

13. Conclusion

Only a brief period in the creation of Augustus the Strong's porcelain collection could be investigated in this publication, but the two years between 1716 and 1718 form a phase that was fundamental to its composition.

Concerning the changes to the royal porcelain collection in the second decade of the 18th century, the question remains as to why Augustus the Strong began amassing so many porcelain objects from 1715. One can certainly imagine that more than anything else, porcelain as an exotic luxury good not only represented wealth and affluence, but also demonstrated a ruler's knowledge of foreign countries and their products. Elisabeth Schwarm assumes that Augustus' initial plan was to create a porcelain palace – or at least a central porcelain repository – in Warsaw, but that the uprising of the Polish nobility nipped this idea in the bud, resulting in the king relocating his porcelain palace to Dresden.

Augustus the Strong visited the porcelain cabinets of Caputh Palace, Oranienburg Palace and Charlottenburg Palace in Prussia in July 1709. Not long before, in January 1708, Johann Friedrich Böttger (1682–1719) and Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus (1651–1708) had reported the successful discovery of the porcelain formulation and a suitable glaze in March 1709. Now, Augustus the Strong could count on an unlimited supply of porcelain. "The fact that this coveted material, for so long closely associated with wealth, status and prestige, was now becoming available to him in apparently unlimited quantities, resulted in him becoming even more focused on porcelain than was normal for princes of his time".²¹¹ The king had already started purchasing larger quantities of East Asian porcelain when he bought the Dutch Palace in 1717. The sudden spike in additions to the collection around 1714–1715 must be seen in the context of the development of the Meissen manufactory and its ability to produce porcelain of appropriate quality.

With the manufactory nearby, Augustus the Strong had a powerful means to produce the much-desired material himself. By 1715, the manufactory was capable of creating products of a quality fit for a king. In Warsaw, Augustus received an extensive shipment of wares from Meissen during the spring of 1713, followed by other deliveries in 1714 and 1715. The certitude of having an independent and functioning porcelain factory was probably the catalyst that prompted the assembling of an extensive collection of East Asian porcelain and the presentation of porcelain as an exceptional feature at the Saxon-Polish court.

Augustus had East Asian porcelain bought in Holland to inspire the Meissen potters with new shapes and colours. The increase in acquisitions from 1715 should thus also be viewed in the context of imitating and even surpassing the quality of East Asian porcelain. That the Meissen imitations of East Asian porcelain were among the reasons for Lagnasco's acquisitions between 1716 and 1718 is confirmed by a statement in his letters, in which he praises the discovery of "eight porcelain objects which, apart from their beauty, have the advantage of being unique in their appearance". He continues by recommending that these could "serve as a model to exercise the ability of the heads of the Meissen factory to make other pieces in imitation of them".²¹² Likewise, a specification of an acquisition from the dealer Abraham Thiens (n.d.) in Amsterdam lists "1 white teapot, very rare, chosen explicitly to make known the difference between the white and the enamels of Saxony and those of India".²¹³

The porcelain collection in the Dutch (and later Japanese) Palace attracted a considerable amount of attention and admiration during Augustus' lifetime. In 1726, Dresden's local chronologist Iccander (Johann Christian Crell, 1690–1762) estimated the "incomparable Japanese porcelain, decorated with gold, silver and precious stones" in Augustus the Strong's palace as numbering "almost one million [pieces]".²¹⁴ This estimation, although grossly exaggerated,²¹⁵ can probably be attributed to how the porcelain was presented in the palace.

A 40-page description of the Dutch Palace in the Palace Inventory precedes the actual record of the artworks. It elaborates on the decoration of the rooms in detail. Thus, the inventory is not only a testimony of the artworks in the Dutch Palace, but also a documentation of the satisfying manner in which they were displayed, which had been undergoing revision for a while. A recurring ornamental feature is the outfitting of walls with mirrors, which formed the backdrops for the porcelain objects, creating the illusion of an endless amount of porcelain in the king's possession. One can imagine the effect this had on the viewer.

