

The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain

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Sugar Boxes and Blackamoors: Ornamental Blackness in Early Meissen Porcelain

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Found adorning sugar boxes and sweetmeat bowls, serving coffee, and steering elephants, a myriad of "blackamoor" figures were popular ornamental motifs in mid-eighteenth-century porcelain design. The vogue for representing the African body in decorative arts served to disseminate tropes of blackness throughout spaces of wealth and refinement in rococo Europe. Objects such as *Negress with a Basket* (Plate 11) operated within this multidimensional matrix of ideas and contexts that transcended the limits of their specific functionality, implicating larger social issues such as the concept of race itself, black slave labor in the colonies, and the presence of black servants in wealthy European households. They were in dialogue with the trope of the black servant in European art that had become a ubiquitous symbol of exoticism and luxury since the Italian Renaissance and was a particularly fashionable motif in Dresden's electoral court culture. This chapter shall demonstrate how seemingly benign decorative objects such as the Meissen sugar box also embody the complexities of race, slavery, and representation in European material culture of the eighteenth century.

Although contemporary theorists such as Henry Louis Gates have unmasked the instability of the notion of race as a meaningful biological or social category, and questioned its use as an analytical framework, unstable constructs of race and otherness surrounding blacks have shaped the representation of blackness in European visual culture for centuries.¹ Most scholars agree that the European Enlightenment was an era in which scientists, philosophers and other thinkers sought to question and understand human variance in a more critical and organized fashion. Theories abounded regarding the nature of human variety, breaking with prior discourses that were largely based in religious beliefs. Major philosophers of the era from across Europe and Great Britain entered the dialogue about

origins, meanings, and qualities of human difference. Humans were brought into a system of taxonomic classification that included flora and fauna.² Differences in human variety were also ascribed to climate and geography.³ The nature of blacks and blackness was of particular interest because of their perceived extreme alterity to Europeans and the monumental social and economic issue of African slavery. There is no monolithic eighteenth-century European view of the black race that can be tethered to objects such as *Negress with Basket* that represent black bodies. However, representations of blacks in Western art and material culture indexed a matrix of complex, often contradictory, understandings of race being negotiated in religious, philosophical, literary, and scientific discourses during the eighteenth century.

In spite of the varied nature of the eighteenth-century discourse on blackness, the need to establish the European at the height of a hierarchical continuum of peoples and cultures was a consistent theme. Africans usually populated the lowest strata of these kinds of schematizations. Europeans posited themselves possessing the moral and intellectual superiority over other non-Europeans.⁴ Considered the most barbaric and savage, Africans were often featured as the antithesis to the civilized European. Hierarchies and binaries espoused by these theories were reinforced through visual and literary tropes such as the Noble Savage, the Allegory of Africa, and the exotic blackamoor.

The blackamoor was the most ubiquitous characterization of blackness as well as the least specific in nature during this period. Not simply black, or African, "blackamoor" is an admittedly nebulous designation that conflates the notion of an Arab or Muslim with that of a black African, and is shrouded with a sense of exoticism. Although the term Moor was used liberally to describe both Arabs and others from North Africa, "blackamoor" became a generic term that described anonymous blacks, particularly in European art and literature, well into the nineteenth century.⁵ Since the Early Modern period, the characterization of the Moor or blackamoor has had a distinctly Eastern or Oriental flavor, essentially filtering the black African through the veil of an imagined Orient.⁶ In fact, many African slaves imported into Europe beginning in the fifteenth century came through Mediterranean North Africa as part of the trans-Saharan Arab slave trade.⁷ Southern Europeans encountered Africans through interactions with Arabs slavers and often associated them with the Orient regardless of their culture of origin.

