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## PORCELAIN, NO SIMPLE MATTER: ARLENE SHECHET AND THE ARNHOLD COLLECTION

*A New York sculptor mixes and matches the good china, at the Frick.*



By Andrea K. Scott

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*Jean-Antoine Houdon's terra-cotta statue "Diana the Huntress" is flanked by clusters of Meissen plates in Arlene Shechet's installation at the Frick. Courtesy the Frick Collection, NY*

Arlene Shechet is the first living artist to exhibit in depth at the Frick. Given the whimsical beauty and deep smarts of her installation in the museum's portico, which pairs early-eighteenth-century Meissen porcelains with sculptures that Shechet recently made at the same German factory, she won't be the last. But her show, called "No Simple Matter," is a triumph that could have been a disaster, a paragon of old-master virtue jumping on the make-it-new bandwagon. The Frick's curator of decorative arts, Charlotte Vignon, deserves major credit for taking the risk. So does

the collector Henry H. Arnhold, who gave Shechet free rein of his trove of hand-painted plates, bowls, vases, tea services, and sublimely absurd figurines. They were made in Meissen, just forty minutes outside Arnhold's home town of Dresden, which he left as a teen-ager, fleeing the Nazis with his family. (Given Hitler's fondness for German white porcelain, there's a bittersweet revenge to the collection, part of which was amassed by Arnhold's parents in between the wars.)

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Shechet's installation is a balancing act of respectful and radical. The portico's stone walls have been papered in damask-patterned green; the vitrines have turned legs that nod with propriety to Boulle tables. But look up and you'll catch a riotously colorful pair of eighteenth-century hoopoes perched improbably close to the ceiling, with a bird's-eye view of the viewers. Or look out the window, where a life-sized, stark-white nanny goat nuzzles her kid in the garden.

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For two thousand years, the process of making white porcelain was a secret known only to the Chinese. After the kings of Europe got an eyeful of China's Imperial treasures, thanks to Marco Polo's adventures on the Silk Road, the objects became so highly prized that the Germans coined a word for the mania, *Porzellankrankheit*, or "porcelain sickness." The Germans were also the first to crack the porcelain code, in 1708, two years after King Augustus the Strong imprisoned the alchemist Johann Friedrich Böttger and ordered him to produce the "white gold." (The recipe involves high-silica clay and high heat.) By 1710, the Royal Meissen manufactory was in business, employing a small army of mold-makers, hand-modellers, and miniaturist painters, as it still does today.

What makes Shechet such an inspired choice for the Frick isn't simply the twenty months she spent, on and off, in a Meissen studio, working closely with the company's artisans. It's also her long-term interest in East-West connections. Since the nineteen-eighties, she's made a close, secular study of Buddhist art. At one delightful point in the Frick's installation, a robin's-egg-blue and white fluted bowl, from 1730, seems to float in midair above a porcelain sculpture by Shechet, from 2012. Both objects were made using the same mold (Shechet's elegantly chunky object is, in fact, a cast of the mold itself), whose form was inspired by a lotus. In Buddhist lore, the lotus is a reminder that even beauty is rooted in mud. It's a good metaphor for porcelain, too. ♦

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