The European ceramics collection of the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne includes one of the great masterpieces of 18th-century English porcelain art: a *Pièta* modelled by Joseph Willems, dated around 1761 and produced by the Chelsea porcelain factory.

Well known to scholars of 18th-century English porcelain, this model (of which only three examples are known) is one of only two models on religious subjects recognized from Chelsea. The other model is a group of the Madonna and Child; both were modelled by Willems and first produced during the Red Anchor period (1753-57) of the factory’s production. Both figure groups represent a relatively rare phenomenon – a clear and indisputable adoption of Baroque imagery in English porcelain. Here the religious character of the imagery so adopted is significant. The Baroque was a style particularly associated with the Counter-Reformation in Europe where its dramatic, affective emotional power saw it adopted for propagandistic purposes by the post-Tridentine Roman church.

The modeller of the *Pièta*, Joseph Willems, born at Brussels in the Roman Catholic Southern Netherlands in 1715, and a member of the Society of Artists of Great Britain from 1760 to 1766, was supplying figure models to the Chelsea factory during the 1750s and was effectively the creator of a ‘Chelsea’ style of porcelain figure.

Although there survives no specific mention of the *Pièta* group in auction records, the catalogues for the Chelsea sales of 1755, 1756 and 1761 mention the model of the Madonna and Child. In the catalogue of the 1761 auction, Lot 80 in the Third Day’s Sale on 2nd May is described in the following terms: ‘A most magnificent groupe of a MADONA and JESUS, curiously enamelled, upon a PEDESTAL of the fine mazarine blue enriched with gold’. The presence of these figure groups at the factory’s London sales suggests that they were intended for the home market – that is to say, they do not represent productions specifically intended for export to the Continent.

It was Bernard Watney who first suggested that the immediate source for Willems’ model is to be found in the marble sculpture (1712-28) by Nicolas Coustou (1658–1733) on the high altar in the choir of Notre Dame in Paris. This sculpture formed part of a larger installation memorialising Louis XIII and Louis XIV. The initial conception had come from Louis XIII who had in 1638 dedicated his kingdom to the Virgin in thanksgiving for the delivery of an heir – Louis

‘Dieudonné’, the future Louis XIV – after twenty-two years of marriage.

Louis XIII died before the project could be realised and it was Louis XIV who saw his predecessor’s wishes brought to fruition, inserting himself into the monument as he did so. Louis XIV was more than sixty years old when he commissioned the memorial. It was begun in 1699 to designs by the architect Jules Hardouin-Mansart (1645/46 – 1708) and completed nearly fifteen years later under the direction of Robert de Cotte (1656 – 1735).

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 returned in the 19th 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, this work by Nicolas’ brother Guillaume Coustou, and Louis XIV, by the Coustous’ uncle Antoine Coysevox, kneeling before the Virgin, giving thanks for his life. A gilt-bronze mise au tombeau relief by François Girardon adorned the front of the altar upon which the Pietà sat. (3)³

Knowledge of Coustou’s Pietà was disseminated throughout Europe via engravings. An engraving of the memorial of which the Pietà forms a part by

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Jacques François Blondel, after Ferdinand Delamonce, was published by Jean Mariette in Paris in 1727. (4) Another engraving of the Notre Dame altar installation, by Antoine Hérisset, was published in J. A. Piganiol de La Force, Description historique de la ville de Paris et de ses environs in 1765. The Coulou altar group was known to and admired by at least some contemporary English connoisseurs. In his Paris Journal for 1734, the painter Joseph Highmore mentions this group on the Great Altar with admiration, only he wished that the figure of Christ ‘lay higher in the lap or that the Virgin’s knees were more horizontal for this fig: seems as if it might slip off her hands too being elevated supposes it secure.’

Coustou’s sculpture clearly draws upon what is a common compositional formula in 17th-century Flemish Roman Catholic devotional art of the type seen, for example, in Anthony van Dyck’s magnificent Lamentation of 1635 held in the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, in Antwerp. (5)12

It seems clear that Willems, a Fleming, was also familiar with this tradition of Counter-reformation sacred art and echoes of this imagery can be seen in his porcelain model. Far from being a mechanical reproduction of its marble prototype, Willems’ porcelain Pietà introduces a number of significant changes to Coustou’s conception. Willems’ Pietà is a carefully nuanced composition in its own right, demonstrating a keen awareness of the exigencies of the porcelain medium and of the requirements for successfully transforming a monumental ecclesiastical sculpture into a domestic-scaled figure group.

