

2. The history of presenting porcelain in royal palaces

The custom of decorating the interior of a house with goods from East Asia had become widespread in the Netherlands by the middle of the 17th century. As the Netherlands was a trading centre of all sorts of products from the Far East,⁶ both the Dutch nobility as well as wealthy citizens had comparatively easy access to exotic luxury wares, including porcelain. When Augustus the Strong purchased the Dutch Palace in 1717 with the intention of turning it into a porcelain palace, the presentation of East Asian ceramics in a space solely dedicated to showcasing these exotic objects already had a long history at the European courts. Amalia of Solms-Braunfels (1602–1675), Princess consort of Orange from 1625, is generally regarded as the pioneer of this fashion. Around 1634, she furnished one gallery of the Huis ten Bosch palace almost exclusively with porcelain. In the 1660s, Amalia added Japanese lacquer panels to the gallery, a type of furnishing that would also become popular with Augustus the Strong and his contemporaries.

Amalia's four daughters all married into other noble European families, each of them bringing the custom of displaying porcelain in a separate space with them into their respective homes.⁷ Of the four residences of the Orange sisters, the most well known today is probably Oranienburg Palace, located approximately 35 kilometres north of Berlin. It was built by Amalia's daughter Louise Henriette of Nassau (1627–1667), Electress of Brandenburg and first wife of the Great Elector Frederick William I of Brandenburg (1620–1688) of the Hohenzollern dynasty. In 1663, Louise Henriette created a separate room in the palace dedicated to porcelain, making it the first cabinet exclusively devoted to this type of ornamentation in Europe. Soon enough, the fashion of having one room in a palace entirely furnished with porcelain and exotic materials caught on with other royal houses in Europe. With the refurbishing of his Munich Residence between 1693 and 1695, the Bavarian Elector Maximilian II Emanuel

(1662–1726) had one apartment decorated in the style of a “Dutch cabinet”, alluding to the fashion’s country of origin.⁸ At Charlottenburg Palace in today’s Berlin, a porcelain cabinet was built between 1705 and 1706, based on designs made during the lifetime of Sophie Charlotte of Hanover (1668–1705).⁹

It is likely that Augustus the Strong was exposed to collecting and presenting porcelain during his Grand Tour from 1687 to 1689, which introduced him to the royal courts all over Europe, among them Portugal, England, Denmark and Austria. As a member of the Wettin dynasty, he was certainly raised in the knowledge that he was a member of one of the oldest high-noble families, and was therefore aware of the importance of demonstrating wealth and affluence through the presentation of exotic and rare artworks. His visits to the porcelain cabinets at the palaces in Oranienburg, Caputh and Charlottenburg in 1709 probably left a lasting impression on Augustus the Strong and ignited his desire to have a comparable – or even superior – collection of splendid porcelain himself.