

Tales from the Table: The Politics of Dessert in Franz Anton Bustelli's *Harlequin*

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Abstract: *Commedia dell'arte* had implications beyond aesthetics and *décor per se*. It both played to and influenced politics and ideological expression particularly for the European elite and those who imitated the elite. The figurines of Franz Anton Bustelli are a case in point. Looking at his 18th century productions at several Bavarian porcelain factories, contextual factors behind the artists and especially their patrons can be analyzed to include aspects of internationalism, politics, projection of socioeconomic and political power and also racism and cultural chauvinism.

KEYWORDS: *commedia dell'arte*, figurines, *décor*, *Harlequin*, *rococo*, theatricality, aesthetics, porcelain, Neudeck, Munich, Nymphenburg, colonialism, commercialism, identity, Catholic, Protestant, Cultural discourses, racism, the Other, socioeconomics.

In his sixth year at Neudeck and at a very young age,¹ Italian-Swiss sculptor Franz Anton Bustelli developed a set of sixteen *commedia dell'arte* figurines using modern French visual strategies that would establish him as one of the most eminent porcelain modelers from the 18th century.² His figurines, in particular *Harlequin*³ [Figure 1], were decorative, sculptural interior pieces that captured the modern, or *rococo*, aesthetic of artful bodies, theatricality, and participation. As stylistic components elected by the Bavarian⁴ court, he reproduced modern, French aesthetics through the medium of porcelain for the Wittelsbach dynasty's royal porcelain factory, in Neudeck, Munich, which later moved to Nymphenburg.⁵ Created with authentic hard-paste ingredients, and true to Chinese quality,⁶ Bustelli modeled the figurines in 1760 using porcelain technology adopted by other regional factories such as Meissen, near Dresden, and Du Paquier⁷ in Vienna.⁸

¹ Neudeck is the name of the porcelain factory that Franz Anton Bustelli worked at while he developed his renowned *commedia dell'arte* figurines. The factory was located on palace grounds in Munich, Germany. By 1761, the factory would move to a different royal palace in Nymphenburg, Germany.

² Michael Newman, "Bustelli the man," in *Keramik-Freunde der Schweiz, Bulletin des Amis Suisses de la Céramique*, no. 111(1997): 7-8.

³ "Harlequin" is currently featured in Gallery 533 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

⁴ Bavaria during the 18th century comprised of South East Germany.

⁵ "History," Porzellan Manufaktur Nymphenburg, accessed June 10, 2019, <https://www.nymphenburg.com/en/manufactory/history>. According to the Nymphenburg sales website, the company provides a history of their factory and state that "rococo" was the preeminent and "electoral" taste of the royal aristocracy in Bavaria. Neudeck was the original factory where Bustelli worked in before it moved to Nymphenburg in the early 1760s.

⁶ Clare Le Corbeiller, *German Porcelain of the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990), 5.

⁷ Du Paquier is a porcelain factory established in Vienna during the early 18th century after the Meissen factory.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

Meissen's output during 1733-1756 served as a manufacturing paradigm for royal porcelain factories emerging in Europe. Courts from Dresden to Munich exchanged their pieces and closely scrutinized them in a competitive manner.⁹ Under the artistry of Johann Joachim Kändler, Meissen became the first true European porcelain factory in 1735 to create figurines for the aristocracy as entertainment using commedia dell'arte themes [Figure 2].¹⁰ Kändler sculpted an assortment of porcelain during his occupancy, ranging from large scale animals to separate porcelain figurines that depicted contemporary court life.¹¹ Building upon Kändler's porcelain experiments at Meissen, Bustelli developed a set of commedia dell'arte stock characters with familiar scenes, but imbued them with hyperbolic gestures and cultural references that blended the dynamic corporeality of aristocrat and performer. His ability to craft porcelain figurines with elegant curvature, interaction, and spectacle distinguished his work from Kändler, whose figurines were considered rigid¹² in comparison.¹³

