The ambiguous place of the porcelain medium within the field of sculptural aesthetics provides an intriguing lens through which to examine the status of the multiple artwork in the eighteenth century.

Porcelain figures, whether of large or small scale, tend to be catalogued in museum collections under the category of the decorative or applied arts. The small, although growing, number of exceptions to this general rule merely serves to emphasise the preponderance of the former classification. The general exclusion of the porcelain figure from the fine art category of sculpture is a heritage of the precarious status of porcelain in eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, a status which was subjected to greater and greater erosion under the influence of Neoclassicism.

Like a sculptor working in bronze, the eighteenth-century porcelain modeller created a sculptural model in a medium like wood, terracotta or wax for multiple reproduction in porcelain. It is generally however only the porcelain object which is preserved, not the artist’s model, which only rarely survives. This contrasts with the survival of original models for works in marble or bronze which have been the objects of collecting interest in their own right since at least the late sixteenth century. The general lack of surviving smodelli relating to figures produced in porcelain is undoubtedly a function of porcelain’s uncertain status as a medium in the canons of sculpture. Although early European porcelain was embraced as a sculptural medium by a number of artists, by the end of the eighteenth century, the porcelain medium’s ability to facilitate serial production and imitate other materials saw porcelain sculptures relegated to the realm of domestic kitsch. Furthermore, the artist responsible for a sculpture in porcelain was generally denied the title sculptor, and was instead relegated to the role of modeller, a craftsman not an artist.

Much of the characterisation of porcelain sculpture arising out of Neoclassical aesthetic theory is, in fact, caricature. Eighteenth-century porcelain sculptures were rarely ever examples of simple reproductive or repetitive multiplication. The methods of assembling complex porcelain models, as well as the frequent addition of surface decoration, meant that no two porcelain sculptures drawn from the same source model were ever identical. This paper will consider a group of soft-paste porcelain sculptures based upon a model by the sculptor Joseph Willems produced at the English Chelsea factory in the mid-eighteenth century. These porcelain figures – a series of Pietà groups – illustrate the complexities surrounding the status of many porcelain objects as works of art. The Chelsea Pietà is known from only three examples. Each of these examples is quite different to the others and all are most likely the results of individual commissions. The ultimate inspiration for the Pietà group lies in the monumental marble Pietà by Nicholas Coustou above the high altar in Notre Dame de Paris. But the porcelain versions are no simple replicas or reductions of their source model. The sculptor Willems has engaged in creative recomposition of the original in creating his figure group. In addition, the porcelain models were almost certainly intended to function as devotional objects; each bears unique enamelled and/or gilded decoration which serves to amplify the devotional resonances of the image. They are not, then, simply decorative objects to adorn an elite domestic interior, but are instead highly symbolically charged sculptural works which evoke a range of complex visual associations. An examination of this group of porcelain sculptures will, I hope, illustrate how the individual histories, properties and associations of a given medium can impact upon how we assess the status of a multiple artwork.

The eighteenth century was a period of transition with regard to the status of porcelain as a sculptural medium. At the beginning of the century, the period at which Europeans achieved mastery of the medium for the first time at Meissen in 1710, porcelain enjoyed a privileged status in the context of court cultures of representation. By the end of the century, porcelain had acquired overwhelmingly decorative connotations in art historical discourse and this overshadowed its place in sculptural aesthetics. The medium fell foul of the aesthetic critiques of Neoclassical theorists like Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Johann Gottfried Herder and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, being seen to embody the phenomena of material illusionism (one material being employed to

Fig. 1 Joseph Willems, Chelsea Porcelain Factory, London, Pietà, 1759–1765. Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria
Neoclassical art historical discourse further problematised the place of porcelain in sculptural aesthetics because of the perceived serial, reproductive character of the porcelain model. Being manufactured from moulds, porcelain figures were deemed 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 was based upon a pre-existing design, be it a painting or a sculpture, saw the modeller’s role caricatured as a mechanical exercise in reproduction. Porcelain was deemed by Neoclassical theorists a secondary material, dependent upon some other material like marble, and an »Ersatz« for a higher order artwork.

