

Sir Francis Watson at Firle Place, East Sussex

DEBORAH GAGE

THE ROLLING CHALK FOLDS OF THE Sussex South Downs appear to rise just outside the drawing-room windows of Firle Place, which has been the home of the Gage family for more than five hundred years (Figure 1). Sir John Gage (1479–1556) built a Tudor manor house, probably on the site of an earlier building, in the late 1530s. This residence reflected the increased stature and wealth that had accompanied his rise in the court of Henry VIII. Sir John's descendants were staunch Catholics until the eighteenth century, which resulted in much hardship for the family until they conformed to the Church of England. The family was then able to reenter public life and service, and they were created viscounts.

My cousin the sixth viscount Gage (1895–1982) married Imogen Desborough (1905–1969) in 1931. She became one of the inheritors of the celebrated Cowper collection, from Panshanger in Hertfordshire, upon the death of her mother, Ettie Desborough (1867–1952). Panshanger was sold and subsequently pulled down. The collection—one of the foremost in Britain at the time—was divided between Imogen and her sister, Monica. Some paintings were disposed of at auction, in one of the first sales at Christie's in London after World War II; these works are now to be found in major museums and private collections.

The Cowpers belong to a long dynasty of collectors, commencing with the first earl (1709–1764), who was appointed Queen Anne's lord chancellor in the early eighteenth century. He both collected and inherited Dutch and Flemish pictures, including the monumental Van Dyck group portrait of *Count John of Nassau and His Family*, which came to him through his wife, Henrietta, daughter of the earl of Grantham. In turn, Grantham's illustrious Dutch Nassau, and thus Orange, forebears descended by way of his paternal line; his father was Henry D'Auverquerque.

The next significant Cowper collector was the third earl (1738–1789), who spent the major part of his life in Florence, where he became a leader in society and a patron of art, science, literature, and the opera. He assembled a remarkable collection of Italian paintings on the advice of the artist Johann Zoffany; furniture; and fabulous works of art including a ewer and basin once ascribed to Benvenuto Cellini.

His second son, the fifth earl (1778–1837), also purchased significant pictures. However, he appears to have taken a greater interest in the decorative arts, with which he augmented his father's collection, which had been brought back to England. He acquired French furniture, *objets de vertu*, and porcelain, evincing a penchant for Sèvres. The fifth earl relinquished the former Cowper family seat at Cole Green House near Hertford shortly after his marriage to Emily Lamb, daughter of the first viscount Melbourne, in 1805. He commissioned Samuel Wyatt and William Atkinson to build a new Gothic Revival home at Panshanger, to house the art collection. Humphrey Repton remodeled the park, and the residence was situated with commanding views down over the Mimram River.

The fifth earl had a special "china room" constructed at Panshanger; contemporary accounts frequently comment upon the porcelain and the effect it created. The overall effect must have been stunning. There were an especially large number of services, representing Sèvres, Paris (Feuillet), Meissen, Berlin, and English factories. There were also examples of Delft and Continental faience, along with an extensive collection of Oriental wares. A recently discovered insurance valuation and inventory provides clues as to how the porcelain was set out in the house. For example, the majority of the Sèvres porcelain, including the Melbourne Service, was displayed in the White Dining Room. Emily had inherited the service from her mother, Elizabeth, which she moved to Panshanger.

In old photographs dating from the Victorian era, Firle Place appears rather grim. The principal rooms were hung with armor, antlers and stuffed animal heads, copies of paintings by Frans Snyders of savage

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art 2002
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM JOURNAL 37

The notes for this article begin on page 246.

239



Figure 1. View of the north facade of Firlie Place, near Lewes, East Sussex, in the lee of the South Downs

boar hunts with snarling and flesh-tearing dogs, and there were bearskins draped over the heavy furniture and scattered on the floor. Apart from family portraits commissioned from artists such as Thomas Gainsborough, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and James Seymour, the Gages did not seriously collect art.

