

# From Silver and Gold to Porcelain

## ***The Imperial Table in Vienna between 1740 and 1814/15***

***By Ingrid Haslinger***

A princely table had to be laid with tableware of precious metal. It was a matter of *decorum* that the meal was served on dishes made of gold, vermeil or silver, and eaten from plates and with flatware of the same materials. Precious metal was not only an aesthetic – and, as was found later on, a hygienic – material for tableware, it was literally the *treasure* of a prince. Whenever he was in urgent need of money, tableware was melted down to make coins which could be used as cash. Plates, tureens, casseroles and flatware underwent changes in fashion and were subject to remodelling. They were handed over to silversmiths who used them as raw material, reshaping it to meet changing tastes.

The last decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century saw a transition from heterogeneous tableware, which made its main impression in the form of richly decorated and carefully arranged dishes, to complete services in a uniform style under the influence of France at the time of Louis XIV (1638-1715). In the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the vessels used at table changed according to progress in cooking techniques and a more sophisticated way of seasoning. Different types of objects were needed: besides salts, containers for pepper, oil, vinegar and sugar, and table center pieces (or *machines*) became fashionable. It also became customary to cover plates with a second plate or a *cloche* – to keep the dishes warm and protect them from hair powder falling down from the perruques of



Wedding breakfast Duke Franz Stephan of Lorraine and Archduchess Maria Theresa

the people who served the meal. Tureens, casseroles, plates und bowls were richly decorated with animals and plants – table decoration which also alluded to what was being served.

When Archduchess Maria Theresa (1717-1780) married Duke Franz Stephan of Lorraine (1708-1765) in 1737, the French influence – already introduced by Prince Eugene of Savoy (1663-1736) ) and his circle – became predominant at the Vienna court. Meals were now served *à la française*: various dishes were combined into courses and placed on the table at the same time; symmetrical order and an aesthetic arrangement of the dishes were essential. The guests at table helped themselves with serving spoons and forks, or offered to help their neighbours. The first course comprised soups, pastry, hors d'oeuvre, salads etc. Then the big roast was served with vegetables and stewed fruit. The meal ended with dessert (ice cream, fruit, candies, jellies, etc).

Although Maria Theresa was confronted with wars from the very start of her reign (1740) and had to economise on tableware, she bought silver services which were necessary for her growing family. Nevertheless, compared with other European courts, Maria Theresa had a rather modest stock of table silver. Besides two *surtouts* with sugar boxes, salts and four carafes, the silver inventories between 1740 and 1747/48 comprised various items of tableware made of (partly gilt) silver. These included ewers and basins (*lavabo sets*) used by the monarch to



Maria Theresa's luncheon service (above) and her "Mundzeug" - personal flatware (right)



wash her hands before and after (public) tables, a sweets stand with six bowls, coffee pots, teapots and other items. The “seven soup bowls with lids, gilt inside” could have been an early form of consommé cups, which were used at the Vienna court to *drink* olio soup and other strong, clear meat stock.

The so-called *contourné silver* gives the impression of a homogeneous service. It consisted of dishes and plates, entrée dishes (to serve some of the components of the first course) and rectangular plates for vegetables and salad. The hors d'œuvre dishes were small plates placed around the big dishes to fill empty space. There were also three *assiettes volantes*, used for serving dishes directly from the kitchen at the time when *service à la française* was fashionable. Given the delicacy of these dishes, it was not possible to leave them on the table for a long time. As soup was a *must* at any meal in Vienna, it is astonishing that this silver service did not comprise any vessels for serving or eating soups.

The silver inventories also include two travelling services as well as a large number of flatware items, among them 134 four-pronged forks. For ceremonial meals Maria Theresa and Franz Stephan used their personal cutlery sets, which were made of gold and consisted of a spoon, a fork, a two-pronged serving fork, a knife, an egg spoon with a marrow scoop, an egg cup and a spice box, which were listed in the silver inventories.

All of the precious-metal objects of the Imperial Silver Room in Vienna were marked with specific signs (coat-of-arms, crowns, cross of Lorraine, etc) showing that they belonged to the court. To avoid confusion when laying the table or storing the tableware away, all pieces were engraved with consecutive numbers.



