

Sacred Ceramics: Devotional Images in European Porcelain (London, 30 Sep 25)

V&A South Kensington, London, Sep 30, 2025

Rebecca Klarner, Matthew Martin

Was eighteenth-century European porcelain just a ceramic material to be moulded into useful objects—or could it mean more? This conference explores what European porcelain might have communicated when it was used to create devotional objects.

This conference explores the phenomenon of religious sculpture produced in European porcelain in the eighteenth century. Sculptures on religious subjects represent some of the most ambitious and complex productions in European porcelain of the period, yet they remain relatively understudied. Meissen, Doccia Vienna, Höchst, Fulda, Nymphenburg—all these factories produced devotional images in porcelain. Even factories in mid eighteenth-century Protestant England—Chelsea and Derby—produced sculptures employing Catholic devotional imagery. In each instance, cultural-political motives for the creation of these images can be reconstructed.

The 1712 letter penned by the Jesuit Father François Xavier d'Entrecolles not only conveyed to Europe first-hand knowledge of Chinese porcelain production at Jingdezhen, but it also construed access to this knowledge as a triumph of the Jesuit global mission—the successes of the Jesuits in China made the secret of kaolinic porcelain available to the Catholic princes of Europe.

Porcelain's alchemical heritage was also not without significance: success at the alchemical enterprise had always been deemed dependent on divine favour. These factors could lead to porcelain assuming a sacral character in Catholic court contexts. Devotional images in European porcelain exploited these cultural associations of the medium itself.

This international conference will explore the religious production of European ceramic factories and consider questions such as: Who were the artists and patrons involved in these sculptures' creation? How did these sculptures function in private and public contexts? What significance lay in the use of porcelain to create devotional images?

Generously supported by the French Porcelain Society

SCHEDULE

10.00 Museum Opens / Registration

10.30 Welcome

10.45 Introduction — Julia Weber (Director, Porcelain Collection, Staatliche Kunstsammlung Dresden)

11.00 Catholic China: Porcelain, the Jesuits, and Counter-Reformation Propaganda — Matthew Martin (Senior Lecturer in Art History and Curatorship, The University of Melbourne)

11.20 Religious Sculpture in Meissen Porcelain — Maureen Cassidy-Geiger (Independent Curator and Scholar)

11.40 Break

11.55 Marian Figures in Meissen Porcelain: A Female Body between a Catholic Court and a Protestant State — Rebecca Klarner (Collaborative Doctoral Partnership Researcher, University of Leeds/V&A and Assistant Curator, V&A Wedgwood Collection)

12.15 The Divine Mission of Du Paquier: Grace, Virtue, and Propaganda in the Context of Habsburg Piety — Claudia Lehner-Jobst (Director and Collections Curator, Augarten Porcelain Museum, Vienna)

12.30 Q&A

12.40 Lunch Break

13.30 Handling Session | Ceramics, Terracotta, and Ivory — Simon Spier, (Curator Ceramics & Glass 1600–1800, V&A) and Kira d'Albuquerque, (Senior Curator Sculpture, V&A), places are limited; please sign up during registration.

14.10 Handling Session Repeated

14.50 A Reliquary Made by the Imperial Vienna Porcelain Manufactory — Manuel von Aufschnaiter (Postgraduate Student, Art History, University of Vienna)

15.10 The Influence of Religious Patronage on European Porcelain Commissioning: Investigating the Rarest Monumental Sacral Porcelain Ensembles and the Ritual Use of the Porcelain Objects in European Ecclesiastical Rites — Carina Nathalia Madonna Visconti Paff (Art Historian, Licensed Art Expert and Embassies Art Advisor)

15.30 St Augustine's Church at Hammersmith: A Contemporary Ceramic Commission for a Catholic Church — Julian Stair (Ceramic Artist, Academic, and Writer)

15.45 Q&A

15.55 Tea and Coffee Break

16.20 Piety and Politics in Italian Porcelain — Errol Manners (Historic Ceramics Specialist)

16.40 Reflections on the Devotional Sculpture from Buen Retiro — Félix Zorzo (Assistant Curator European Decorative Arts, National Museums Scotland)

17.00 Porcelain for the Pope: Sacred Ceramics in Eighteenth-Century France — Susan Wager (Assistant Professor of Art History, University of New Hampshire, Durham)

17.15 Q&A and Closing Remarks

Reference:

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