While the implications of the Moor or the blackamoor have been widely addressed in terms of literary discourse, and the visual imagery is receiving increasing scholarly attention, the typology of the blackamoor in decorative arts has received scant critical analysis.⁸ Blackamoor figures, often distinguished by a signature Oriental turban or generic Oriental garb, were common elements in Italian Renaissance art. Painters included exotic

blackamoor servants in portraits, genre paintings, religious subjects, and even still life. They were a popular motif in decorative arts including glass, jewelry, furniture, silver, and ceramics, increasing in popularity throughout Europe into the nineteenth century.⁹ Typically representing servants or slaves of uncertain age and gender, they were modeled on actual black servants who served in wealthy households and courts from the Renaissance into the nineteenth-century in Europe.¹⁰

Of particular interest to this study is the influence of Augustus the Strong, the Elector of Saxony (1670–1733). Founder of the Meissen manufactory in the early eighteenth century, he was also an avid collector and patron with a seemingly insatiable taste for exotic objects. He amassed precious natural materials from around the globe with which some of the finest artists and artisans from Europe fashioned spectacular decorative objects depicting peoples and cultures from exotic lands such as India, Africa, and the Far East. Moors are prominently featured in some of the most opulent objects commissioned by the Elector for his infamous Green Vault, the royal *Kunstkammer*. This collection of treasury art set the tone for the aesthetic development of Meissen porcelain designs, many of which were imitations of objects found in the royal *Kunstkammer*.¹¹ It is in this milieu that Meissen designers developed their signature blackamoor figures. This article will examine the Meissen sugar box *Negress with Basket* as one of many such objects that embodied typologies of race based on the complicated construct of the exotic blackamoor.

Meissen

Officially opened in 1710, the Meissen manufactory in Dresden was the first European major producer of hard-paste white porcelain that approximated the popular Chinese prototype.¹² Established by Augustus the Strong, the manufactory became the major trendsetter in porcelain design in eighteenth-century Europe. The Elector, an enthusiastic collector of Chinese and Japanese porcelain, influenced the aesthetic character of Meissen design through his various commissions, particularly for copies of Oriental porcelains found in his collection.¹³ Not only did his obsession for Oriental design drive the early production of Meissen, but also his passion for collecting and commissioning elaborate art and artifacts for the Electoral *Kunstkammer* set a tone of opulence and luxurious exoticism.

By the mid eighteenth century exoticized black figures, or blackamoors, emerged as a popular motif in Meissen porcelain. An extension of the larger interest in exotic peoples that seemed to permeate the Saxon treasury, Meissen's designers included black figures in a variety of models, both freestanding and in figure groups. Among his many incarnations, a blackamoor attendant was depicted serving a fashionably dressed aristocratic woman in the popular



8.1 *Lady with Blackamoor*. Modeled by Joachim Kändler, Meissen Porcelain Manufactory, c.1737, © Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

crinoline group *Lady with Blackamoor*, c.1737 (Figure 8.1).¹⁴ Another piece features two black “Moorish” figures amid a spray of porcelain flowers posing in a decorative swagger as they flank a potpourri jar.¹⁵ Several models by noted Meissen figure sculptor Johann Joachim Kändler (1706–75) depict a Sultan riding on an elephant with a blackamoor guide dating from the 1740s. The elephant and blackamoor pair was recast into the more elaborate *War Elephant I* and *II* in the 1773 pieces designed as diplomatic gifts for the Oranienbaum, the Russian royal residence.¹⁶ Black figures also represented allegories of both Africa and America in popular porcelain figurines of the four continents.

These examples typified the manner in which black bodies, usually in the role of servants, were used to enhance the sense of the exotic in porcelain designs. They were in dialogue with a visual language of exoticism that bloomed in the eighteenth century and often referred to with the French term *turquerie*. A domestication of Turkish flavored exotica that became fashionable in *ancien régime* France, *turquerie* conventionalized western mythologies of the East and provided an arena where themes of race, ethnicity, sensuality, and

dominance were explored under the guise of rococo frivolity. The physical, social, and cultural binaries represented by the black servant became a trope that automatically signaled the exotic and evoked a fantasy of distant lands that fascinated Europeans in the eighteenth century. The artifice of this kind of exoticism was a means by which Europeans could celebrate, domesticate, and naturalize racial domination.

Negress with Basket

Negress with basket (Plate 11) was modeled by Kändler and Johann Friedrich Eberlein for Meissen in 1741 and combines a female blackamoor character with a covered sugar bowl. Mounted on a typical rococo style irregular landscape formation, the female figure stands next to a covered bowl with a basket weave motif.¹⁷ In this version the bowl is embellished with flowers. The black female wears a purple skirt decorated with floral sprays as well as a striped headdress. Her deep black coloration is typical of Meissen's black figures and provides a stark contrast to her red lips and white eyes. In a contrapposto stance, she bends slightly at the waist and holds an apple in her hand. This type of figure is not simply embellishment, but through the direct gaze and offering gesture she intervenes between the diner and the contents of the bowl, much like a servant. A second model at the Rijksmuseum is almost identical in form but with small differences such as yellow drapery and fruits instead of flowers as embellishment.