But up until the final decades of the eighteenth century porcelain did enjoy a real, if tenuous association, with the art of sculpture. From the earliest period of European porcelain production, and on through the eighteenth century, academically trained sculptors like Balthasar Permoser, Johann Benjamin Thomae, Johann Joachim Kändler, Franz Anton Bustelli, Friedrich Wilhelm Doell, 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 menagerie of near-life-size animal sculptures for Augustus the Strong.

In the early eighteenth century porcelain still bore the inherited prestige of its status as a »Wunderkammer« treasure. Its physical characteristics of »shine« – the nonmirroring, light-reflecting character of the glazed porcelain body – and fragility, highlighting rather than detracting from its preciousness, appealed greatly to a courtly baroque aesthetic. Although figures like Kändler at Meissen and Count Richard Ginori at his factory at Doccia seized upon the potential for heroically-scaled porcelain sculpture, feats of enormous technical bravura, much early porcelain sculpture was of small-scale and allied to the baroque tradition of »Kleinplastik.«

Small-scale sculptures in ivory and boxwood had enjoyed considerable prestige in »Wunderkammer« collections in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries 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 in this tradition. 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. In his Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums, Winckelmann famously turns such polemic specifically against porcelain: »Most porcelain is fashioned into ridiculous dolls, resulting in the spread of childish taste.«

Here porcelain, smallness of scale and defective taste are explicitly linked. Catriona Macleod has suggested that Griesz’s analysis of kitsch might also have mentioned proximity to the body as an indicator of the kitsch object. »Kleinplastik« 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. The use of much small-scale porcelain sculpture as adornment for the court dining table further served to associate these objects, and the medium itself, with contexts of bodily maintenance and control. Such objects were thus condemned by Neoclassical theorists as domestic, sensual and unworthy of critical scrutiny.

Where marble and bronze, materials in which objects survived from ancient times, could be seen to embody, by their very physical nature, the eternal values of the Classical world, porcelain by its fragility and the technical limitations on the size of object it could readily produce, was deemed precisely the opposite – transient and domestic. By the end of the eighteenth century, the physical characteristics of the porcelain medium which had so enamoured it to the aesthetics of Baroque court society contributed to its disqualification from the Neoclassical canons of art.

The foundational significance of the writings of Winckelmann especially in the formation of the academic discipline of art history has ensured that it is this aesthetic framework which continues to inform contemporary attitudes to porcelain sculpture. But evidence exists suggesting quite different reception histories of porcelain sculpture in the mid-eighteenth century. Amongst the collections of the National Gallery of Victoria is one of the finest essays in porcelain sculpture produced in England during the eighteenth century; a Pietà group made at the London Chelsea Factory and modelled by Joseph Willems, the leading figure modeller at what was at this time the pre-eminent English luxury porcelain manufactory (fig. 1).

Willems was born at Brussels in the Catholic Netherlands in 1715 where he appears to have received at least part of his academic training. By 1748–1749 he is in London where he finds employment with Nicholas Sprimont’s Chelsea porcelain factory. Willems clearly conceived of himself as a sculptor, not merely a craftsman, and is spoken of as such in contemporary sources, such as Mortimer’s Dictionary of Trade and Commerce. He annually exhibited sculptural models with the Society of Artists of Great Britain in the years 1760-66.15 In a letter of February 1766 from
François-Joseph Peterinck, director of the Tournai 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.16 When Willems died at Tournai in November 1766, an inventory of his effects included a number of whitepainted terracotta models of his own creation, some of the subjects of which were also produced as porcelain figures at Chelsea.17 Amongst the models was un groupe représentant la Vierge et le Saveur descendu de la croix, avec un adorateur.18

