot is thus a generation younger than the Höchst models from around 1750 and—in contradiction with the parrot’s gregarious nature—remained single. Nor are there any recognisable connections with any of the many Höchst models. Furthermore, the question who the Kelsterbach modeller was has never been asked, or at least never answered conclusively. How is it, then, that so many faience parrots were made at Höchst and practically none at the other manufactories in the area? For want of more specific information, we simply have to assume that the electorate of Mainz boasted customers with a specific interest in parrots while there were no such devotees in the counties of Hanau and Ysenburg (Offenbach), the free city of Frankfurt, or the landgraviate of Hesse-Darmstadt (Kelsterbach).

Another interesting question is why all these manufactories were located on the Main. The answer is a simple and practical one, namely, that the river provided the cheapest (and for the wood the only possible) means of transport. It would hardly have been possible for the large quantities of wood needed for the kilns to be transported with road waggons.

It must therefore be assumed that the electorate of Mainz contained one or more parrot-lovers, and that the parrots will have been kept in aviaries, so that the modeller from Höchst will have had the opportunity to observe living specimens. And as parrots are gregarious creatures, it is certain that the unknown enthusiast or enthusiasts will have ensured that the parrots had company. After all, parrots which are forced to live on their own very easily become neurotic, not only making loud and shrill noises that are out of character with their beautiful plumage but also tending to pull out their own feathers so that they end up looking like plucked poultry. Given that their charming aesthetic appearance will have been one of the principal reasons for buying these birds in the first place, it will obviously have been a priority to ensure their happiness by keeping them in company with others of their kind. As parrot-keeping will no doubt have been a very smart pastime, it will surely have appealed to those with pretensions to a certain standing in society. Which gives us further good grounds for supposing that the corpus of Höchst faience parrots was an artistic representation of the actual collection of a keen parrot-lover.

This will not only have enabled the Höchst modeller Gottfried Becher to do his work from nature, but also the decorator Johannes Zeschinger, who will have chosen his colours in accordance with the plumage of living specimens.

The exact location of the parrot aviary or aviaries in the electorate of Mainz remains a mystery, though it is most likely to have been in the capital city itself. One possible location is the spacious palace known as the “Favorite” that the Prince-Elector Lothar Franz von Schönborn built in the early eighteenth century opposite the mouth of the river Main in the south of Mainz, and which his great-nephew Elector Johann Friedrich von Ostein will certainly—given the unfashionable location of the historical electoral castle on the banks of the Rhine—have used as his Mainz residence. Sadly, as the whole “Favorite” complex was destroyed in 1793 in the siege of Mainz, we only know it from the series of copperplate engravings by Salomon Kleiner printed around 1723 (published in the

issue of *Lebendiges Rheinland-Pfalz* entitled “Favorita,” 117/6, 1980). In this context it should be expressly noted that it was during Ostein’s reign (1743–63) that the Höchst manufactory was founded.

Given that the animal figures very often display visible “joins,” that is to say, fine and usually almost invisible lines indicating the place where two mouldings were joined (“luted”), it may be of interest to consider the working procedures followed by the modeller and former. Although the “repairers,” who assembled the figures, will have taken the greatest care to smooth over the joins between the mouldings (“fettling,” it was called), they were still often just visible, which at least enables us to say that these figures, or at least the bodies of the birds themselves, must have been made with moulds. The pedestals in the form of tree stumps, on the other hand, were most likely moulded freehand, though even in this case there may well have been moulds for the basic shape. Even when moulds were used, however, it was still possible to effect small variants, as even when the paste came out of the mould it will still have been wet, making it possible, for example, for the bird’s head to be turned either to the left or to the right.

What was it about the parrots that made them so attractive, interesting, and desirable? Firstly, it was their strange, exotic character and the strikingly colourful plumage that was so different from that of local birds. But, in addition, parrots are also special because of their ability to repeat and memorise words or even short sentences. That this was common knowledge in the eighteenth century is shown by a fable by Antoine Houdart de la Motte that appeared in 1736 in the German-language edited collection of his fables published in Frankfurt and Leipzig. The third fable, entitled “Der Papagei” (pp. 9–11), tells of a man who sought consolation for the loss of his wife by purchasing a parrot: “He was immediately seen going off to the bird-seller’s, where there was an ample choice of birds with beautiful plumage and singing voices. Siskins, goldfinches, and nightingales—and most especially very many parrots.” While almost all the parrots but one emitted words ranging from the coarse to the positively vulgar, one parrot greeted him with: “I myself tend to think....” Duly impressed, the poor widower promptly bought it. When he got home, however, he made the sad discovery that these were the only words the parrot could utter. The language of the parrot was no more than an echo, and the phrase it had learned had nothing to do with any kind of intellectual capacity. Among other things, the fable proves the existence of bird-sellers in the 1730s. This perhaps comes as no surprise, as parrots were captured and brought to Europe from Africa and America for commercial purposes, as is confirmed by the famous Zedler in his *Universal Lexikon* of 1740 (see vol. 16, p. 614): “A foreign bird, commonly brought to us from America but also found in Africa and India.” It was also along the trade routes that the very name “Papagei” came to Europe, after having been derived from the Arabic word “babaga,” which itself in its turn was of Indian origin (see Lokotsch 1975, no. 147). It may be assumed that the parrots came to Europe by way of Spain. They did not find a place in the world of superstition (see *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, Berlin 2000, vol.6, cols. 1387/88), though they do appear in emblematic literature (see Henkel/Schöne 1996, cols. 801–05).

After this little excursion into the fields of economics and social history it is now time to return to the faience parrots under consideration. The present author mentioned them in his book on Höchst faience (Reber 1986, figs. 22 and 33). It is especially noteworthy that the bird figures of the Höchst faience period—which in addition to the many parrots also included a jay—had hardly any influence upon the Höchst models made for execution in porcelain after 1750. Only two porcelain models are known, one being a parrot perched on a fairly high and richly worked rocaille pedestal (see Röder/Oppenheim 1930, no. 30, plate 6; Reber 2006, vol. 2, pp. 16–19).

This investigation into two faience parrots has led us to ask many questions. In adopting this method, we have followed a very ancient maxim that Erich Kästner, in a publication entitled “Dedicated to Socrates,” summed up with the precision of which he was such an incomparable master:

“So it is: That which endures is always born of questions.

Think of the question of the child:

'What does the wind do when it is not blowing?' "

Horst Reber

