EUROPE 1600-1800

18th-century table fountain to be displayed for first time in 150 years following ambitious conservation project

A huge 18th-century table fountain is to go on public display for the first time in 150 years when the V&A’s new Europe 1600-1800 galleries open in late 2014. The theatrical dining decoration came into the Museum’s collection as part of a large group of white porcelain parts, fragments and broken pieces in the 1870s and had always proved too baffling to reconstruct. However, a thorough re-examination of the collection in preparation for the new galleries and a partnership with the Royal College of Art has enabled an ambitious 18-month project to restore the fountain. Advanced 3D modelling and printing techniques are being used alongside traditional craftsmanship and conservation to reconstruct this remarkable object, which helps bring alive the fine dining and entertainment traditions of Europe’s most splendid courts.

The fountain – nearly four metres long – was commissioned by one of the most extravagant characters of the age, Heinrich, Count von Brühl, Prime Minister at the Saxon court in Dresden. It depicts Neptune and Amphitrite being drawn on a shell-chariot by hippocamps and was ordered as a ‘scale’ model of a stone fountain built in the gardens of von Brühl’s summer palace in Dresden. An early example of the fine white porcelain of the Meissen factory, the fully operational model would have been used to delight and entertain guests at sumptuous dinner parties and state events, unveiled during dessert running with fragrant rosewater.

The British Ambassador in Dresden at the time, Sir Charles Hanbury Williams, wrote about the fountain in a dispatch from 1748: “I was once at a dinner where we sat down at one table two hundred and six people... When the dessert was set on, I thought it was the most wonderful thing I ever beheld. I fancied myself either in a garden or at the opera. But I [could] not imagine that I was at dinner. In the middle of the table was [a] fountain ... , which ran all the while with rose-water, and ‘tis said that this piece alone cost six thousand thalers”

When the Museum acquired the fountain, many of the parts were broken or missing, with the official description reading ‘much shattered’. In seeking to rebuild it, curators were confronted with a puzzle made up of more than 150 pieces in four cabinets. After careful sorting, it was clear that some parts were originals made between 1745 and 1747, some were missing, some were duplicates or later replacements and many did not belong to the fountain at all.
Reino Liefkes, Senior Curator said: “It has been extremely exciting to piece together all the available evidence in order to restore what will become one of the finest and largest Meissen groups in existence. It was believed that this was a later version of the lost fountain made for Von Brühl, but we have now established that we have the original fountain, albeit with a number of replacement parts.”

In order to achieve the greatest historic accuracy, scanning technology was used to construct accurate 3D models of the missing parts. ‘Real’ models were then created by machine milling or, for the finer pieces requiring greater detail, printed in resin using cutting-edge 3D printers at J.H. May Ltd. in Essex. Multi-part plaster moulds were taken from the models by B&C Mouldmakers, a traditional firm in Staffordshire. Steve Brown, ceramic artist working at the Royal College of Art in London, is using these to create the missing parts by pressing the clay into the part-moulds. He assembles the press-moulded parts and adds fine detail such as leaf- and shell-work, just as the modellers in Meissen would have done over 150 years ago. After a lengthy drying process the final pieces are fired, glazed and fired again at the RCA. The complexity of the process meant that each model needed to be enlarged to 115% of the size of the original pieces to account for shrinkage during drying and firing. Brown made at least 50 different trial pieces to establish the combination of porcelain and glaze that would match appearance of the original fountain parts.

This way of working also allowed the Museum to re-create some parts for which there were no parallels. Of the four sections of curved, sloping walls, that flank the fountain on either side, only the two on the right have survived, albeit broken in various pieces. After they were restored, these were scanned to create 3D copies, digitally-flipped to create accurate models for the two sections of wall on the left.

The final reconstruction will bring together the original parts made for Von Brühl, with those made later and the replacement parts created at the RCA. Existing parts of the fountain have been carefully cleaned, bonded together and missing areas have been filled and retouched by paintbrush with care taken to match the irregularities of the original glazed surface.

The fountain will go on display in the new Europe 1600-1800 galleries; a complete redesign and redisplay of seven galleries containing some of the most magnificent and elaborate works of art and design in the V&A collections. The fountain will be a focal point of the gallery devoted to city and commerce between 1720 and 1780.
The Europe 1600-1800 galleries are being made possible thanks to a generous £4.75m lead grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund with further support from many other Trusts, Foundations and individuals.

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