This latter model appears to stand behind the porcelain Pietà groups produced at the Chelsea factory.19 Only three examples of this figure are known: one produced c. 1756–1758, towards the end of the so-called Red Anchor period of the factory’s production, and two produced during the Gold Anchor period and dating c. 1759–1765 (fig. 2). All three examples have gilt and/or enamel decoration which renders them quite individual in their appearances. The Red Anchor example employs polychrome enamels and features a distinctive decorative treatment to the Virgin’s cloak, employing an unusual five-pointed rosette, reminiscent of the ornament found on medieval Vesperbild,10 and evocative of the cult of the Five Wounds of Christ. The two Gold Anchor examples are distinguished by the addition of an integral mazarineblue ground porcelain pedestal with tooled-gilt ornament. On the NGV example, this ornament includes a depiction of the Lamb of God and a quotation from Revelation 13:8: the lamb slain from the beginning of the world (agnus occisus a[bb] origine mundi). The pedestal of the example from a Melbourne private collection includes a polychrome vignette in the manner of Rubens depicting the Entombment, with a gilt border depicting the Instruments of the Passion (fig. 3). There is not the space here to consider the individual decorative treatments of these figure groups in detail, but what should be clear is that the distinctive iconographic content of each example results in a quite distinctive symbolic valance to each work, although all are clearly concerned with Eucharistic symbolism.

The distinctive appearances of these three porcelain sculptures is worthy of more general comment. The production of a complex porcelain model might involve the efforts of a number of craftsmen. A model like the Pietà group would have been assembled from multiple components; the individual parts of the model would have been slip-cast separately in moulds before being assembled by a craftsman known as the repairer. This process allows subtle variations to be introduced into the form of the final model, despite all of the component parts being drawn from the same set of moulds. Any surface enamelling and gilding would have been the work of yet further craftsmen. But we can also be certain that in the case of a model like the Pietà groups, these craftsmen would have been working under the direction of the chief modeller who had overall control of the final appearance of the work.20 This would have been especially the case with a model like this one where there is a strong likelihood that each example is a product of private commission and that the decorative scheme is carefully calculated. In many ways, thus, the production of a sculpture in porcelain mirrored the workshop practices associated with the production of bronze sculpture. The processes of producing forms from moulds, and then assembling and finishing a bronze sculpture might involve a number of craftsmen.

Similarly, the use of moulds facilitated serial production. But, unlike a porcelain sculpture, a bronze sculpture, even when it was a replica or reduction of a classical model, because of the status of the material itself in Neoclassical aesthetics, was deemed a legitimate work of art by connoisseurs. A further point of note is that Willems’ Pietà groups were almost certainly intended, not as simple decorative objects, but as devotional images. Although large-scale porcelain figures were fashionable luxury objects acquired by members of the mid-eighteenth century English elites, the explicitly Counter-reformation imagery of these Pietà groups, as well as the sculptural character of the works, renders them unlikely acquisitions by Protestant English collectors. And indeed, one of these works, the NGV’s example, appears to have been in the collections of Catholic family in the eighteenth century, the Lords Clifford of Chudleigh.

The likely devotional function of these objects is reinforced by the fact that the ultimate model for Willems’ composition was apparently the monumental 1712–1728 Pietà above the high altar of Notre Dame de Paris by Nicholas Coustou. But whilst Coustou’s Pietà forms the inspiration for Willems’ figure group, Willems does not simply produce a replica of his Parisian model in reduced scale; his figure group can be shown to be a carefully considered recomposition of the original, transforming a liturgical work into a private devotional image.

Here we may critique the notion that a porcelain model based upon an existing artwork is the product of an unmediated, mechanical process of reduction and reproduction, thereby forfeiting any real claim to artistic originality. Such a characterisation of the sculptor’s or modeller’s role is wholly unrealistic; modelling is necessarily a creative activity and the ability of artists consciously to imbue a model with particular aesthetic and symbolic qualities, even when adapting a pre-existing prototype, must be given due attention.

And we may see this in Willems’ work. Where Coustou’s Pietà is marked by a hieratic frontality, suited to its situation presiding over an altar, Willems has created a far more dynamic group, readable

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Fig. 3 Joseph Willems, Chelsea Porcelain Factory, London, Pietà, 1759–1765. Melbourne, Private Collection
in the round. The reduction of Coustou’s four figures to three, each occupying a distinct plane in space, and the drawing in of the figures closer to one another, tracing an upward spiral, injects the porcelain composition with an increased sense of drama absent from the monumental original. Willems demonstrates a mastery both of the exigencies of the porcelain medium and of the compositional requirements for transforming a monumental liturgical sculpture into a small-scale work suited for private devotional contemplation.21

