

“CONDENSATION AND DISHPLACEMENT, II”:¹
THE BREAST BOWL



Bol Sein de la Laiterie de Rambouillet, Manufacture National de Sèvres, France, 1787

Meet Marie Antoinette’s breast bowl, one of the campiest objects of the late eighteenth century Western repertoire. Made in Sèvres porcelain, it was part of the theatrical scenery of a neoclassical architectural folly in Rambouillet (France), titled “Laiterie de la Reine” (the Queen’s Dairy). D’Angiviller, the superintendent of the king’s buildings, oversaw its construction before the Queen’s Dairy was offered to Marie Antoinette by Louis XVI in 1787. Flanked by a sheep farm, this small pavilion participated in the trend of pastoral entertainment, which sprang up during the development of Anglo-Chinese inspired landscape gardens and the cult of the *pittoresque* (picturesque), during the second half of the eighteenth century in France. The dairy or the ornate farm was seen as being a prerequisite to a suitable “pastoral embellishment.”²

At that time, dairies were far from being unheard-of. Since at least the regent queen Catherine de Medicis (1519–1589), they have existed as highly feminized spaces of abundance, where motherhood was staged, but also suspended in a number of festivals that inverted class and gender.³ Female hermitages flourished as therapeutic health retreats but, also, as an escape from the oppressive demands of the court. There, women could enjoy command over their minds and bodies: these pleasure dairies (known in French as *laiterie d’agrément*) became an “assertion of power enveloped in the language of retreat,”⁴ where aristocratic women were able to perform or resist images of idealized femininity, while occupying themselves by milking cows, churning butter and making cheese.

The Queen’s Dairy in Rambouillet offered the enticement of relaxing and savoring fresh milk and sweetened cheese (“*se rafraîchir de frais laitages*”⁵) in a most dazzling environment. Putting forward the rather severe and monumental appearance of the outside, the inside with its rotunda was built in white stone and paved in white marble. A small trench cut in the floor was adapted for the passage of water. Ornamented with statues and bas-relief medallions, it was devoted to subjects such as a Nymph “milking the cow,” “shearing the sheep,” or “churning butter,” and various mythological scenes, heroes, and gods that pertain to the cult of nature and its agricultural chores. As for the “Pièce de Fraîcheur” (“Refreshing Room”) the rocky contiguous cave was built in the shape of a grotto and its basin was adorned by a white marble statue of *Amaltea and The Goat That Suckled Jupiter*.⁶

Overseeing the design and the iconography was the primary task of the painter, landscape gardener, and poet of ruins, Hubert Robert, who like the other artists called upon to build the Laiterie, espoused the archeologically-based form of then-new Neoclassicism. This project, according to historian Meredith Martin, wasn’t devoid of moralism, as its aesthetics were intended to regenerate the “spoiled” body of the queen.⁷ To express the neoclassical shift, as well as to perform the task of cooling, tasting, transforming, or preserving milk—a service of sixty-five basins,

1 The first occurrence of this phrase was its use as the title of a critical text on Julian Schnabel by the Holy Ghost Writers, “Condensation and Dish-Placement,” *Real Life Magazine*, no.9 (Winter 1982–83): 9–13.

2 See Carolin C. Young, “La Laiterie de la Reine at Rambouillet,” in *Milk: Beyond the Dairy*, ed. Harlan Walker (Devon, UK: Prospect Books, 2000).

3 See Meredith Martin, *Dairy Queens: The Politics of Pastoral Architecture from Catherine de Medici to Marie-Antoinette* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

4 Martin, 151.

5 Pierre Arrizoli-Clementel and Xavier Salmon, eds., *Marie-Antoinette* (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2008), 221.

6 The statue by Pierre Julien (1731–1804), a Neoclassical sculptor, was an adaptation from the pose of the famous Capitoline Venus in Rome. With Julien’s bas-reliefs from the *Laiterie*, it was sold at auction in 1819, but the sculptures were retrieved by the State in 2005 and it is now in the sculpture department of the Musée du Louvre, Paris.