Bustelli's work uses French aesthetic trends to communicate elite subjectivities.¹⁴ The Wittlesbach dynasty, who were politically aligned with France, modeled their court after French etiquette and decorated it with French art in the modern style.¹⁵ There is room here to add contextual and discursive analysis about the processes that led to *Harlequin's* configuration as decorative tableware. While Bustelli made his figurines, within a factory, the purpose behind his productions were not mutually exclusive; they were artistic sculptures and commercial models¹⁶ for nobility and the porcelain market. These figurines, I believe, transmit a specific visual rhetoric meant to strengthen aristocratic identity in Bavaria amidst years of debt and conflict brought on by the Habsburgs¹⁷ and instability within the Holy Roman Empire. Bustelli's actors were political aids for the Wittlesbach family, who were keen on proving their imperial sovereignty¹⁸ in the region following Austria's occupation in the early 18th century. Through spectatorship at formal banquets, his figurines were agents used to preserve class order and royal character by mirroring facets of aristocratic identity¹⁹ influenced by colonialism, trade with China, and high French culture (e.g., performance, dance).

Harlequin was a source of entertainment for guests to visually read and participate with during formal dinner banquets. By the 18th century, middle to upper class interior spaces in Europe

⁹ Ronald Jones, "Franz Anton Bustelli and the Porcelain Manufactory: Ronald Jones in Conversation with Alfred Ziffer," in *Commedia Dell'Arte - Couture Edition (Collector's Book)* (Basel: Birkhäuser Architecture, 2010), 24-25.

¹⁰ Howard Coutts, *The art of ceramics: European ceramic design, 1500-1830* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 96.

¹¹ Coutts, 97.

¹² Jones, 22-23.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Jennifer Dawn Milam, *Historical Dictionary of Rococo Art* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 207.

¹⁵ Christiane Hertel and Ignaz Günther, *Pygmalion in Bavaria: The Sculptor Ignaz Günther and Eighteenth-century Aesthetic Art Theory* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 161.

¹⁶ Matthew Martin, "Joseph Willems's Chelsea Pietà and Eighteenth-century Sculptural Aesthetics," National Gallery of Victoria. Accessed March 17, 2018, <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/joseph-willems-chelsea-pieta-and-eighteenth-century-sculptural-aesthetics/>.

¹⁷ Robert G. Pasiieczny and Dorota Szatańska, editors, *Eyewitness Travel Guide: Munich and the Bavarian Alps* (New York: Dorling Kindersley, 2018), 41.

¹⁸ Allen Forrest and Peter H. Wilson, *The Bee and the Eagle: Napoleonic France and the End of the Holy Roman Empire 1806* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 98.

¹⁹ Le Corbeiller, 8.

became noticeably more intimate. The home generated modes of sociability,²⁰ seduction, and messages about identity (e.g., femininity, social status, political beliefs, taste).²¹ In “The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,” Habermas states that the 18th century was an era known for “subjectivity” in which architecture saw the “solitarization” of elite families to meet their needs.²² Family rooms and courtyards shrunk in size and moved to the back of the home, and private rooms with specific purposes and furnishings accumulated.²³ Dining, as well, became less communal and more personalized; the elite and lower classes²⁴ no longer passed around platters of food or drank from a shared cup.²⁵ Individualized dining and tea service, with beverages and spices from colonial territories, produced consumer demand for custom tableware.²⁶ This shift reinforced an impulse to showcase status in elite households; food no longer served as the main feature during formal gatherings, but rather, tableware. In response to high society’s need for status-driven tableware, European trade companies (e.g., Dutch East India Company and the English East India Company)²⁷ capitalized on their consumer demand by importing porcelain from China.²⁸