An unpainted pair close in style to those at the Rijksmuseum was also part of the grand "St Andrew" service created by Meissen for Empress Elizabeth of Russia in honor of her heir's marriage.¹⁸ The service consisted of painted dinnerware as well as unpainted figures for the dessert setting. Two white sugar bowls flanked by a male and a female Moor figure were in the dessert program. The female is identical to the Rijksmuseum model in both gesture and costume. The male wears a feather headdress and feather skirt, a costume associated with the allegorical representations of both America and Africa. While allegories were a possible source of inspiration for the porcelain figures, there is no evidence of the production of companion models of Europe and Asia that would complete the four parts of the allegorical world. With the absence of blackness as a racial marker, the costumes are the only signifiers of race or ethnicity, demonstrating their importance in the codification of this typology.

This figure was a very common Meissen product.¹⁹ In several 1741 reports, Eberlein describes various sugar bowls with attached Moors created for a "Mr. Huët."²⁰ Mr. Huët is most likely the Parisian merchant to whom Meissen exported their goods in the 1740s.²¹ French merchants of luxury goods in Paris, or *marchands merciers*, were influential in the sale of Meissen and other fashionable objects throughout the eighteenth century.²² Apparently, the



8.2 Pair of Meissen Ormolu-mounted Blackamoor Sweetmeat Figures. Modeled by Johann Friedrich Eberlein, 1740s, © Christie's Images Ltd. 1993.

blackamoor and sugar box design was appealing to French tastes as three models were destined for Mr. Huêt in 1741.²³ According to Howard Coutts, "the tendency at the Meissen factory in the 1740s and 1750s was to produce items to impress the French market ..."²⁴ The taste for rococo exotica in the form of *chinoiserie* and *turquerie* flourished at the pre-revolutionary French court and in aristocratic circles. Prominent in interior design and art, decorative black figures were fashionable and their popularity undoubtedly influenced this design at Meissen. In fact, in Eberlein's work report of July 1741, he refers to this model as "*Eine Mohrin, in türkischem Habit ...*"²⁵ (A [female] Moor in Turkish costume), directly associating the black female figure in this model with vogue for Turkish exotica.

Although the models vary in design, the combination of blackamoor figure and sugar box that originated at Meissen was clearly an important part of their repertoire. The pairing was recast by Meissen in sweetmeat bowls that were of a similar concept, but the uncovered bowl was intended for small confections rather than sugar (Figure 8.2).²⁶ This style of object seems to have

been modeled consistently at Meissen in the 1740s and eventually picked up by other manufactories.

Meissen's success as a trendsetter and thriving enterprise in the luxury goods market inspired the growth of competitive factories throughout Europe. Not only was Meissen's secret formula for its hard-paste porcelain coveted and eventually stolen by other manufactories, designs were adopted by competing enterprises as well.²⁷ Models similar to Meissen's blackamoor sugar box appeared in Viennese as well as Bavarian designs. In the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art is one of the variant models produced by the Vienna manufactory during the Du Paquier period (1718–44).²⁸ The Vienna version depicts a turbaned male figure wearing a skirt with arms outstretched standing beside the covered bowl. The bowl is painted in black and gold and features a vignette of a woman and man at a well. The piece is decorated with leaves and branches. A similar figure with a different gesture accompanies another Vienna sugar box in the Liechtenstein collection.²⁹

An interesting iteration of the model from the Nymphenburg Porcelain Manufactory is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum (Figure 8.3). Male and female black bodies flank covered sugar bowls similar to the Meissen "St Andrews" pair. The female is adorned with luminous white pearl jewelry that serves to enhance the jet-black pigment of her nearly



8.3 *Sugar Boxes*, c.1760, Nymphenburg Porcelain Manufactory. Modeled by Franz Anton Bustelli. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Jack and Belle Linsky Collection, 1982 (1982.60.197 ab, 198 ab). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

nude body. The male figure is adorned with a feather headdress and feather skirt, typical attire of the blackamoor trope.³⁰ These reclining black figures drape their sensuous bodies around the sugar bowls. Seductively posed, the male figure holding up a bunch of grapes exudes an exoticized bacchanalian languor.

