Joseph Willems's Chelsea Pieta and eighteenth-century sculptural aesthetics

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The question of the extent to which porcelain figures were considered sculpture—that is, figurative works bearing an independent meaning, viewed and engaged with as such, rather than objects which were seen as components subsumed into a larger decorative scheme—in mid-eighteenth-century England is one of interest. In general, porcelain has acquired overwhelmingly decorative connotations in art historical discourse and this has overshadowed its place in sculptural aesthetics. The medium falls foul of the aesthetic critiques of neoclassical theorists such as Winckelmann and Goethe, as it is seen to embody the phenomena of material illusionism (one material being employed to imitate another) and miniaturization, both identified by Ludwig Gear in his influential study Phänomenologie des Kitsches as art historical criteria for kitsch. The failure to consider the work of the modeller of porcelain figures as an exercise in compositional creativity is symptomatic of the more general failure to consider porcelain figures as art and their creators as artists.

Being manufactured from moulds, porcelain figures have been placed in the category of reproductive, serially produced objects, and as such are assumed to provide only the most tenuous access to the independent creative processes of the artists responsible for these works. The process of a porcelain figure's creation, especially when the figure is based upon a pre-existing design, be it a painting or a sculpture, has seen the modeller's role caricatured as a mechanical exercise in reproduction.

For much of the eighteenth century, however, porcelain did enjoy a fragile association with sculpture. From the earliest period of European porcelain production, and on through the eighteenth century, academically trained sculptors like Balthasar Permoser, Benjamin Thomae, Johann Joachim Kindler, Franz Anton Bustelli, Friedrich Wilhelm Döll, Jean Jacques Desouches, Étienne Maurice Falconet and John Flaxman were involved in the creation of sculpture in porcelain. From the very outset, Kändler's work at the Meissen factory had seen the porcelain medium turned to the production of original large-scale sculptural works—including the famed monochrome of near-life-size equestrian sculptures for Augustus the Strong (fig. 2), many of which are still preserved in the Franco-Saxon collections—and Kändler's projected, although never completed, monumental larger-than-life-size equesrian statue of Augustus III, which in its final form the monument would have stood eight metres tall. It is also of note that Permoser, Thomae, Kändler and Bustelli all produced original devotional...
sculptures in porcelain, a genre which can hardly be dismissed as merely decorative and one which had occupied some of the greatest European sculptors since the Renaissance. Indeed, the very earliest productions of sculpture at Meissen include religious subjects intended to function as devotional images.6

Among the collections of the National Gallery of Victoria is one of the greatest essays in porcelain sculpture produced in England during the eighteenth century: a Pieta group made at the Chelsea Factory, London, and modelled by Joseph Willems, the leading figure modeller at what was at this time the pre-eminent English luxury porcelain manufacturer, and the only modeller active in the English porcelain industry prior to 1770 about whom much is known (figs. 1 & 2). Willems's masterpiece provides us with important insights into the issues surrounding the ambiguous position occupied by porcelain figures in the eighteenth century and the creative role of the figure modeller. Williams conceived of himself as a sculptor. His Pieta, executed for a Catholic patron, was almost certainly not intended as a decorative object, but as a devotional image. Based upon a monumental French (Burgundian) sculpture, Nicholas Cousturier's 1713–28 Pietà above the high altar of Notre Dame de Paris, Williams does not simply reproduce his Parian model in reduced scale; his figure group can be shown to be a carefully considered assemblage of the original, transforming a liturgical work into a private devotional image.

Joseph Willems was born in Brussels in the Catholic Netherlands in 1715. By the age of twenty-four he had moved to Tournai where he married Marie-Josephe Lahaize on 16 November 1739. He may have continued to work at Tournai in the faience factory of Francois Joseph Carpentier for the next few years, before leaving to go to England where he is recorded in the trade books for Chelsea from 1748. It is likely that his first wife, Marie-Josephe, was dead before he had moved to England.7 Willems appears to have had a child, named after Joseph Francis Nollekens, or 'Old Nollekens', the Antwerp-born painter, on or before 1754. Mary Anne's children from her first marriage included Joseph Nollekens, the famed sculptor. Old Nollekens had been a Catholic, and he and Mary were married in the Sacred House of the Virgin and Child at St. Mary's Fields in 1739, the same place where their son Joseph was baptised.8 Mary apprenticed her son to the sculptor Peter Scheemakers, another Catholic from Antwerp working in London.9

