

THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE



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The Chatsworth Vases, a gift from Louis XV in 1768 to Henri Léonard Jean-Baptiste Bertin

by DEBORAH GAGE



15. *Garniture de trois vases fond violet œuf montés* (the Chatsworth Vases). Sèvres, 1768. Soft-paste porcelain, central vase 38.1 cm. high; side vases 27.3 cm. high. (Copyright Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth, reproduced by permission of Chatsworth Settlement Trustees).

WILLIAM SPENCER CAVENDISH, the 6th Duke of Devonshire (1790–1858), known as the Bachelor Duke, succeeded his father at the age of twenty-one and became one of the grandest and most prolific collectors of his day, living through the reigns of four monarchs: George III; the Prince Regent, later George IV; William IV and Queen Victoria. His taste and interests, which he indulged on a princely scale, were clearly influenced by his friendship with the Prince Regent; the passion for bibliography, ceramics and minerals of his mother, Georgiana; and his frequent tours to Russia and elsewhere in Europe, where he was entertained at the grandest royal courts. Extravagant and eclectic, he devoted forty-seven years to the improvement of his many houses, collecting significant works of art of every genre. His main focus was Chatsworth, Derbyshire, whose efflorescence is the result of his landscaping of the grounds and ambitious architectural extensions, providing a suitable setting for the house's vast collection today.

Distinguished by their rare and exotic *fond violet* ground, the Chatsworth Vases (Fig. 15) are listed in the December 1768 sales

inventories at the Manufacture nationale de Sèvres, having been commissioned by Louis XV as a gift for Henri Léonard Jean-Baptiste Bertin (1719–92), together with a second garniture, also comprising three vases, presented to Jean-Baptiste Machault d'Arnouville (1701–94).¹ While the production of these two garnitures of *fond violet* vases marked a watershed of the ingenuity and technical accomplishment of Jean-Jacques Bailly and his colleagues at Sèvres,² just as intriguing is Louis XV's choice of recipients for such lavish gifts, both of whom were prominent within eighteenth-century court circles, notably as two of the King's finance ministers.

To this day, Sèvres is celebrated for its quest for quality and unequalled ground colours, and for its technical excellence allied with characteristic flamboyance. As Sèvres vases continually captured public imagination and therefore received the most publicity, they became the vanguard for the latest style or fashion. The year 1762 saw the introduction of the first vases at Sèvres and, with the evolution of Neo-classicism, vase shapes were simplified, based upon antique models ultimately evolving into forms such as

I would like to record my gratitude to Antoine d'Albis for his help and insight in the research for this article, in particular, explaining and providing me with a copy of Bailly's 1785 manuscript. Also to Hannah Obee, Curator of Decorative Arts, Chatsworth House, and Kate Henson for their guidance.

¹ It appears that the Machault garniture became separated, and was reunited when the central vase was auctioned from the collection of Frederick J. and Antoinette H. Van Slyke of Baltimore, Maryland, at Sotheby's, New York, 20th May 1989, lot 171.

² Jean-Jacques Bailly was painter and *chef de couleurs et chimie* at Sèvres (1745–90).



16. Pair of trial cylindrical shaped vases *fond violet*. Sèvres, c.1768. Soft-paste porcelain, 17 cm. high. (Musée National de Céramique, Sèvres).



17. One of a pair of vases *pot pourri Pompadour*. Sèvres, c.1753. Soft-paste porcelain, 43 cm. high. (Musée National de Céramique, Sèvres).

the prized egg-shaped vases. The egg was the ancient symbol of the world, a theme reiterated through the eighteenth century. The name *vase œuf* appears in Sèvres archival documents, referring to a variety of egg-shaped vases produced by the factory in the eighteenth century. Thus the shape of the Chatsworth Vases – a garniture of one central and two side vases – may be interpreted as the most classical in form. The pulsating colour of the *fond violet* is the most immediately striking aspect of the Chatsworth Vases, further enhanced by ormolu mounts of such quality that they may surely be attributed to Jean-Claude Duplessis.³