These sugar receptacles were not necessarily stand-alone objects, but would have been part of an elaborate display destined for the dessert table. Interestingly, these items created to hold sugar and sweets were developed in order to replace tabletop ornaments once made out of sugar for royal and aristocratic tables across Europe.³¹ Out of a vogue for ephemeral confectionery dessert settings came the impetus for Meissen to develop this tradition in the more durable material of porcelain.³² In fact, by the end of the eighteenth century small porcelain figural sculpture eventually supplanted the centuries-old tradition of sugar sculpture.³³

Grand decorations had been an important feature of the sumptuous table since the Renaissance. Sugar sculpture was invented in Italy and used for the wedding banquets of the Este, Sforza, Montefeltro, and Medici families between 1473 and 1539, and gained popularity throughout Europe.³⁴ Historian Eddy Stols describes a program of sugar sculpture at a wedding banquet at the palace of Brussels in 1565:

a gallant company of great lords and ladies ... crowded around a long table to admire crystallized fruits from around the world, from Spain, Portugal, Genoa, and Naples, and from Africa and the marvelous Indies, laid out on dishes in jars, in cups, and on plates, with matching and paring knives and napkins amidst chandeliers and candelabras. Everything except the cloth on the table, was made of sugar.³⁵

Stols discusses a setting at the same banquet in a neighboring room where sugar sculpture was fashioned as the voyage of a Portuguese princess:

One saw at the start the Pillars of Hercules and the imperial eagle, the squadrons of ships, the unfurled sails marked with the arms of Portugal and Spain, the raging ocean with its whales, dolphins, and sea monsters, ... and, on the road to Termonde, packed with cavaliers and carriages, the princess surrounded by her ladies and black slaves in livery—and all was this in a region where custom prohibited slavery.³⁶

Stols's description indicates that, like other forms of visual culture in the Renaissance, the image of the black servant could also be found in the spectacle of fantasy feasting. Like the unusual fruits and the sugar itself, the black slave indexed exotic locales. The presence of liveried slaves in the retinue of a Portuguese princess was probably not an unusual association considering the Portuguese role in the Atlantic slave trade and more specifically their role in the distribution of African slaves for domestic service in wealthy

European households.³⁷ As Stols points out, the region in which the sculpture was created prohibited slavery. Yet I contend that in the context of the table decoration their presence is not surprising since black figures possessed a certain type of ornamental value in European visual culture that included, but went beyond, their status as slaves. Clearly the "ornamentality" of black servitude that would flourish in painting and decorative arts had a place in these culinary extravaganzas. Spectacles in sugar and spices imported from around the globe displayed in overabundance on the tabletops of the aristocracy were signs of a symbolically prosperous European economy, an economy in part flourishing because of the exploitation of slave labor.

Blackness as represented by Europeans was never a simple *re*-presentation, but associated with specific histories of their complex interactions.³⁸ The fact that these black figures were so closely linked with sugar evokes the inextricable relationship between sugar production and black slave labor. Sugar was a commodity that, by the eighteenth century, was essentially brought to the table via the labor of enslaved Africans. Sugar, once a rare delicacy cultivated in the Mediterranean, by the sixteenth century became a thriving industry in the Atlantic slave cultures, particularly Brazil and the Caribbean.³⁹ In fact, eminent slavery historian James Walvin states that it was the production of sugar that changed the course of Atlantic slavery, creating more than any other crop a great demand for slaves in the Americas.⁴⁰ The association between slavery and sugar was so great that the abolitionist sentiment "East India sugar not made by slaves" was inscribed on an 1822 British stoneware sugar bowl in order to avoid the stain of slavery that was brazenly brandished in the Meissen piece.⁴¹

Black servitude that was evoked in decorative porcelain wares was part of the fabric of a European culture deeply involved in the perpetuation of African slavery well into the nineteenth century. Any reference to black slavery or servitude, even by a non-slaveholding society, necessarily reflects the relationship between the European economy and the slave trade. The close association between sugar, slavery, and the Meissen object exemplify how material culture celebrated black slavery in a manner that recast human degradation and exploitation into exotic vignettes. Black figures as ornamentation in objects such as *Negress with a Basket* and others of its kind were not simply benign frivolous appointments, but evidence of a culture that marginalized and dominated blacks in the pursuit of grand economic gain.