Porcelain’s discursive potential manifested in the 18th century; it communicated messages about wealth, taste, beliefs, interests, and etiquette. Objects went from being seen on the table, to display cabinets, and finally, filling entire rooms and palaces.²⁹ In Berlin, the Oranienburg Palace had lavish rooms brimming with 17th century blue and white Chinese porcelain. Visiting nobility, such as Augustus the Strong of Saxony, toured these opulent rooms and emerged with a desire to surpass them.³⁰ Yet Augustus viewed porcelain as more than just a symbol of wealth; he realized its ability to communicate royal power on an international basis.³¹ In 1710, he established the Royal Saxon Porcelain Factory in Meissen, Germany. By amassing vast amounts of this material as a Catholic and starting his own manufactory, like Delftware in the Netherlands, he separated the centuries long Dutch-Protestant association with porcelain.³² Collecting and manufacturing porcelain under his patronage effectively shifted diplomacy, improved his kingdom’s economy, and enriched his court’s reputation; at the same time, Augustus’s patronage led to innovative porcelain experiments that tinkered with style and function. Appointed painters and sculptors,

²⁰ Tara J. Zanardi, "Palatial Splendor," ARTH 7803V: Eighteenth Century Art and Material Culture (class lecture, Hunter College, NY, February 21, 2018). Professor Zanardi lectured on the role of furniture and interior decor in the palaces as well as dwellings of the aristocracy and professional classes in 18th century Europe.

²¹ Melissa Hyde, "The 'Makeup' of the Marquise: Boucher’s Portrait of Pompadour at Her Toilette," *The Art Bulletin* 82, no. 3 (2000): 453.

²² Jürgen Habermas, *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2014), 44-48.

²³ Habermas, 45.

²⁴ Robert Finlay, *The pilgrim art: cultures of porcelain in world history* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 258.

²⁵ Finlay, 170.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, 267.

²⁸ Katie Scott. *The rococo interior: decoration and social spaces in early eighteenth-century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 84.

²⁹ Moira Vincentelli. *Women and Ceramics*. (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2000), 109.

³⁰ Susan Broomhall and Jacqueline Van Gent, *Dynastic Colonialism Gender, Materiality and the Early Modern House of Orange-Nassau* (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2016), 223-233.

³¹ Maureen Cassidy-Geiger and Mogens Bencard, *Fragile Diplomacy: Meissen Porcelain for European Courts, Ca. 1710-1763* (New York: Bard Center for Graduate Studies, 2007), 195-196.

³² Broomhall and Van Gent, 263.

such as Johann Gregorius Horoldt and Kändler, initiated artistic changes such as adding European drawing techniques that distinguished their porcelain from Chinese imports. Throughout his tenure at Meissen, which lasted over twenty years, Kändler experimented with porcelain, such as adding relief designs³³ on dinnerware, conceptualizing figurines with contemporary narratives (e.g., hunting, studying), and creating precise, life-like sculptures of animals (e.g., turkeys, rhinoceroses, elephants) for Augustus's menagerie. His animal sculptures were rigorously developed with references to drawings imported from China and ornithology books.³⁴ The sculptures, in part, contributed to understanding porcelain as an artistic medium. In "Porcelain Figures Reflecting XVIII Century Amusement," Avery points this out: "sculptors, trained to working in wood or stone, found porcelain provocative and exciting. Its plasticity before firing, its hardness afterward, its gleaming surfaces, and its colorings made [the material] different from other media and susceptible of use in new and varied forms."³⁵ Porcelain no longer represented décor or rarity, but an art form with discursive capacities.

As small, 3-dimensional hollow sculptures, porcelain figurines replaced sugar sculpture table decorations.³⁶ Decorators chose figurines based on their symbolic messages, much like sugar sculptures, and matched them to court festivities.³⁷ Subjects ranged from animal ensembles, fête galante scenes, commedia dell'arte characters, and sitting *chinoiserie pagods*.³⁸ Porcelain figurines of humans such as aristocrats, actors, and pagods, communicated a language of corporeal ideals and cultural perceptions.³⁹ Figurines possess an aura of individuality and authority that stirs the viewer's attention in the midst of personal or social rituals. McPherson argues in "Marketing Celebrity: Porcelain and Theatrical Display" that the figurine, whether as décor or gift, uncovers "cultural discourses" about bodies and politics. Porcelain pagods, for example, crafted from factories in Europe, reveal perceptual differences about Asian bodies. Unlike the artful, noble fête galante figurines of Meissen or Neudeck, sculptors rendered pagods as obese Asian men that are aimlessly grinning and sedentary; the corporeal disparities visually distinguished the European body from the Asian body.