All that changed in 1954 when Imogen Gage's share of the Cowper collection arrived at Firlie. This inheritance comprised paintings such as the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt with Saint John the Baptist* by Fra Bartolommeo

(Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum) and the tour de force *Count John of Nassau and His Family*, which remains today in the Great Hall of Firlie Place. The paintings were accompanied by magnificent French furniture; the celebrated Panshanger Cabinets by Thomas Chippendale, originally commissioned for Melbourne House in Piccadilly; rare books and manuscripts; outstanding silver; and much more. Finally came the porcelain: the Oriental ceramics, the Chelsea, Longton Hall, Worcester—and an exemplary Sèvres collection



Figure 2. Front and reverse views of the Firlie Vases, French, Sèvres, 1763. Soft-paste porcelain, ormolu, H. 8¼ in. (21 cm). Firlie Place, East Sussex



Figure 3. Front and reverse views of the Firlie Vases shown in Figure 2. One vase is separated into its two component parts



Figure 4. *Vase hollandais nouveau*, French, Sèvres, ca. 1760. Soft-paste porcelain, H. 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (23.5 cm). Firle Place, East Sussex

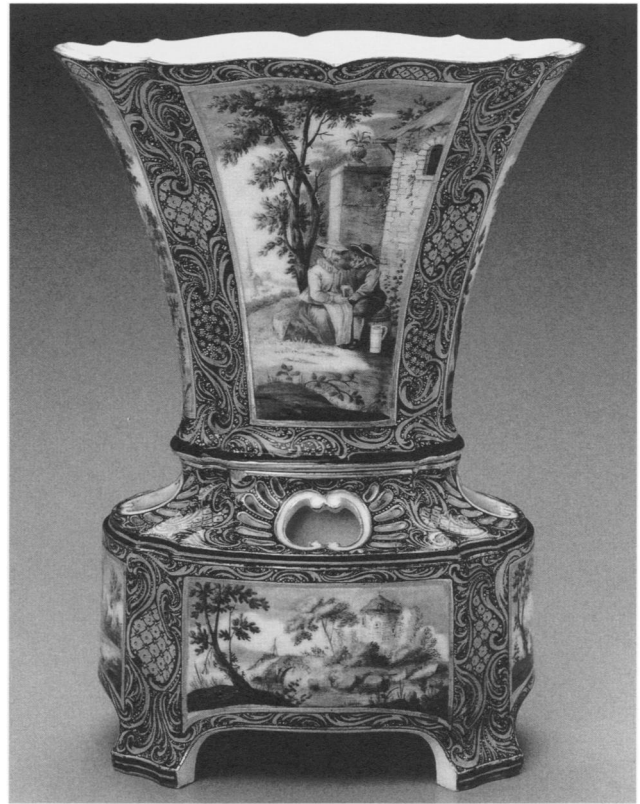


Figure 5. Flower vase (*vase hollandais nouveau*), French, Sèvres, 1761–62. Soft-paste porcelain decorated in polychrome enamels and gold, 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 5 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. (22.3 x 17 x 14.2 cm). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Bequest of Forsyth Wickes Collection (65.1791a-b) (© 2002 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

The interior of Firle Place was rearranged, its paintings and furniture of lesser quality auctioned. Their place was taken by objects from the Cowper collection, which were incorporated with the Gage family portraits and important English furniture with a view to showing all off to best effect. Today the whole evinces a palpable sense of joy and refinement, thanks to the taste and unerring eye of its new custodians, Henry Rainald and Imogen Gage. Their enthusiasm engendered a scholarly interest. When, a few years later, the house was opened to the public on a regular basis during the summer months, leading experts were called upon to catalogue the works of art, in order to increase visitors' enjoyment and knowledge.

The display of Sèvres porcelain at Firle is eye-catching and gives life to the house. The collection may be considered one of the most important in the south of England, especially noteworthy for its selection of vases. The Firle Vases (Figure 2), with their chinoiserie panels by Charles-Nicholas Dodin (1754–1803),¹ are the pride of the collection. The shape is referred to as a *vase à dauphins*. A pair of vases of corresponding form, though with a modeled figure of a dolphin on either side and with a *bleu céleste*