Ornamentality and the Black Servant

The black exotic servant in eighteenth-century porcelain is part and parcel of a much larger trend in visual culture that perhaps had its most widespread

manifestation in painting. Images of black attendants were woven into European constructions of religious events, mythologies and self-stylings in a fairly consistent pattern from the sixteenth century onward. Artists such as Titian, Rubens, and Rembrandt included black servants in Biblical and mythological tableaux and portraits. Sensuous goddesses Venus and Diana, and Biblical heroines Judith and Bathsheba were often accompanied by black servants, both male and female. The image of the African attendant served both aesthetic and ideological functions.

The ornamental blackamoor's association with luxurious courtly life was cemented in Renaissance painting. Black servants, fairly common in the upper echelons of European society from the fifteenth century, were in practice as well as in representation, an embodiment of their owner's wealth.⁴² There has been a proliferation of recent scholarship that investigates the importance of the Islamic trade in luxury goods in Renaissance Italy and other parts of Europe.⁴³ Items such as fabrics, ceramics, glass, and slaves that entered Europe through the Islamic trade were associated with exotic luxury and status. Artists often included objects such as Oriental carpets in representations of both secular and sacred subjects.⁴⁴ Like a richly patterned silk fabric or an Oriental carpet, the African servant who had entered Europe through the same channels also signaled the luxuries of exotic lands, was a conspicuous display of wealth.⁴⁵ Art historian Paul Kaplan points out that black African servants were not rare, but they were expensive and in great demand in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe.⁴⁶ The blackamoor servant as a luxury accoutrement becomes a symbol of wealth and worldly tastes that would have been understood by elite Europeans in the sixteenth century, and remained so into the twentieth century. Certainly the idea of the black servant as a luxury item would be fundamental to the context of the porcelain figures discussed here.

As Europeans became increasingly involved with commercial slavery during the era of colonial expansion, the symbol of the blackamoor servant, in addition to a generic exoticism, also imported notions of an imperial economy and mercantile wealth. Often black servants in painting were linked to precious objects such as coral, pearls, and seashells brought back to Europe from distant and exotic locales. In Pierre Mignard's (1612–95) *Portrait of Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth* of 1682 (Figure 8.4) the adoring black attendant, by this time a convention in portraiture, wears a strand of pearls while holding a nautilus shell filled with pearls as well as a piece of red coral.⁴⁷ By linking the black servant with these objects, the artist not only makes an explicit reference to the wealth Europeans "found" in exotic overseas domains, but points to the trade in and exploitation of black labor that fueled the colonial economy. The dark skin of the servant also employed the centuries-old notion that the blackness of the servant's skin served to enhance the whiteness of the skin



8.4 Pierre Mignard, *Portrait of Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth*, 1682, Oil on canvas, © National Portrait Gallery, London.

of the main figure. Whiteness often equated beauty in the representation of European women.⁴⁸ The black servant therefore served to accentuate the beauty of those served. The contrast between blackness and whiteness would be echoed by Meissen and others in the juxtaposition of the jet black figure and the whiteness of porcelain.

By the eighteenth-century the trope of the black servant in painting was employed in a variety of modes from the pictorial exoticism of *turquerie* to social satire. Jean-Marc Nattier (1685–1766), portraitist at the court of Louis XV, depicted courtier Anne-Marie de Bourbon as a Turkish sultana surrounded by an array of exotic black slaves in the 1733 portrait *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane*.⁴⁹ The Turkish harem complete with exotic black servants became a popular setting for portraits *déguisé* in which fashionable sitters were portrayed in thinly veiled disguises. Often the only hint at the exotic was the presence of the black attendant in oriental garb. In England, William Hogarth (1697–1764) employed liveried black servants to satirize the vanity and pretensions of the wealthy, and the desire for foreign luxuries.⁵⁰ An important connection between these two paradigms is that exotic black bodies used in an ornamental fashion signified a fictive East as a locus of material opulence as well as European tastes in exotic luxury items.