The allusion to an existing monumental public religious sculpture is itself of interest. As we do not witness here a strict replication of the original image, we do not appear to be dealing with an instance of the phenomenon whereby an authoritative image is repetitively reproduced in order to multiply the efficacious sacred power of the original. But the evocation of a sacred image adorning the altar of the cathedral of the Archbishop of Paris would nevertheless have borne special significance in the milieu of English Roman Catholic culture. We must recall that the public practice of Roman Catholicism remained illegal in eighteenth century England and that, theoretically, a number of legal proscriptions of varying severity could be brought against those found guilty of adherence to Catholicism. Although excluded from the political life of the country, many Roman Catholic gentry and aristocrats remained actively engaged with the cultural world of their day: they built houses, created gardens, collected and commissioned art; they undertook the Grand Tour, educated their children in Catholic institutions on the continent, and often maintained residences in cities like Paris or Brussels.22 In this context, an image referencing the Notre Dame Pietà can be read as a statement of the cosmopolitan character of English Catholic culture and its ties to the wider European Church and aristocratic European society.

The very distinct appearances of each example from this series of porcelain Pietà groups, allied with their powerfully Catholic devotional imagery, suggests that these works were not speculative productions by the Chelsea Factory, destined for sale at auction or through china dealers, but were instead the products of individual commissions by Roman Catholic patrons. The ideologically and symbolically charged function for which these objects were intended further suggests that, for these patrons, the porcelain medium was not possessed of any negative valance; rather it must have been held in an esteem appropriate to the dignity of these images’ purpose. In mid-eighteenth century England porcelain sculptures were fashionable luxury objects collected by members of the English elite.23 It is true that the devotional nature of the Willems Pietà groups anticipates for certain audiences a particular type of viewing and response which might be opposed to the, putatively, purely aesthetic response to sculpture anticipated by Neoclassical theorists. But the porcelain medium clearly held positive aesthetic and symbolic associations within the context of eighteenth-century English elite cultures of representation and this must have influenced the choice of this particular medium for the creation of these sculptural works which, as well as their potential to function as the objects of devotional meditation, clearly played a role in a specifically English Catholic culture of elite self-representation and where their underlying serial character could further function as a symbol of the collective identity of this discreet social group.

The Willems Pietà groups demonstrate clearly how the reception history of a given medium necessarily impacts upon the reception of sculptural works executed in that medium. By the late eighteenth century, a bronze replicating an antique model was accepted as a work of sculpture, whilst a porcelain figure replicating a known model was, by and large, deemed an element of domestic decoration. This hierarchy which has its origins in the aesthetic theories of the Neoclassical movement remains largely in force to this day, certainly in the museum world. But I wish to suggest that in the mid-eighteenth century when the Willems Pietà groups were made, porcelain still had a legitimate place in sculptural aesthetics, alongside materials like bronze, ivory, and marble. Commissions by members of the English Catholic elite of porcelain sculptural works which are expressive of fundamental aspects of their social and cultural identities clearly illustrate the esteem in which the medium was held, at least in England at this time. The modes of production of porcelain figures like these allowed that each example was of distinctive appearance and symbolic content. These are not simple, serial replications of Willems’ lost terracotta sketch; each may lay some claim to an independence of total aesthetic conception. They are certainly not replicas, reproductions or reductions of Coustou’s Pietà. Willems’ adaptation of his model has creatively transformed that composition into something suited to a new medium and a new function. The evocation of Coustou’s sculpture may contribute to the overall symbolic significance of the porcelain works for their owners, but the porcelain sculptures themselves are individual and original responses to the challenge of reconciling the demands of devotional image, elite self-representation and aesthetic exploitation of a precious and beautiful medium.