ground, are in the Wallace Collection, London. One of the Firle Vases bears the date letter K for the year 1763, together with a script K for the figure painter Dodin, who had a remarkably long career at the factory, from 1754 to 1802. The exceptional feature of the Firle Vases is the front panels, on both sections. Chinoiserie decoration is rare on Sèvres porcelain, and in the instances when it did occur, it tended toward a Europeanized idea of what the Chinese looked like and how they should occupy themselves. However, it appears that in 1761 and again in 1763 Dodin painted a handful of wares with genre scenes obviously taken directly from Oriental sources. It is possible that the panels on the front of the Firle Vases are in imitation of the Chinese "eggshell" porcelain that was produced in Canton during the second quarter of the eighteenth century. The figures are outlined in thin black lines in the Chinese manner, and the colors, although richer, are laid in almost flat washes without modeling. The panels on the reverse are decorated with stylized *fleurs des Indes* (no doubt a reference to the fact that these wares were intended as flower vases). The *bleu du roi* ground of the bases is enhanced with circles of gold dots.



Figure 6. *Cuvette à fleurs*, French, Sèvres, ca. 1759. Soft-paste porcelain, H. 7¼ in. (18.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, 1976 (1976.155.37)

The Firlie Vases and a *vase hollandois nouveau* with a rose marbled ground were conceived as vessels in which to plant bulbs, such as narcissus or tulips, which were considered rare and exotic in the eighteenth century. It was naturally preferable that they should be shown off and displayed in as luxurious a vessel as possible, such as a Sèvres vase. All the vases comprise two sections. The bases of the upper halves are pierced with six holes to admit the water retained in the lower portion. The upper sections would have been filled with earth, and the bulbs kept moist by capillary action as the water was absorbed from below. During the summer the earth could be tipped out, and the vases filled with cut flowers instead. These vases were the design of a former goldsmith, Jean-Claude Duplessis (act. 1745–74), whose individual style was essential for the evolution of the rococo forms at Sèvres to which soft-paste porcelain was so well suited. The striking form and ingenuity of the Firlie Vases—for example, the open trelliswork on the lower section through which the water was poured, and the way the sections fit together—are characteristic of his genius (Figure 3). The ormolu mounts on four double-hoof feet on the lower section are probably of a later date.

Also of great rarity is the *vase hollandois nouveau* with a rose ground heightened with deep blue marbling and dots of gold (Figure 4). This is one of a pair of vases; the other is now in the Forsyth Wicks collection in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Figure 5). Its extraordinary effect is achieved by the use of two glazes, first a rose glaze over the ground, then a blue glaze skillfully applied over that. The central reserve

on the upper section has a gilt border that encloses a rustic scene in the manner of David Teniers: a peasant woman scolds her drunken husband, who is seated on the ground before an empty wine barrel, with a shed beyond. This subject appears to have been taken from a drawing by Charles-Nicholas Dodin, now in the archives at Sèvres, and occurs with some variation on other examples of Sèvres porcelain. This scene appears, for example, on a *cuvette à fleurs* with a rose ground and green borders in The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Figure 6). The two vertical side panels and the three decorating the lower section of the *vase hollandois nouveau*, also within gilt borders, depict rural scenes and various buildings. These panels are juxtaposed with the swirling flamboyance of the marbled ground heightened with contrasting *pointillé* and diaper patterns and gold dots on the reverse. The whole evinces a daring brilliance. The extent to which Sèvres excelled is reflected on the reverse of each vase, where the exuberance of the design comes into full play to create a breathtaking effect.

The Melbourne Service (Figures 7, 8) is another highlight at Firlie Place. Sir Penistone Lamb, first viscount Melbourne (1744–1828), married Elizabeth

