

Object in focus: Swedish Faience Tray with English Fashion Caricature

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This faience tray from the collections of the National Museum of Fine Arts in Stockholm, was made in Sweden in 1772, decorated with the motif of an English fashion caricature entitled ‘Ridiculous Taste or the Ladies Absurdity’. The image is ‘after’ an etching with engraving produced by the London print-sellers and makers Matthew and Mary Darly in July 1771.¹ The Swedish decorative painter Erik Borg translated the scene from a paper print to a hand-painted faience tray at the Swedish manufacturer Marieberg in Stockholm, which was one of the more creative of the ceramic producers in eighteenth-century Sweden.² Due to its shape and motif this tray can be considered a type of ‘conversation piece’, a part of social life organized around drinking tea, coffee or chocolate in private or public meeting places. Although there are many political prints and portraits of famous people that were translated into the decoration of ceramic wares, the re-casting of satirical imagery in this way appears to have been less common. This robust example, with its dramatic sweeping tendril frame, suggests that English caricature imagery was incorporated into the expanding visual culture of 18th Century Sweden very rapidly. Together with the importation of the paper prints themselves, which were often pirated by local printers, a broader European social critique was also made part of local cultural production. The print mocks the towering wigs that were considered fashionable all over Europe at the end of the 18th Century. The image shows a hairdresser who is forced to use a tall ladder and a large pair of curling-tongs in order to be able to reach the top parts of the *coiffure*. A man is entering the room and peering at the woman’s hair with means of a sextant; his face registers surprise at its height and steep angle. Possibly this is her husband, and the navigating instrument suggests that he might be an officer in the navy or involved in other naval business or sea trade. Certainly he is a man with a liking for calibration. The presence of the measuring instrument opens up a joke about the extreme precision with which a futile thing like a headdress might be arranged. The husband’s

¹ “Ridiculous Taste or the Ladies’ Absurdities”, 1771, first edition. Lewis Walpole Library, Yale. <http://images.library.yale.edu/walpoleweb/oneitem.asp?imageId=lwpr03130> 2011-04-15

² Hernmarck, Carl: *Marieberg. En lysande representant för svenskt sjuttonhundratalet*, Stockholm: Wahlström och Widstrand, 1946, p.194 and *Marieberg 1758-1788*, (ed. Carl Hernmarck & Bo Gyllensvärd) exhibit. cat. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm 1945, p.5-11.

long thin *queue* and the high frontal part of his wig, however, suggest that he is not completely uninterested in fashionable appearances himself.

The lady is looking serene and seems to be calmly enjoying the attention stirred by her headdress. Apart from the size of the hair, her face, dress and general appearance is not particularly caricatured or ridiculed. This reinforces the joke. The role of the hairdresser rather seems to be the secondary focus of the satire here. The physiognomy of his facial traits, with a large and crooked nose and the accentuated dark eyebrows, would suggest the character of a Jew for a contemporary viewer.³ For the English eighteenth-century viewer, however, it probably referred to the *friseur*, a stereotyped figure of a foreign hairdresser, common in popular imagery and theatre alike.⁴ The physiognomic references seem to have been used in order to visualize the period's view of facial ugliness. The contrast between the supposed beauty and artifice of the wonderful hair and the ugliness of its originator of course opens up a range of jokes.

The rear part of the hairdresser's own wig – doubled and folded up – is the type of hair that was referred to as a macaroni club, and together with the costume that is trimmed with lace and the pointed saber, the dress and accessories contribute to further create an image of a questionable character. Men who beautified women's appearances might cross boundaries of gender and social class, and were consequently often ridiculed in the caricatures of this era. Women's desire for fashionable beauty is mocked in this image, and the professions of the appearance industries are equally ridiculed.

The dating of the tray as well as the composition of the scene suggests that Borg probably used the British original print sheet of July 15th 1771 as his prototype for this monochrome scene, carefully painted in sepia. It was a popular type. The scene was inverted in several later editions of the print, and also hand-coloured; other variants of this type were published in English periodicals.⁵ There are a few key differences between the print and the painted tray.

³ Cf. *Jew as Other*, web exhibition on the stereotyped representation of Jewish people in 18th Century British caricature, curated by Library at the Theological Seminary, New York.

<http://www.jtsa.edu/prebuilt/exhib/jewoth/index.shtml> 2011-04-15

⁴ Cf. "A Courtesan & Friseur", print by M. Darly, 1772. British Museum, London.

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/search_object_details.aspx?objectId=1637592&partid=1&searchText=friseur&numpages=10&orig=%2fresearch%2fsearch_the_collection_database.aspx¤tPage=1 2011-04-15

⁵ "Ridiculous Taste or the Ladies' Absurdities", 1771, coloured. British Museum, London.

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/search_object_details.aspx?objectId=1478776&partid=1&searchText=ridiculous+taste&fromADBC=ad&toADBC=ad&numpages=10&images=on&orig=%2fresearch%2fsearch_the_collection_database.aspx¤tPage=1 2011-04-15

The print represents an interior with a flowered carpet on the floor, underscoring luxury. The carpet, wooden panels, portraits and a mirror have been removed by the Swedish painter and have been replaced instead by a discreet platform. A few corrections of proportion have been made in the composition of the tray – an extra step has been added to the ladder and the man standing to the left has put his foot just outside the platform – in order to make the motif easily fit the surface of the tray. Otherwise the painter has closely copied every fold of the woman’s dress and the ornament on the chair-back on which she sits.

