

Differing View

Stephanie Imbeau's artistic research at the Meissen Porcelain Foundation

The Meissen Porcelain Foundation owns a collection running to around 33,000 items. Part of the Foundation's work involves preserving, conducting research into, and making this collection accessible to the public. As well as displaying works in its Museum or loaning items to other exhibitors, this also means regularly opening up its repository to researchers who submit project proposals. Concepts need to be delineated as accurately as possible beforehand given the wealth of material held so as to ensure we can support the research to optimum effect. That is not always feasible without in-depth knowledge of the collection or the outcome anticipated, yet thematic familiarisation with the holdings in question is essential at the preparatory stage.



The research request lodged by the American/Canadian artist Stephanie Imbeau revolved around art. She had won Kunstverein Meissen's artist-in-residence scholarship in 2024 and single-mindedly set about learning the history of the city in which she was now to reside. Calling her project "Porcelain to Meissen"¹ was a waggish nod to the proverbial carrying of coals to Newcastle. She fearlessly laid out her porcelain carpets at the interface between Kunstverein, artistic self and Meissen Porcelain and invited city society and passers-by to get involved. Those willing joined with the artist in stitching porcelain segments together to form carpets. Imbeau thus effectively used her residency as a means of engaging in the city's day-to-day life, though she was also intent on conducting research for new projects.

[Fig 1: Stephanie Imbeau beside one of her porcelain creations at the Kunstverein Meissen in September 2024, photo: S. Bochmann]

It was against this background that we afforded Stephanie Imbeau access to our collection for her artistic undertaking. The artist framed her approach by focusing on the subject of "fabrics". Thus, porcelains with textile surface textures were what she was in search of. What a guiding concept! We hadn't had this kind of research request before. The focus was very specifically laid on surfaces such as cloth, material, clothing and drapery, to which end it was nevertheless necessary to pore through a collection embracing vast holdings of figurines, miscellaneous items with relief-moulded textile decoration and specialist pieces such as lithophanes – translucent porcelain images that only become visible to the human eye when backlit.

We came to see our own collection through different eyes when preparing for this cross-collection research visit. What can be looked upon as "fabrics"? How are they formed and made? There are figures in full attire and neo-Classical nudes with but a modicum of cover to spare our blushes. And what about the gossamer materials from around 1900 that reveal more than they conceal? We further addressed ourselves to the coarse jute relief-moulding in Ludwig Zepner's abstract images of the elements and to the momentum of art nouveau porcelains in which a person and their clothing

¹ Documented in: Kunstverein Meissen: Porcelain to Meissen. Stephanie Imbeau, 19 October–16 November, artist-in-residence scholarship 2024, curatorial supervisor: Johanna Bettle. Meissen 2024.

sway in undular unison. The craggy structural properties of the coats worn by the Saints were not to be ignored either. Imbeau's artistic research allowed us to view our collection differently.

It was Kunstverein Meissen that actually brought the artist Stephanie Imbeau to Meissen. The city's long tradition of porcelain production was both a source of inspiration and a point of departure for her. She didn't confine herself to simply beholding during her repository research. Wherever possible, we allowed the artist to run her hands over an object's surface so she could literally get to grasp its texture, relief-moulding, dynamics and depth through the act of touching. Imbeau then went her own way in terms of the material and mode of operation adopted. Once the subject-matter had been researched, she selected suitable porcelains or promising surface areas from which to garner "fabric", initially with the aid of digital photography. The next step saw her cut suitable sections out and assemble them into digital collages that she printed out in colour and drew over. Drawing simultaneously served the artist as a means of appropriating the three-dimensional textile textures with her hands.² Ms Imbeau's large-format black-and-white drawings emerged from this process of artistic creativity as wholly original new work of her own.



Assisting the artistic research of this scholar in residence was both exciting and stimulating for the Meissen Porcelain Foundation. Ever since 1916, the Manufactory's modellers and decorators have been able to consult items exhibited in the Meissen Porcelain Museum for their own purposes. The inspiration Stephanie Imbeau derived from our collection took her beyond porcelain. It served her as a step along the way towards works of her own produced in a different mode and material. Conversely, we derived something of great value from the artist too – a new and different way of viewing our own collection.

Susanne Bochmann

[Fig 2: Porcelain to Meissen - Folds Expanded 9, drawing, 1.30 m x 1.30 m, Stephanie Imbeau 2024, photo: S. Imbeau]

² Stephanie Imbeau explained her way of working in correspondence with the author as follows: "[...] they are independent works that are also a method of me trying to embody the 'language' of the textile sculptures into my hands. [...] That's sort of all of my work though, a mix of stand-alone and reference."; also cf. Johanna Bettler: Porcelain to Meissen. Stephanie Imbeau, in: Kunstverein 2024 (as note i), pp.7-9, p.9.