A Pair of Sphinxes in the Linsky Collection Reattributed

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When the catalogue of the Jack and Belle Linsky Collection was published in 1984, a pair of hard-paste porcelain sphinxes (Figures 1, 2) was somewhat hesitantly attributed to a German factory, possibly that at Fulda, which was in operation from 1764 to 1788. The chief justification for this attribution was the record of an identical pair in the Ostermann collection in 1928; that pair was marked—like each of the Linsky sphinxes—with a blue-painted cross such as that used at Fulda, and was assigned to Fulda in the sale catalogue. However, potential objections to such an attribution for the Linsky pair were seen in a pronounced dullness of paste and glaze and in the fact that the mark was applied over rather than under the glaze, contrary to Fulda’s usual practice.

It has since been brought to my attention that the Ostermann sphinxes—now on loan to the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich—have been re-examined, and that as a result they have been reattributed to William Cookworthy’s Bristol factory.

2. Dr. Paul Ostermann Collection, sale cat., Cassirer and Helbing (Berlin, Oct. 30—Nov. 2, 1928) lot 1791 (catalogue by Otto von Falke).
3. “A Miscellany of Pieces,” English Ceramic Circle Transactions 8, pt. 2 (1972) pp. 228–229, pl. 184. I am grateful to Dr. Rainer Rückert for information and to Miss Kate Foster for telling me of her rediscovery of the Ostermann sphinxes and of the published note concerning her observations.
In addition to the cross mark, the Munich sphinxes are said to bear impressed numerals and the letters T	extsuperscript{a}, all partly ground away. The letters are those identifying the itinerant assembler or "repairer" Tebo, who worked at Bristol from 1771 to 1774. Before then he had been at Bow, Worcester, and Plymouth, and in 1774 he left Bristol for Josiah Wedgwood's factory at Etruria, where he is last recorded the following year.

Of all the factories at which Tebo was employed, only Plymouth and Bristol produced hard-paste porcelain, and it was only at Bristol that the mark of a cross in blue enamel was used. On late Plymouth and Bristol figures, too, there can be found allover fabric patterns comparable to those on the saddlecloths of the Linsky sphinxes, with formalized flower heads and gilt foliage, interspersed with circles or dots.

For these reasons, an attribution to Bristol of both pairs of sphinxes seems entirely valid. In addition, a model of a sphinx on a rectangular base, of comparable size to these, was produced in about 1768–70 at Cookworthy's earlier factory at Plymouth. It is curious, however, that there is so little correspondence between the models. The earlier one, known from a single example, is a traditional representation: the body and torso are aligned, the paws rest firmly and in parallel on the ground, and the sphinx stares straight ahead. All this is in marked contrast to the coquettish poses, feminine costume details, and almost flirtatious expressions of the Linsky models.

It is in just these respects, however, that the Linsky sphinxes correspond to models produced at two other English factories: a Chelsea pair of about 1747 and another, dated by J. V. G. Mallet about 1750–54, from Bow.

Although far more playful and rococo with their mobcaps, ruffs, and pearls, and perched on steeply sloped scrolled bases, they establish a precedent for the pose and jewelry that is quite different from the severity of the Plymouth model. The Plymouth sphinx was very likely inspired by a stately, all-white Chelsea model of the raised-anchor period (ca. 1749–52), while the earlier Chelsea and the Bow sphinxes—and, by extension, the Linsky pair—would seem to have a different origin. It has been suggested that they are derived from French bronze sculpture, and certainly the form of the bases of the Chelsea and Bow models, the sinuous poses of the sphinxes themselves, and the somewhat whimsical details of costume are all in keeping with the compositional mannerisms and theatrical quality of gilt-bronze andirons being made in Paris about 1750.