

Elaborate Purveyors Of European Culture

By RITA REIF

IN 1715, AFTER CENTURIES OF FAILED ATTEMPTS at making porcelain, Europeans finally mastered it at Meissen in Saxony. Rulers throughout the continent proceeded to build or buy factories to make their own porcelains. And then they dazzled their dinner guests with the most spectacular color-splashed tureens and figurines — status symbols of the ancien régime.

In the 19th century, European monarchs sent pieces abroad as gifts to foreign dignitaries and sold vast quantities at home to the expanding middle class. These later pieces, though less esthetically refined than their predecessors, were more technically sophisticated. And the images embellishing their surfaces appealed to a public increasingly interested in travel, politics and Greek and Roman mythology.

Porcelains, it seems, sold European culture to the world 200 years ago, in much the way that Hollywood films promote America globally today. And nowhere was this influence more evident than in France. There, the royal factory of Sèvres set the style in porcelains for the continent and elsewhere from 1760 on. After Sèvres's wealthiest clients were killed or banished in the French Revolution, bankruptcy threatened, and new ways of making and selling porcelain had to be found to save the company.

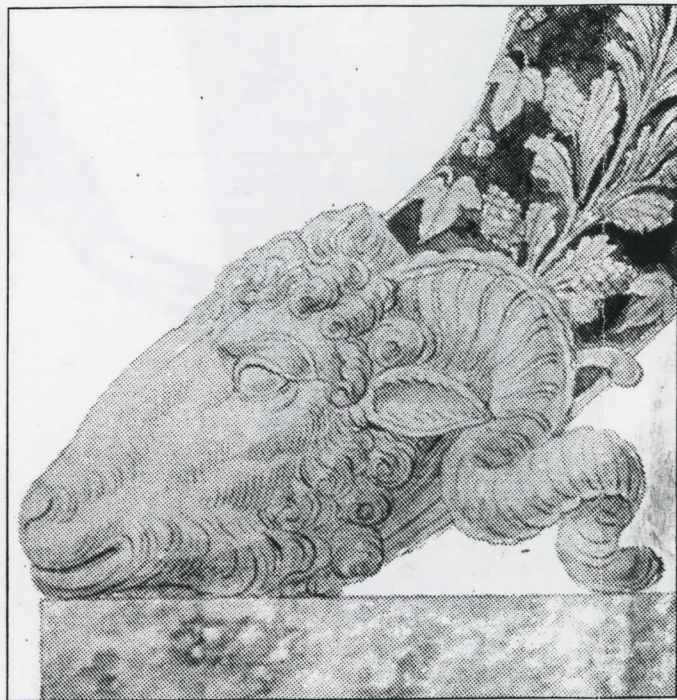
Sèvres's transformation was accomplished by its new director, Alexander Brongniart, a savvy scientist with a head for business who was appointed by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1800. Brongniart modernized production

**Porcelains were prized
by royalty, but it was
Napoleon, while he lasted,
who gave them a boost.**

by refining the formula for porcelain. Then, with a work force downsized to one-quarter what it had been before the revolution, he developed designs that became so popular, they were copied throughout Europe.

The story is told for the first time in this country in "The Sèvres Porcelain Manufactory: Alexandre Brongniart and the Triumph of Art and Innovation, 1800-1847," an exhibition at Bard Graduate Center, at 18 West 86th Street in Manhattan, through January. The 110 drawings and watercolors in the show were selected by Tamara Préaud, its curator, from the National Manufactory of Sèvres, where she is the archivist. Most of the 50 objects in the show were lent by 12 American museums.

Napoleon gave a jump-start to 19th-century production at Sèvres. He ordered huge vases and dinner



STATUS SYMBOLS A cream jug, right, in the shape of a ram's head and, above, a detail of a watercolor of it.

services emblazoned with scenes of his military triumphs in Italy, Egypt and Austria, works that brilliantly fulfilled his propaganda goals. Images of ancient Saharan ruins, Etruscan landmarks and historic sites in France were soon seen on the tables of Napoleon's supporters.

And as the Emperor's popularity grew, Sèvres added portrait busts of Napoleon to its line, in a marble-like white biscuit porcelain, boosting the company's sales. The most unusual tableware evoked nature, antiquity or both, as can be seen in drawings of a fanciful pineapple-like sugar bowl and a melon-shaped teapot with a black-snake spout embellished with an Etruscan scene.

THE SOCIAL WHIRL THAT CHARACTERIZED Napoleon's reign ended when he was exiled to Elba in 1814. During the politically conservative 30-year period that followed under Louis XVIII, Charles X and Louis Philippe, Sèvres's tableware was decorated with less distinctive images, mostly of birds, flowers and landscapes. Porcelains continued to reflect the dominant architectural styles, evolving from the strong, simple forms of the Greek Revival period to the fussier imagery that exploded in the decorative arts during the Gothic Revival.

Watercolors in the show date from 1816 that detail how the watercolors look on porcelain from cups to plates. (Such scenes were rare in the Bard exhibition.) The basic ingredient of the exhibition is the painting of the mining scene, the basic ingredient of the exhibition. The finest example is a watercolor of the shape of a ram's head and base of lapis lazuli.



Photographs by Bard Graduate Center

show include a marvelous series of porcelain was made at Sèvres. produced on various pieces of trays, none of which is on display.) The first in the series is a of kaolin, a fine white clay that is of porcelain. Others show kilns, rs at work in their studios and nself, depicted studying several sroom.

udes only four objects that show ked when reproduced on porce- e, an exquisite cream jug in the ooks as if it were carved from a d gilded on the handle and the

Sèvres rarely duplicated its important objects. In fact, only three of the ram's-head jugs were known to the show's organizers until the eve of the opening, when the owner of the jug in the show came forward.

"We received the flier advertising Bard's show, and I did a double take," said Leon Dalva, an antiques dealer at Dalva Brothers on East 57th Street in Manhattan. "On it was a watercolor drawing of a cream jug we had in stock." He immediately called Derek E. Ostergard, the associate director at Bard, to share his discovery.

"Shows are meant to flush out objects, but it rarely happens," Mr. Ostergard said. "Re-establishing the ties between the original ideas on paper and the actual objects, which often have been dispersed for decades, even centuries, is a curator's dream come true. We got lucky." □