Cultural discourses about the body, politics and etiquette appear in *Harlequin*. The pair (Mezzetino and Lalage) is composed of visual signs that communicate beliefs espoused by elite Europeans. Its modern theme, commedia dell'arte, and precious materiality were most likely used to increase profit and consumer worth.⁴⁰ During the 1700s, commedia dell'arte's popularity in decorative arts grew due to its familiarity between social classes and association with the modern style, made popular by Antoine Watteau. As recognizable subject matter, it had

³³ Hodder Michael Westropp, *Handbook of Pottery and Porcelain: Or, History of Those Arts from the Earliest Period* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1880), 93.

³⁴ Samuel Wittwer, *A Royal Menagerie: Meissen Porcelain Animals* (Los Angeles, CA: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2001), 20.

³⁵ C. Louise Avery, "Porcelain Figures Reflecting XVIII Century Amusements," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 3, no. 8 (1945): 189. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3257214>.

³⁶ Snite Museum Virginia Marten Collection of Decorative Arts, "A Taste for Porcelain" (news release), 2014, 40.

³⁷ Corbeiller, 9.

³⁸ Pagods were 18th century renderings of deities from Asia.

³⁹ Michael E. Yonan, ed, *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain* (Abington, UK: Routledge, 2017), 3-4.

⁴⁰ Mimi Hellman, "The Nature of Artifice: French Porcelain Flowers and the Rhetoric of Garnish," in *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain*, ed. Alden Cavanaugh and Michael E. Yonan (Abington, UK: Routledge, 2017), 39-65.

consumer value across European cities, where different social classes were using their disposable income for entertainment and goods.⁴¹ The theme appeared in prints, porcelain services, and tapestries. To the elite, commedia dell'arte represented an aspect of leisure that could be privately enjoyed during weddings, court performances, impromptu *parades*,⁴² and masquerades.⁴³ In Italy, where the theater originated, it was a part of everyday life and not considered high art; however, for the French, Flemish, and Germans, commedia dell'arte represented novelty, youth, and a world away from their harsh realities.⁴⁴ This style of theater started performing in royal Bavarian courts in the late 16th century. As early as 1579, Duke Wilhelm V of the Wittlesbach family added large-scale frescos of commedia dell'arte stock characters in his Bavarian castle, *Trausnitz*. Known as the *Fool's Staircase*, they featured stock characters parading on donkeys, that were simultaneously getting injected by an enema. The Duke's staircase was a political allegory meant to satirize imperial power; its salacious nature, arguably, set a precedent and made it permissible for artists in later generations, like Bustelli, to freely exercise their creative vision through commedia dell'arte.

For Prince Max III Joseph, founder and patron of Neudeck, showing *Harlequin's* narrative, where two lovers give birth to a baby monkey, did not shock his guests, but delighted them as humorous entertainment, and perhaps even signaled upcoming events at court (i.e. a comedy will be shown after dessert).⁴⁵ Bustelli imbued his actors with modern iconography such as contorted menuet poses, pagods on Harlequina's dress, and *singerie*, the art of monkeys behaving like humans.⁴⁶ The use of such references, like the menuet and owning exotic animals, reflected common cultural and bodily trends occurring in 18th century Europe. Monkeys were a popular motif in the modern style of art and thus in accord with Neudeck's elected style. Yet, behind the humorous intention and aesthetic ties to the modern style, exporting monkeys for domestication symbolized European imperialism of the Global South and scientific racism. During the 18th century, scientists compared monkey skulls to lower class and non-European non-Caucasian people,⁴⁷ elites bestowed or owned them as markers of status, and to a greater extent, they symbolized the elite practice of owning African children as accessories at court.⁴⁸ Prior to Darwin's findings in the 19th century, animals were considered inferior to humans, but this assumption began to deteriorate as zoologists in the 18th century were finding early

⁴¹ Kate Meehan, "The Rise of Commedia Dell'Arte in Italy: A Historical Perspective," in *The Routledge Companion to Commedia Dell'Arte* (Abington, UK: Routledge, 2014) 21.

