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**Nature, Porcelain and the
Age of the Enlightenment.**

A Natural History of Early English
Porcelain and its place in the
eighteenth century home.

Paul Crane

The Age of Enlightenment in eighteenth century Europe established rules and rationalism in science and nature which swept aside the former superstitions and old medieval orders to highlight reality and learning within the educated classes. This in turn led to a fantasy of playful imagination that was to be the playground where Rococo design and form could firmly take root. Therefore just as Porcelain was a new European product and invention of the Enlightenment, it also became a substance with which modellers and designers, inspired by and developing the Rococo style, could play and entice.

Europe in the mid eighteenth century was riveted by an insatiable appetite for knowledge, exploration and discovery. This forged a new scientific approach, which was to spearhead the Age of the Enlightenment. Through new eminent publications, science and nature became the pinnacle of taste and fashion amongst the aristocracy, who decorated their homes with this organic natural force of life.

It is important to understand that the development of porcelain in England is directly inspired by a natural yearning to question and learn from the scientific breakthroughs and new understandings, which categorise this period of learning and discovery. Exploration and science, both essentially funded by the ruling classes now began to go hand in hand with new styles that were to capture the imagination of artists, sculptors, modellers and their patrons of the period. This led to a transformation of the theatrical baroque into a new and natural Rococo style that endorsed man's triumph over nature.

It was at the Chelsea manufactory, the partnership of silversmith Nicholas Sprimont and Charles Gouyn, that porcelain was developed first in London. Nicholas Sprimont had the necessary knowledge of form and design, to appeal to the potential aristocratic clientele and Gouyn had the knowledge of paste and glaze. The new manufactory, located at the house leased from Mr. Anthony Supply in Church Lane Chelsea provided an unparalleled opportunity for enlightenment and the arts to fuse together. One can only imagine the experiments and work needed to succeed in this venture but on



the 5th March 1745 the Daily Advertiser stated that 'Chelsea China is arrived to such perfection, as to equal if not surpass the finest old Japan'. The key to success in a venture of this sort, the creation of a new and novel material, was a certainty of aristocratic support and custom, this could not be relied upon due to the fickle nature of fashion and could only be achieved with a style that would appeal to the higher orders of society or designs that would easily understand, the use to begin with of silver forms.

The first period of the Chelsea Manufactory spans the period 1745-49, during which time, the new and novel products were marked with an incised triangle, the alchemical symbol of fire. When observing these extremely early and rare surviving pieces of this first period, it is quite clear that they are derived from a working knowledge of the silver form and that it is evident that the modellers have an extraordinarily high

Figure 1. Chelsea figure of a Chinaman, c. 1745-49. Private Collection.

degree of sculpting experience. The characteristics of the porcelain are a thinly pliable body easy to throw and model and therefore also would take moulded details easily. There was an addition of lead and crushed glass or cullet, which creates a high translucence. When light is transmitted through the glazed pieces one can see pinpricks of luminosity amongst a myriad of bubbles through the paste, producing a highly tactile and alluring body similar to that of the contemporary products of Vincennes manufactory. Nicholas Sprimont was certainly still attached to his Silversmith business in Soho, therefore it is not surprising that exact counterparts found their way into Chelsea porcelain. The unique Chelsea example of a figure of a Chinaman fisherman (Fig. 1) this Rococo piece, formerly belonged to Dr. F. Severne Mackenna². and now resides in a 'Chinese Room' of an English Private Collection, dating from circa 1745-49, it is marked on the underside with an incised triangle mark. The applied shells on this piece are moulded from life and are placed together with seaweed recreated by the use of sieved clay. Juxtaposed playfully with these forms is a Chinaman surmounting the group, or rather the European vision of such a character, teetering over the shells in search of Neptune's fish. This group illustrates a dichotomy of enlightenment and playful rococo asymmetry. The shell forms transfer from silver inspiration and knowledge of casting but also from the insatiable appetite for the collecting of shells and understanding conchology. Therefore through Man's quest for knowledge and science through travel and exploration the Age of Enlightenment was responsible for bringing nature indoors and was recreated within the living space. As man chose to study nature, life was breathed into the Country homes of the ruling elite. A very rare silver shaped Chelsea marine salt form, (Fig. 2a) the marine shell inspired receptacle supported on two dolphins, circa 1745-49 and outside decorated probably at the workshop of William Duesbury, due to the characteristics of the rendition of the seaweeds.

