



WHITE AND GOLD

Pierre Gouthière's Candelabras for the Duke of Aumont

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Louis-Marie-Victor-Augustin d'Aumont de Rochebaron, the Duke of Aumont (1709–1782), created an important collection that was much admired in France and abroad, but he was an unusual collector for his time.¹ Instead of paintings, sculpture, and antiquities, he collected vases, furniture, columns in rare stones, porcelain, and other objets d'art. He kept many of the pieces he acquired intact, but, in a few instances, he commissioned the architect François-Joseph Bélanger (1744–1818) to design bases or mounts for them, these to be made in gilt bronze by the great chaser and gilder Pierre Gouthière (1732–1813). When the duke died, in 1782, his collection was sold at auction. A catalogue of these “precious works”—organized into 447 lots—was written by the painter Alexandre-Joseph Paillet (1743–1814) and by Philippe-François Julliot (1755–1836), a *marchand-mercier* (dealer in luxury furniture and objets d'art). In their introduction, the two experts describe the duke's collection as “the most precious collection that an inherent taste, guided by the Enlightenment and the works of the most distinguished artists, has shaped in a long time.”² Lot 148 is described as follows:

Two oblong urns of old white Saxony [porcelain], holding a three-branch candelabra, each arm with foliate scrolls and cornucopia ornamented with fruits, used as drip pans, and other ornaments; these two urns are decorated with a border of gadroons, three scrolling ram's heads, ivy swags, vine leaves with grapes and projecting feet, [which have] bracket decoration and supports in the form of double deer's feet in matte gilt bronze. G. Height 16 *pouces*.³

Fig. 1
Detail of Pair of Candelabras
with Mounts by Pierre Gouthière
1782
Hard-paste porcelain and gilt
bronze, 17¹/₈ × 6⁷/₈ × 6⁷/₈ in.
The Frick Collection; Gift
of Sidney R. Knafel, 2016
(2016.6.01)

The description by Julliot and Paillet—which was not accompanied by an illustration—indicates that the objects were candelabras made of Meissen porcelain and three-branched gilt-bronze ornaments composed of arabesques, ram’s heads, and cornucopias full of fruit. At a height of 16 *pouces* each, or about 17 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches, the candelabras were relatively small (fig. 1 and frontispiece). We also know that the gilt-bronze mounts were by Gouthière because Julliot and Paillet explain that works by Gouthière are identified by the letter “G” at the end of the entries.⁴ Acquired at the sale by Aumont’s son, Louis-Alexandre-Céleste, Duke of Villequier (1736–1814), the candelabras have spent the last two and a half centuries in private collections. In the last forty years, they have been sold twice at auction—first in Paris in 1974 and then in London in 2008.⁵ Neither of the sale catalogues mentions their illustrious eighteenth-century provenance as part of Aumont’s collection or the attribution of the mounts to Gouthière. The candelabras were “rediscovered”—and ultimately acquired by The Frick Collection—and their provenance recognized in 2016, during the preparation of *Pierre Gouthière: Virtuoso Gilder at the French Court*, a monographic exhibition organized by the Frick.⁶

The story of the genesis of this exquisite pair of candelabras is a window onto the life and culture of the French aristocracy a few years before it fell in 1789 with the capture of the Bastille and the beginning of the revolution. It also offers unique insight into the practice of adding lavish gilt-bronze mounts onto European and East Asian porcelain, modifications that altered both their original meaning and function.

The White Porcelain Vases: A Journey in Early Eighteenth-Century Saxony

The two white vases transformed into a pair of exquisite candelabras by Pierre Gouthière presented a puzzle to be solved (fig. 2). In the eighteenth century, gilt-bronze mounts were made to fit the vases and not vice versa. Therefore, the vases existed before the conception of the candelabras, which dates to sometime in the early 1780s. They were integrated into the design of the objects before becoming the support for, and offering a striking contrast with, the ornamented three-branch candelabras in gilt bronze beautifully chased and gilded by Gouthière. The initiative for their transformation likely came from the Duke of Aumont—the owner of the vases and, ultimately, of the candelabras—or his architect, François-Joseph Bélanger, who designed many of Aumont’s objets d’art. How much did Aumont, Bélanger, and Gouthière



