

Madame de Pompadour and the Sèvres Porcelain Factory: Cultivating a French Artistic Identity and Clientele

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Abstract

Sèvres porcelain emerged in France in the mid-eighteenth century as one of Europe's leading porcelain manufacturers. Scholars such as Donald Posner¹, Remy Saisselin² and Colin Jones³ have debated the influence of Madame de Pompadour, a noblewoman and mistress to King Louis XV, on the style and content of the factory's early products. Her role is often under-valued because of her gender, assumed frivolity, and seemingly indiscriminate spending. Dismissal of Madame de Pompadour mirrors the low regard in which art historians and consumers have held Rococo style and the decorative arts. This thesis will take into account multiple aspects of her cultural role to argue that she was a major patron of Sèvres. She helped Sèvres cultivate a uniquely French porcelain identity by introducing the artist Étienne-Maurice Falconet to the factory, and by encouraging the adoption of François Boucher's style and themes in factory works. By focusing on particular pieces that can be connected to her, this paper demonstrates the ways in which Madame de Pompadour directly and indirectly encouraged Sèvres porcelain's distinct character as the quintessential French decorative art form. Additionally, this argument refutes Posner's distinction between art and luxury objects that dismisses Madame de Pompadour's role in art history, and shows that she deserves to be considered a patron of 18th-century arts. Drawing on scholars such as John Shovlin⁴ and Mimi Hellman⁵, who have contributed to a re-examination of older prejudices against the Rococo and the role of luxury in the eighteenth century, this paper emphasizes that Madame de Pompadour's accumulation of Sèvres, along with the role of luxury and Rococo art of her day, played a role in Sèvres' early success.

Keywords: Sèvres, Porcelain, French Decorative Arts

1. Introduction

In the early 1740s in France, two brothers left their jobs at the Chantilly porcelain factory to start their own porcelain company. Robert and Gilles Dubois moved into a chateau in the town of Vincennes, France in 1741. They started producing and selling porcelain there by 1748. First called Vincennes, this factory relocated to Sèvres eight years later, soon becoming one of the most well-known porcelain manufacturers in the world. It produced these pieces all during its first fifty years.

Sèvres' continuity is surprising, given inauspicious conditions during this time. The factory emerged when China and the Meissen factory in Germany were already dominating the porcelain scene. For the first thirty years, its chemists could not produce a substance as sturdy as Meissen's and China's porcelain. And the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth-century overthrew the values of the French nobility, which was closely tied to Sèvres.

However, the European porcelain market resulted from myriad economic and social developments. Sèvres likewise ended up finding success through a multitude of advantages. Among these factors, scholars disagree heavily on one

figure in particular: Madame de Pompadour, a woman of the bourgeoisie class and King Louis XV's official mistress. Also called the Marquise de Pompadour, she acquired an astounding amount of Sèvres from 1748 until her death in 1764. She was bested in her collection size only by the crown itself. Evidence shows she had a hand in some of the factory's decisions. Yet the extent of her patronage is contested. Can we call her a patron of Sèvres porcelain, or was it coincidence that her artistic taste fell upon it, without intention to promote or push the factory to new frontiers?

Previous scholarship has recognized Madame de Pompadour's heavy financial support for Sèvres, but scholars frequently debunk her contributions as being conclusively significant in regard to eighteenth-century French visual culture. While some do not seek to downplay her influence, they still do not consider the broader significance of the aspects of Sèvres' production on which she made an impact.

This gap I have found is that we have not brought Madame de Pompadour's role at Sèvres into the context of the global porcelain culture spreading throughout Europe. We leave out of the discussion the distinct Sèvres identity within that material culture. It was an identity that drew on French culture and allowed the factory to persist.

This paper situates the manufacturer within the growing material culture of porcelain, considering how European porcelain looked before Sèvres began and the influences on that earlier porcelain. This study will then show how Sèvres was able to create a product that aligned with already-existing trends in the market while drawing on new influences that came from French culture itself. Madame de Pompadour helped push the factory toward that French influence. She also cultivated the particular clientele that allowed Sèvres to receive continuous support. She helped the factory develop its new artistic style in the porcelain medium and its target market through her patronage of French artists at Sèvres, her influence on factory decisions and her direct promotion of Sèvres toward her fellow noble company domestically and abroad.