In this regard, a number of instructive comparisons may be made between Willems’ model and 17th-century Flemish devotional paintings. These include the 1629 Lamentation by van Dyck executed for the high altar of the Begijnhofkerk in Antwerp where the figure of the Magdalene kissing the hand of the dead Christ closely parallels the figure of the angel kissing Christ’s hand in Willem’s porcelain group;13 the 1628-32 Van Dyck Pietà in the Prado, a version of which is also to be found in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Here again the Magdalene is kissing the wounded hand of the dead Christ – Christ’s hand brought up to her mouth with her left hand, her open right hand brought up before her chest – is reminiscent of gestures in Willems’ model which differ from the marble group of Coustou. (6)14

This is the 1617-20 Pieta with St Francis from the high altar of the Capucine church in Brussels by Rubens where the pose adopted by the weeping virgin, eyes cast heavenward, may have influenced the pose of Willem’s figure; and the 1617 Descent from the Cross by Rubens executed for the Church of the Capucines in Lille where the figure of Christ, especially the curving sweep of the right arm, offers an interesting parallel to Willems’ porcelain composition.

These comparisons could easily be multiplied. Born in the Catholic Netherlands, and no doubt

5. Anthony van Dyck, Lamentation, 1635, oil on canvas. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerpen (Inv.404)
receiving at least part of his artistic training there, it is highly probable that Willems was familiar with many of the best known devotional images of the 17th century produced by the great Flemish masters Rubens and Van Dyck, especially those works which were reproduced in engravings and circulated in that form. It should be borne in mind that engravings after paintings were not merely a means of circulating images of famed modern artworks for the benefit of other artists—woodblocks, engravings and other prints after religious paintings were themselves circulated as relatively inexpensive devotional objects. Moreover we know from the inventory of his possessions taken on his death that Willems owned a sizeable number of engravings on various subjects, including religious images. It should not surprise us then to find such images providing inspiration for Willems when he comes to dealing with a devotional subject.

Willems takes Coustou’s monumental, hieratic liturgical sculpture, a work with an emphatic frontality designed to dominate the sightline down the nave of the cathedral to the choir, and skilfully transforms this into a small-scale work intended for viewing at much closer quarters. He reduces the four figures of Coustou’s composition to three, drawing them in close to one another, creating an upward spiral of exaggerated diagonals, to be read from multiple viewing angles, disrupting the horizontal, frontal orientation of the marble original and injecting into the group a far greater degree of dynamism. In many ways, Willems’ model may be judged a more successful sculptural composition than Coustou’s rather static work.


It would appear that the model of the Pieta held special appeal for Willems. Shortly before his death in 1766, he returned to Flanders at the instigation of Francois Peterinck of the Tournai factory to assume the position of Director of the Imperial Royal Academy of Drawing and Modeling in Tournai. An inventory of Willems’ effects at the time of his death included ‘un groupe représentant la Vierge et le Saveur descendu de la croix, avec un adorateur’, along with other models in white-painted terracotta – such as a Roman Charity group – of subjects which were also produced as porcelain figures at Chelsea.

A very closely related version of the Pieta group was produced at Tournai in biscuit porcelain. This work is sometimes given, especially in Belgian literature, to the sculptor Nicolas Lecreux (1733/34–1799). Lecreux produced a number of models, mainly rustic groups, for the Tournai factory between 1757 and 1760 and was appointed professor of drawing and modelling at the academy associated with the factory in 1765. Soil de Moriamé believed Lecreux to have created the model for the Tournai Pieta on the basis of Coustou’s marble group in Paris. But the manner in which Willems subtly recomposed Coustou’s sculpture in order to produce his Chelsea porcelain group provides the confirmation that Willems was also responsible for the Pieta group produced by the Tournai factory.

There are differences between the Tournai and Chelsea models – such as the Tournai model’s piled-up rockwork base, a French device, the addition of the Instruments of the Passion to the composition, and stylistic differences in the rendering of, for example, drapery – but in critical aspects like the number and posing of individual figures in the groups, they are near to identical. Whether executed under Willems’ direct guidance, or produced posthumously by another modeller working from the terracotta model carried by Willems to Tournai, the compositional similarities between the Chelsea Pieta and the Tournai Pieta over against the Coustou marble group clearly indicate the involvement of Willems in both porcelain versions. The likelihood that another artist should entirely independently arrive at a similar solution to the reduction of Coustou’s monumental work into a porcelain group seems quite unlikely. The formal similarities between the two porcelain versions are too striking.

The Tournai Pieta group exists in relatively large numbers – close to a dozen are recorded by Soil de Moriamé. The Tournai group is also distinguished by the introduction of the Instruments of the Passion into the composition. This is explicitly Roman Catholic devotional imagery, heightening the devotional associations of the figure group. The honouring of the Arma Christi serves to recall Christ’s wounds and his suffering for the redemption of humanity and was a focus of Counter-reformation devotional contemplation. That the Tournai groups were probably intended to serve devotional functions has never really been questioned, being produced as they were by a factory in a Catholic city in the Catholic Austrian Netherlands.