The pen and ink drawing (Fig. 2b) shows a very similar design attributed to Nicholas Sprimont, within the Victoria and Albert Museum³. The shell moulded Chelsea creamboat, (Fig. 3), sits on a naturalistic shell and rockwork base, it is highly naturalistic rococo but

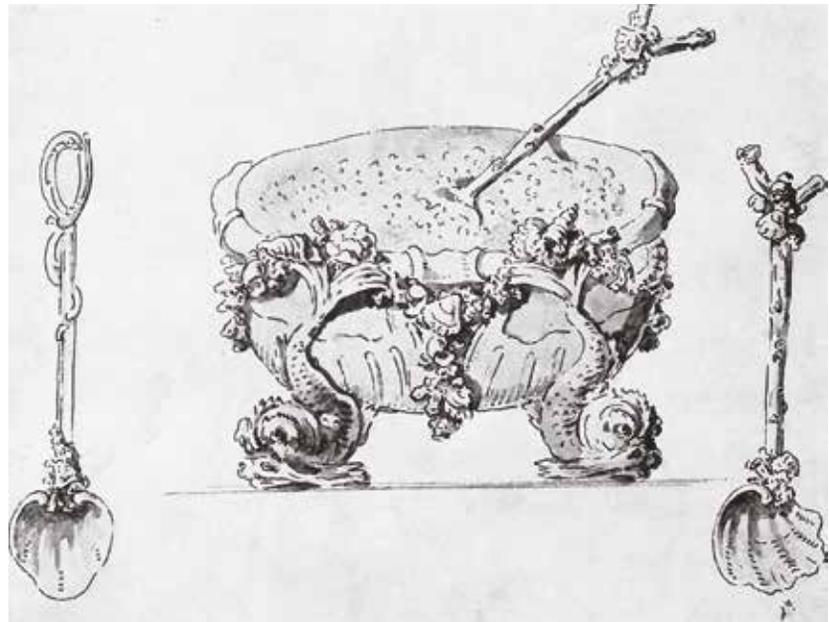


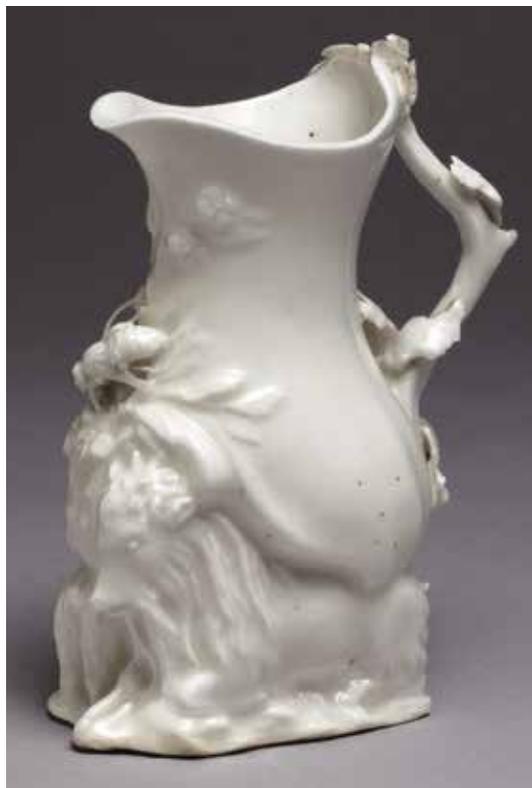
Figure 2a. Chelsea Salt, outside decorated, c. 1745-49. Courtesy Christies.

Figure 2b. Pen and Ink design for a salt cellar and two spoons, attributed to Nicholas Sprimont. Victoria and Albert Museum.