⁴² Spontaneous commedia dell'arte performances featuring elite class members.

⁴³ Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-century Paris* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

⁴⁴ Susan Maxwell, "A Marriage Commemorated in the Stairway of Fools," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 36, no. 3 (2005): 734, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20477487>.

⁴⁵ Howard Coutts and Ivan Day, "Sugar Sculpture, Porcelain and Table Layout 1530-1830" (paper presented at the Taking Shape talk series at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, England, October, 2008).

⁴⁶ Gauvin A. Bailey, *Spiritual Rococo: Decor and Divinity from the Salons of Paris to the Missions of Patagonia* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2017), 71-72.

⁴⁷ Richard J. Powell, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 186.

⁴⁸ Tara J. Zanardi, "African Children in European 18th Century Art," ARTH 7803V: Eighteenth Century Art and Material Culture (class lecture, Hunter College, NY, April 28, 2018). See also T. F. Earle and K. J. P. Lowe, eds., *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 161.

evolutionary evidence for the similarities between humans and monkeys.⁴⁹ While on the surface, the monkey stood for comic relief to Max Joseph's guests, its inclusion as a modern motif and source of entertainment in 1760 indicates a condescending way of seeing the "Other"—as people compared to animals and used for entertainment, science, or nurture. Imported African children, like exotic monkeys, became pets and stood as yet another marker of status for the aristocracy (see "*Young Black Man Holding a Basket a Fruit and Young Woman Stroking a Dog*" by Charles-Antoine Coypel) [Figure 3]. The aristocracy's use of African children as fostered pets signifies political beliefs about colonialism's goal to civilize indigenous people from North Africa and North America. The French established this goal as early as the 17th century, when they based their colonial policy on educating and assimilating indigenous North Americans to Christianity and French culture.⁵⁰ The sculptural and graphic distinctions in *Harlequin* between the human figures and coddled monkey creates a body-based binary: refined Europeans and infantile non-European, non-Caucasians.

European ideology about the "Other" is again made clear in another version of *Harlequin* [Figure 4], listed on the official Nymphenburg factory website. Harlequina's dress design features small painted images of nodding pagods, as opposed to flowers (as seen in the Met version). Pagods were popular amusements made from various materials such as copper or ceramics; they were either Chinese or Indian figures with large bodies and distorted facial features such as raised eyebrows and wide smiles. Their abnormal figure and repetitive gestures (i.e., nodding), were popular consumer objects that made the Europeans laugh during the 18th century. Artisans often decorated them with flowers or gold mounting, which in effect, eliminated their autonomy as a cultural symbols and instead modified their foreign and exotic qualities with familiar French designs that would fit into modern aristocratic interiors.⁵¹ Bustelli may have added pagods to enhance *Harloquin's* playful aura and association with French taste.⁵² Yet despite these practical concerns, Harlequina's dress design produces another body-based binary between Europeans and non-European non-Caucasians.

The way each figurine moves toward one another in choreographed poses, glancing at their alleged child, delivers a sense of personality and interaction. The couple is satirizing parental roles (i.e., mother and father) with lewd undertones about cuckoldry—yet, their aristocratic dance-like gestures in commedia dell'arte costumes distort who they are. Are they actors, actors mocking the aristocracy, or aristocrats masquerading? Like Watteau, Bustelli synthesizes different social realities; he arranges aristocratic dance movements within commedia dell'arte acting, creating a blurred identity⁵³ where actors are parading as members of court, or vice versa. Bustelli may have referenced prints by Watteau and Lancret for *Harloquin's* corporeality.⁵⁴ In both prints, actors pose with one hand on their hip, and in Lancret's imagery, actors have

⁴⁹ David Bindman, *Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the 18th Century* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 190-202.

