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# ‘Porcelain’ Review: In Search of the Arcanum

Many of the European rulers who sponsored the porcelain industry cared less for profit than for objects of luxury to display their grandeur.



Porcelain from Meissen, Germany.

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*By Marc Levinson*

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When they weren’t trying to make gold, alchemists at the end of the 17th century kept busy with an altogether different quest: finding the secret to porcelain. Europe’s monarchs and nobles had been obsessed with Chinese porcelains since the early 1600s, and they spent fortunes to discover how to make delicate translucent ceramics with blue-and-white enamel beneath the glaze. In 1708 experimenters employed by Augustus the Strong, Elector of Saxony, hit paydirt. Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus, a famed mathematician, and Johann Friedrich Böttger, a young alchemist, worked out that mixing 43% kaolin from the German town of Aue, 43% clay from Colditz, and 14% alabaster would yield a ceramic very much like that from China.

Augustus ordered Böttger to create Europe's first porcelain works, in Meissen, near Dresden, but his dreams of monopoly were dashed as alchemists in the service of other kings and princes uncovered the secret formula—the Arcanum, it was called—or bribed those already in the know to disclose it. Within a few years, dozens of porcelain manufactories opened across the Continent and in Great Britain. Money was no obstacle. “Already by 1750, porcelain making had become a pan-European, and not just a German, industry,” writes LSU professor Suzanne L. Marchand in “Porcelain: A History From the Heart of Europe.”

While “Porcelain” includes lovely color plates with photos of cups and statuettes, artistry is not its main subject. Rather, Ms. Marchand uses porcelain as a vehicle to weave a sweeping economic, social and cultural history of central Europe. Along the way, she traces the transformation of the hundreds of German principalities into a powerful state that, by the late 19th century, was producing porcelain on an industrial scale.

Porcelain-making was, from the start, a troubled industry. Many of the rulers who sponsored it, Ms. Marchand notes, cared less for profit than for objects of luxury they could use to display their sophistication and grandeur. Porcelain was “a necessary aspect of splendor and prestige,” as a duke from southwestern Germany explained in 1758. Making money proved harder than making tureens, vases and statuary, and subsidies were ubiquitous.

The frequency with which porcelain-loving rulers helped themselves to the products only added to the problems. When Frederick the Great's chemists failed to discover the Arcanum after 30,000 trials, the Prussian king found it simpler to occupy Meissen, which he referred to as the “Peking of Saxony,” and to commandeer the inventory. Frederick then opened his own porcelain works in Berlin, which turned a profit only because Jews who wished to set up households in Prussia were forced to buy. In France, Louis XVI's great porcelain factory at Sèvres, near Paris, faced similar challenges. As Ms. Marchand reports, “so many illegal porcelain makers set up shop that the state ceased trying to enforce the firm's monopoly rights.”

Thanks to excess capacity and technical improvements, such as kilns that burned less wood and glazes that expanded the color repertoire, prices eventually fell,

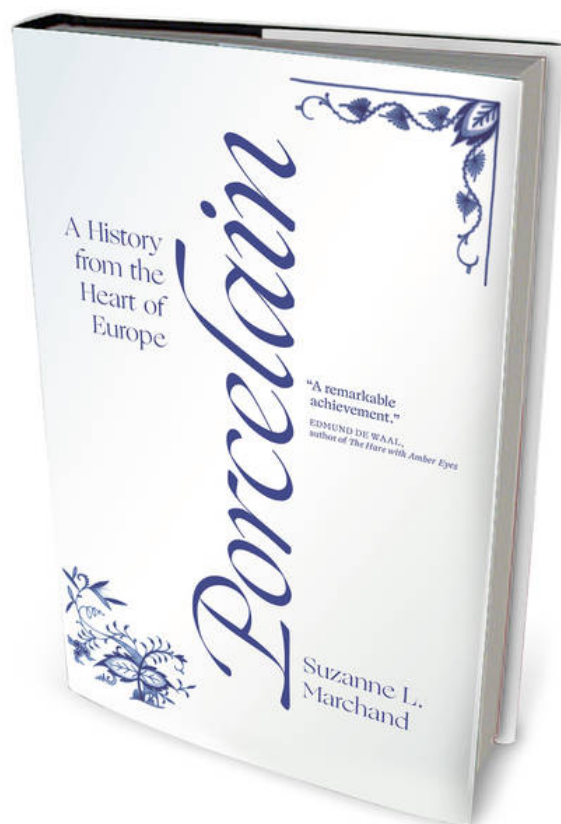


PHOTO: WSJ

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**PORCELAIN: A HISTORY FROM THE HEART OF EUROPE**

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By Suzanne L. Marchand  
*Princeton, 501 pages, \$35*

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turning the rarest of luxuries into a consumer good. By the 1830s, a shelf displaying porcelain figures was a standard parlor fixture for the aspiring middle-class household. As drinking coffee became a fashion, the emergence of cafés created demand for cups and saucers. An entire new line of business, sanitary ware, later developed to furnish an increasingly health-conscious public with porcelain sinks and tiles. The industry, Ms. Marchand writes, adapted to serve “a world of persons who increasingly felt entitled to eat, drink, and smoke in public, to claim boulevards and parks for their own, and to offer *their* families and guests a little taste of *Glanz* [splendor].”

Many manufacturers resisted such changes. Souvenir plates bearing the Kaiser’s image lacked the pizzazz of a 600-piece dinner service or an elaborate statue created for an international exhibition. They also didn’t require the services of the skilled artisans who painstakingly painted and glazed each piece by hand. By 1877, with more than 1,800 firms making porcelain in Germany alone, the pressure on prices was so severe that manufacturers formed a cartel to halt discounting. The effort was only modestly effective: It was hard to resist the temptation of selling to the newly established department stores, which ordered large quantities of

standard items for sale to cost-conscious customers.

The mythology surrounding porcelain has survived wars, regime changes and several consumer revolutions. Hitler had a fondness for porcelain from the Nymphenburg works in Bavaria, and a firm owned by Himmler's SS advertised that "white porcelain is the embodiment of the German soul." The communist government of postwar East Germany turned the venerable factory at Meissen into a People's Enterprise that earned hard currency by selling to the foreign bourgeoisie. In the 21st century, Ms. Marchand concludes, changing tastes and imports from China may bring about the final victory of mass production over artisanal craftwork.

Ms. Marchand has written an ambitious book. It is not uniformly successful; we learn about obscure porcelain manufacturers that are not integral to her story, and at times she drifts too deeply into details that might have been better left aside. In a number of instances, less would have been more. That said, her task was not easy. "German economic history is a very complicated subject," she says at the very start. To her credit, she has developed an unorthodox and engaging way of telling it.

*Mr. Levinson's book "Outside the Box: How Globalization Changed From Moving Stuff to Spreading Ideas" will be published in September.*

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