Figure 3. Chelsea cream jug, c. 1745-49. Private Collection.

Figure 4. Chelsea Goat and Bee Jug, c. 1745-49. Private Collection.



extending into fantasy with the tentacle of the octopus that lurches from the inside of the shell to form the handle of this extremely interesting form, dating from the incised triangle period.

The Goat and Bee jug, (Fig. 4), illustrates a playful dichotomy of naturalism and fantasy, dating from circa 1745 and bearing the incised triangle mark it is a breathtaking example of symbolism, fantasy and naturalism mixed into one virtuoso model. Sadly history dictates that we do not know the gifted modeller that was involved with making this or any other Goat and Bee Jug, however its comparison to the reclined goats at the base of the silver Ashburnham centrepiece⁴, bearing the mark of Nicholas Sprimont himself, is very close indeed. Beneath the spout the cast bee carefully walks across flowering sprigs of roses. The slight asymmetry of the essentially sturdy baluster form is imbued with a chinoiserie element of the design that mixes with the natural rococo element. If one views the piece from above the outline of the top of the jug appears to suggest the outline of a peach shape, with the necessary leaves issuing from the upper terminal of the oak sprigged handle to enhance this intricate suggestion. Related to this model and dating to incised triangle period circa 1745-49, is the highly naturalistically modelled model of the Finch, (Fig. 5) perched within a leafy tree stump that is effectively used as a kiln support to augment the natural capriciousness of this model. The details of the feathers, beak and extended claws of the model lead one to deduce that this bird has been carefully observed at close quarters.

The man who in some way was responsible for this keen interest in naturalism and therefore source of modelling, was George Edwards known as 'The Father of Ornithology'⁵. He was appointed Librarian to the Royal College of Physicians in 1743 on the recommendation of the great naturalist and collector, Sir Hans Sloane. His great enlightened publication was the 'Natural History of Uncommon birds' published in 4 volumes between 1743 and 1764. This astonishing set of volumes recorded some 600 species, including the Cock and Hen 'Cold Finches' (Fig. 6) manufactured at Bow circa 1752 and taken in inspiration from pl. No. 30, Volume 1. Edwards visited Hans Sloane on a weekly

basis⁶ and it is easy to see that the relationship was one of pupil and mentor. Sir Hans Sloane had, during and after his travels, collected an astonishing array of natural specimens, the dried and preserved examples are now seen in the Enlightenment Galleries of the British Museum and the Natural History Museum. He also had collected a good many live specimens of birds and animals, which were kept in a Menagerie at Cheyne Manor⁷. It was here that Edwards recorded and sketched many of the examples that we see in the four Volumes that make up the *Natural History of Uncommon Birds*, which in part he dedicated to Sir Hans Sloane and in part to God.

Edwards notes that these particular birds were lent to him by Taylor White Esq, 'who procur'd them from the Peak in Derbyshire'⁸. These porcelain examples modelled to an astonishingly high degree of natural accuracy and left in the white, show that the Bow manufactory, like that of Chelsea had access to his volumes. They provided a natural source of examples, recently recorded and modelled from life that perfectly captured the imagination of the new scientifically minded aristocracy and its quest for enlightened knowledge. The Chelsea model of the Owl, circa 1750, (Fig. 7) taken from Volume 2 pl. 60, 'The Great Hawk of Horned Owl', shows the skill and faithfulness of the modeller to the original plates.

Botanical Designs and Leaf Forms

The Raised Anchor period at Chelsea coincided with the falling out or disagreement between Sprimont and Gouyn. By this time the manufactory had become extremely successful and in need of growth and expansion. There was a need to streamline useful production to include a wider variety of new and simpler forms to sell in larger quantities to an eager larger audience. In order to facilitate the new business strategy, the manufactory moved to larger premises on Lawrence Street⁹. Mr. Supply's house continued to be leased from 1751 where the training of young modellers and painters took place.