With regard to the detailed description of the furnishing of the Dutch Palace, the question remains whether Count Lagnasco was aware of the king's plans and the reasons behind his mission to acquire artworks in the Netherlands. In his letters to Lagnasco, Augustus the Strong issued instructions and demanded

information, but of course never explained himself or his intentions. Lagnasco repeatedly made suggestions about how the objects he found could be used, but from his writings, it is not completely clear if he was aware of the king's projects. In November 1716, he wrote about the goods available in the Netherlands, opining that: "there would be enough [porcelain] [...] to furnish a large apartment in Indian or Chinese [style], in the same fashion as your Turkish one".²¹⁶ Lagnasco was probably referring to the Taschenberg Palace, the former residence of the king's mistress, the Countess of Cosel (1680–1765). Around 1707, the Countess already had one room in the palace decorated in an exotic style.²¹⁷ After she was banished from the court in 1713, the Taschenberg Palace reverted to the Saxon court and was decorated in Oriental fashion around 1715/16.²¹⁸

The absence of any reference to the Dutch Palace in his letters indicates that Lagnasco might not have been aware of the king's intentions to buy and furnish this particular building. Furthermore, the chronology of the correspondence reveals that it is unlikely that he selected the pieces with this location in mind. Lagnasco's last letter to the king was written from The Hague on 5 March 1717. Augustus the Strong purchased the Dutch Palace shortly afterwards in April 1717,²¹⁹ around the time the first delivery of 70 crates and barrels arrived in Dresden. Knowledge of the Dutch Palace as a central porcelain repository did indeed reach the Netherlands, but only later, as can be deduced from the reference in the correspondence of Jean St. Martin of August 1717.²²⁰ Therefore, it can be assumed that Lagnasco did not buy porcelain with a definite location in mind, but that he probably was aware of the general idea to have a building furnished entirely with porcelain.

It is clear from the letters and accompanying specifications that Augustus the Strong sought to purchase large pieces in particular, and that he did not limit the search to Amsterdam or The Hague alone. The hunt for monumental blue-and-white vases of a certain (yet unspecified) height expanded to Delft and Rouen, but ended without any results after five months in November 1716. Augustus the Strong proposed sending a ship to China immediately after the unsuccessful quest for porcelain in Europe. It is astonishing that he even considered the investment of buying, equipping and sending a vessel to Asia along with capable agents, solely to buy porcelain unavailable in Europe. This confirms the already well-known appreciation the king had for East Asian porcelain, but also underlines the shortcomings of European porcelain production in 1716. While able to apply the desired designs, the potters in Delft and Rouen refused to accept any assignments that exceeded the technical possibilities regarding dimensions. The Meissen manufactory on the other hand was capable of producing white porcelain of appropriate quality, but was less advanced in terms of both polychrome decoration and the production of monumental objects.

Faced with these limitations, it becomes more understandable why Augustus the Strong considered buying porcelain directly in Asia.

The design and decoration of porcelain in terms of colour appear to have been another factor of special importance to Augustus the Strong. From the specifications sent with the first lot, it can be gathered that above all, he valued the acquisition of multipartite table services with uniform or matching decorations. Six table services ranging from ten to 40 places are mentioned in specification Sub. Lit. A. alone,²²¹ which were assembled with great effort from several dealers. The specification does not provide any information about the functions these services finally fulfilled. They were most likely either used to decorate the rooms on the ground floor of the Dutch Palace, or to furnish the *Schauküchen* (show kitchens), located in the basement of the palace from 1723. The homogenous or colour-coordinated designs of the objects made the pieces interchangeable, allowing for more creative scope in the eventual decoration process.

Both Count Lagnasco and the St. Martins regularly praised certain objects as being “very old” (*très ancien* or *vieille*), usually when referring to blue-and-white wares. What exactly was considered “old” remains unspecified. A reference to “old porcelain called Gracht”²²² gives reason to believe that some objects belonged to the group of Kraak porcelain, blue-and-white wares produced in Jingdezhen during the Wanli (1573–1620), Tianqi (1621–1627) and Chongzhen (1628–1644) periods. The objects’ age and the acquisition of objects already considered antiquities in the early 18th century thus appear to have been another important factor in Augustus the Strong’s selection.