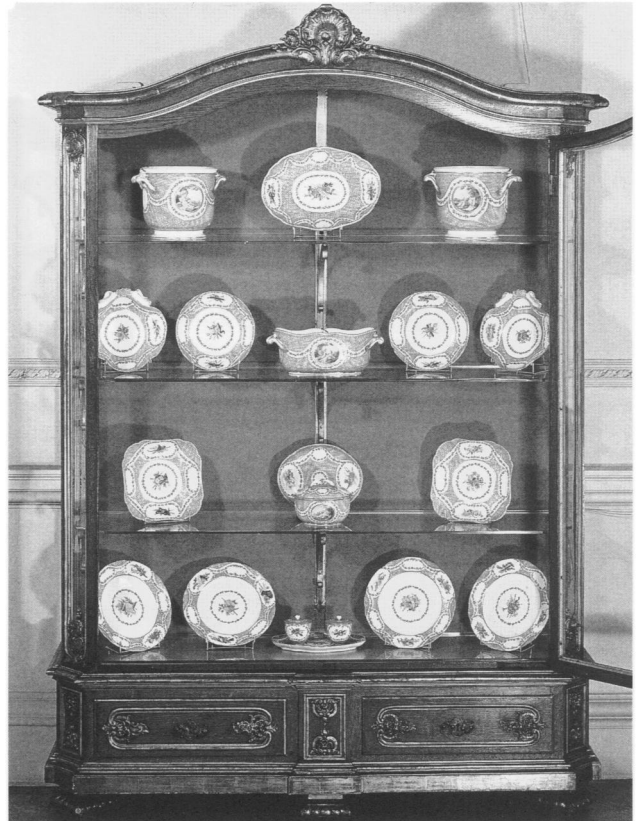


Figure 7. Portion of the Melbourne Service displayed in one of two showcases in the Long Gallery, Firlie Place, East Sussex



Figure 8. Pieces from the Melbourne Service. The oval *jattes anglaises* and the *compotiers* were used for the display and serving of fresh or glazed fruit, depending upon the season. The two *plateaux à deux pots de confiture* were integral components of a dessert service. The pair of *seaux à liqueur ovales* still have their dividers. In the 18th century these vessels were filled with crushed ice to keep cool narrow glass vials of liqueurs; the dividers helped keep the bottles upright in the ice

Millbanke (1744–1828) in 1769, and later their daughter Emily came to marry the fifth earl Cowper. Melbourne inherited an enormous fortune for his day, over £500,000, and the couple spent freely. In 1771, he purchased Lord Holland’s house in Piccadilly (now Albany). Sir William Chambers was commissioned to erect a new building on the site, and Thomas Chippendale was responsible for the interior, one of his most lavish furnishing schemes. In the same year, Melbourne took delivery of a Sèvres service that he had ordered directly from the factory through the intermediary of “Mon. Chevalier” Lambert, as is attested by the original invoice dated March 20, 1771, in the Sèvres archives. Sir John Lambert (and later his wife) appears to have supplied other members of the English aristocracy with Sèvres porcelain, which he obtained directly from the factory or through *marchands merciers*. No doubt the English taste for great Sèvres services dates to the gift by Louis XV of a magnificent diplomatic presentation service for sixteen persons to the duchess of Bedford (her husband, the fourth duke, had negotiated the Treaty of Paris). The aristocracy were quick to follow this vogue: the third duke of Richmond, leading the way, ordered no fewer than three celebrated services from Sèvres in 1765, during his tenure as ambassador to France. The sets comprised a dark blue-ground dessert service, a green-ground dessert service, with blue- and green-ground baskets linking the two, and a green-ground tea service. Not wishing to be outdone, his successor

in Paris, the earl of Harcourt, ordered his Sèvres service in 1769. Between 1765 and 1775, leading figures of English society bought Sèvres services as they vied with one another to be fashionable.

The Melbourne Service is notable for the central decorative theme of musical trophies combined with emblems of the arts, music, and love. It was commissioned by Melbourne as a tribute to the talents of his new wife, who was a gifted musician. (Scrutiny of the sales registers in the archives at Sèvres gives cause to ponder the reaction of those involved at the factory. For example, one of the panels on a *seau à bouteille* depicts a chubby cherub holding open a book marked HAMLET, no doubt especially chosen to flatter the English patron.) A closer examination of the composition of the Melbourne Service is of interest. Two oval *jattes anglaises* are included. The name of this shape and the fact that the shape does not appear to have been used previously at Sèvres lead one to conjecture whether it was created especially for this service. Even more intriguing is a comparison undertaken by David Peters² relating to equivalent components of expensive services (mostly with ground color) produced at Sèvres between 1765 and 1777. The price structure of the Melbourne Service shows a sharp division between the pieces with putti and those with trophies only (Figure 8). The putti-decorated pieces in the Melbourne Service are generally some 60 to 80 livres more expensive than their counterparts from comparable services of this time. For example, the Melbourne *seau à bouteille* at



Figure 9. Pair of *fond vert seaux à bouteille*, French, Sèvres, 1757. Soft-paste porcelain, H. 7⁵/₈ in. (19.4 cm). Firle Place, East Sussex

288 livres was an exceptional price, and it is necessary to look to the comte d'Artois service of August 16, 1782, to find an equivalent *seau à bouteille* at this price.