In contrast, the Chelsea figures employing explicitly Counter-reformation imagery, namely the Pieta and the Virgin with the Christ Child as Salvator Mundi, have long puzzled some commentators: ‘Strangely perhaps in a Protestant country, and at a factory presumably managed by a Protestant Frenchman, a number of figures and groups on a religious theme were nevertheless made at Chelsea.’ So Elizabeth Adams introduces her brief consideration of this group of models. Arthur Lane commented that ‘it is perhaps more surprising that Chelsea, with its Huguenot associations, should have produced in the seated Madonna and Child (1755 and 1756 catalogues), one of the most successful religious groups in European porcelain’. We register here a concern about the presence of, not simply religious, but Counter-reformation, or Roman Catholic, imagery in post-Reformation, enlightenment England. But this concern expressed by modern commentators does not necessarily reflect the realities of 18th-century England.

As it happens, Counter-reformation art was surprisingly common in 18th-century English collections. Clare Haynes has recently argued that Protestant English elites had by the middle of the 18th-century developed strategies for engaging with Counter-reformation images. Such images were unavoidable as some of the most admired art of the day was created by Catholic
artists for Catholic patrons and possessed explicitly Catholic content. In order to be able to acquire French and Italian paintings and enjoy the prestige that accrued from these cultures, Protestant elites pursued a policy of aestheticising such works, construing their merits in terms of composition and technical accomplishment whilst bracketing out their problematic content.

Careful calculation of contexts of display was also employed to manage the art's Catholic meaning. The display of Counter-reformation devotional images in, for example, the picture gallery of a country house implied that only those admitted by the master of the house, and therefore presumably possessed of educated Protestant discernment, were exposed to these images and these persons were at no risk of succumbing to any popish superstition the images might embody. The discerning Protestant master of the house too bore a responsibility to guide his dependents in appropriate responses to these Counter-reformation images.28

An image like the Chelsea Pietà was not, therefore, automatically unacceptable to an English audience simply on the basis of its Catholic subject matter. But in the 18th century, not all Counter-reformation imagery was necessarily susceptible to such strategies of mediation. Sculpture in particular remained especially problematic because of its overt associations with idolatry and religious sculpture in England remained exceedingly rare, Catholic sculpture even more so. Whilst there was an active market for sculpture in 18th-century England, it was almost exclusively restricted to the production of tomb and other forms of commemorative figure sculpture, or to portrait sculpture.29

As a three-dimensional object, the Chelsea Pietà would have shared in this awkwardness. And we must recall that the Pietà is a specifically Roman Catholic subject in the sense that it is not an episode based in Scripture and as such was one of the artistic subjects rejected during the Reformation. Indeed, Marian imagery in general was viewed with suspicion in Reformation thinking due to the reformers' rejection of the intercessory role attributed to Mary in Roman Catholic theology.

Yet these Chelsea figures exist. Why? It is suggested that these sculptures, like their counterparts produced at Tournai, were intended as devotional objects and that the audience they were created for were members of the English Roman Catholic elite. At least one of the Chelsea Pietà groups may be associated with a Catholic family during the 18th century and the combination of Catholic devotional subject and sculptural form makes the probability that these objects were specifically intended for a Catholic, and not Protestant, audience seem almost certain.

A close examination of the decoration of the extant Chelsea Pietà groups provides support for the contention that these objects were made specifically to serve as devotional works. The earliest of the three known Chelsea examples, from the Red Anchor period around 1756-58, bears naturalistic polychrome enamel decoration and lacks the integral base that forms part of the two Gold Anchor versions. (8) Of particular note is the decorative patterning applied to the mantle worn by the Virgin. (9) The red, five-pointed stars which form a part of this decoration are highly reminiscent of the rosettes evoking the

Marian symbol of the *rosa mystica* found employed as decorative motifs on numerous late medieval images of the passion, especially *Vesperbilder* from Northern Europe, where they serve as a symbolic reference to the five Wounds of Christ.\(^{30}\)

The cult of the Wounds of Christ had been widespread in the Middle Ages and continued on into the post-Tridentine period.\(^{31}\) Explicitly Eucharistic in its resonances – the devout are sometimes depicted drinking blood from the Wounds – Counter-reformation devotion to the Wounds emphasised the material presence of the salvific blood of Christ in the elements of the Eucharist and, in so doing, evoked the doctrine of Transubstantiation, a point of fierce doctrinal dispute between Protestant and Catholic theologians.\(^{32}\)

Simple, sparse floral decorations are to be found in the treatment of drapery on a number of early Chelsea figures, but the repeating geometric pattern found on the Virgin’s mantle is atypical\(^{33}\); indeed it is to a Red Anchor period figure of a seated nun, or the Gold Anchor group of the *Madonna and Child*, that is an example of a similar style of pattern.\(^{34}\) The five-pointed stars would appear to be an intentional evocation of the cult of the Wounds and are an explicitly Counter-reformation devotional detail. The polychrome decoration of the Red Anchor group, too, also serves to draw attention to the devotionaly charged wounds on the body of Christ. Indeed, the attending angel lifts the bleeding hand of Christ to its lips in order to kiss the wound.