In 1719, the chronologist Iccander reported on the “newly established factory, where the locally invented porcelain and Terra Sigillata are being produced”, and assessed the quality of products as “if not superior, then at least equal to the foreign Dutch [products]”.²²³ Contemporary commentaries like these underline the Meissen manufactory’s competitiveness regarding the quality of their products. The acquisition of East Asian porcelain for the purposes of examination, adaption and improvement by the Saxon potters certainly played a role in the selection of objects, as can be understood from the explicit statements in the correspondence. Lagnasco furthermore emphasises the “uniqueness” of the objects he selected as models for the manufactory, although this vague statement unfortunately does not enable any identification.

As explained in chapter 5, Count Lagnasco fulfilled all the requirements of a good agent, and he had an excellent network of dealers. The recruitment of Egidius van den Bempden as a Dutch correspondent proved to be a true stroke of luck for the ambitious acquisition plans of Augustus the Strong. Due to his position as one of the directors of the Amsterdam chamber of the VOC, Van den Bempden probably had access to insider information about the East

Asian porcelain imported privately on VOC ships. There is no information as to whether he managed to reduce any of the prices that the dealers were demanding. However, Van den Bempden was influential enough to have export duties lowered or even waived, and could make use of his connections to quicken the processing time of passports or export-related paperwork. The storage of acquisitions in Van den Bempden's own warehouse simplified the logistics by providing a central location for the packing, loading and shipping of all the goods. His connections with correspondents in Leipzig ensured that the wares were safely delivered to Saxony. Furthermore, payments to individual dealers and the complicated money transactions using bills of exchange could be executed swiftly and flawlessly by an experienced merchant such as him.

It is unknown why Van den Bempden's involvement ended after the dispatch of the first lot of porcelain in spring 1717 – maybe the agreement was only valid for the time Lagnasco himself stayed in the Netherlands. To what extent the St. Martin's abilities equalled those of Van den Bempden remains to be researched, but their letters verify that they were well connected, even among the higher social classes. The attempts to acquire porcelain from Lord Albemarle's collection (see chapter 8) leaves room for the assumption that Augustus the Strong aimed to purchase porcelain with a prominent provenance. Reselling porcelain was common practice in the Netherlands in the early 18th century. At least some of the objects acquired in the Netherlands for Augustus the Strong came from private collections, albeit none as prominent as that of Lord Albemarle. The descriptions in the St. Martin's letters confirm that there was a lively trade in previously owned porcelain, and that art dealers in the Netherlands did not solely rely on new products arriving with the ships from Asia. Even if it was not always possible to find suitable objects – Madame St. Martin returned empty-handed from Amsterdam several times, after all – supply and demand nevertheless seemed to be high enough to promote strong competition among royal agents.

The Great Northern War was in its sixteenth year when Count Lagnasco stayed in the Netherlands. If and how the conflict influenced the economic power of the VOC is beyond the scope of this publication. Likewise, the impact that the political circumstances had on the porcelain trade could not be investigated. The correspondence, however, provides an impression of the types of porcelain available in the Netherlands in 1716/17, but an analysis of the types unavailable to Augustus the Strong due to the prevailing conditions is yet to be researched. That the war influenced trade, at least marginally, can be inferred from the discussions regarding the safest transport route for the first porcelain acquisition in 1717. The dilemma of transporting the acquisitions by land or by boat, and the warning to consider "Swedish privateers" point to the challenges that acts of war presented to sea trade.

The trade networks described in this publication spanned two countries and were diverse and far-reaching. They extended from moneylenders to merchants, from wholesalers to retailers, with porcelain suppliers spanning private collectors to professional dealers who traded in new imports. Established over 300 years ago, the porcelain collection of Augustus the Strong has experienced wars, destruction, natural disasters and extensive sales, resulting in the loss of over two thirds of its former inventory. After numerous relocations, the collection is now housed in the Zwinger Palace, recalling the former splendour of the Dutch Palace. Formed through Augustus the Strong's fascination for the "white gold", the collection was assembled out of the desire to impress, and to match or even surpass contemporary competitors through considerable investment. Like no other, the royal porcelain collection represents the entanglements of art and trade, of object and taste, of seller and buyer, and remains a fascinating example of the complex microstructures of global trade.