

PORZELLAN MANUFAKTUR NYMPHENBURG A KNACK FOR DESIGN

Even today, the traditional company from Munich, founded in 1747, is regarded as an international authority on contemporary design.

It seems like a scene from another world: with calm gestures, experienced hands carefully pull the edges of a plate higher as it rotates on a wooden turntable towards its becoming. It is early afternoon, daylight illuminates the historic rooms of the Porzellan Manufaktur Nymphenburg.

It is only a few hundred metres to the famous castle of the same name with its long canal. Today, Josef Knipfer has already shaped around 30 blanks, carefully and with feeling. Even though each plate will later have a base thickness of 4.8 mm when it is lined up on the shelf to dry – no two pieces are exactly alike, each one is unique. “Turning and drying are followed by firing in the kiln, first at 950 degrees during the glow firing, then again at 1,380 degrees. Around 14 days of manual work go into such a plate”, says Knipfer, pressing a stamp with the blind mark into the still soft bottom of the plate and adding a hand-carved “J” for Josef. The ceramic tableware maker has been working here since 1976. He was one of the last to learn his trade here.

FOCUS ON QUALITY

Since the founding of the manufactory in 1747, the steps of porcelain making have not changed significantly. Since then, the focus has been on handwork as quality, for 275 years already – as if there were no 3D printers, no computer design, no Artificial Intelligence, no mass-produced goods from China.

To this day, the fragile and delicate figurines, tableware series and design objects for which the manufactory is internationally renowned are still produced here at the Nymphenburger Schlossrondell. “One third of our turnover comes from services, one third from art editions and one third from special orders”, says Sandra Gottwald, who has been the company’s press officer for six years.

Kaolin, quartz and feldspar are the three main ingredients for the white gold. What else goes into it remains a secret. Once a week, the mass is mixed and stirred for hours, then passed through a

sieve – “even finer than nylon stockings”, says Gottwald. After that, the flawless raw mass rests for up to two years in the so-called Mauk cellar in the basement.

“Time is an important factor in the manufactory”, explains Sandra Gottwald. “Even when the kiln goes up, it is always a surprise. You have to constantly rethink and develop, the climate of the day also has to fit, that cannot always be determined. The material is special and idiosyncratic, it requires serenity in handling.”

JUST LIKE IN THE OLD DAYS

Just like in the old days, the workshops produce the porcelain mass themselves, using the power of the water from the nearby castle stream to drive the turning wheels, for example. Everything that appears to be round, i.e. plates, vases and bowls, is moulded as a solid mass on the wheel; everything that has corners or



needs to be shaped into a figure has to be liquefied into “slip”, cast and sometimes painstakingly assembled. The moulds for casting are created in the model room. For the “Lightscape” series, for example, designed by Ruth Gurvich in 2009, white bisque porcelain on the outside, glazed on the inside. Here, the porcelain looks like stretched paper, with the edges hinted at here and there. The series was actually designed in paper, and the designs radiate that lightness.

QUICK-CHANGE ARTIST

Porcelain – a quick-change artist? Yes. For those who know how to exploit its materiality. There are 700 animal figures in the archive alone, we learn. Mouse “Karl”, for example, a modern contemporary for the home, designed by Wilhelm Neuhäuser. The shades are mixed in the colour laboratory, where there are 300 shades of green alone. “The final firing changes the applied shade. This has to be correctly estimated through years of experience”, Gottwald explains.

Things get really contemplative in the painting room on the first

floor, a bright hall with tables lined up next to each other, flanked by long shelves of future gems. “It takes about a year to mix a colour properly,” says Eileen Knibbe, who can call herself a porcelain painter after her 3.5-year apprenticeship. She mixes pigments, turpentine, clove oil or 24-carat gold, for example, to apply a decorative gold decoration to a plate that mimics the shape of the material – with a brush made from the feathery hair of Siberian squirrels.

LINK TO ART

A few tables away, a colleague is painting a “Blue Panther”, earthen symbol for the Bavarian Television Award. The “Corine”, trophy of the Bavarian Book Trade, also literally gains colour here. Originally a figure from the Commedia dell’Arte, the statue is a reminder of the first great porcelain artist who helped the manufactory to early fame: Franz Anton Bustelli (1723-1763) created around 150 figures as a Rococo figurist and sculptor, 16 of which are from the Commedia dell’Arte. Bustelli thus established the link to art that still exists today. He was followed by Dominikus Auliczek, who created around 100 figures, and then,



quite a bit later, Josef Wackerle, who enriched the creative cosmos with majolica garden figures and ornamental birds – around 600 porcelain artists and workers from all periods are recorded by name until after 1945.

LABORATORY AND STUDIO AT THE SAME TIME

To this day, the workshops are both laboratory and atelier, where new models are created in cooperation with international creatives. Today, the manufactory employs 75 people. Its history has always been linked to the Bavarian Royal House of Wittelsbach. Since 1999, the focus has been increasingly on contemporary avant-garde forms, created by Hella Jongerius or Konstantin Grcic, Ted Muehling, Kiki Smith or Carsten Höller, Damien Hirst or Rolf Sachs, Vivienne Westwood or Nick Knight, who captured Kate Moss as a winged angel in porcelain.

In the interior, the old craftsmanship surprises with accessories such as artificial tiles, washbasins, chandeliers – or cashmere comb “Frytz”, created in cooperation with the label Allude.

INCREDIBLY VERSATILE

At the end of this illustrious tour, we know: Porcelain can do an incredible amount. It can shimmer, glow or shine. It can be muted and draw the eye discreetly to its form. We encounter it as a soup plate, a bird’s nest, a chandelier or a penguin. Friends of simple forms will be enthusiastic about “The White Doves” by Michael Pendry, the “Colo” table lamp by Studio Faubel or the delicate “Gentiana Alba” lamp, which was developed for the parlour of the historic Falkenhütte in the Karwendel, also with Studio Faubel. Minimalists like the egg vases by Ted Muehling, artsy fans prefer the limited edition “Bandleader” by Rachel Feinstein, a satire on the hype surrounding the Victoria’s Secret lingerie label, if you like.

EARTHEN SURPRISE

A tour of the flagship store at Schlossrondell offers one or two earthen surprises. Those who can afford a stay-over in the neighbouring Kavaliershaus am Schlossrondell will be truly amazed.

Opened in 2020, The Langham Nymphenburg Residence is an illustrious showroom and Munich’s finest noble hostel at the same time. Up to twelve people can stay here in the 18th century mansion, on three floors with 836 square metres that can be booked as a whole – a biotope of Nymphenburg porcelain art that puts all the objects, sculptures, animal figures and tableware from the neighbouring workshops into a lifelike context.

At the latest, a “lithophany” – a view of Lake Tegernsee – will make the very last porcelain heretics ponder: In a wooden-lined spa, the perspective on the noble Bavarian lake, resembling an ancient engraving, captivates with high-class skill. In a process older than photography, the result measures only 0.25 mm at its thinnest point. In this way, the actually opaque material is made to shine in relief and conveys three-dimensional qualities. What porcelain can’t do!

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