The decoration of the Red Anchor version of the Chelsea *Pietà* seems to be calculated to enhance the devotional significance of the work. Similar observations may be made concerning the other extant figure groups. The second version of the model, produced during the factory’s Gold Anchor period, is known from two examples.

The first of these, in the collections of the National Gallery of Victoria, lacks polychrome decoration and is instead in the unadorned white glazed porcelain. Unlike the Red Anchor example, the NGV *Pietà* is set upon an integral porcelain pedestal base decorated in a mazarine blue ground with gilded decoration. The tooled gold ornament includes a depiction of the Lamb of God against a sunburst, with the inscription ‘Agnus occisus a [sic] origine mundi.’\(^{35}\)

A second example of the Gold Anchor version appeared on the London market in 1991, and is now in a private collection.\(^{11}\) This example is finished with polychrome enamels, but like the NGV example, includes a porcelain plinth decorated in a mazarine blue ground. This plinth is decorated with tooled gold ornament and a central polychrome vignette reminiscent of Rubens in style depicting the entombment.\(^{12}\)
The gold borders of the vignette include depictions of the Instruments of the Passion. The porcelain plinth is itself mounted upon an ormolu base.

Both the Gold Anchor examples of the Pièta group are dramatised by the addition of the monumental pedestal. The version sold in 1991 is further embellished by the addition of an ormolu base. These are grand display pieces of high visual impact. But the addition of the richly ornamented bases to these two examples does not merely increase the monumentality of the sculptures. Details of the decoration of these bases serve to amplify their devotional associations.

The addition of the vignette depicting the entombment on the pedestal of the polychrome example emphasises the associations of the main subject with the Passion narrative, as does the depiction in the gilded borders of the Instruments of the Passion. But more than this, the 18th-century installation of the Coustou Pièta in the Choir of Notre Dame originally included a gilt-bronze mise au tombeau relief by François Girardon adorning the front of the altar. The Chelsea model appears to be making a direct allusion to the configuration of the altar and the marble Pièta in Notre Dame. Here again the work’s devotional associations are emphasised – the porcelain plinth is effectively transformed into an altar and the sacrificial, and by extension Eucharistic, symbolism of the dead Christ upon the altar is highlighted.

Similarly, the depiction of the Agnus Dei along with the quotation from Revelation on the pedestal of the NGV Pièta again emphasises the Eucharistic symbolism of the work. Indeed, the decoration on the plinth amounts to a relatively sophisticated theological commentary on the subject of the figure group. Christ, whose redemptive sacrifice was the salvation of humankind, has been referred to as the Lamb of God since New Testament times. Within the Canons of the Mass, following the consecration of the Gifts and the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, the Agnus Dei has been sung since
The Eucharistic meaning of the metaphor, an interpretation that was universal from the High Middle Ages onwards, is made clear when the priest raises the Sacrament before distribution of communion and declares: ‘Ecce Agnus Dei’; ‘Behold the Lamb of God’. The juxtaposition of Christ’s body in sculptural form and the image of the sacrificial lamb on the Chelsea figure group’s base presents this metaphor in visual form.

The quotation from Revelation 13:8 ‘The lamb slain from the beginning of the world’ serves to emphasise the continuous nature of Christ’s sacrifice, a sacrifice re-enacted at every celebration of the Eucharist. The attribution of this continuous character to Christ’s sacrifice and the presence of Christ’s body in the materials of the Eucharist is in accord with the Tridentine emphasis on the doctrine of Transubstantiation.

It can be argued, too, that the unadorned white porcelain of the Melbourne Pièta further enhances the devotional associations of the figure group. Whilst the white porcelain could be seen as an echo of the marble of the original Coustou sculpture, it can be argued that the lack of polychrome ornament combined with the diminutive, domestic scale of the porcelain group recalls carved ivory, a traditional medium for devotional figurines.

The above observations suggest that the decoration of the three known examples of the Chelsea Piétà, each in its own way, serves to enhance the devotional character of the object. These devotional associations would have been immediately apprehendable by any Catholic viewer literate in the visual language of their faith and its rituals. Catholic devotional practice often involved the faithful physically interacting with the object of devotion through, for example, the acts of touching, caressing or kissing. The focus of such devotional practice will, thus, often bear physical traces of such activity.