⁵⁰ Sahilia Belmessous, "Assimilation and Racialism in Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century French Colonial Policy," *The American Historical Review* 110, no. 2 (April 2005), 322, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/110.2.322>.

⁵¹ F. J. B. Watson, Gillian Wilson, and Anthony Derham, *Mounted Oriental Porcelain in the J. Paul Getty Museum* (Malibu, CA: Getty Museum, 1982), 10.

⁵² Hellmen, 57.

⁵³ Tara J. Zanardi, "Watteau and Borders," ARTH 7803V: Eighteenth Century Art and Material Culture (class lecture, Hunter College, NY, April 18, 2018).

⁵⁴ Katharine Baetjer, *Watteau, Music and Theater* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 130.

exaggerated dance-like movements.⁵⁵ For the 18th century noble, artful and refined physical movements seen at masquerade balls, were gestures that communicated status and elite identity.⁵⁶ Harlequin looks like he is about to romantically kiss his baby monkey, while Harlequina plays role of domesticated mother by raising her hand to feed it from a painted porcelain plate— a material symbol favored by high society, which further hints at her elite identity. The space between both figurines establishes a curved line, which enhances their bodily interplay. The pair's twisting alignment is reminiscent of the menuet, where aristocratic couples use elegant and patterned dance moves to articulate courtship and play the part of aristocrat as opposed to actually linking oneself to the king.⁵⁷ *Harloquin's* performative corporeality mirrors the way high society communicated their status at court (i.e, through bodily movements). Its imitation of elite realities enabled the Wittlesbach's to construct a message about the legitimacy of their court; like the French, they also adhered to aristocratic modes of self-presentation and condoned this behavior from their guests.⁵⁸

To say Neudeck fashioned these figurines solely for aristocratic spectatorship is not entirely plausible, since they were also commercial models— much like Meissen's output. Their social, political, and corporeal references point to upper class ideals and aided the Wittlesbach family's political need to assert their legitimacy toward the Hapsburgs. By analyzing *Harloquin's* visual rhetoric, it helps us understand the system of beliefs embedded in the modern style, and how certain gestures and graphics reflect cultural realizations. Bustelli's relatively unknown status as a young sculptor, plucked to work in a royal porcelain factory and complete commissions on behalf of nobility is enough information to prove how limited his role was in developing their rhetoric; instead, one must look at the relationship between the Wittlesbach dynasty's political ambitions and aesthetic sensibilities. Porcelain fashioned in the modern style for interiors served as a salient tool for communicating one's identity and stature. Neudeck's goal to make these models for sale gives them socioeconomic implications as consumer products, and suggests that one does not need aristocratic lineage to read, appreciate, or own *Harlequin*.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Tara J. Zanardi, "Watteau and Commedia Dell'Arte," ARTH 7803V: Eighteenth Century Art and Material Culture (class lecture, Hunter College, NY, February 7, 2018).

⁵⁷ Sarah R. Cohen, "Un Bal Continuel: Watteaus Cythera Paintings and Aristocratic Dancing in the 1710s," *Art History* 17, no. 2 (1994): 166, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8365.1994.tb00571.x>.

⁵⁸ Cohen, 169.

Illustrations



Figure 1: Harlequin by Franz Anton Bustelli. Taken from MetMuseum.Org



Figure 2 : Commedia Dell'Arte Figurines by Johann Joachim Kändler. Taken from Collections.vam.ac.uk



Figure 2: Young Black Man Holding a Basket of Fruit and Young Woman Stroking a Dog” by Charles-Antoine Coypel Taken from Getty Images



Figure 4: “Harloquina” or “Lalage” by Franz Anton Bustelli. Taken from Nymphenburg.com

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