2. Global Porcelain Trends

Chinese porcelain did not reach Europe until the seventeenth century. In 1603 the Dutch East India Company began importing enormous amounts of porcelain from China. Europeans then received Chinese visual motifs from the imported ceramics, foreign goods that contained an exotic and luxury aura. So, whereas previously European potters used colorful Italian ceramics as models, they began decorating instead in the blue and white Chinese style to give their wares a similar exotic appeal to their wares. Chinese influence was thus a firmly-rooted trend in the porcelain material culture by the eighteenth century.

3. Patronage of Falconet and Boucher

One of China's products was porcelain figurines, and to follow the Chinese porcelain trend European factories likewise made porcelain figurines. Before Sèvres, factories used Chinese models when they made figurines. This is evident in the French Chantilly factory's works from the early to middle eighteenth century, such as *Pair of Magot Figures* (Figure 1) and *Figure Seated on a Lion* (Figure 2).



Figure 1. *Pair of Magot Figures*, Chantilly Porcelain Manufactory, French, 1740, The J. Paul Getty Museum, <http://www.getty.edu/museum/media/images/web/larger/00675701.jpg>

<http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8D1Efjk2NjsgQi85cDV7QHkv&userId=gDVAeDQ%3D&zoomparams=>

Figure 2. *Figure Seated on a Lion*, Chantilly Porcelain Manufactory, French, 1750, The Cleveland Museum of Art, The Norweb Collection, 1983

In these figures' dress and facial features, we can see the inspiration from Chinese pieces such as the porcelain man in *One of a Pair of Mounted Groups* (Figure 3).

<http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8DdCZTURQjorQi85eT9wTHwtXH0%3D&userId=gDVAeDQ%3D&zoomparams=>

Figure 3. *One of a Pair of Mounted Groups*, Chinese Porcelain Figure, 1662-1772, The J. Paul Getty Museum

It was made toward the end of the seventeenth to the beginning of the eighteenth century, and exhibits similarly rendered features to the Magot and Lion figures: the long, curved eyebrows, bald head, round cheeks, prominent nose and ears with low-hanging ornaments and the floral pattern in the dress.

The Meissen factory did veer off of the Chinese figure features some, like in *Harlequin with Pug as Hurdy-Gurdy* (Figure 4).



Figure 4. *Harlequin with Pug as Hurdy-Gurdy*, Meissen, Germany, 1740, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Jack and Belle Linsky Collection, 1982, www.metmuseum.org

The figure looks more European in its solid color clothing, subtler cheeks and nose and a mustache, but the Meissen factory did not draw from a particular European art for inspiration as Sèvres did.

Sèvres took the art of figurines and applied a French artistic flare. Two artists were instrumental in this development: the sculptor Étienne-Maurice Falconet and the French painter François Boucher. Madame de Pompadour patronized both, and was thus instrumental in their involvement at Sèvres.

Falconet's contributions were in the realm of biscuit porcelain, which was unpainted and unglazed white porcelain. Sèvres decided not to paint their pieces because this kept the material sturdier in the intricate figurine forms. When Falconet was appointed in 1757 to oversee the biscuit workshop, his tasks were to oversee the shop's overall production and to stock the workshop with models after which the workers could design their pieces. While at Sèvres,

he instigated developments that helped the factory cultivate a niche in the market, in terms of both artistic inspiration and clientele. He actually brought in examples of French art as models.

Under Falconet, this resulted in an aesthetic very different from the type of work other French porcelain factories produced previously. The appearance of Sèvres follows the manner in which the French painter Boucher renders his human figures in paintings, rather than how the works were rendered in China. *Group of Children with a Dancing Dog* (Figure 5) was executed by Falconet after Boucher's designs, and *The Flute Lesson* (Figure 6) was likewise overseen by Falconet after a Boucher engraving.