It is of interest then to observe that the tooled gold decoration on the base of the NGV Piétà suffers from localised surface wear. The central cartouche with the depiction of the Lamb of God and its accompanying inscription is now extremely difficult to read with the naked eye and, indeed, the use of raking light is required to render the tooling of the gilt legible. This appears to be the result of abrasion. The tooled gold decoration on other areas of the base evidences no comparable degree of wear. Whilst any proposed explanation for this surface wear must remain speculative, the localised nature of the abrasion is very suggestive of repeated touching of this particular area of the base’s decoration, as one might expect with a ritual object which has served as the focus of Catholic devotions.

In this regard, it is notable that the NGV Piétà may be associated with a Catholic family in the 18th century. Indeed, not just any Catholic family; this example of the Willems Piétà was sold out of the collections of the Lords Clifford of Chudleigh in 1953 and it is highly probable that the work was in the family’s possession in the 18th century, whether through direct acquisition from the Chelsea factory, or obtained through the marriage alliances made with other Catholic gentry families at this period, like the Welds and the Petres. The Barons Clifford of Chudleigh was one of the 18th-century’s most important Recusant families. Hugh, 4th Lord Clifford of Chudleigh (1726-1783), the most significant of the 18th-century Lords Clifford, was an important patron. He commissioned Robert Adam to rebuild the family seat of Ugbrooke in Devon in 1763 and had the park laid out by Capability Brown. Adam’s rebuilding of the family chapel at Ugbrooke, dedicated to St Cyprian, is widely considered to be his finest country house chapel.

These Chelsea Piétà groups perhaps give us a small window into an as yet little explored area: the role of Recusant elites as art collectors and patrons in the 18th century. Denied active participation in the political life of the country, it has long been common to see the 18th century as a period of decline into provincial obscurity for England’s Catholic aristocracy. It is beginning to become clear however that, in the absence of political roles, Recusant elites actively sought to enhance their status through patronage of the arts, just as their protestant peers did.

But these activities were pursued in a fashion which reflected their distinctive English Catholic identities. A costly luxury object like a Chelsea Pièta group –
and the productions of the Chelsea factory were very much aimed at the luxury end of the market – would have fulfilled both the requirement for an appropriate image to form the focus of private devotions, as well as satisfying the desire present amongst 18th-century English elites to acquire fashionable luxury commodities, like porcelain sculpture.

Of course, what we have not looked at, for want of space, is the circumstances of the production of these figures. This could form the basis of another paper but there are some brief comments here. The sense of puzzlement at the use of Counter-reformation imagery by the Chelsea factory seems to be based upon the characterisation of the factory as a Protestant or Huguenot concern. But one does not have to look too closely at what biographical data available about the principle figures at the factory to realise that this characterisation is not necessarily straightforward.

To begin with, the sculptor Joseph Willems was almost certainly a Catholic. That he should thus be capable of producing a powerful Catholic devotional image replete with references to masterworks of Flemish sacred art should not surprise us. Nicolas Sprimont, a founding manager of the factory has long been assumed to be of Huguenot origin. Sprimont was born into a family of goldsmiths and jewellers in Liège, a city that was, until 1795, the seat of a Catholic Prince-Bishopric and, in the 18th century, was still a part of the Holy Roman Empire. In the wake of the Reformation the diocese remained predominantly Roman Catholic, but little or no persecution of Protestants is known to have taken place there. There is certainly no direct evidence that Sprimont came to England as a Protestant refugee, and it is of note that his family remained resident in Liège after he left for England.

Sprimont’s relationships with other Protestant French-speaking artists and craftsmen working in London have contributed to assumptions about his Huguenot heritage. Charles Gouyn, his early business partner at the Chelsea factory, is known to have been a Huguenot. The Swiss-born industrial spy Jacques Louis Brolliet, commenting on the Chelsea factory in around 1759, states that:

It [the Chelsea factory] was first established by Mr Gouin, brother of a Paris Jeweller of that name, born at Dieppe of the so-called Reformed Faith. His paste was compounded by d’Ostermann, a German, chemist and artist of Dr Ward, a famous empiric. Mr Gouin left, with the loss of part of his funds, and makes at his house in St James’s Street, very beautiful small porcelain figures. The present undertaker of the Chilsea (sic) factory is one named Sprémont, from Liege. The turner was a Frenchman named Martin. He left Chelsea and went to Lambeth, to work for Jacson, a faience-maker. The modeller is one named Flanchet, a pupil of Mr Duplessis. The Draughtsman is named Du Vivier: he is Flemish.

On the basis of his partnership with Gouyn, it has been assumed that Sprimont too was a Protestant. Similarly, in 1744 Sprimont stood as godfather to a daughter of the great sculptor Louis-François Roubiliac, a Huguenot, at the French Protestant chapel in Spring Gardens. Upon his death in 1771, Sprimont was buried in the Deschamps family vault at Petersham Church, an Anglican church, near Richmond. Sprimont’s sister-in-law Susanna Protin had in 1771 married the London upholsterer Francis Deschamps, of the French Huguenot Deschamps family. That Sprimont stood as godfather to Roubiliac’s daughter is taken by many to clinch his Huguenot identity. But even this may not be quite so straightforward, as recently published evidence from the Netherlands suggests.

