

'Would a golem have had Nordic features?'

'Yes,' he agreed. 'Giants' features.'

Utz brooded for a while and then arrived at the crux of the discussion:

All these tales suggested that the golem-maker had acquired arcane secrets: yet, in doing so, had transgressed Holy Law. A man-made figure was a blasphemy. A golem, by its presence alone, issued a warning against idolatry – and actively beseeched its own destruction.

'Would you say then', I asked, 'that art-collecting is idolatry?'

'Ja! Ja!' he struck his chest. 'Of course! Of course! That is why we Jews . . . and in this matter I consider myself a Jew . . . are so *good* at it! Because it is forbidden . . . ! Because it is sinful . . . ! Because it is dangerous . . . !'

'Do your porcelains demand their own death?'

He stroked his chin.

'I do not know. It is a very problematical question.'

The other visitors had left. A black cat had positioned itself on the crest of a tombstone. The guardian told us it was time to leave.

'And now my friend,' said Utz, 'would it amuse you to see my collection of dwarfs?'

An odour of suppurating cabbage leaves seeped from a dustbin in the entrance hall. A rat hopped off as we approached. In an apartment on the second landing, a baby wailed and someone was trying to master one of Dvořák's 'Slavonic Dances' on an out-of-tune piano. On the third landing a woman opened her door to see who was passing: a hysterical face under a heap of auburn curls. She wore a peignoir of magenta peonies, and vehemently slammed the door shut.

'She is mad,' Utz apologised. 'She was a famous soprano.'

On the top floor, he caught his breath, fumbled for his latch-key and ushered me inside. The smell was familiar to me: the stale smell of rooms where works of art are kept, and dusting considered dangerous. In a dingy green kitchenette off the hallway, Utz's servant sat perched on a stool.

She was a solid woman dressed awkwardly in a maid's uniform, with glowing cheeks and sandy hair flecked with grey. Over a black woollen dress there was a frilly white apron and, across her forehead, a

fillet of lace. Her legs were encased in black stockings, which had a pair of white 'potatoes' at the knee.

She was expecting us.

In her lap she cradled a dish of emblazoned white porcelain which, I knew from my 'arty' days, was a piece of the celebrated Swan Service made by Kaendler for the Saxon First Minister, Count Brühl. On it she had arranged some slivers of cheese and crackers, Hungarian salami and rounds of pickled cucumber cut in the form of flowers.

She bowed her head deferentially.

'Guten Abend, Herr Baron.'

'Guten Abend, Marta,' he returned her greeting.

We moved into the room. Behind the net curtain, a single north-facing window looked out over the trees of the cemetery.

'I didn't know you were a baron,' I said.

'Yes,' he blushed. 'I am a baron also.'

The room, to my surprise, was decorated in the 'modern style': almost devoid of furniture apart from a daybed, a glass-topped table and a pair of Barcelona chairs upholstered in dark green leather. Utz had 'rescued' these in Moravia, from a house built by Mies van der Rohe.

It was a narrow room, made narrower by the double bank of plate-glass shelves, all of them

crammed with porcelain, that reached from floor to ceiling. The shelves were backed with mirror, so that you had the illusion of entering an enfilade of glittering chambers, a 'dream palace' multiplied to infinity, through which human forms flitted like insubstantial shadows.

The carpet was grey. You had to watch your step for fear of tripping over one of the white porcelain sculptures – a pelican, a turkey-cock, a bear, a lynx and a rhino – modelled either by Kaendler or Eberlein for the Japanese Palace in Dresden. All five were scarred with fissures caused by faults in the firing.

Utz waved to some bottles on the table: scotch, slivovic, and a soda siphon.

'It is scotch, isn't it?'

'Scotch,' I said.

At the whoosh of the siphon, the maid emerged with her canapés on the Swan Service dish. Her movements seemed so lifeless and mechanical you would have thought that Utz had created a female golem. Yet I detected the suggestion of a superior smile.

'Cheerio!' said Utz, mimicking an English gentleman's accent.

'Your health!' I raised my glass – and took stock of my surroundings.