<http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=4iFCeTg4NCciJy8laCt2KngqVXkgdlNydg%3D%3D&userId=gDVAeDQ%3D&zoomparams=>

Figure 5. *Group of Children with a Dancing Dog*, designed by Boucher and executed by Falconet, Sèvres Porcelain Manufactory, 1757-1759, Museo degli argenti

<http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8DdCZTUrOjorQi85eT9wTHssUXI%3D&userId=gDVAeDQ%3D&zoomparams=>

Figure 6. *The Flute Lesson*, Modeled under Falconet after engraved designs by Boucher, Sèvres Porcelain Manufactory, French, 1757-1766, The Saint Louis Art Museum, Marjorie Wyman Endowment Fund, the Mary Elizabeth Rosborough Decorative Arts Fund, and The Lopata Endowment Fund

Group of Children with a Dancing Dog reflects Boucher's typical themes of children and revelry, topics we do not see in Chinese porcelain scenes. *The Flute Lesson*, the figures' features reflect those in Boucher's paintings rather than in Chinese porcelain examples like the Chantilly figures. We can clearly see this influence when considering Boucher's *The Music Lesson* (Figure 7).

<http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=%2FThWdC8hIywtPygxFTx5TncmXnMpdQ%3D%3D&userId=gDVAeDQ%3D&zoomparams=>

Figure 7. François Boucher, *The Music Lesson*, 1740s, Musée Cognacq-Jay, Paris

The porcelain example *The Flute Lesson* echoes this painting in the small noses and mouths, curly hair, large downward-facing eyes, shape of the bodice in the woman's dress and narrower faces in comparison to the Chinese and Chantilly examples. Its musical theme also reflects Boucher's subjects, since he often painted music scenes. Boucher's painting style represented eighteenth-century French visual culture, since he was closely linked to the Rococo style that originated in France during this century.

These examples identify the French inspiration that Sèvres was taking on in the world of European porcelain, and to show that this practice had not appeared at other French porcelain factories previously. Even so, how was Madame de Pompadour able to play a role in bringing Falconet and Boucher to Sèvres' attention? In 1755, Madame de Pompadour had Falconet model *L'Amitié*, the figure of friendship, in biscuit porcelain with her own features (Figure 8). She wanted Sèvres to create nineteen copies of the sculpture, which she planned to give to friends as gifts, and she used Falconet's sculpture as the model for the others. Falconet presented his work to Sèvres, and two years later was appointed to help run the biscuit porcelain workshop.

<http://www.thebowesmuseum.org.uk/portals/0/Collections/Ceramics/1997-54-cer.JPG>

Figure 8. *L'Amitié*, modeled after the sculpture by Étienne-Maurice Falconet, 1755, The Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle

The marquise introduced the Sèvres factory to Falconet and instigated his appointment there. In regard to Boucher, Madame de Pompadour heavily patronized the painter and consequently linked him to the visual culture of the French noble court. He painted the most famous portrait of her (Figure 9), including in it visual references to her access to luxury, through her lavish dress and gilt-bronze framed clock behind her, and references to her cultural knowledge

through the book in her hand, the music scrolls on the floor and the prints and drawings by the dog. As mistress to King Louis XV, the marquise occupied the most prestigious social position in the French elite world, so her patronage of Boucher indicated he could be trusted to represent this elite world artistically.

<http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8CJGczI9NzldLS1WEDhzTnkrX3kpfh%2Bfy8%3D&userId=gDVAeDQ%3D&zoomparams=>

Figure 9. François Boucher, *Madame de Pompadour*, 1756,
Alte Pinakothek, Munich

Madame de Pompadour's patronage of François Boucher had labeled him an acceptable artist for the French court of wealth and luxury. This elite world was Sèvres' target market, and the marquise strengthened the factory's relationship with this audience to increase its business.

4. The Factory Location Moves

From the start, Sèvres was expensive. Not only was it financially accessible only to the very wealthy, but also by incorporating the French Rococo style, Sèvres' spoke to the values of the noble and royal classes under the *ancien regime* of Louis XV and his noble court. His rule was characterized by excessive wealth, luxury and beautiful material goods that projected that access to luxury. Rococo reflected these noble class values through its association with excessive ornament and flourishing forms, characteristics we can see in the triangular pot-pourri vases (Figure 10). Previous French porcelain companies had not incorporated this French visual style in such distinguishable ways. In fact, Madame de Pompadour actively promulgated this kind of French porcelain coming from Sevres within the wealthy, high society realm of Europe. She did so through direct involvement in factory decisions and events.