The world of the 18th century porcelain industry was international in scope with artists freely moving from factory to factory and country to country. Brolliet’s account of the Chelsea factory is of note insofar as all of the craftsmen of whom he makes direct mention bear French surnames. This is possibly indicative of a tendency for those craftsmen and artists of Francophone heritage resident in London to associate with one another. The confessional allegiances of all of these figures are not known with certainty. It is of note, however, that only Gouyn is explicitly – and in a somewhat condescending fashion – identified as a Protestant.
There is some confusion about the identity of the Flemish draughtsman Duvivier, a French name which was not uncommon in England at the time. Recent research makes it seem probable that there were two Flemish Duvriers working for Sprimont in the late 1750s, Michel-Joseph and Henri-Joseph (possibly, but not necessarily related), both of them moving (back) to Tournai around 1762/63 where they were both given employment by François Joseph Peterinck, director of the Tournai porcelain factory. The Duvivier spoken of by Brolliet around 1759 who served as dessinateur at Chelsea may well be Michel-Joseph Duvivier (c 1736-71).

Conflicting information exists concerning the confessional identity of Michel-Joseph Duvivier’s family. His brother Fidelle Duvivier, another porcelain decorator who worked at the Derby and Newhall Factories in England, the Sceaux factory in France, the Oude Loosdrecht factory in the Netherlands, and possibly the Tournai factory in Belgium, married Elizabeth Thomas in Derby in 1769. Their first son, Peter Joseph Duvivier, was baptised on 20th March 1771 at the Anglican church of St Alkmund in Derby. Twelve years later, in 1783, another child of Fidelle and Elizabeth, Maria Susanna Frederica, was baptised at a Catholic church in Slootdijk near Loosdrecht in the Netherlands, where Fidelle was working as a porcelain decorator. This has led to the claim that Fidelle, and by implication his family, including his brother Michel-Joseph, was Roman Catholic, not Protestant. It is apparent that there is not necessarily a simple one-to-one mapping of public ecclesiastical affiliation and confessional allegiance.

Indeed, it is of particular interest that Johann Friedrich Daeuber, who died in 1800, occupied the position of works manager at the Loosdrecht porcelain factory and often served as a baptismal witness for factory workers at both the Protestant church in Loosdrecht and the Catholic church in nearby Slootdijk. Among his godchildren was the Duviviers’ daughter Maria Susanna Frederica. All of this evidence suggests that social aloofness driven by confessional difference was not automatically a given for these porcelain artists and craftsmen and that, on the contrary, other bonds of professional and social fellowship were more important than an excessive focus on theological and clerical distinctions might lead one to expect. More importantly in this case, it is obvious that the fact that Sprimont stood as godfather for Roubiliac’s daughter Sophie cannot be taken to prove his Protestant identity.

What these sources clearly indicate is the complexity of the relationships between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism in the international world of the European porcelain industry. Even Fidelle’s marriage in the Church of England does not necessarily imply, at this date, 1769, that he was not Roman Catholic – the Marriage Act of 1753 rendered invalid any marriage taking place outside the Anglican church and not according to the tenets of the church, except in certain special circumstances. It was not unknown for English Catholics to be publicly married in the Established Church in accordance with this law, with a Catholic ceremony being celebrated in private. And whilst Fidelle Duvivier’s tenure at the Loosdrecht factory takes place nearly twenty years after many of the Franco-Flemish artists had left Sprimont’s Chelsea factory – and that the setting is the Netherlands, not England – it nevertheless suggests the real possibility that similar social, professional and cultural bonds took precedence over confessional differences in determining how people related to one another in everyday life.

Whatever the personal faith of Nicholas Sprimont might have been, the probable Catholicism of his leading modeller Joseph Willems makes it quite clear that confessional allegiances did not play a determining role in Sprimont’s commercial and personal networks. He apparently sought out artists and craftsmen for his porcelain business on the basis of their skill and their ability to contribute towards the production of a high quality, saleable product. Whether they were Protestant or Roman Catholic does not appear to have been a primary consideration.