Willems's immediate English family context was thus one in which he had regular contact with established artists, a member of their sculpture. In Mortimer's Dictionary for 1763 there is this entry: 'Willems, Joseph, Modeller, at the Brussels Coffee House, Chelsea. This Artist teaches Drawing, Modelling, & has modelled for the Chelsea China Factory for many years.' Although identified here as a 'modeller', Willems appears to have thought of himself as a sculptor. The exhibition catalogues of the Society of Artists of Great Britain for the years 1760–66 contain annual entries for sculptural models exhibited by Willems.10 In a letter of February 1766 from Francois-Joseph Peterinck, director of the Brussels porcelain factory, to the city fathers of Tournai, seeking support for the employment of Willems as a professor at the art academy associated with the factory, Peterinck speaks of Willems as one "très entendu dans la partie de la sculpture et du modelage." A handful of terracotta figures bearing Willems's signature are known, including a figure of St. Ysaco and a group of dancing peasants, signed and dated 1742 and 1749 respectively, and a recently discovered figure of an African man dated 1736, from the period before Willems had moved to England (fig. 4).11 During the years that he exhibited terracotta with the Society of Artists, Willems also seems to have been manufacturing terracotta garden sculptures, a number of which were advertised for sale in Chelsea after his departure for Toursan in early 1764.12 When Willems died at Toursan in November 1766, an inventory of his effects included a number of white-painted terracotta models, some of the subjects of which were also produced as porcelain figures at Chelsea.13 The inventory suggests that these models were of Willems's own creation: "plusieurs groupes de roche blanche ou terre cuite et colorées en blanc de sa composition, et par lui modelés."14
with Portrait Painting: The Nobility now exert to have their Busts done that Way rather than sit for their Pictures, and the Fashion is to have their Apartments adorned with Bronzous and Figures in Plaster and Wax.  

If the porcelain medium itself did not necessarily disqualify a figure from being deemed sculpture, what of the tendency to miniaturisation that characterised much porcelain figure work? Baker has traced the increasing marginalisation of small-scale sculpture in Northern Europe through the course of the eighteenth century as the canons of art were being formulated in accord with academic norms. In the early eighteenth century porcelain still bore the inherited prestige of its status as a Wunderkammer treasure. Small-scale sculpture in ivory and hornwood had also enjoyed similar prestige in Wunderkammer collections, and it seems clear that in the first decades of the Meissen factory’s output porcelain figures were highly regarded in aristocratic circles where they were valued as luxury works of art. But the latter half of the eighteenth century saw such Kleinplastik increasingly marginalised. An absence of monumentality – a characteristic attributed to and revered in classical sculpture – as an expression of historical forces and sublime genius – saw small-scale sculpture gradually relegated to the realm of the decorative. Catriona MacLeod has suggested that Goethe’s analysis of kitsch might also have mentioned proximity to the body as an indicator of the kitsch object. Small-scale sculpture, including the porcelain figure, certainly meets this criterion, the physical handling and close scrutiny of the object being an important aspect of the appreciation of cabinet sculpture. Such objects are thus condemned by the neoclassical theorists as domstic, sensual and unworthy of critical scrutiny, in the Italienische Reise Goethe writes: “The art which formed the ground for the ancient world, and the church done for Christians, has now been reduced to decorating jars and bracelets.”

An adjacent of the issue of miniaturisation is the idea that a porcelain model based upon an existing work of art is the product of a simple, mechanical process of reduction and reproduction, and thereby forfeits any real claim to artistic originality. Such a characteristic of the modeller’s role in cabinet modelling is necessarily a creative activity and the ability of porcelain artists consistently to imbue a model with particular aesthetic and symbolic qualities, even when adapting a pre-existing prototype, must be given due attention. After all, the history of European art may be framed in terms of the use and re-use by artists of models and the artist’s introduction of innovations forming part of the criteria by which an artist’s compositional skills are assessed.