On the 9th January 1750 the *Daily Advertiser* published a notice: 'The Manufacturer of China ware at Chelsea... has been employed ever since his last sale in making



Figure 5. Chelsea Finch, c. 1745-49, ex Rous Lench Collection. Brian Haughton Gallery.

Figure 6. Bow Cock and Hen Cold Finchs, circa 1752. Brian Haughton Gallery.



Figure 7. Chelsea Great Hawk or Horned Owl, c. 1745-49. Private Collection.

Figure 8. Chelsea 'Scalopendrium' tea bowl and saucer, c. 1749-52, raised anchor mark. Private Collection.



a considerable Parcel...it will consist of a variety of services for tea, coffee, chocolate, porringers, dishes and plates, of different forms and patterns, and of a great variety of pieces for ornament in a taste entirely new¹⁰. This new taste heralded a departure from silver forms although inevitably some that were easy to produce remained. The pronounced change in decoration and ornament was the Japanese taste or kakiemon palette, however it also coincided with a new and better recipe and mix of paste. The new and improved body included more lime, calcined shells, less lead (therefore more pliable) and tin oxide was also added to the glaze creating a whiter body. Leaf forms within this period of production include, the Scalopendrium moulded teabowl and saucer, (Fig. 8) complete with the new mark of the stamped and applied oval raised anchor in crisp low relief. A notable feature of the new mix are the translucent 'moons' or air bubbles that are characteristic of those pieces marked with the raised anchor.

The village of Chelsea was sited outside of the city of London on the banks of the river Thames, thus the soil was extremely fertile being rich with alluvial deposits. In the mid eighteenth century this area also consisted of tree nurseries, which were depositories for seedlings brought back from foreign scientific exploration abroad¹¹. There were also market gardens for the production of every kind of vegetable and fruit needed for the hungry environs of London. Sir Hans Sloane, the great long lived naturalist lived at Cheyne Manor and leased the area of the Physic garden to the Royal Society of Apothecaries in perpetuity. It was here that Phillip Miller came, on the recommendation of Sloane, to become Head Gardener or Curator. Miller's sister-in-law Sarah Kennett was married in 1738 to a highly skilled botanical artist George Dionysius Ehret. Ehret was chosen to illustrate a number of plates in Phillip Miller's book, 'Figures of the most beautiful, useful and uncommon plants described in the gardener's dictionary', published in London in 1752. These illustrations taken from the first of Miller's two volumes, together with those taken from *Plantae Selectae*, published at intervals by Dr. Trew of Nuremburg from 1750, both provided a design source for the Chelsea painters to copy. This taste for the decoration of natural



specimens spawned a range of naturalistic tableware that was to be fittingly named in 1758 after Sir Hans Sloane himself. The term was coined through an advertisement in Faulkner's Dublin Journal 1st to 4th July 1758 for an auction of Chelsea Porcelain at Mr. Young's rooms at Cork Hill. 'Three fine tureens, one in curious plants enamelled from Sir Hans Sloanes plants'.

Plants such as Cactus, Pineapple, Banana and Cocoa tree, previously all unknown to society, were presented in full bloom as well as with their fruits on the new Chelsea porcelain, bearing the red anchor mark. An original drawing by Ehret of the Coffee Bush¹². Is copied, by the painters at Chelsea on the 'Hans Sloane' botanical plate (Fig. 9).

At this time the paste was further refined and enhanced with a tight fitting glaze over a closely grained and finely mixed body, which took crisply moulded detail extremely well¹³. Chelsea became a melting pot of Enlightened Rococo naturalistic design as the role of nature breathed life as if from a Garden of Eden upon the tables of the Aristocracy, keen to show off their level of nurture afforded by these interpretations of God's dazzling abundance. The melon scalloped shaped dish (Fig. 10) and the Tiger lily soup plate (Fig. 11) are some of the most dazzling examples of the refinement of painting at this heady period. The Pineapple



Box (Fig. 12) and Asparagus Box (Fig. 13), show the ingenious inventiveness of the modellers with the three dimensional form, in creating naturalistic tureens, boxes and covers which enhance the trompe l'oeil effect, see the Artichoke box (Fig. 14) and the Cauliflower, melon and lettuce boxes (Fig. 15). Tureens were now produced to hold a relevant part of the conceit of their image and form, to the great entertainment of the dinner guest, whether fruit, vegetable or animal. The pineapple, a symbol of abundance and wealth, for example, could be

Figure 9. Acacia, coffee bush, Chelsea plate, c. 1755, red anchor mark. After G.D.Ehret drawing. Private Collection.