I am not an expert on Meissen porcelain – although my years of traipsing round art museums have taught me what it is. Nor can I say I like Meissen porcelain. I do, however, admire the boisterous energy of an artist such as Kaendler, at play with a medium which was totally new. And I entirely side with Utz in his feud with Winckelmann – who, in his ‘Notes on the Plebeian Taste in Porcelain’, would supplant this plebeian vitality with the dead hand of classical perfection.

I am equally fascinated by the way in which ‘porcelain sickness’ – the Porzellankrankheit of Augustus the Strong – so warped his vision, and that of his ministers, that their delirious schemes for ceramics got confused with real political power. Of Brühl, who would become Director of the Meissen Manufactory, Horace Walpole commented tartly: ‘ . . . he had prepared nothing but bawbles against a prince (Frederick the Great) that lived in a camp with the frugality of a common soldier . . . ’

Utz had chosen each item to reflect the moods and facets of the ‘Porcelain Century’: the wit, the charm,

the gallantry, the love of the exotic, the heartlessness and light-hearted gaiety – before they were swept away by revolution and the tramp of armies.

Arranged along the longer set of shelves were plates, vases, flagons and tureens. There were tea-caddies of polished redware by the ‘inventor’ of porcelain, Johannes Böttger. There were Böttger tankards with silver-gilt mounts; teapots with ‘Watteau’ scenes; teapots with eagle-headed spouts and teapots painted with goldfish, after Chinese and Japanese models.

Utz came up behind me, breathing heavily.

‘Beautiful, no?’

‘Beautiful,’ I repeated.

He showed me an excellent example of ‘indianische Blumen’, and a turquoise bowl painted by Horoldt, with a panel of Augustus enthroned as The Emperor of China.

He showed me the Meissen imitations of K’ang Hsi blue-and-white: the porcelain his hero Augustus had loved so passionately; for which he had emptied his treasury to the dealers of Paris and Amsterdam,

causing his Minister of Industry, Graf von Tschirnhaus, to moan, 'China is the bleeding-bowl of Saxony'.

Pride of place, however, was given to a Swan Service tureen: a Rococo fantasy on legs of intertwined fishes, the handles in the form of nereids, the lid heaped high with flowers, shells, swans and a bug-eyed dolphin – which, but for the bravura of its execution, would have been a monstrosity.

I gasped: knowing that the way to endear oneself to an art-collector is to rhapsodise his things.

'Come,' he beckoned me across the room.

I picked my way around the pelican and the rhino and arrived at the second bank of shelves where, in rows of five and six, were assembled a multitude of eighteenth-century figurines, all dazzlingly clothed and coloured.

I saw the characters of the *Commedia dell'Arte*: Harlequin and Columbine, Brighella and Pantaloon, Scaramouche and Truffaldino; The Doctor with a corkscrew for a beard; The Captain, who, being Spanish, had a jet-black moustache.

Utz reminded me how the Italian players – the real ones! – had been masters of extempore who would decide what to play, and how to play it, a mere five minutes before the curtain rose.

He pointed to the Personification of the Continents: Africa in leopard skin, America in feathers, Asia in a pagoda hat – while a lascivious, broad-bottomed Europa sat astride a white horse.

Next came the ladies of the Court: ladies with frozen smiles and swaying crinolines; their wigs were powdered, their cheeks pocked with beauty spots, and there were black bows tied around their necks. One lady caressed a pug. One kissed a Polish nobleman. Another kissed a Saxon while Harlequin peeped up her skirt. Madame de Pompadour, in a lilac dress scattered with roses, sang the aria from Lully's 'Acis and Galatea' which she had sung in real life, with the Prince de Rohan for a partner, in the Petit Théâtre de Versailles.

The lower orders were represented, each according to his or her occupation: the miner, the rope-maker, the woodcutter, the seamstress, the hairdresser and a fisherman, hopelessly drunk.

Shepherds trilled at their flutes. A Turk puffed a hookah. There were Tartars, Malabars, Circassians and Chinese sages with wispy beards and songbirds perched on their fingers. A party of freemasons scrutinised a globe. A pilgrim bore his staff and scallop-shell, and an endlessly grieving Mater Dolorosa sat next to a disconsolate nun.