Although work has been carried out in the past on the identification of sources – printed, painted and three-dimensional – informing the creation of eighteenth-century porcelain figures, in general these enquiries have rarely been developed beyond the simple identification of an individual image or work of art as the initial inspiration for the modeller. There has been little attempt to interrogate the role of the modeller in interpreting the sources they may have encountered.
have drawn upon in creating a sculptural work. Bernard Watney observes that porcelain figures from the Chelsea factory appear to have been copied from original sources, such as those between the Borghese gladiator, a favourite academy model of the period, and the Chelsea porcelain figure A fisherman. But he does not consider in any detail the actual work of adaptation that has gone on in the creation of a model in a new medium from a source image, be it of two or three dimensions. There is a creative process at work in such adaptation, and the modeller clearly has direct imaginative input into the form and aesthetic effect of the final figure: the radical re-imagination which Watney identifies in the recasting of the Bellicose classical sculpture subject as a porcelain figure of a fisherman clearly attests to this.

When we turn to consider the Chelsea Pieta group, we may observe a similar creative adaptation of a source image on Willems’s part. The small group of Chelsea porcelain models which employ explicitly Counter-Reformation imagery and of which the Willems Pieta forms a part have long presented a challenge to commentators on eighteenth-century English porcelain with difficulties. What was a porcelain factory in Protestant England doing producing figures so redolent of Roman Catholic piety?28 We have argued elsewhere that the answer to this question is to be sought among members of the English Catholic elite. The Chelsea Pieta, in the collection of the NGV, can, in the eighteenth century, be associated with one of the leading Recusant families in England, the Baron Clifford of Chudleigh. The very small number of examples of the Chelsea Pieta extant – only there are known – and the fact that all three examples differ from one another in details of decoration suggest that these works were the result of individual commissions by private patrons.

The subject matter of these Willems models – the Pieta, a non-biblical subject explicitly rejected by the Reformation – and the nature of the additional decoration found on the Gold Anchor examples (the Agnus Dei, the deposition and the Arma Christi) serve to amplify the liturgical and devotional associations of the models’ imagery, and suggests that these figures were not intended as decorative objects but rather served as devotional images. Traces of such ritual function can be found on the NGV Pieta, where the foiled gold depiction of the Agnus Dei is now barely readable to the naked eye, apparently the result of localised wear to the gilded surface consistent with the type of repeated touching or kissing associated with Catholic devotional images.29 We are reminded here of the production of devotional images in porcelain at the leading Continental factories from the earliest days of the material’s production in Europe.

As a model for his devotional image, Willems chose a famed work of modern religious sculpture – the Pieta of Nicolas Coypel in Notre Dame de Paris. However, a close formal analysis of the porcelain group indicates that, far from being a mechanical reproduction of its marble prototype, Willems’s Pieta is a carefully nuanced composition demonstrating a keen awareness of the requirements for successfully transforming a monumental ecclesiastical sculpture into a domesticised figure group. Willems’s adaptation of his French model involves a sophisticated recomposition of the original work resulting in a sculpture that differs from its model in ways which serve to emphasise and enhance the subject’s potential devotional function.

Earlier commentators sought the model for Willems’s Pieta in an engraving after Van

The two versions of Willems’s Pieta were produced at Chelsea. The earliest version dates to around 1756–58 and is from the Red Anchor period of the factory’s production. The single known example of this version, held in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, is embellished with polychrome enamel decoration (fig. 5). A second version, produced during the factory’s Gold Anchor period (1729–66), is known from two examples. The first of these, in the collection of the NGV, lacks polychrome decoration and is instead in the unadorned white-gilt porcelain. Unlike the Red Anchor example, the NGV Pieta is set upon an integral porcelain pedestal base decorated in a marbled blue ground with gilded decoration that includes a depiction of the Agnus Dei and a quotation from the Revelation of Saint John: “The Lamb slain from the beginning of the world.”

