

Zeitschrift: Mitteilungsblatt / Keramik-Freunde der Schweiz = Revue des Amis Suisses de la Céramique = Rivista degli Amici Svizzeri della Ceramica
Herausgeber: Keramik-Freunde der Schweiz
Band: - (1997)
Heft: 111

Artikel: The comedians of Franz Antonÿ Bustellÿ
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Kapitel: Summary
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-395191>

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Summary

The eighteen figures of the Italian Comedy which Franz Anton Bustelli modelled for the Bavarian Porcelain Factory of Neudeck-Nymphenburg between 1757 and 1760 are, without question, the artist's finest achievements. In his short career in Munich his genius rose to outstanding heights of artistry in porcelain sculpture. These splendid figures, as a body of work, stand head and shoulders above similar porcelains produced in the second half of the eighteenth century. Their expression is that of the Bavarian rococo, in which Bustelli played an indisputably eminent part, and which distinguished itself by its great vivacity and a pronounced asymmetry of forms.

Bustelli arrived at Neudeck with a fund of ceramic knowledge, with a trained artist's eye for anatomy and with a considerable gift of transforming these into three-dimensional sculpture. Almost from the beginning of his employment, he proceeded to create masterpieces of rococo art in a material which, since its original invention in China centuries earlier, had lent itself to multiple production, but which Bustelli, the sculptor, handled as if each one of his figures were an unique creation.

Although we have latterly come to understand that Bustelli made use of iconographic sources, such as engravings, drawings and prints, as did all other porcelain modellers in the early years of European production, these two-dimensional models played only a secondary role in the inception of his figures, which were his own creatures, imagined and matured in his mind, and in his heart.

Franz Anton Bustelli's Italian Comedy figures are inspired by the spark of life, an inner substance of great verve which radiates *joie de vivre*, emotion and a most delicate image of elegance. It matters little that he selected a mixture of actors both from the time-honoured troupes of the Italian Commedia dell'Arte and from the more recent, eighteenth century French casts of the *Théâtre Italien*. The incomparable Bustelli touch blended his characters into a coherent company of his own. He modelled emotion, be it dignity, humour or sorrow, deceit or avarice. Dandies and blusterers pursue his scheming ladies, and pranksters create intrigue and turmoil. Bustelli's art shows much bravura, as his figures twist and turn in rapid movements and display a variety of feelings in gestures and facial expressions. Under the sharply defined drapes, we detect real human bodies. Created as table decorations on a pre-determined subject – in the eighteenth century porcelain had replaced earlier sculptured sugar and marzipan confections as centre pieces – Bustelli composed a ballet of interweaving bodies in a minuet of figures rotating on their own axis, but attuned harmoniously to the movements of their partners.

These movements, frozen in porcelain, allow us to behold each figure from any given angle with always renewed pleasure. As a final accomplishment, at least in his lifetime, the artist ensured that the painters of the factory decorated his figures with a faithful simulation of the most costly and elegant contemporary materials, the finest silks, brocades and damasks, the latest refinements of fashion. Thus each of Franz Anton Bustelli's figures became a unique work of art.