The Vincennes factory appears to have produced an earlier purple colour, emulating Meissen, but it was tinged with a brownish-grey hue, as its composition was pure manganese using a lead base. This can be seen in the pair of *vases pot pourri* in the Musée National de Céramique at Sèvres (Fig. 17). The colour of the Chatsworth and the Machault d'Arnouville vases is a different purple and, apart from their aesthetic glamour, in technical terms their significance is based upon a challenging formula, developed by Bailly at Sèvres, using an alkaline glaze. This *fond violet* proved to be the rarest of the soft-paste ground colours, because the colour was so volatile. Rather than an overglaze, the manganese pigment and the alkaline glaze were melted down in a crucible and quickly cooled in water to harden, before being ground into a fine powder and sieved directly onto the bisque ceramic body, thinly covered with an adhesive *mordant*.⁴ The vase was then fired and the process repeated. This application was highly experimental because of the difficulty involved in balancing the levels of alkaline in the glaze.⁵ *Fond violet* required even greater levels of alkaline mixed with the colouring agent manganese to achieve the desired colour. Such high alkaline levels require sodium oxide that liquefies as it is subjected to heat, which can cause the colour to run or bleed and become washed out when fired. Alternatively, the ground might turn black if too

thickly applied, and this ground had a tendency to craze.⁶ Such a *fond violet* ground could only have been produced because of the introduction of Claude-Humbert Gérin's muffle kiln, which allowed a greater degree of control during the firing.⁷ So tricky was this *fond violet* to produce, that it appears to have become quickly obsolete. As a result, apart from the two garnitures of three vases each commissioned by Louis XV in 1768 as gifts, and one other single vase,⁸ no other wares of this stunning ground colour appear to have been completed.

In his handwritten *Manuscrit de Bailly, 17...–1785*, Bailly recorded the process of producing the two *fond violet* garnitures.⁹ It seems there were various trial stages, which included, for example, a Sèvres pair of cylindrical shaped vases (Fig. 16), mounted with nineteenth-century ormolu collars around each rim, and another small pair of *vases œuf*, with more elaborate ormolu mounts (Fig. 18). There is an intriguing reference to this formula on 24th September 1767, under a paragraph headed *Violet No. I*, in which Bailly specifically refers to '*les petits œufs qui est tres beau [sic]*'. These prototypes are exciting, as they highlight the element of trial and error that was a constant – and essential – part of the developmental process at Sèvres: the factory experimented on small pieces to attain the desired level of excellence. These trial pieces appear to have a dominant blue tonality to their ground colour, and must therefore relate to Bailly's first experimental firing. His manuscript stipulates that the first formula of the *fond violet* produced a bluer tone,¹⁰ and that the second, possibly due to the addition of *fondant de crystal* to the formula, was redder.¹¹ The difference in colour may have also been caused by variations of temperature during firing or the varying thickness of layers. While both garnitures demonstrate the artistic and technical skills necessary to comply with the King's daunting commission, the small test pieces were not subsequently discarded. Rather, they became desirable objects in their own right; the *vases œuf* were

de Vincennes, Paris 1991, p.226.

³ Only the ground colours *bleu celeste*, *verte pomme*, *beau bleu* and *fond violet* required an alkaline glaze which contained higher levels of potassium and sodium in order to achieve the brilliance and intensity of their colour.

⁴ A. d'Albis: *Traité de la porcelaine de Sèvres*, Paris 2002.

⁵ For Claude-Humbert Gérin (d.1751) and the muffle kiln, see S. Eriksen and G. de Bellaigue: *Sèvres Porcelain*, London 1987, p.58.

⁶ Sale, Christie's, New York, *The Collection of the Late André Meyer*, 26th

¹ Jean-Claude Duplessis (d.1774) was an Italian goldsmith, sculptor, *fondeur-ciseleur* and designer who had settled in Paris by 1742. In 1747 he joined the Vincennes porcelain factory, moving with it to Sèvres and remaining on the staff until his death; see J. Fleming and H. Honour: *The Penguin Dictionary of Decorative Arts*, Harmondsworth 1977, p.253.

⁴ The Sèvres factory purchased Egyptian mummies, which were subsequently boiled, mixed with turpentine and used as an adhesive material, or *mordant*, to which the powdered pigments would adhere; see M. Préaud and A. d'Albis: *La Porcelaine*

mounted in elaborate ormolu, so that they could be displayed as 'stand alone' objets de vertu. It would appear that the ormolu foot, stem, rim and handles are approximately contemporary with the date of the porcelain's manufacture and of notable quality. As these were trial vases, they would not have been made with corresponding porcelain lids. Therefore, at a later date, the Neo-classical ormolu lids and knops were apparently made for the vases to provide a complete ensemble. Again, neither of these sets of experimental vases is internally glazed.