7 This notion of a “spoiled” body of the queen will be discussed later.

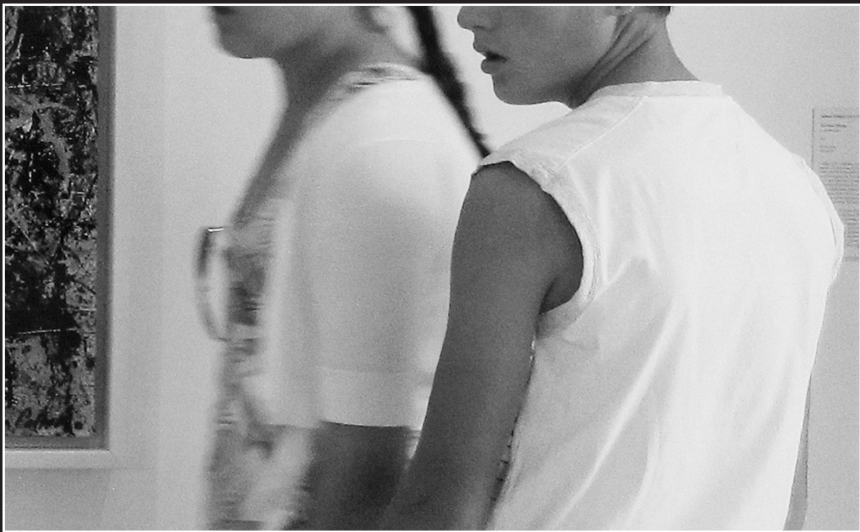


Halle f. Kunst
Lüneburg eV

VERLAG DER BUCHHANDLUNG WALTHER KÖNIG

TOBIAS KASPAR: BODIES IN THE BACKDROP

VERLAG DER BUCHHANDLUNG WALTHER KÖNIG



BODIES IN THE
BACKDROP

TOBIAS KASPAR

pots, vessels, cups, bowls, ewers, or saucers, including a sugar bowl to sweeten the cheese—and a series of decorative vases were ordered from the Royal Porcelain Manufacture in Sèvres. Even if this new style was still referred to as being a little “barbaric,”⁸ as d’Angiviller has confided, the project was one of the primary vehicles for testing out and branding the “Etruscan taste”⁹ in porcelain production. Based on the recent discoveries of excavations in Pompeï and Herculenum, this style (inaccurately named Etruscan) had come to be well-known in Sèvres notably through the purchase of the four-volume catalog of the Hamilton’s collection of antiquaries,¹⁰ as well as through the archaeologist Dominique Vivant-Denon’s collection, which consisted of five hundred examples of Greco-Roman pottery. Intended for display in the Louvre, the collection was stored in the porcelain workshops. It was to inspire most of the components of the dairy, which was designed by the painter Jean-Jacques Lagrenée le Jeune, the young artistic director of the Sèvres Manufacture who was known for his studies of Herculenum and of Roman baths.¹¹ As seen from the remaining pieces and the archival documents, the design for the cups or saucers appears to have remained classical, save for the handles, some of which were made to resemble cow’s legs or goat’s heads. The decorative motifs, however, dramatically depart from the gilded signature style of the Sèvres Manufacture. Etruscan designs and Roman arabesques adorn the painted edges, and the central band depicts animals generally associated with milk: cows, sheep, goats, and figures in pastoral tasks.

“Although the figures are in classical dress and strike classical poses, they and the animals and plants that accompany them are painted in vivid, lifelike colors on a white ground, in the long-established Sevres tradition. Even the borders are rarely in ‘Etruscan’ colors but instead use a large palette of pale colors: lilac, gray, blue, green, and yellow—the colors very much in fashion for contemporary interiors. Only on about half the pieces are the borders, referred to as ground colors in the documents, either ‘étrusque’ (or range-red and black) or ‘grès’ (the color of sandstone, a pale golden-orange). The decorative motifs that would usually have been gilded are painted in black or carmine.”¹²