Even if Sprimont was a Protestant, there is no shortage of examples of Huguenot and other Protestant craftsmen who freely undertook commissions for Catholic patrons, even producing Catholic liturgical objects. Students of painting from the Golden Age...
of the Dutch Republic have long been aware of the fact that the confessional allegiances of artists do not always translate directly into the subject matter of their paintings: just as many of the finest artists of this period were Catholics, including Vermeer, Steen and van Goyen, many Protestant artists produced paintings and altarpieces for Catholic churches.58

In the same way, Huguenot silversmiths are known to have produced ecclesiastical plate for Catholic use: for example, the altar cruets and a stand attributed to Jean Sonjé, produced in The Hague in 1712 and 1713 and the architectural Tabernacle dating to 1720, made by Jesaias van Engauw, again in The Hague.59

The Huguenot ivory carver David le Marchand seems to have produced devotional sculptures of a decidedly Counter-reformation cast early in his career, including a Virgin and Child and a Corpus Christi. (53, 54)60

The Protestant Charles Gouyn’s St James factory too produced at least two figures employing Counter-reformation imagery: the Holy Family group and a figure of the Mater Dolorosa, which was perhaps copied from an ivory.61 Also Stephen Janssen, senior partner of the Battersea enamel factory, a Huguenot and a member of the Antigallican Association, oversaw the production of enamel crucifix pendants and plaques transfer-printed with scenes of the Passion, Mary Magdalene, St James of Compostella and other Catholic saints, all intended for export to the Continent.62

Sprimont, a silversmith turned porcelain-maker, was an entrepreneur, and business was business. He retained the services of skilled craftsmen capable of producing luxury porcelain sculptures of the highest quality. In Joseph Willems he had a Franco-Flemish trained artist who was familiar with the great southern Netherlandish tradition of Counter-reformation devotional art and who was clearly comfortable and capable of working within that tradition, producing his Pietà group, a masterpiece of porcelain sculpture.

In the Recusant elites of the 18th century, Sprimont would have found a market for such images. At least one of the Chelsea Pietà groups may be reasonably associated with a leading Catholic family of the day, the Lords Clifford of Chudleigh, and the indications are that this image has served as the focus of private devotions. Each of the extant examples of the Pietà group is unique in its decoration – decoration that is highly charged with devotional significance. This goes a long way to suggest that these objects were individual commissions, reflecting the requirements and tastes of individual Catholic patrons.

The Chelsea Pietà groups provide us with an intriguing example of the currency of late Baroque devotional imagery in mid 18th-century England, a currency here connected with the patronage of English Catholic elites for whom the acquisition of luxury commodities like grand porcelain sculpture aided in the accumulation of standing and prestige amongst their peers, Protestant and Catholic, but also for whom Franco-Flemish devotional imagery was an outward reminder of their membership of a wider European Catholic Church and a cosmopolitan, continental, Catholic aristocratic culture.
There is confusion over the attribution of the Prado painting. For many years attributed to Rubens and dated prior to 1618, the work was in 1974 given to Van Dyck by Diaz Padrón, and it remains catalogued as such (Diaz Padrón, M., Archivo Español de Arte, vol.47, April 1974; Museo del Prado, Inventario General de Pinturas I, La Colección Real (Madrid: Museo del Prado, 1990), 132 no.439). Erik Larsen, however, rejects this new attribution, considering the execution of the work to leave no question of Rubens’ authorship (Larsen, Erik, The Paintings of Anthony Van Dyck (Frenen: Luca Verlag, 1988), vol.i, 112 no.267).

An engraving by Cornelis Galle I after the version of the painting in Vienna (see fig.6) attributes that work to Rubens, suggesting that the Vienna Van Dyck may be a copy of a Rubens model (see Larsen, Erik, The Paintings of Anthony Van Dyck (Frenen: Luca Verlag, 1988), vol.ii, 423 no. A 35). The absence of the angel in the Prado picture, however, suggests that it is not the direct model for Galle’s engraving and thus the value of the engraving’s attribution of its subject to Rubens remains unclear for determining the author of the Prado work. Although an interesting problem, the question of the true authorship of the Prado Pietà does not directly affect our arguments here and the attribution to Van Dyck will be accepted for the purposes of this paper.


From the 5 March 1767 inventory of the effects of Joseph Willems quoted in Lane 1961, 135-136. A version of the Gold Anchor period Chelsea group of Roman Charity is in the collections of the National Gallery of Victoria (D21.a-b-1984). That Willems produced porcelain sculptures after terracotta models of his own making is clearly demonstrated by the presence in the collections of the Cecil Higgins Museum of a signed terracotta by Willems of a girl with flowers (the so-called ‘Gardner’s companion’) (S.12), the Chelsea porcelain example of which is held in the same collection.

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Incidentally, this makes the Chelsea Pietà the one clear instance where a model produced by an eighteenth-century English factory is copied by a continental factory, the reverse of the usual scenario.