A second example of the Gold Anchor version was sold on the London market in 1991 and is now in a private collection. This example is finished with polychrome enameled, but includes a porcelain plinth decorated in a marbled blue ground upon which the figure group sits. This plinth is decorated with tooled gilt ornament depicting the Arma Christi and a central polychrome vignette of the deposition (fig. 6).
Dyck or Rubens. It certainly appears to be the case that Willems drew upon engravings after seventeenth-century Flemish artists for inspiration of some of his models, an unsurprising set of circumstances for a Flemish modeller. Willems' immediate model for his Pietà group, however, would appear to lie not in a painting but in the marble sculpture of the Pietà by Coustou in the choir of Notre Dame de Paris (Fig. 7). This sculpture, part of a larger installation memorialising Louis XIII and Louis XIV, was begun in 1699 to designs by the architect Jules Hardouin-Mansart and was completed nearly fifteen years later under the direction of Robert de Cotte. The elaborate ensemble consisted of many statues, reliefs and decorative elements. Only parts of the monument remain in Notre Dame today, much of the material being removed during the French Revolution and partially restored in the nineteenth century. Coustou's Pietà was set in a niche behind the high altar, flanked on either side by the kneeling figure of Louis XIII offering up his crown to the Virgin, and Louis XIV kneeling before her, giving thanks for his life.

Among the terracotta models recorded in the inventory of William's effects upon his death in 1777 are 'groupes' representing a Pietà de l'Evêque de Sarre and a Pietà de l'Evêque desaulec la croix, avec un adorateur', and this may reflect the work from which his porcellain models derive. Although knowledge of Coustou's Pietà was disseminated throughout Europe via engravings - including one by Jacques-François Blondel, published in 1779, and another by Antoine Hérisset published in 1765 - Willems' Pietà seems to have been modelled from direct observation of the Coustou sculpture in Paris, or after one of the models of the sculpture which appear to have been in circulation, rather than via a print representation, as there are differences between the extant print sources for the Notre Dame Pietà and the actual sculptural group itself. Differences that are not reflected in Willems' porcellain models, which agree in the majority of details with Coustou's marble, rather than with the prints. For example, the orientation of the Virgin's gaze upwards to the left in the 1772 Blondel engraving (Fig. 8) is in the reverse of the direction of the Virgin's gaze in the Coustou sculpture, and the angel kneeling the head of the dead Christ in Coustou's composition is replaced by two putti in the Blondel print. In both of these details Willems' porcellain model follows Coustou's original and not the engraving. While the Coustou Pietà in Paris would appear to be the primary inspiration for Willems' model, the extant porcellain groups do not precisely reproduce the marble sculpture in every detail, nor are all of the Chelsea examples identical to each other.

One of the more significant changes that Willems introduces into his model is in the pose of the Virgin. Coustou's Virgin sits with her upper torso turned in the direction of the viewer, her arms spread wide in a gesture of grief, her hands open, palms up. Her head is tilted slightly to the left and her gaze is cast upwards. The overall effect is of a sorrowful but contained appeal to heaven.

Willems transforms this pose into something far more dramatic. His Virgin sits at an exaggerated angle to the viewer, her legs and toes facing to the right of centre. Where Coustou's Virgin has noticeably turned her head to the left, her neck elongated in an exaggerated sinuous curve, her upward gaze paralleling the upward sweep of her left arm. The angle at which she holds her outstretched arms is also more exaggerated than that of Coustou's Virgin, forming a powerful diagonal, her left arm tracing a line downwards, which is followed by her gaze. The palms of her hands are turned downwards. The result is a dynamic, circular torsion in the body of the Virgin, whose form traces a vigorous, upward spiral, in total contrast with the hieratic frontal of the Virgin in Coustou's composition.