While painting was influential in the conflation of blackness and luxury in imagery, the trope was physically embodied in the sumptuous decorative objects assembled in the Dresden collection of treasury art. The taste for the exotic blackamoor that seemed to flourish in Dresden collections and court culture constituted an immediate and influential framework for the Meissen adoption of the subject.

Saxon Court Culture and the Aesthetic of the Moor

Meissen porcelain was developed in a context where opulent material objects dominated both the collecting and patronage practices of court. The Dresden collection of treasury art developed between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. Treasury art often transformed natural materials such as stones, seashells, and rhinoceros horns into elaborate ornaments designed to inspire awe rather than perform any specific function.⁵¹ Characterized by spectacular ornamentation and virtuosic treatment of precious materials, the dominant aesthetic was the sensuous delight of the material's beauty. This type of exotica brought a sense of the expanding world to the collections of the European courts.

The Dresden collection, or *Kunstkammer*, was founded c.1560 and included various types of objects including *naturalia* (natural products), *ethnographica* (artifacts from distant lands), and *artificialia* (fantastic objects crafted by

artists and artisans). By the eighteenth century Augustus the Strong had become an enthusiastic collector and patron of extraordinary *artificialia*. It is within this realm of objects crafted for the princely collector that the association between exotic black bodies and precious objects had their greatest incarnation.

Dirk Syndram has stated that "African exoticism" was a special preference of Augustus the Strong's.⁵² The elector commissioned or purchased numerous items that featured ornamental blacks. These objects, typical of the heavily adorned pieces in the collection, were often made of gold, silver, rare materials, and precious stones. Johann Heinrich Köler's *Triumphal Arch with Two Obelisks* of 1701 depicts an African king whose profile is featured in the center of a triumphal arch. The piece is further embellished with busts of black men and black putti as well as other figures in cameo. More common than depictions of kings are figures of blackamoor servants in treasury objects. They could be found carrying Venus in a sedan chair, riding camels, elephants and horses, or providing the support for a goblet or bowl. They are even present among the myriad of exotic figures in Johann Melchior Dinglinger's *Grand Mogul's Throne* acquired by August the Strong in 1709.⁵³

Perhaps the most celebrated moors in the Dresden collections are those by court sculptor Balthasar Permoser (1651–1732). Permoser crafted a "Hottentot" couple in ivory and gilded silver.⁵⁴ Another African couple by Permoser, of pearwood, gilded silver, and precious stones, serve as caryatid figures supporting capitals. Notable in this genre are his four moor statues adorned with gilded and bejeweled costumes derived from illustrations of American Indians.⁵⁵ The conflation of the African bodies with American Indian costumes is typical of the generalized approach to ethnicity that often characterized eighteenth-century exoticism. Two of the figures hold trays with pearl clusters, and one holds a crystal cluster. The most renowned piece, *Moor with Emerald Cluster* (Figure 8.5), holds an emerald step that was presented to Elector August of Saxony by Emperor Rudolf II in 1581. These moors are the ultimate in ornamental blackness, encrusted with jewels and precious metals, their bodies both display and deliver the wealth of distant lands and embody the unabashed accumulation and consumption of exotic luxury goods by European elites.

Not only were Moors featured in the material objects in the Dresden collections, but these characters had manifestations in court festivals and portraiture as well. The Dresden tournament of 1609 included a large procession of "Ethiopians" as drummers, trumpeters, attendants, and an Ethiopian king.⁵⁶ Augustus the Strong himself appeared as an African chief in the procession of the "Carrousel of the Four Continents," a festival that took place in 1709.⁵⁷ Material wonders as well as public spectacle created in Dresden represented the power and stature of the court.



8.5 *Moor with Emerald Cluster*, c.1724, sculpted by Balhsar Permoser with ornamentation by the Dinglinger workshop. Grünes Gewölbe, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Inv. No VIII 303. Photo: Jürgen Karpinski.