Some of the milk buckets are even painted to imitate wood. Amongst the display of kitchen instruments enhanced or disguised in porcelain, the breast bowl remains the queerest of them all. First, amongst the other objects fabricated in “hard-paste,” a new technical shift at the time,¹³ the breast bowl is the only one made in the more ancient recipe of the “tender paste” and includes gilded motifs, which were otherwise rejected from the other pieces at the Laiterie. Catalogued with the description “bowl in the shape of a woman’s breast on a stand with goat’s heads,” it was perhaps inspired by the ancient Greek *mastos*, which were shaped like women’s breasts and were used to consume wine during Dionysiac rituals. The suggestion of a nipple is made almost hyper realistic by the flesh coloration of the bowl, which is painted a pale white for the skin and a pert, pinkish-red for the areola. Its almost-liquid glaze heightens these bodily associations, which are made all the more obvious in that the tit is tilted facedown and held by a tripod in gilded porcelain whose extremities are sculpted in the shape of goat heads and hoofed feet. The story—widely denied yet primarily publicized by the Goncourt brothers in 1858—is that the bowl was molded from Marie Antoinette’s own breast.¹⁴ This narrative transformed the breast’s imprint into a container—a bowl—thus inverting the bodily curves into a concave, smooth surface. Destined to be filled with milk, the bowl

8 Letter from d’Angivillers to Denon, May 24, 1786, quoted in Selma Schwartz, “The ‘Etruscan’ Style at Sevres: A Bowl from Marie-Antoinette’s Dairy at Rambouillet,” *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 37, (2002): 262.

9 The *style étrusque* or *goût étrusque*.

10 Sir William Hamilton (1730–1803) was British Envoy to the Kingdom of Naples and the Two Sicilies from 1764 to 1798. He was a renowned collector of antiquities, and his fascination with classical art had considerable influence on artistic life in Britain in the eighteenth century. His collection included objects from the recently excavated ruins of Pompeii (1738) and Herculaneum (1748). See Pierre d’Hancarville, “Antiquités étrusques grecques romaines tirées du cabinet de M. Hamilton,” 1785–88, in the Archives de la Manufacture Nationale de Sèvres.

11 Schwartz, 261.

12 Schwartz, 263.

13 The adoption of hard-paste porcelain, including kaolin, marked the greatest technical shift of the Manufacture de Sèvres.

14 Edmond de Goncourt and Jules de Goncourt, *Histoire de Marie-Antoinette* (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1858).

produced in turn an idealized performance of the queen’s femininity, the capacity to breast-feed her children. It therefore turned the object into an iconic condensation, which matched perfect bosom and idle container, in a splendid, catachrestic, shortcut.

Marie Antoinette enjoyed playing the role of the milkmaid and dressing her world in the glittery replicas of a more simple way of life amidst a nurturing nature. But deference to a Rousseauesque landscape was not only used to escape from the pressure of the court and return to nature, it was also an issue of gender. Jean-Jacques Rousseau himself led a public campaign engaging women to seek refuge in their pleasure dairies, in order to “cleanse themselves of the impurities and wanton values of the city ... by breast-feeding their children themselves.”¹⁵ Not only did breast milk separate the good women from the degraded ones, but maternity made the link towards women’s “natural” propensity towards dairy products. Thus, the erotic power of the breast bowl is in a way doubled by a regenerative one, and the aesthetic promotion of motherhood embedded at the Laiterie through the myth of Amalthea—the nymph that nursed Jupiter with milk—is reciprocally endowed with the sexual fantasies that are aroused by the pink nipple.

This embedded eroticism certainly adds to the cup’s enthusiastic reception by queers. Literary critic and academic Terry Castle thus describes a “Marie-Antoinette Obsession” in one chapter of her book *The Apparitional Lesbian*.¹⁶ Chronicling a number of female accounts of their homoerotic fantasies around the French queen, Terry Castle comments that these dream-romances founded an already coded basis in the rumors around Marie Antoinette’s “tribadism,” as Sapphism was then called. Whatever the truth about the matter, sexual transgression (and lesbianism in particular) was one of the main charges put forth in the antiroyalist propaganda just before the French Revolution—a charge which, in the nineteenth century, would inversely provide reason for the queen’s romanticization.