Differences are also introduced into the figure of Christ in the Chelsea groups. Willems' Virgin sits in a more elevated position than Coustou's, and the body of Christ sits higher upon her lap, resulting in the dead Christ's head being thrown back more violently, and the fall of his pelvis and legs being exaggerated. Where the head of Coustou's Christ has fallen to the side, his long hair pooling upon his mothers knees, leaving his face free for contemplation by the viewer standing before the altar, Willems' Christ lies with his head strained back in an unnatural position and his face, especially in the two Gold Anchor examples, is best viewed from a slightly elevated perspective by the viewer looking down upon the figure group. Christ's body is twisted into an exaggerated S-curve by Willems, the legs projecting towards the front of the figure group, the feet overhanging the edge of the work formed by the softly folded drapery of the funerary shroud. The fall of the drapery covering Christ's body mirrors the slack fall of his limbs, the hanging end of the shroud echoes Christ's hanging arm. This is all in marked contrast to the positioning of Christ's body in Coustou's sculpture, where the body lies in a vertical plane parallel to the front of the altar and where the legs are drawn slightly back towards the treading angel. Coustou positions Christ's body slightly on its side, thus conforming to the iconographic convention of Mary presenting the body of her son to the viewer. Willems' innovations serve to heighten the drama of the figure group, the viewer is forced to approach the group closely and to contemplate it from a variety of angles to read the composition. Willems effectively transforms Coustou's composition, which must be viewed frontally and at a distance, into an object the viewer must engage with in a three-dimensional space.

A final difference between Willems' and Coustou's Pietà groups is the absence in Willems' model of the putti clutching the crown of thorns to the right of the Virgin. The appearance of the putti in Coustou's composition seems to be an echo of the 1599-1600 Pietà by Annibale Carracci in the Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte in Naples, his most moving treatment of this subject. Here two putti accompany the mourning Virgin - both positioned to her left - one holding the dead Christ's left hand, the other retrieving a thorn, having pricked his finger on the crown of thorns which lies at Christ's feet. By omitting this second putto and simply depicting the crown of thorns lying on the ground to the Virgin's right, Willems simplifies Coustou's group, creating a tighter, more compact and dramatic compositional structure.

Willems' modifications to Coustou's composition have radical results. Coustou's Pietà is characterised by a strong frontal orientation. The Virgin, with her outstretched arms, directly faces the viewer before the altar. The body of Christ lies across her lap horizontally, echoing the orientation of her arms. The angel who leans in to adore the wounded hand of Christ is also oriented parallel...
to the body of Christ, presenting his left side to the viewer. The putto grasping the fallen crown of thorns on the proper right of the Virgin gazes upward and serves as a focal point to the composition.

Willems disrupted this monumental frontality. His compositional modifications establish all three figures in the porcelain model: the Virgin, Christ, and the angel—two distinct spatial planes. The powerful upward-right-to-left diagonal formed by the turn of the Virgin's upper body, her outstretched arms, and her heaveywards gaze contrasts with both the orientation to the right of her legs and lower body, and with the curve of Christ's body on her lap, emphasizing a downward-right-to-left diagonal. Both the figures of the Virgin and Christ evidence considerable diminution elongation of form, the neck, arms, and fingers of the Virgin, especially in the eighteenth-century examples, verge on Manierism in their elegant exaggeration. The dynamic gestures of the Virgin serve to emphasize her emotional appeal to heaven in response to the death of her son, while amplifying even further the powerful diagonal formed by her figure and by that of Christ. The figure of the angel has been pulled in beside the Virgin, creating a left-to-right diagonal which contrasts with the orientation of the bodies of the other two figures, visually emphasizing the act of the angel kissing Christ's wounded hand. All of these modifications were made with great energy and power to transform Coustou's composition. Created to be viewed front-on as a backdrop to the ritual taking place at the high altar, Willems reconfigures Coustou's composition to create a scene which is in the round and impossible to read fully from a single viewpoint. In addition, by omitting the putto holding the crown of thorns, Willems simplifies Coustou's grouping of figures, allowing for an increased emphasis upon the dynamic relationship that he has established between the three protagonists in the scene. More than mere modification, this is a striking piece of sculptural recomposition on Willems's part.