<http://www.dia.org/object-info/247a091b-6c8d-4c8f-89a5-b830ce8b8196.aspx?position=119>

Figure 10. *Triangular Pot-Pourri Vases*, Sèvres Porcelain Manufactory, 1761

The factory began in the town of Vincennes in 1748, but moved to Sèvres in 1756. It was located between Versailles and Paris, the two cities from which the factory's clientele was mostly likely to be coming. Clients were either French royals or nobles, or they were wealthy foreigners who purchased through the Parisian art dealers; in any of these cases, the proximity to both Versailles and Paris wonderfully facilitated factory visits. The King could have considered the benefit of this location on his own, but it is important to note Sèvres' proximity to Madame de Pompadour's chateau at Bellevue, at present-day Meudon. She built Bellevue in 1750, six years before the factory moved to Sèvres. It is likely she brought about the move, convincing Louis XV to move the factory so that it could be nearer to her. Furthermore, the marquise gave to the manufactory the rights she owned to a glass-bottle factory in the town of Sèvres so that its workers could live there. She not only urged the king to move the factory to Sèvres, but she also helped to settle into the new location.

This example demonstrates how Madame de Pompadour was included in the efforts of the crown and the factory to serve a specific clientele and make Sèvres a strong economic venture. There were still further ways in which she promoted Sèvres within its customer niche and spread her taste throughout France and beyond.

5. Spreading her Taste throughout France and Beyond

Around the same time the factory moved to Sèvres, the king and the marquise began holding annual Sèvres sales in the apartments at Versailles during the weeks of Christmas and New Year's Day. Intended to showcase Sèvres' new designs for the upcoming year, these sales drew a crowd from all over Europe, attracting wealthy foreign nobles and rulers. Once again, we see an instance where Sèvres' intended clientele are drawn in, this time through prestigious

invitation to browse and buy the company's newest products. It appears that Madame de Pompadour was actively involved in the preparations and support for these essential annual events. In a letter she wrote in 1759 to a French minister to Denmark, she mentioned that she sent to the Danish comte de Moltke four pieces of Sèvres in a certain green color, adding that the color would not be revealed until the end of the year at the Versailles sales. It is likely this color was similar to the magnificent green in the triangular pot-pourri vases. She chose to send the Danish noble pieces from Sèvres that showcased its ability to produce brilliant new colors. In so doing she also advertised the Versailles sales early on in the year to pique the foreign comte's interest. She actively drew in Sèvres' wealthy and powerful clientele from beyond French borders. Additionally, primary records from the factory show that Madame de Pompadour would use Sèvres for diplomatic gifts to foreign rulers on behalf of herself and the king. In these two examples, she was broadening the noble and royal patronage of Sèvres past just France. She nonetheless saw the importance in Sèvres' continued popularity at home as well.

As the King's mistress, Madame de Pompadour was often present at his state dinners, which other important diplomatic and noble figures attended. The Marquis d'Argenson, a French statesman and contemporary of Madame de Pompadour, noted in a letter that, "At the King's suppers, the marquise [Madame de Pompadour] says that it is unpatriotic not to buy it, as long as one has the money."⁶ This record shows that Madame de Pompadour did not only directly urge her noble company to buy Sèvres, but she also recognized that it was a matter of being patriotic; to buy Sèvres was to show loyalty to the French crown. In the growing world of European porcelain, as several other countries including Germany, Holland and England were producing their own by the end of the century, Madame de Pompadour saw Sèvres as the epitome of the French identity in porcelain. To support Sèvres was to promote what was distinctly French about it, and therefore support the factory's unique contribution to the global porcelain market. It contributed an expensive and luxurious porcelain for the wealthy and powerful figures in Europe that played to pre-existing market trends while incorporating a French flare.

6. Conclusion

In this paper it was argued that Madame de Pompadour promoted the French artistic influence and cultivated the noble and royal market that together created a niche for Sèvres porcelain. Targeting wealthy aristocrats and rulers both domestically and abroad, Sèvres created a product that was unparalleled in the world of porcelain with its brilliant ability to create colors and its *Rococo* elements that represented luxury. Madame de Pompadour directly moved along the artistic developments at Sèvres and helped strengthen its relationship with its clientele through the following: patronage of French artists and support of the Rococo inspiration; gifting of Sèvres to wealthy foreign figures; and active persuasion of her French company to purchase Sèvres. These were all practices that helped Sèvres sustain its wealthy and high-profile clientele as well as maintain an artistic identity unique to French porcelain that was inspired by French art.

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