German states were not directly involved with the slave trade and colonial slave economies, but Africans were obtained as court adornment dating back to the seventeenth century.⁵⁸ Throughout the German territories blacks were employed as musicians, and black drummers were an important aspect of musical processions in the Saxon court. Both Augustus the Strong and his wife Christiane Eberhardine (1675–1760) were depicted with black pages in portraits by French-born court painter to Augustus the Strong, Louis de Silverstre (1675–1760).⁵⁹ Several paintings by Silverstre include black servants and indicate that they were probably in attendance in some form at the Saxon court while he served there. Their presence notwithstanding, black bodies were part of the visual lexicon of the Saxon court and served, in images and objects, to create an atmosphere of exoticism and wealth.

Meissen porcelain designs were an extension of the ever-growing collection of luxurious objects amassed by the Elector. Just as Meissen designers copied the collection of Chinese and Japanese porcelain, treasury art inspired many forms as well. Although *Negress with Basket* and her porcelain brethren were designed after the death of Augustus the Strong, his influence in operations and aesthetic choices were fundamental to the Meissen manufactory. His taste for moors laid the groundwork for the adoption of this and other designs in the Meissen repertoire. In many cases modelers retained the exoticism of the black body but adapted the designs for the new medium. I contend that *Negress with Basket* is a descendant of the *Moor with Emerald Cluster* and the others in this group. Both designs are structured around the black figure in the act of offering or presenting. Both substances being offered are rooted in the colonial encounter, the emerald from Colombia and the sugar from Brazil or the West Indies. The association between the black body and exotic substances establish the link between the courtly environment and distant lands while the act of serving maintains the social hierarchy that these kinds of objects served to maintain.

The porcelain models mimic the black ornamentality found in other decorative arts or painting and fashion these ideas into objects that can be made in multiples. The popularity of this design and its adoption by other manufacturers speak to the currency of the theme. The widespread distribution of this model imbued it with significant power as a marker of racial codes. Even though the trope of the ornamental black was a convention, its very conventionality effectively relegated an enormous economic and social system of inhumanity to the space of a decorative vignette. Small, utilitarian objects insidiously presented the idea of black servitude as normal, natural or charmingly exotic in the context of a grand table setting. Sarah Richards has pointed out that the court table could be an important political site, a place where the powerful position of the hosts could be underscored.⁶⁰ Richards states that:

In the 1730's, when the Dresden court sculptors had got to grips with the technical difficulties of firing porcelain figures, part of their work included the production of small-scale sculptures depicting the labouring poor, the artisans and professionals of the Saxon state. These porcelain figures replaced sugar sculpture on the tables at court festivities, but their purpose was not simply ornamental. In a society where people were acutely conscious of their social position, and where the hierarchy was rigid in comparison to Britain, these depictions personified the subject peoples of the state and reinforced social distinctions.⁶¹

Blackamoor figures as well as other exotic types— misfits, laborers, and peasants often adorned fine tabletops—constitute a social and cultural counterpoint to the atmosphere of wealth and refinement in which these objects were displayed.

The aestheticized, schematized black servant in Meissen porcelain and other objects can be seen as a rhetorical tool that emphasized binary oppositions between black and white, civilized and savage, self and "other." Ornamental Blackamoors inject the presence of the black body into the domestic interior and bring with them the attendant racist ideologies and practices that necessarily inform the creation of such objects. Shrouded in Oriental costumes or exotic adornment that mask the horrific inhumanity of the Atlantic slave trade, black bodies perform a decorative servitude that mimics their role as household servants in Europe and slaves in the Americas, and mitigates the harsh realities of slavery. This brand of imagery is particularly effective because the ostensibly innocuous ornamentation insidiously normalizes and even promotes racist ideologies and practices.

From painting to porcelain design, the ornamental blackamoor was a ubiquitous figure, punctuating luxurious settings with decorative exoticism throughout *ancien régime* Europe. *Blackamoor with Basket* and her variant models exemplify black typologies in porcelain that drew on equally complex social and cultural contexts marginalizing difference and transforming unwieldy social issues into fashionable exotica.