'Bravo!' I cried. 'Unbelievable!'

'Now look at these funny fellows!' Utz was stroking the cheek of a grotesque buffoon. 'This one is Court Jester Fröhlich. That one is Postmaster Schmeidl.'

The two clowns used to perform at royal banquets, and keep everyone in stitches all night. Utz thought them as funny in porcelain as they were supposed to have been in real life. Schmeidl, he said, was terrified of mice.

This was why he chose to portray the Court Jester in the act of teasing his friend with a mouse-trap.

'Kaendler', he sniggered, 'was a witty man! A satirical man! He was always choosing persons to laugh at.'

I forced a nervous laugh.

'Now, Sir, if you please, look at this one!'

The model in question showed the soprano, Faustina Bordone, singing in ecstasy while a fox sat playing a spinet. Faustina, he said, had been the 'Callas of her day' and wife of the court composer, Hasse. She also had a lover called Fuchs.

'Fuchs,' said Utz, 'you must know in German means "fox".'

'I do know.'

'That is very amusing? No?'

'Very,' I laughed.

'Good. We agree on that one.'

He let fly an unexpectedly loud cackle, and went on shaking with laughter until Marta returned with her canapés and, with another 'Herr Baron!', silenced him.

The moment her back was turned he re-entered his world of little figures. His face lit up. He grinned, displaying a set of unhealthy pink gums, and showed me his monkey musicians.

'Lovely ones, aren't they?'

'Lovely,' I assented.

The monkeys wore ruffs and powdered wigs and, under the baton of a tyrannical conductor in a blue swallow-tailed coat, were fiddling and scraping, trumpeting, strumming and singing: in mockery of Count Brühl's private orchestra.

'I', Utz boasted, 'am the only private collector to possess the whole set.'

'Good for you!' I said, encouragingly.

Finally, we passed from the monkeys to the rest of the menagerie where there were wagtails, partridges, a bittern, a pair of sparrow-hawks, parrots and parakeets, orioles and roller birds, and peacocks displaying their tail feathers.

I counted a camel, a chamois, an elephant, a crocodile and a Lipizzaner led by a negro. Count Brühl's

favourite pug-dog sat curled on a rose-velvet cushion while, on the bottom shelf, like a large albino fish, lay the life-size horse's tail in white porcelain intended – or so Utz said – for an equestrian statue of Augustus to be erected at the Judenhof in Dresden.

He then removed one of his seven figures of Harlequin – *the* Harlequin his grandmother gave him as a boy – and, turning it upside down, pointed to the 'cross-swords' mark of Meissen, and to an inventory label with a number and letters in code.

This was the label that earmarked the piece for the Museum.

'But those persons', Utz whispered, 'have made a mistake.'

One morning in February of 1952, a rap on the door demanded entry for three unwelcome visitors. They were a curator from the Museum; a photographer and an acne-pitted lout who, as Utz guessed, was a member of the secret police.

For the next two weeks he was a helpless witness while this trio turned the apartment upside down, trampled slush into the carpet, and made an inven-

tory of every object. The curator warned him not to tamper with the labels. If he did so, the collection would be forfeit.

Utz particularly loathed the photographer: a grim, fanatical young woman with an astigmatism, who had worked herself into a fever of indignation. In her view, he had no business keeping treasures that rightfully belonged to the People.

'Really?' he answered. 'By what right? The right of theft, I suppose?'

The policeman told him to hold his tongue – or it would be worse for him.

The photographer converted the room into a makeshift studio, fussing over her plate-camera as though it were a thing beyond price. When Utz accidentally brushed against the lens, she ordered him into the bedroom.

She may have been a competent photographer: but she was so short-sighted, and so clumsy when handling the porcelains that Utz had to sit on the edge of his bed, numbly waiting for the crash. He begged to be allowed to position each piece in front of the camera. He was told it was none of his business.

Finally, when the young woman dropped, and smashed the head off, a figure of Watteau's Gilles, he lost his temper.