Detail of Martin van Meytens' painting of the coronation table in Frankfurt 1764 on the occasion of Archduke Joseph being crowned King of the Holy Roman Empire



By 1748, the inventory of the Silver Room had changed considerably with the objects made of gold. The number of items was much larger. The silver-gilt vessels now formed a large service: one basin/ewer set, several *soucoupes* for glasses and water/wine carafes, *jattes* (deep bowls) for jellies and stewed fruit, six round *pots à oilles* and two *oilio* [sic!] spoons for serving the precious soup. Some of the silver from Lorraine was still there, but fewer pieces than in the earlier inventory. There were also sauce-boats, which were first produced in precious metal in the reign of King Louis XIV (1638-1715). Since then they have preserved their characteristic shape. The inventory also lists 15 *Lingots* (= silver bars) as reserve material for the silversmiths. All of these objects were placed on fine table linen, which was put on the table in three layers. After each course – or *service* – the dirty table cloth was removed to make room for a clean one. Table cloths and napkins were bought in the *Austrian Netherlands* and in Saxony, later in Austria-Silesia.

In 1760 Emperor Franz Stephan of Lorraine (1708-1765) commissioned a table service made of pure gold, which was first used on the occasion of the wedding of his son Joseph (1741-1790) with Isabella of Parma (1741-1763) in



Martin van Meytens' painting of the Coronation of Archduke Joseph as King of the Holy Empire,

Please note the various silver buffets built up along the wall belonging to the Electors.

the same year. It continued to be used on special occasions when important banquets were held, e.g. at the coronation of Archduke Joseph as King of the Holy Roman Empire (1764) and at the marriage of Archduke Leopold (1747-1792) with the Spanish *Infanta* Maria Ludovika (1745-1792) in Innsbruck (Tyrol) in 1765.

The gold service consisted of the following pieces: a *surtout* with a basket, two plates for oil and vinegar, four carafes with gold mounts, five carafes without mounts and two sugar boxes; sixteen oval plates of three different sizes; two round and two oval plates with silver-gilt liners; twelve round plates of three different sizes; forty-eight plates; eighteen pieces of flatware (spoons, forks, knives), two ladles, two double and four single salts. In 1767 Emperor Joseph II enlarged the service by commissioning the following items: four round plates of medium size; sixteen round and twenty oval plates; sixteen serving plates; six pairs of confectionery flatware (knives, forks and spoons from the legacy of Emperor Franz); nine silver serving plates and three candelabra with three arms made of gold. This was an extraordinary commission as Emperor Joseph tried to keep down costs.

When the war against France broke out in 1792, Joseph's nephew and successor Emperor Franz II (1768-1835; from 1804 Emperor Franz I of Austria) put services of precious metal to the mint whenever money was needed. In 1797, Franz Stephan's gold service was melted down. All that is left of this outstanding ensemble is the inventory and paintings by Martin van Meytens (1695-1770) showing the service at the coronation table in Frankfurt (1764), when Archduke Joseph was crowned King of the Holy Roman Empire, and in Innsbruck (1765), when Archduke Leopold (1743-1792) – later Emperor Leopold II – married the *Infanta* of Spain, Maria Ludovika (1743-1792).



The gold porcelain service, 184



But still the Imperial family needed new table services. It is not known when the Vienna Porcelain Manufactory was commissioned to produce the first *complete* dinner services. Some pieces of the two Sèvres services given to Maria Theresa by King Louis XV (1710-1774) and to her brother Joseph by Queen Marie Antoinette (1755-1793) had survived. There is evidence that the white service with golden wine leaves was acquired in 1810, and the white service with a golden rim in 1814.

Problems arose in 1814 when – after the defeat of Napoleon I (1769-1821) – the monarchs decided to hold a congress in Vienna to reorganise Europe and restore peace. After the costly wars, Emperor Franz had no services of precious metal for use at public tables. Therefore he had his Lord Chamberlain order a porcelain service completely gilt on the outside. The following pieces were suggested: four round pots of medium size with stands and two oval ones (soup tureens), two entrée pots with stands, six rectangular plates, one big oval and two smaller oval plates; four medium-sized plates for sweets; two casseroles; twelve dinner plates; twelve salts; two bowls for stewed fruit and two sauce-boats. It is obvious from this list that public tables were not really extensive meals.

In 1816, the *Grand Vermeil Service*, acquired during the Congress of Vienna by Emperor Franz from Eugène de Beauharnais (1781-1824), Napoleon's stepson, came from Italy on the occasion of the Emperor's fourth marriage with Carolina Augusta of Bavaria (1792-1873). Now the Imperial court again had a service of precious metal. From the mid-1830s the Habsburg court commissioned the Viennese silversmiths Eduard Würth, Stephan Mayerhofer, Mayerhofer & Klinkosch and J.C. Klinkosch to make a silver service. This service – called *Viennese Court Silver* – and the *Grand Vermeil* as well as surviving pieces of the porcelain services of 1814/15 are on display at the former Imperial Court Silver and Table Room in Vienna.



The Grand Vermeil Service

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