One example of this English print is held in the collection of the Royal Library Stockholm and the image was also copied by Swedish print makers. The daily paper *Stockholms Posten* published the image rather later, in 1779, in connection with a discussion on proposed constrictions on the freedom of the press. In an article, editor Johan Holmberg defended the rights of authors of texts and images to remain anonymous by discussing the necessity of satire, for example of women’s fashion exuberance, and exemplifies this by referring to this print.⁶ A few weeks later the image was reproduced on the front page of the periodical to illustrate his argument.⁷ The figures and the composition are closely copied in their details and expression, but the interior walls are replaced by a plain white surface and a simple checked pattern adorns the floor. Illustrations were still rarely published in periodicals in Sweden in this period and the discussion that preceded the publication of the image suggests that the image was already known to a larger audience, possibly from collections of loose prints. In this context it seems to have become a symbol for the freedom of authors and printers to “work in various subjects for delight and benefit of the general audience” (“...arbete i flera ämnen til det allmännas både nöje och nytta.” *Stockholms Posten* June 28, 1779)

Another significant copy of this motif is held in the museum *Kulturen* in southern Sweden, where the image has been transposed to yet another medium: oil painting on canvas, dated c1780. It is rare that a popular print of this kind is turned into a painting, but this might give an idea about the popularity of the image itself in the period of the 1770s and 1780s.

According to the museum’s conservation report the backside of the painting show traces of a plate with rococo style flowers and an unknown man’s name that possibly reads Gustaf

⁶ Holmberg, Johan Christian: “Dictamen ad Protocollum, d. 4 Junii, 1779”, *Stockholms Posten*, June 28th, 1779.

⁷ *Stockholms Posten*, July 17th, 1779.

Böner.⁸ These traces suggest that the executor might have been a skillful decoration painter, working on top of a discarded signboard of some local merchant or artisan. The size of the motif has been enlarged in the painting (84 x 52 cm compared to the size of the print, 35 x 25) and even though the overall composition is the same as in the print, there are some elements that have been altered. The walls of the room are decorated in a neo-classical style (which supports the dating of the painting) without any portraits or mirrors; there is no furniture except for the lady's chair, and the flowered carpet is replaced with a checkered floor. The colours do not follow the hand painted sheets that I have been able to compare it with, and were probably chosen by the painter or the commissioner themselves. What the function of this painting might have been requires further investigation.

Interestingly, modifications to the figures have been made in this version. The lady herself is smiling and looking towards the beholder of the image, almost like a conventional society portrait of the period. Her husband's face is no longer surprised: he looks content, and all emotional details of expression have been smoothed out. It is however the hairdresser that has been changed the most – instead of a caricatured *friseur* he looks more like a beautiful aristocrat with a soft, delicate face, idealized according to prevailing conventions of male beauty. The men can now be interpreted as colleagues, one helping the other to direct their joint effort. Their lavish dresses could be interpreted as part of their profession as hairdressers. It may also be noted that there is a contrast between the formal level of their costumes and the seemingly trivial work they execute, which opens up further satiric comments.

In Sweden images of hairdressers of foreign origin may not have been as culturally significant as they were in, for example, England.⁹ The professional hairdresser was never organized in a separate guild, but rather worked as wig-maker or barber. It seems, however, that the critical attitude of the image was highly interesting for the contemporary Swedish audience, not least because the freedom of the press, introduced in 1766, was constricted by king Gustaf III in 1774. The range of imported caricature prints clearly made a contribution to the visual culture of satire and the circulation of caricature motifs in Sweden in this era; their publication was held up by some to ensure the disposition of the freedom of the press. These images also

⁸ Lindberg, Bo Ossian: "Vård och konservering av konstverk i Kulturens samlingar", *Ur Kulturens gömmor – Bildkonst från 6 sekler utst. 24 maj – 27 sept 1987*, Institutionen för konstvetenskap, Lunds universitet, Lund 1987.

⁹ Cf. "Preposterous Headdresses and Feathered Ladies: Hair, Wigs, Barbers, and Hairdressers" Exhibition at Lewis Walpole Library, Yale, 2003. <http://www.library.yale.edu/walpole/programs/hair.html> 2011-04-15.

fueled the critical attitude towards continental luxury consumption and the motifs matched a growing critical discourse in Sweden of the 1770s concerning aristocratic men and women's use of large wigs and other luxury items including silk and lace. The transnational migration of fashion caricatures as material images thereby also involve the spread of ideological fashion criticism. The local adaptations of the motif in various material supports indicate that this discourse was highly topical in Sweden. The critique of lavish costume was propagated by king Gustaf III himself, and in 1778 he introduced a reformed national dress for the courtiers at the Swedish court.¹⁰ Considering that the porcelain manufacture Marieberg was directed by the Johan Liljencrantz, minister of finance under the king, the tray should probably not only be interpreted as laughing matter, but also as a vehicle of possible political campaign.

Thanks to Professor Peter McNeil for useful comments.

¹⁰ Bergman, Eva: *Nationella dräkten: en studie kring Gustaf III:s dräktreform 1778*, Nordiska museet, Diss., Stockholm, 1938.