Figure 10. Chelsea dish, c. 1755, red anchor mark. Private Collection.

Figure 11. Chelsea soup plate, c. 1755. Ex Earls Egremont. Petworth House. Private Collection.



Figure 12. Chelsea pineapple box, cover and stand, c. 1755, red anchor marks. Private Collection.

Figure 13. Chelsea asparagus box and cover, c. 1755, red anchor marks and numeral 12. Private Collection.

Figure 14. Chelsea artichoke, c. 1754-56, red anchor marks. Lot 47 on 10th Mar. 1755. 'Two fine Artichokes, second size'.

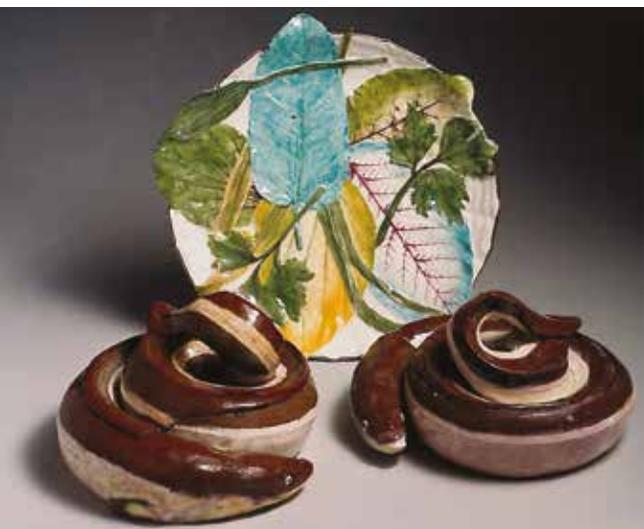
Figure 15. Chelsea cauliflower, melon and lettuce boxes, c. 1755. Red anchor marks.

filled with crystallised fruit pieces or exotic sorbet. The Chelsea Sale catalogue of 1755, the first day commencing 10th March, is a roll call of delicate delights and naturalistic forms, using as inspiration the produce which literally grew around the manufactory itself¹⁴. The sale conducted by Richard Ford in his rooms at the Haymarket, was the production of the previous year at Chelsea which was sold to the aristocracy and wealthy classes who were keen to acquire pieces for use in their dining rooms.

Zoomorphic Forms

Meat was one of the greatest forms of luxury within the eighteenth century home and the serving and presentation of it on the tables of the aristocracy demanded a stage set of the highest calibre. The dining rooms of their stately homes showed a land of prosperity and plenty which included game related objects which endorsed their landed estates. Chelsea porcelain provided models, forms and shapes for every occasion and thereby marked the passing of each season. Hunting particularly was a symbol of power and social standing and the now refined porcelain body found its perfect use within forms representing the chase and captured quarry for the table. Some forms took their inspiration from Meissen, perhaps through objects owned by Sir Charles Hanbury-Williams, at Holland House. Chelsea took their inspiration and





literally grew it to invent a vast new range of forms and shapes, which heralded a natural rococo born out of enlightened publications. The Eel boxes (Fig. 16), Plaice tureen (Fig. 17), Partridge Boxes (Fig. 18), Duck tureen (Fig. 19), Swan tureen (Fig. 20), Hen and chicks tureen (Fig. 21) and Boar's head tureen (Fig. 22), show models found within the surviving 1755 sale catalogue.

