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JUNE 2014 HK\$25



Souperbowls

FINE DINNER SETS FROM WORLD FAMOUS FAMILIES ARE NOW EMINENTLY COLLECTIBLE

No great occasion of state is complete without a formal banquet. Here we see national pride come very much to the fore, as only the finest foods and most respected wines served to the distinguished guests of the day. The tableware chosen for such an event, however, is every bit as important. Choice of dinner service is an integral part of any high society occasion.

The actual concept of a dinner service, as such, first gained popularity during the 18th century. This saw a number of factories – notably Royal Copenhagen, Wedgwood and Royal Worcester – producing fine porcelain plates, bowls and centrepieces. All the key elements of fine tableware.

First established in Denmark in the 1700s, under the patronage of the Royal Family, Royal Copenhagen is one of the most enduring names in the world of fine porcelain. Explaining its lasting appeal, Dominic Simpson, the head of ceramics and glass at Christie's, says: "*Flora Danica* is Royal Copenhagen's most popular pattern and the one the company is most famous for. It was introduced in the 18th century and then revitalised in the 19th. It has been consistently reproduced ever since, with its designs never changing. Sadly, there are no available 18th century examples, making the 19th century pieces the most desirable."

Flora Danica is a simple and elegant pattern, featuring botanical specimens in the middle of the porcelain. The surrounding borders follow a deceptively complex design, with the focus lingering on the details throughout. Overall, it remains its tasteful, restrained style – along with the quality of its craftsmanship – that makes the *Flora Danica* design quite so popular.

As with most porcelain manufacturers, it is possible to order Royal Copenhagen directly from the factory. Thankfully, its emphasis on quality continues





to this day, with customers expected to wait up to 10 weeks for a delivery of their specially-commissioned *Flora Danica* ware. A single plate will set you back between £750-£1,500 (HK\$9,800-\$19,600), while a teapot is priced at around £4,500.

A complete (or near complete) 19th or 20th century *Flora Danica* service would sell for around HK\$1 million at auction. With keen collectors from around the world (particularly those in Europe and the United States) competition for a good dinner service can get fierce, leading to some exhilarating bidding battles.

In something of a testament to the enduring quality of Royal Copenhagen, Christie's and Sotheby's, the world's two leading auction houses, have both sold relatively modern examples of *Flora Danica* in their recent sales. Sotheby's sold a collection that once belonged to Joe Gregory, the former president of Lehman Brothers. The collection included several pieces of Royal Copenhagen porcelain, all of which sold above the estimated price. One particular highlight was a set of 14 modern *Flora Danica* soup plates that went for US\$15,000 in New York.

Christie's, however, managed to unearth a somewhat more extensive *Flora Danica* dinner set for its own recent auction in New York. Though not a complete set – disappointingly rare to discover these days – the service still had all the key components, including a tureen, a salad bowl and a platter, alongside the serving dishes and dinner plates. With an impeccable provenance and clearly in good condition, the lot fetched US\$182,500.

Emphasising the importance of a traceable history, Simpson says: "Provenance is critical. Buyers are always intrigued to know more about the history of pieces and, in particular, they want to own pieces that belonged to people they admire. This is particularly important when a service has been split and a piece or a few pieces

– are then offered for sale. The services which end up split up are typically the very finest ones, those made to order for the grandest of people."

Simpson cites two examples where provenance has undoubtedly made a clear difference in terms of value. One is the Meissen-made *Swan Service*, belonging to Count Brühl. Heinrich Graf von Brühl (1700-1763) was the prime minister of Saxony and the director of the Meissen factory from 1733 to 1763. Brühl commissioned the service to celebrate his marriage to Maria Anna Franziska von Kolowrat-Krakowska.

Assessing its importance, Simpson says: "The service is so famous because it was such a lavish and bold baroque statement – the highly innovative moulded decoration of the service had a watery theme, a play on the word Brühl, meaning 'watery'."

"The modelling was carried out by J.J. Kändler, the finest modeller at Meissen at the time, along with his assistant, J.F. Eberlein. It is thought to have been the largest such service produced in the 18th century." One item from the collection, a single Meissen oval montichi from the *Swan Service*, was recently sold at Christie's in London for £151,875 including the

auction house's premium. Recalling an even more memorable example, Simpson says: "One service springs to mind that was of superb quality and – unusually – it was largely complete. This was the *Choiseul Service*, a beautiful service made at Sévres, the French Royal factory. It was originally ordered in 1766 by Louis-César-Renaud, Vicomte de Choiseul, later second Duc de Praslin (1735-1791). The vicomte followed in his father's footsteps as ambassador to Vienna, representing Louis XV on a special mission between May and June 1764. In 1770, he was sent to Naples as ambassador.

"The service was acquired in the 19th century by Baron Alphonse de Rothschild (1827-1905) who, upon the death of his father, James, in 1868 assumed his place as head of the French branch of the family, as well as taking over the businesses in France. The service descended through the Rothschild family to the vendors offering it at the April 2000 sale."