An entry in the Sèvres sales inventories clearly refers both to the Chatsworth and Machault d'Arnouville garnitures as being a unique commission by Louis XV as '*Livrés pour Présenter*'. They also detail the sales price. The two side vases were 120 livres each and the cost of the ormolu mounts was 132 livres each. The cost of the central vase was 240 livres, and there are two entries for the mounts at 144 livres each or a total of 288 livres.¹² The Chatsworth garniture presented to Bertin appears to have been slightly larger than the Machault d'Arnouville vases (Fig. 19). The lids of the two side vases have either been damaged or replaced. The interiors of the vases from both garnitures are unglazed, as it was necessary to apply the *fond violet* with three or four layers, and therefore any glaze would have crazed upon numerous firings.

Henri Léonard Jean-Baptiste Bertin¹³ (1719–92) was admitted as a lawyer in Bordeaux in 1741. He served as both *conseiller* and president to the Grand Council (1749), and then served successively as Intendant of Roussillon (1749) and Intendant of Lyon (1754) before being named Lieutenant general of the police of Paris in 1757. He replaced Etienne de Silhouette as Controller General of Finances in October 1759, resigning from this position in 1763. He created the Land Registry to enable a better distribution of taxes, although these reforms met with hostility from the Parliament of Paris. Bertin was Secretary of State of the Council until Louis XV's death in 1774 and his department was in charge of, among other things, the King's personal finances. He received a secretariat of State which, unusually, was separate from the overall control of finance, its responsibilities ranging from the East India Company to canal development, depending on the department. As a collector, Bertin was interested in books and Chinese drawings. Fascinated by China, he allowed two young Chinese Catholics to spend several years of study in France, and on their return to China, they received a pension from Louis XVI. Bertin supported the Jesuit mission to the Emperor of China by way of fathers Bourgeois and Amiot. His correspondence with *père* Amiot, a Jesuit in Beijing, was published in 1776.

Bertin succeeded Jacques Dominique Barberi de Courteille in 1767 as the *commissaire du Roi*, taking charge of the Sèvres factory, the latter having held the post since August 1751. In 1772 Bertin appointed his own clerk, Melchior François Parent, as director of the factory, to replace Jacques-René Boileau, who had held the post at Vincennes since 1745. No doubt the receipt of the princely garniture of *vases fond violet* inspired Bertin to become the driving force behind Parent, encouraging him to concentrate



18. Pair of trial vases *auf fond violet*. Sèvres, c.1768. Soft-paste porcelain, 22.2 cm. high (including mounts). (Private collection, USA).



19. Garniture de trois vases *fond violet aef montés* (the Machault d'Arnouville Vases). Sèvres, c.1768. Soft-paste porcelain, central vase 30.5 cm. high; side vases 27.3 cm. high. (Private collection).

upon the manufacture of hard-paste porcelain at Sèvres; thus Bertin may be credited with playing a significant role in securing the commercial future of the manufactory.

How and from where the Chatsworth Vases arrived in the collection in Derbyshire is at present unknown. They certainly reflect the 6th Duke of Devonshire's taste, although regrettably few of his purchase vouchers have survived. Given the Bachelor Duke's penchant for Blue John, these vases would surely have proved a perfect complement within some of the most lavish interiors in Britain at the time. What is certain, the two garnitures evince the passion of their patron, their creators and their owners and rank today among the most alluring works of art in the Chatsworth collections. They also remain among the most exemplary and fascinating royal commissions at Sèvres.

October 2001, lot 8 (unsold); subsequently sold Christie's, New York, 22nd May 2002, lot 314.

¹² *Registre des procédés de couleurs pour la porcelaine tendre et la porcelaine dure de Sèvres, Manuscrit de Bailly, 17...-1785*; Archives Manufacture Sèvres (hereafter cited as AMS), Y75.

¹³ '*Violet pour mettre en fond du 24 Sept 1767. Violet No.1: Prenez 6 gros de manganese calciné avec 9 gros de sables d'Etampes. Trois onces de sel de nitre et un gros de borax que vous mettez dans un creuset et le ferez fonder dans un creuset et le ferez fondre a grand feu pendant 4 heures*'; AMS, Y75.

¹¹ '*Violet pour mettre en fond du 24 Sept 1767. Violet No.2: Prenez cette première fonte No.1 une partie avec deux parties de fondant de cristal [. . .] Faites fondre pendant 4 heures et le coulez. Prenez de cette seconde fonte No.2 pour faire votre violet. Prenez deux onces de Violet No.2. une once de sable. Une once de sel de tartre. Une once de sel de nitre. Trois onces de minimum. Mettez le tout dans un creuset et faites le fondre à grand feu et le coulez*'; AMS, Y75.

¹² AMS, VY4, fol.173.

¹³ See A. d'Albis: 'The creation of hard-paste porcelain production at Sèvres', *French Porcelain Society* 13 (1998), p.34, note 9.