The largest tureens at Chelsea include the Swan, (Fig. 20), the Hen and Chicks, (Fig. 21), and the Boar's Head, (Fig. 22). They embrace both the Zoomorphic and the Leaf forms. The Hen and Chicks rests on the brightest of the leaf and floral stands, it is also one of the largest. The Swan and Duck tureens, together with the Fish and Eels, all rest on stands moulded with strewn river plants and their leaves, no doubt procured from the banks of the Thames near the manufactory. The illusion of the creatures themselves is strengthened by the overlapping of the leaves or shells on the rim of the stands, thus enhancing their naturalistic effect. The Boar's Head tureen, (Fig. 22), rests on a stand formed as a quilted shield, moulded with an exotic scimitar and quiver of arrows. This may be a representation of the shield armour with which the aristocrat or hunter would dodge the charging boar or it may be representing a



Figure 16. Chelsea, eel boxes, covers and stands, c. 1755, red anchor marks, 15 pairs sold in 1755. Brian Haughton Gallery.

Figure 17. Chelsea plaice tureen, cover and stand, c. 1756. Trustees of the British Museum.

Figure 18. Chelsea partridge tureens and covers. March 10th 1755, 'Lot 11, Two fine partridges for desert'.

Figure 19. Chelsea duck tureen, cover and stand, c. 1754-56. Red anchor marks and numeral 26. Lot 65 10th Mar 1755, 'Four very fine ducks in different postures'.



Figure 20. Chelsea Swan tureen, cover and stand, c. 1755. Cecil Higgins Museum.



Figure 21. Chelsea Hen and Chicks Tureen. Lot 50, 10th Mar. 1755. Private Collection.



Figure 22. Chelsea Boar's Head tureen, cover and stand, c. 1755. Winterthur Museum, Campbell Soup Tureen Collection, bought by Mrs. Dorrance.

sugar sculpture. If one considers the arrows as not just the means of the killing but symbolic of the attributes of Cupid, it may be that this boar's head could be symbolic of the culmination of the chase of love as well as the hunt.

The rococo style in England begins with an interpretation of frivolity seen through Chinese interiors and began to interplay with naturalism through the interest of the Cabinet of Curiosity. From the invention and manufacture of porcelain in London in the 1740's, where silver greatly influenced the form of objects in order to appeal to the aristocratic clientele, the rococo found a new and novel medium with which to conjure. A natural interest in Science, fuelled by exploration and discovery, influenced a transformation of the English rococo style from frivolity and fantasy to a real depiction of nature, essentially through the publication of Natural History, Botanical and Ornithological source books. The successful refinement of the porcelain body allowed for the modelling of large scale naturalistic and Zoomorphic tureen forms that were 'As Big as Life'¹⁵, that brought God's creation into the English interior, in all its dazzling organic splendour and array.

1. Elizabeth Adams. 2001 'Chelsea Porcelain'. Ch 2. P.20.
2. Dr. F. Severne Mackenna. 1948 'Chelsea Porcelain the Triangle and Raised Anchor Wares'. Fig 36.
3. Elizabeth Adams. Ch. 2 p. 18.
4. Dr. Philippa Glanville. Victoria and Albert Museum Exhibition Catalogue, 'A Grand Design'. No. 147.
5. Through to 8. Generally. Stuart Mason. 1992 'George Edwards, The Bedell and his Birds' Royal College of Physicians of London.
9. Elizabeth Adams, Ch. 4. And Bevis Hillier. ECC trans Vol 20. Pt 3. 2009 'New Findings on John Offley and Anthony Supply'.
10. Elizabeth Adams, Ch. 6. Generally.
11. Hazel le Rougetel. 1990 'The Chelsea Gardener, Phillip Miller 1691-1771' Ch. 4 beginning at page 28.
12. Natural History Museum. Image 022215. Sketch 215 Ehret collection of original sketches. Botany Library. Unbound.
13. Dr. F. Severne Mackenna. 1951 'Chelsea Porcelain The Red Anchor Wares' General comments and observations. Ch. 17.
14. John Austin, 'Chelsea Porcelain at Williamsburg'. Appendix, Chelsea 1755 Sale Facsimile Copy.
15. John Austin, 'Chelsea Porcelain at Williamsburg'. Appendix, Chelsea 1755 Sale.