Notes

1. Henry Louis Gates, Jr has notably unmasked the notion of race in the twentieth century as a fiction and has questioned it as a meaningful category in critical theory. See his "'Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes," in *Race, Writing, and Difference*, ed. Jr Henry Louis Gates (Chicago IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1985).
2. This idea is attributed to Swedish naturalist Carl von Linné (1701–78). Nicolas Hudson, "From 'Nation' to 'Race': The Origin of Racial Classification in Eighteenth-Century Thought," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29, no. 3 (1996): 253.
3. Comte de Buffon George-Louis Leclerc, "A Natural History, General and Particular." In Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, ed., *Race and the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 21.
4. David Bindman, *Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the 18th Century* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press), 24–5. See also Gustav Jahoda, *Images of Savages: Ancient Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999).

5. The term Moor became associated with Arabs, blacks and sometimes whites. Jahoda, *Images of Savages*, 27. See also A. Buluda Itandala, "European Images of Africa from Early Times to the Eighteenth Century," in *Images of Africa: Stereotypes and Realities*, ed. Daniel M. Mengara (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2001), 65-7.
6. David Brion Davis pinpoints the Muslim conquest of Central Europe as the event that bonds Islam and Africa in the mind of the European. David Brion Davis, "Constructing Race: A Reflection," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, no. 54 (1997): 16. For the conflation of the Oriental and the black African see my dissertation: Adrienne L. Childs, "The Black Exotic: Tradition and Ethnography in Nineteenth-Century European Art." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland, 2005.
7. A part of the larger dynamics of slavery in the Islamic world, the practice of enslaving black sub-Saharan Africans and dispersing them through widespread network of slavers and markets carried black slaves to North Africa, Mediterranean Europe, the Middle East and as far east as China. See: Ronald Segal, *Islam's Black Slaves: The Other Black Diaspora* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).
8. William Shakespeare's *Othello* has spawned a large amount of critical analysis regarding the implications of race in modern Europe. For a synthesis of these issues see Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race and Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
9. This article is part of a larger project that charts the blackamoor as an ornamental motif in European decorative arts from its roots in Venice through the nineteenth century.
10. David Northrup, *Africa's Discovery of Europe: 1450-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 149-55.
11. Maureen Cassidy-Geiger, "Porcelain and Prestige: Princely Gifts and 'White Gold' from Meissen," in *Fragile Diplomacy: Meissen Porcelain for European Courts ca. 1710-63* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 3.
12. Clare Le Corbieller, *German Porcelain of the Eighteenth Century* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990), 5.
13. Le Corbeiller, *German Porcelain*, 7.
14. The term "crinoline group" refers to porcelain figure groups featuring a woman wearing fashionably wide skirts.
15. The piece entitled *Montierter Potpourri mit Mohrenpaar* is in the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum in Munich. Ranier Rückert, *Meissener Porzellan 1710-1810* (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 1966), 239.
16. Ulrich Pietsch, ed., *Meissen for the Czars: Porcelain as a Means of Saxon-Russian Politics in the Eighteenth Century* (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2004), 116.
17. Meissen offered several dessert services with basket-weave motifs in the 1730s and 1740s. Howard Couatts, *The Art of Ceramics: European Ceramic Design 1500-1830* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 95.
18. Lydia Liakhova, "In a Porcelain Mirror: Reflections of Russia from Peter I to Empress Elizabeth" in *Fragile Diplomacy*, 74.
19. The catalogue mentions two examples at Mannheim and several at the Hermitage. Abraham L. den Blaauwen, *Meissen Porcelain in the Rijksmuseum* (Amsterdam: Waanders Publishers, 2000), 436.
20. Blaauwen, *Meissen Porcelain*, 436.
21. Mr. Huët is mentioned by Otto Walcha in *Meissen Porcelain* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1981), 123-4. A Jean-Charles Huet is mentioned by Howard Couatts as being appointed Paris agent for Meissen in 1734. Couatts, *The Art of Ceramics*, 95.
22. Carolyn Sargentson, *Merchants and Luxury Markets: The Marchands Merciers of Eighteenth-Century Paris* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1996).
23. Blaauwen, *Meissen Porcelain in the Rijksmuseum*, 436.
24. Couatts, *The Art of Ceramics*, 101.
25. As quoted by Blaauwen in *Meissen Porcelain in the Rijksmuseum*, 436.
26. A pair of Meissen ormolu-mounted figures modeled by Eberlein was pictured in Christie's catalog from March 1, 1993. *Continental and British Ceramics Including Meissen Porcelain from the Korthaus Collection* (London: Christie's, 1993), 59.