Soil de Moriamé, Eugène-Justin, La Manufacture impériale et royale de porcelaine de Tournay: fondée en 1751. Préface de Marcel Laurent (Tournai et Paris: Casterman, 1937), 309, pl. 570


Adams, Elizabeth, Chelsea Porcelain (London: The British Museum Press, 2001), 133


On the symbol of the Rosa mystica see Camille, Michael, ‘Mimetic Identification and Passion Devotion in the later Middle Ages: A Double-sided Panel by Meister Francke’ in MacDonald, A A et al (eds), The Broken Body: Passion Devotion in Late Medieval Culture (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1998), 198; Passarge, Walter, Das Deutscher Vesperbild im Mittelalter, Deutscher Beiträge zur Kunstwissenschaft I (Köln: F.J. Marcan, 1924), 99


E.g. the dress of the Raised Anchor period figure of Isabella from the Commedia dell’arte (Adams, Elizabeth, Chelsea Porcelain (London: The British Museum Press, 2001), 93, Fig.7.37; the dress on the Red anchor period figure of a Polish lady (Adams, Elizabeth, Chelsea Porcelain (London: The British Museum Press, 2001), 132, Fig.9.19

Seated Nun: Adams, Elizabeth, Chelsea Porcelain (London: The British Museum Press, 2001), 135, Fig.9.23. Madonna and Child: BM 1948,1203.57 and the star-spangled head-covering of the Virgin (Fig. 52)

Rev. 13.8 ‘The lamb slain from the beginning of the world’. The Latin as read contains a clear error: a origine mundi for ab origine mundi. Such orthographic infelicities are not uncommon in recusant Latin. However, it should also be noted that French mottos which appear on Chelsea toys also frequently contain errors. It is possible that the issue lies with the literacy levels amongst the Chelsea Factory’s decorators. See Honey, W B, English Pottery and Porcelain. Second edition (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1945), 122

Christies, London 11 February 1991, Lot 90

A source for this entombment image has yet to be identified although it is clearly very closely related to a 1788 engraving by John Goldar after Daniel Dodd (British Museum 1939,1104.2)

E.g. John 1:29 ‘Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who taketh away the sin of the world’


In the second half of the 17th century in Germany, ivory superseded bronze as the favourite medium for Kleinplastik, the small cabinet sculptures which were such an important influence on the genesis of the porcelain figure as an art form. Lane, Arthur. English Porcelain Figures of the Eighteenth Century. (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 59; Avery, Charles, David Le Marchand 1674 – 1726: ‘An Ingenious Man for Carving in Ivory’, (London: Lund Humphries, 1996), 26


The Right Honourable Thomas Hugh Clifford, 14th Baron Clifford of Chudleigh, personal communication to the author, 3rd August 2012. Sold Sotheby’s, London, October 27, 1953, lot 140; Sold at Christies, London, June 5, 1978, lot 137; Stevens Collection, Melbourne; acquired by the NGV in 1989


Young, Hilary, ‘Anti-gallicanism at Chelsea: Protestantism, Protectionism and Porcelain’, Apollo CXLVII (June 1998), 37


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51 Murdoch, Tessa, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, ‘Sprimont, Nicholas’

52 Jacob-Hanson, Charlotte, “Deux-viviers?” A Critical Re-appraisal of the Duvivier family tree’, Trans, ECC, Vol.19, Pt 3, p 478. Much earlier writing on the Duviviers has conflated the references to Michel-Joseph and Henri-Joseph Duvivier, assuming them to be one and the same person. I here follow Jacob-Hanson in assuming that these two names refer to two, distinct persons, as seems almost certain given that Peterinck refers specifically by name to both an Henri-Joseph Duvivier and a Michel-Joseph Duvivier

53 Mention may also be made of William Duvivier who came from Tournai to London in 1742 or 1743. He worked as painter at the Chelsea factory and died in 1755. He was long believed to have been the father of Henri-Joseph Duvivier, although this is now known not to have been the case. Severne Mackenna, F. Chelsea Porcelain: The Red Anchor Wares (Leigh-on Sea: F Lewis Publishers, 1951), p 14; Jacob-Hanson, Charlotte, “‘Deux-viviers?’ A Critical Reappraisal of the Duvivier family tree”, Trans, ECC, Vol 19, Pt 3, p 477

54 It has been suggested that Elisabeth Thomas was perhaps the daughter of Francis Thomas, works manager at the Chelsea factory, but this remains as yet unproven. Godden, Geoffrey, New Hall Porcelains (London: Antique Collector’s Club, 2004), 160; Jacob-Hanson, Charlotte, ‘Fidelle Duvivier in France and the Netherlands’, The Magazine Antiques (January 2006), 172

55 Zappey, W M, Den Blaauwen, A L et al. Loosdrechts Porselein, 1774-1784 (Zwolle: Waanders, 1988),103; Jacob-Hanson, Charlotte, “‘Deux-viviers?’ A Critical Re-appraisal of the Duvivier family tree’, Trans, ECC, Vol.19, Pt 3, p, 480. It is of interest that many of the decorators at the Loosdrecht factory at this time were German Catholics who worshipped at the Slootdijk church (Zappey et al, op.cit.,102)


57 Rowlands, Marie B (ed), English Catholics of Parish and Town, 1558–1778 (London: Catholic Record Society, 1999), 270-72