Fig. 2
Left, Vase detached from its gilt-bronze mount (frontispiece, *left*)
 German, Meissen manufactory
 ca. 1713–22
 7⁷/₈ × 3⁷/₁₆ in.
Right, Vase detached from its gilt-bronze mount (frontispiece, *right*)
 Probably French, Samson manufactory, ca. 1880–1900
 7³/₄ × 3¹/₂ in.

know about these vases? Did they believe them to be valuable and therefore suitable for extraordinary mounts, or did they instead view them as relatively common wares that could be enhanced with gilt garniture?

“Old white porcelain from Japan” and “old white from Saxony”: Issues of Connoisseurship in Eighteenth-Century France

Gouthière was still working on the gilt-bronze mounts for the candelabras when Aumont died on April 14, 1782.⁷ For this reason, they do not appear in the inventory of the duke’s belongings that was prepared by Julliot and Paillet.⁸ Instead, they were appraised by the casters François Rémond and Jean-Claude-Thomas Chambellan Duplessis, who focused on the gilt-bronze mounts, referring to the vases simply as “old white” (*ancien blanc*).⁹ In the sale catalogue Julliot and Paillet prepared for the duke’s collection, they are called “old white from Saxony” (*ancien blanc de Saxe*)—meaning Meissen porcelain—but are placed in the section titled “old white porcelain from Japan” (*porcelaines d’ancien blanc du Japon*).¹⁰

With the volume and variety of East Asian porcelain pieces that had reached France by the second half of the eighteenth century, connoisseurs, collectors, and experts began to classify them, but their loose categories led to many mistakes.¹¹ In his *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (Political and Philosophical History of European Trade and Trading Companies in the West and East Indies), published in three editions between 1770 and 1780, the Abbé Guillaume Thomas Raynal (1736–1796) explained that “connoisseurs divide Asian porcelain into six categories: the so-called ‘trouted’ porcelain, old white [porcelain], porcelain from Japan, porcelain from China, Chinese-style Japanese porcelain, and Indian porcelain.”¹² He noted, however, “All these designations are determined more by an expert eye than by any specific characteristic.”¹³ According to Raynal:

Old white [porcelain] is definitely of great beauty; whether one observes the sheen of its glaze, or the biscuit. This type of porcelain is precious, quite rare and of little use. The paste is very slight, and one can only make small vases or figures, and small pagodas, which are suited to this flaw. They are sold as porcelain from Japan, even though some, very beautiful, are certainly made in China.¹⁴

The porcelain pieces that Raynal and his contemporaries considered “old white [porcelain] from Japan” were, in fact, made in Dehua in China and exported in large quantity to Japan before reaching Europe. They are known in France as *blanc de Chine* (white from China) (figs. 3, 8, 14–16). Raynal later wrote that identifying the origin of a piece of porcelain as China or Japan was difficult and quite subjective, depending more on the quality of the piece than on where it was made, adding, however, that “anything that is called porcelain from Japan is always porcelain of great beauty.”¹⁵

The reason the small white vases described as “old white” and “old white from Saxony” were classified as “old white porcelain from Japan” in the 1782 Aumont catalogue can be understood from a catalogue written in 1767. It was published for the sale of the collection of Jean de Jullienne (1686–1766), director of the royal Gobelins manufactory and one of the great eighteenth-century art collectors,¹⁶ and was authored by Philippe-François Julliot’s father, Claude-François Julliot, a prominent *marchand-mercier*. The catalogue served



Fig. 3
Figure of Guanyin
Chinese, Dehua, ca. 1675–1725
Hard-paste porcelain
17½ × 4¾ × 4¼ in.
Porzellansammlung, Staatliche
Kunstsammlungen Dresden
(PO 8638)