Willems's porcelain models are often taken as evidence of a mediocre talent. Arthur Lane describes the pair of signed 1749 terracotta models of dancing peasants as possessed of "ponderous realism, heavily built, with disproportionately short legs" and conveying "little of the intended sense of movement." Bernard Waterlow speaks of "Willems's [sic] rather ponderous Flemish style." Peter Breinhall is more generous, stating that Willems's figures have a "statuary appearance" but lack animation owing to his failure to represent steadiest posture and adjustment that normally accompany action. Hillery Young speaks of the "ponderous realism" of certain of Willems's models, although he allows that Willems has "some legitimate claims to being considered a gifted artist." I would suggest, however, that Willems's adaptation of Coustou's sculpture into a porcelain form demonstrates considerable compositional skill and evidence of the transformations necessary to successfully translate a monumental marble group into a small-scale sculptural work. It would be an injustice to Willems to attribute a lack of animation to his figures. On the contrary, the group is a highly dynamic composition and a testament of the three constituent figures tracing a single, fluid, ascending spiral in space. By compressing space and drawing the individual figures in close to one another, Willems heightens the tension and drama of the whole. Indeed, it may be argued that he has succeeded in producing a more successful composition than that by Coustou. In Coustou's sculpture which is hieratic and static constrained by liturgical requirements it is overwhelmingly frontal in orientation, its extension to the sides to accommodate the flaking figures of the royal donors damps the work of business, thus diminishing its dramatic impact. It is a work intended to persuade over an altar, not to form the focused, private contemplation.

It is well to recall that, as a Catholic, Willems would have been familiar with the rituals of domestic devotion in a Catholic household, and that he understood the characteristics required of an image serving as a focus for devotion. Willems's Pietà transforms this monumental liturgical model into such an intimate, domestic work. He establishes a dynamic visual relationship between the three protagonists in the scene, inviting the contemplative viewer to enter himself into the drama depicted, experiencing the maternal anguish of the Virgin, and the sorrow of the attending angel who kneeles the very wounds of Christ. This latter detail in particular is a powerful image associated with Counter-Reformation devotional practice. The cult of the Wounds of Christ had been widespread in the Middle Ages and continued into the post-Tridentine period. Explicitly Eucharistic in its resonances, Counter-Reformation devotion to the wounds emphasizes the material presence of the blood of Christ in the elements of the Eucharist and, in so doing, evokes the doctrine of transubstantiation, a point of ferocious doctrinal dispute between Protestant and Catholic theologians. Similarly, the inclusion of the crown of thorns in the Gold Anchor Pietà group is a hieratic and static detail which evokes Counter-Reformation devotional tradition. As an element of the Arms Christi, the crown of thorns serves to recall the bodily agony of Jesus. Together these representational traces—the wounds and the instrument—are emblematic of both the Eucharistic body of Christ and the suffering death of Jesus as objects of devotional contemplation.

All of these aspects make Willems's masterpiece a fitting sculptural work for a Roman patron seeking a domestic devotional image, as was the case when the NGV Pietà came into the possession of the Lords Clifford of Chudleigh in the eighteenth century. Large-scale porcelain figures groups by the Chelsea factory were costly objects, and the commissioning a devotional work by Lord Clifford in this material speaks of its luxury status, commensurate with the consequences of its intended function. This function was strictly decorative. The Pietà group is highly charged with profound, symbolic meaning, and it is a domestic scale and the haptic nature of its owners' interactions with it—both characteristics designed in late nineteenth-century academic sculptural practice—are integral parts of that function. Indeed, the display of characteristics intimately associated with the role of images in post-Tridentine Catholic doctrine indicates the existence of a significant strand of Reformation polemic in Willems's imagery. We must assume that, for patrons and collectors like the Lords Clifford, the Chelsea Pietà was a desirable work of art, its acquisition a statement simultaneously of their aesthetic sensibilities and their distinctively English Catholic identity. For Willems his Pietà group is no mere exercise in mechanical reduction or reproduction. It reveals him as a creative artist capable of reconceptualising his Parisian model, transforming it and imbuing it with new symbolic and aesthetic value in order to meet new requirements of function. There are few grounds remaining for not allowing Willems a deserved status as a sculptor, as he seems to have thought of himself, working in a newly mastered, costly medium. Nor are there grounds for not allowing that, at least for a period in the middle years of the eighteenth century, the most ambitious of English porcelain productions could lay claim to the status of sculptural art.