Yet Castle argues that the most compelling evidence for Marie Antoinette’s cult figure status remains to be found in the works of fiction written by and about lesbians in the first decades of the twentieth century. As she writes:

“An even more striking invocation of the Marie Antoinette topos occurs in *The Well of Loneliness*, Radclyffe Hall’s openly polemical classic of lesbian fiction from 1928. Midway through that novel, Hall’s lonely young heroine, Stephen Gordon, who has yet to confide in anyone her tormented knowledge of her own homosexuality, pays a visit to Versailles in the company of Jonathan Brockett, a sympathetic yet oddly effeminate artist friend who has taken her under his wing. Brockett guides her through the rooms of the palace. ... As soon as Stephen and Brockett enter the dead queen’s apartments (where Stephen is inexplicably moved), Brockett’s comments become oddly insinuating.”¹⁷

The episode concludes with their visit to Marie Antoinette’s *Love Temple* in her private retreat, the Petit Trianon in Versailles. Clearly Radclyffe Hall expects her lesbian readers to understand the references she makes to images of homosexual “communion.”¹⁸ Little did she know, but the description of the breast bowl, from which Marie Antoinette and her (potential) girlfriends took a sip of precious liquids, would have counted as major potential in this network of signs. Not far away from the Laiterie de Marie Antoinette at Rambouillet stands the “Shell Cottage,” a peasant-like thatched cottage that reveals a sumptuous interior covered wall to wall in nacre, marble, and colored shells that form compositions in place of the paintings, their frames and the decorative surroundings. This other architectural folly was built for the Princesse de Lamballe, the superintendent of the Queen’s household, one of her closest friends and allegedly her lover. In the 1780s, the extravagant luxury of mineral decoration hidden inside a rural envelope couldn’t help but reveal the artificiality of the outside, which bore no resemblance to the reality of farming conditions. In the same vein,

15 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile ou de l’éducation* (1762), trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 395.

16 Terry Castle, “Marie Antoinette Obsession,” in *Representations*, no. 38 (Spring 1992), 1–38; and Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

17 Castle, “Marie Antoinette Obsession,” 26–27.

18 Castle, “Marie Antoinette Obsession,” 28.

Marie Antoinette’s alleged vices were denounced both in terms of class and sexuality. In other terms, adopting the role of a milkmaid for pleasure—while peasants were starving in France—was seen as a way of transgressively undermining the dairy as a place of work, through associations that linked “the ornamented farm, perverse desire (particularly desire between women), and criminality.”¹⁹ Published after the Bastille days, an anonymous political-pornographic pamphlet, *The Patriotic Brothel Instituted by the Queen of France for the Pleasures of the Deputies of the New Legislature* (1791),²⁰ presented one of the many satires in which Marie Antoinette is depicted in different erotic postures and with a growing number of aristocratic partners, both male and female. Two prints flank the text. One represents a landscape garden adorned with a statue of Priapus on a pedestal.²¹ Marie Antoinette is featured nearby, ecstatic, dancing and chanting “a hymn to the glory of the god of cum”²² with “Mlle Théroigne.”²³ This scene is far from reality: Anne-Josephe Théroigne de Méricourt, a revolutionary character, was a ferocious polemist of the queen, an emancipated woman, and a fierce advocate of the right of women to enroll in the army (she frequently appeared in public dressed in a riding habit, a pistol in her belt, and a sword at her side before her eventual institutionalization in 1800).²⁴ In the pamphlet, however, they are both shown fondling the statue’s enlarged phallus: the political plot of pornography depicts female desire as being too voracious to be calmed. Foregrounding the sexuality of women is seen as threatening in a patriarchal society, whether monarchic or revolutionnary: the narrative of the image participates in the condemnation of women in their ability to empty male substance in order to capture male prerogatives and fetch an illegitimate position in the public sphere. Thus the setting of the image within the frame of a man-made landscape, also reveals “a spectacular threat of the transformative cultivation of nature into gardens for the production of perverting pleasures.”²⁵ By the late 1780s, if the rapid dissemination of entertainment dairies in and around Paris could be perceived as a precocious sign of “camp” consumer culture bereft of feudal significance, the Queen’s Dairy, on the contrary, would be cautiously scrutinized in terms of the signs it intimidated. Marie Antoinette, as “a powerful, self-governing female body (introduced into) the royal landscape,”²⁶ did indeed constitute a threat to monarchical order. As a gift from the king to the queen, the dairy in Rambouillet is endowed with a message, and the choice of a new, austere decorative style points to an environment where fears about royal and queenly degeneration could be alleviated or contained, and where Marie Antoinette’s supposedly perverse body could be purified.