Fig. 4
Figure of Guanyin
German, Meissen manufactory
1713–25
Hard-paste porcelain
14¾ × 3¾ in.
Porzellansammlung, Staatliche
Kunstsammlungen Dresden
(PE 2188)

as a model for later auction catalogues, including the one for the Duke of Aumont’s collection, written by his son. In 1767, Claude-François wrote that “the taste for old white porcelain from Japan (i.e., *blanc de Chine*) enticed several manufactories to attempt to imitate it.”¹⁷ Although he felt that the European manufactories failed to “ever reach the beauty, the fine and soft grain of that porcelain,” he included their productions in the section of East Asian white porcelain of the Jullienne catalogue, and his son did the same in the Aumont catalogue.¹⁸ In addition to pieces made in hard-paste porcelain at the Meissen manufactory (founded in 1710, near Dresden, in modern Germany [fig. 4]), Julliot also included pieces in soft-paste porcelain made since the early

eighteenth century in France at the manufactories of Mennecey, Saint-Cloud (fig. 5), Chantilly, Vincennes, and later at Sèvres. Soft-paste porcelain—also known as artificial porcelain—was made without kaolin, the white substance essential for the production of true Asian-type hard-paste porcelain. Because of its composition—which included a mixture of fine white clay and ground glass—soft-paste porcelain cannot withstand a temperature above 1100°C without cracking. Therefore, pieces in soft-paste porcelain are white but not translucent and never fully vitrified like hard-paste porcelain fired at the high temperatures of 1250–1400°C.

Julliot's harsh judgment of the production of European manufactories, especially at Meissen, was not, however, shared by all French experts. By the mid-eighteenth century, some of them had begun to consider Meissen porcelain decorated in the Kakiemon style superior to the Japanese porcelain that it imitated; others admitted that Meissen porcelain could pass for "old porcelains" (*anciennes porcelaines*, i.e., East Asian porcelain).¹⁹ By the 1770s, they had all begun to change their thinking about the porcelain made at the Meissen manufactory, which had, in the sixty years since its founding in 1710, produced many pieces in a wide range of styles. Pierre Remy, another important *marchand-mercier*, wrote about lot 797 in the catalogue of the collection of Blondel de Gagny sold in 1776: "Two faceted urns of Saxon porcelain, imitating old porcelain. These two pieces . . . are remarkable for the beauty of the paste and the beautiful colors."²⁰ These were sold for 420 *livres*, which was equivalent to the annual salary of a craftsman at the time. Julliot's description, in 1782, of the Frick's two small vases as "old white from Saxony" communicated to prospective buyers at the Aumont sale that such vases were no longer produced at the Meissen manufactory and were therefore rare and more difficult to acquire. By associating them with fine and rare East Asian porcelain "from Japan," Julliot probably knew that they were unusual examples of Böttger porcelain, the earliest examples of Asian-type porcelain produced at the Meissen manufactory about 1713–20.

"Böttger Porcelain" and the Discovery of Porcelain in Europe

The story of the production of porcelain in Europe is a tale of passion and obsession, ambition and pride, persistence, and some good fortune. Before it was manufactured in Europe in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, porcelain was not only admired for its rarity and beauty but was also intriguing



Fig. 5
 Figure of a Chinese Man
 French, Saint-Cloud
 manufactory, ca. 1730–40
 Soft-paste porcelain, h. 7 in.
 The Metropolitan Museum of
 Art, New York; The Jack and
 Belle Linsky Collection, 1982
 (1982.60.259)

for the mysteries surrounding its production. The small number of pieces that reached Europe before the fifteenth century were owned by a few discerning princes.²¹ During the next two centuries, royals and determined entrepreneurs throughout Europe were eager to learn the arcanum, the formula of the porcelain paste, as well as the secrets of the firing process. In time, they succeeded in creating beautiful soft-paste porcelain pieces, like those produced in Florence in the second half of the sixteenth century under the patronage of Francesco I de' Medici or during the early eighteenth century in France at the manufactories of Mennecey, Saint-Cloud, and Chantilly and later at Vincennes and Sèvres. It was in the service of Augustus II, Elector of Saxony and later King of Poland, known as Augustus the Strong (1670–1733), that the goal of making porcelain of the kind made in Asia was finally achieved.