Notes
1. For example, the Getty Museum’s catalogue of its Italian and Spanish Sculpture Collection includes porcelain and glazed earthenware works: Peggy Fogelman/ Peter Fusco/Marietta Cambareri: Italian and Spanish Sculpture. Catalogue of the J. Paul Getty Museum Collection. Los Angeles 2002.
2. The terracotta sketch assumes a significance in the eighteenth century commensurate with the increasing weight given in enlightenment aesthetic theory to the notions of originality and individual genius. So Diderot, writing to Falconet in 1768, was able to state: “Terracotta is the concern of genius; marble is the conclusion of the work.” (Diderot: Correspondence, vol. 5. Paris 1997, p. 865.) Winckelmann expressed a similar belief: “Modelling in clay is to the sculptor what drawing on paper is to the painter [...] In the soft material, and on paper, the genius of the artist is seen in its utmost purity and truth; whilst on the contrary, it is concealed beneath the industry and the polish required in a finished painting and a completed statue.” Johann Joachim Winckelmann: Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums. Ed. by Joseph Eiselein. Donaueschingen 1825–1829, vol. 3, p. 121.
3. Exceptional here is the survival of many of Falconet’s terracotta sketches produced between 1757 and 1766 for production in porcelain sculptures at Sèvres but it would seem to be Falconet’s reputation as an academically schooled sculptor which rendered his sketches of interest to posterity, despite their final realisation in the porcelain medium. Marie-Noëlle Pinot Villechenon: Falconet à Sèvres, 1754–1766, ou, L’art de plaire. Paris 2001.

7. From the outset, Böttger’s ambition was for his porcelain and stoneware bodies to be substitutes for silver, capable of being transformed into anything that silver was employed for, including furniture and sculpture. See Menzhausen 1990 (note 6), pp. 11–12.
8. On shino see Wittwer 2006 (note 6), pp. 159–163.
12 MacLeod 2007 (note 4), p. 49.
13 John Kenworthy-Browne: The Wife of Joseph Willems: Mary Ann Nollekens (née Lesac). In: Transactions of the English Ceramic Circle, 19, 2006, no. 2, p. 249. – Elizabeth Adams: Chelsea Porcelain. London 2001, p. 88. It is likely that Willems’ first wife Marie-Joséphe was dead before he had moved to England. Willems appears to have remarried on or before 1758 to Mary Ann Nollekens, the widow of Joseph Francis Nollekens, or “Old Nollekens,” the Antwerp-born painter, father of “Young Nollekens” the sculptor.
14 In Mortimer’s Dictionary of Trade and Commerce. London 1763, pt. 1, p. 19 (quoted in Arthur Lane: English Porcelain Figures of the Eighteenth Century. London 1961, p. 134), Willems is mentioned as a “Modeller, At the Brussels Coffee House, Chelsea; This Artist teaches Drawing, Modelling, & has modelled for the Chelsea China Manufactory for many years.” Although Willems is here spoken of as a modeller it is clear that this term, allied as it is with drawing, is used to designate him an artist rather than a mere craftsman.
15 Lane 1961 (note 14), pp. 133–134. During the years that he exhibited terracottas with the Society of Artists Willems also seems to have been manufacturing terracotta garden sculptures, a number of which were advertised for sale at Chelsea after his departure for Tournai in early 1766. Nancy Valpy: Extracts from 18th Century London Newspapers and Additional Manuscripts, British Museum. In: Transactions of the English Ceramic Circle, 13, 1987, no. 1, p. 80.
17 “Plusieurs groupes de ronde bosse de terre cuite et colorées en blanc de sa composition, et par lui modelés;” from the 5 March 1767 inventory of the effects of Joseph Willems quoted in Lane 1961 (note 14), pp. 135–136. 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 (p. 12), the Chelsea porcelain example of which is held in the same collection. A handful of other terracotta figures bearing Willems’ signature are known, including a pair of dancing peasants, dated 1749 (Adams 2001 [note 13], p. 88), and a recently discovered figure of an African man dated 1736, from the period before Willems had moved to England. Scultura III. Exhb.cat. Tomasso Brothers Fine Art. London 2010.
19 There is also a version of this group, clearly closely related to the Chelsea group and therefore certainly by Willems, produced at the Tournai factory.
20 Bustelli at the Nymphenburg factory not only provided models from which moulds were produced, but after 1756 and the introduction of polychrome decoration, appears to have designed the paint schemes to be executed for his models. Franz Anton Bustelli: Nymphenburger Porzellanfiguren des Rokoko: das Gesamtwerk. Exhb.cat. Bayerisches Nationalmuseum. Ed. by Renate Eikelmann/Katharina Hantschmann/Alfred Ziffer. Munich 2004.
23 The range of subjects and number surviving of these large Chelsea sculptural groups – like the Roman Charity – suggest that there existed an elite market for them.

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