But for many, concludes historian Meredith Martin, “The dairy’s message of reformed femininity was too little, too late. Even d’Angiviller seems to have envisioned the Queen’s dairy not as a space for Marie Antoinette’s recovery but for a different form of regeneration altogether—that of the state or *patrimoine*. It is possible in this light to interpret the iconography of the dairy as symbolizing the queen’s body excised from that of the monarchy and the king, just as the infant Jupiter had been separated from his mother in the classical myth. The Queens’s Dairy enacted a fantasy not of Marie Antoinette’s purification but of Louis XVI’s salvation and autonomous male rebirth. Here, the bodies of real women were absent—purged from the dairy’s pristine white surface—or recalled only in fragments such as the uterine grotto or the porcelain breast cup.”²⁷

If Marie Antoinette had already been supplanted at Rambouillet by the statue of Amalthea, an allegory of virtue, the breast bowl has survived as figuration for a magnificent obsession, where a part-object (in psychoanalytic terms) drives the logic for aesthetic production. As a mixture of imagination and material reality, which makes it a kind of cyborg, the breast bowl is a marker for finding pleasure in an incessant fragmentation and reconstitution of inessential bodies.

ELISABETH LEBOVICI

19 Jill Casid, “Queer(y)ing Georgie: Utility, Pleasure, and Marie-Antoinette’s Ornamented Farm,” in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30, no. 3 (Spring 1997): 304–18. <http://muse.jhu.edu/gate3.inist.fr/journals/eighteenth-century-studies/v030/30.3casid.html>.

20 *Bordel patriotique pour le plaisir des deputes a la nouvelle legislature*, 1791, enfer 602, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. Many other pornographic libels against Marie Antoinette—mostly theater and pamphlets—can be found at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, including *Les Amours de Charlot et Toinette, Portefeuille d’un talon rouge, Le godemiché royal, L’Autrichienne en goguette, ou L’Orgie royale, La Confession de Marie-Antoinette, Bordel royal, Bordel patriotique, Grande fête donnée par les maquerelles de Paris, Fureurs utérines de Marie-Antoinette, Les Adieux de La Fayette, Les Adieux de la reine à ses mignons et mignonnes, Les nouvelles du ménage royal sens dessus dessous, and La journée amoureuse*.

21 See Antoine de Baecque, *La Caricature révolutionnaire* (Paris: Presses du CNRS, 1988), 193; and Lynn Hunt, ed., “Pornography and the French Revolution,” in *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800* (New York: Zone Books, 1993), 301–39.

22 Author’s own translation, original: “une hymne à la gloire du dieu de la fouterie.” Quoted in Marie Delouze, “*Sodom* (1676) et le *Bordel patriotique* (1791): Mises en scène d’une pornographie politique,” in *Loxias* 18 (August 6, 2007): <http://revel.unice.fr/loxias/index.html?id=1781>.

23 Ibid.

24 For more on Anne-Josephe Théroigne de Méricourt, see Laure Murat, “Théroigne de Méricourt ou la mélancolie révolutionnaire” in *L’Homme qui se prenait pour Napoléon* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), 224–35.

25 Casid. — — — 26 Martin, 209. — — — 27 Martin, 256.