The fact the service had been in the ownership of two of Europe's great families, with the Rothschilds continuing to retain great influence around the globe, gave it an impeccable provenance. It was

Opening spread:
Part of the Maharajah
of Patiala's dinner
service made in 1921;
Opposite page: Four
Sevre Fond Pompre
Fable porcelain plates
from the Service de
l'Archicancelle.
This page: Examples
of *Flora Danica* from
Royal Copenhagen

“The world's most expensive tea service went for HK\$25 million, at auction, and included some 1,400 pieces”



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the combination of its fascinating history and the sheer craftsmanship of the set that saw the lot go for £355,750. Considering this was 14 years ago, it would inevitably command a far higher price today.

Perhaps surprisingly, one of the most expensive dinner services ever to be sold at auction, was not of porcelain manufacture, but was actually fashioned from silver-gilt. The other unusual aspect of this particular service was its sheer size – in total, it comprised 1,400 different pieces and weighed in at a colossal 500kg.

The set was originally commissioned by the Maharaja of Patiala in 1921 for the 1922 visit of the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VIII. According to Christie's, each piece came with "a scroll and foliage border above cast and chased panels of animals, separated by cast daggers, variously engraved or cast with coats-of-arms, crown and initials." Today, it offers a unique insight into the life of the leader of one of India's wealthiest states of the time, a man who was known for his extravagance. An early motor-car enthusiast, he was also known to travel in a convoy of Rolls Royces – 20 of them at a time.

With such an extensive set and links to one of the most flamboyant characters in India's long history, it is no surprise it commanded a premium valuation. Accordingly, the service eventually went to an anonymous buyer for £1.9 million.

As we move back through the 20th century, it is apparent that many artists began to pursue a more contemporary take on porcelain and, by extension, dinner services. Pablo Picasso, for instance, an artist more commonly associated with paintings, designed ceramics in his own distinctly modernistic style.

One of his services, created back in 1948, was glazed black and featured a contemporary take on a face with



Opposite page, above: Pablo Picasso's Service Fruits de Provence sold for £79,250 at a Christie's auction; Opposite page below: Chinese export porcelain Canton Famille Rose dinner service from circa 1815; This Page: The Pablo Picasso Service Visage Noir

green patterns around the border. This was clearly a departure from the largely white and floral style of the Royal factories. Nevertheless, Picasso always has his admirers and his ceramics are considered highly collectible in their own right. Another service he created in 1948, consisting of 13 plates, sold for a staggering sum £91,250 in 2012.

As fashions change and modern life demands greater convenience, Susanna Valerio, the founder and creative director of Hong Kong based SV Casa – a luxury product company with outlets throughout the city – has developed a more contemporary take on fine dining. She says: "While there are some key compo-



complete set is not always required – something that is perhaps understandable given the original size of some of the services.

Provenance, as ever, is one of the most important factors in ascertaining the exact value of certain services. A single plate, if it once belonged to a significant German count, can be worth in excess of HK\$1 million – the same sum as an entire modern, near complete Royal Copenhagen set. As Dominic Simpson rightly points out, buyers are interested in the history and people associated with the service.

In the 21st century, people may feel there is no longer a place for such extravagance. A visit

“A single plate can be worth in excess of HK\$1 million if it belonged to a particularly interesting German count”

ments which should always be present as part of a dinner service, there is always room for creativity.”

With this in mind, Valerio has designed and manufactured *One Thousand and One Nights*, her own distinctive interpretation of the genre. Explaining her approach, she says: "It embodies lots of inspiration from my past and from the time I spent in Egypt. I travelled extensively in the Middle East and North Africa and you can see this reflected in the intricate – almost Moroccan-style – designs. These were largely inspired by the beautiful tiles that still adorn many of the riads and palaces there.”

The *One Thousand and One Nights* collection is more than just a dinner service, however. Continuing the theme, Valerio has looked at the wider concept of interior design, exploring how a dinner service could be used to complement a room and to "create a seamless story." As ever, the social element has a major part to play, with Valerio saying: "One of our objectives for the dinner service – and the collection as a whole – was to create a talking piece, a subtle accent of interest in a room or a dinner setting.”

As demonstrated by a number of impressive auction results of late and by the fact that a number of the venerable producers in the sector – notably Royal Copenhagen and Wedgwood – continue to thrive, the market for old-fashioned and high-quality services clearly remains in rude health. In fact, it is one of the few areas of the antiques market where a

to state dinner or any other major society occasion, however, would clearly suggest otherwise. This is, of course, reserved for the privileged few who are either a part of a royal family or lucky enough to be deemed worthy of an invitation.

Nonetheless, dinner parties are still very much a part of contemporary society. In fact, they are becoming increasingly fashionable, with the rise of celebrity chefs teaching young, cool things how to cook. The modern style, however, tends towards the relaxed and unfussy – instead of formal and "correct."

So, not yet the end for dinner services? Susanna Valerio sums up its abiding appeal perfectly, saying: "For me it's always an absolute joy to prepare an amazing dinner table, complete with beautiful show plates, oversized napkin rings and outstanding centrepieces. This is one of the greatest pleasures when it comes to welcoming friends and guests.

"It's important – and a lot of fun – to create a different and unique settings every time. It's a little like the care taken to perfectly wrap a gift for someone you love. It creates a unique talking point for my guests whenever they come round.”

The way forward, it would seem, is to continue focusing on quality but, at the same time, simplify and reduce the size of such services in line with modern lifestyles. There is, for example, no need nowadays for a 1,400-piece service. Unless, of course, the Dowager Duchess of Wan Chai happens by. ☺