Another remarkable feature of the Melbourne Service is its spectacular pale turquoise blue *pointillé* ground. Although *pointillé* grounds came into being in the 1760s, not many services were produced with them. For example, three *pointillé* services were produced by 1769/70 and five or six more by the 1780s; these include the Eden Service. The infrequency with which the *pointillé* ground was used for table services was perhaps on account of the considerable amount of work necessary to produce such a detailed ground pattern on the numerous differently shaped pieces that were required to make up a service. Since it appears that the decoration of the Melbourne Service was chosen with Lady Melbourne in mind, one wonders whether the *pointillé* ground is not also a reflection of her lighter, more feminine taste.

The forty-eight plates in the Melbourne Service carry the factory mark of the interlaced LLs in underglaze blue, while few bear any painters' marks. An exception is a plate with the date letter R for 1770 and painter's mark for Charles-Buteux *l'ainé* (act. 1756–82), the factory's chief trophy painter. From the date it would appear that the commission probably was placed at the Sèvres factory in 1769 or 1770, and the Service delivered to the Melbournes within a month of their purchase of their grand new home in Piccadilly. There Lady Melbourne became one of the leading hostesses of her day. When the dining table was cleared and laid for the last course with the

Melbourne Service, her guests must have been in awe.

From many other notable examples of Sèvres porcelain at Firle Place, I would like to mention an important pair of *seaux à bouteille* (Figure 9), quite possibly from the Frederik V service.³ This service is the third complete ground-colored service appearing in the sales register at Sèvres. It was a munificent diplomatic present from Louis XV to Frederik V of Denmark in 1758, as a result of the Danish monarch's gift to him of a Frederiksborg stallion. Later this service came to be transferred to the Russian imperial court and is now in the collection of the State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg.

The first announcement of the Frederik V service is contained in a letter which is dated April 1, 1757, from the marquis de Rouillé to Jean-François Ogier, French ambassador in Copenhagen: "C'est avec grand plaisir que je vous annonce que le Roy s'est porté de la meilleure grâce du monde à ordonner un service de Porcelaines de Vincennes pour le Roy de DanK; il ne sera point couleur de Lapis parce qu'on vient d'inventer un nouveau verd qui est beaucoup plus beau et que Sa Mté en veut donner les premisses à Sa Mté Danoise . . . mais il faudra au moins 4 mois pour que le service destiné au Roy de Dannemarck soit pret a etre envoyé."⁴

From these comments, it is clear that the use of the green ground for service ware was considered a great innovation. During these early years of the factory, production was slow. For example, it took three years to complete and deliver the 1,496 pieces of the *bleu céleste* Louis XV service, including twenty-six biscuit figures for table decoration, to the monarch. Therefore,

it is hardly surprising that this diplomatic service was not delivered to Frederik V until May 22, 1758, through the good offices of Ambassador Ogier. Ogier observed that he had been charged with expressing to the French king “dans les termes les plus fort son admiration de la beauté de l’ouvrage et sa reconnaissance infinie d’un present aussi magnifique qui lui est un gage precieux de l’amitié de Sa Majé.”⁵

The decoration of the pair of *seaux à bouteille* at Firle Place matches that of the pieces of the Frederik V service at the Hermitage. However, the Hermitage pieces are dated 1756, whereas one of the Firle *seaux* bears the date letter for 1757. As has been mentioned above, it took time to produce all the components of a service, a circumstance that could possibly explain the difference in the dates. According to the sales register, there were six *seaux* in the original service; there are now only two in Saint Petersburg, so four remain to be accounted for. In addition to the interlaced LLs in underglaze blue, one *seau* has the painter’s mark for Charles-Louis Méreaud (act. 1756–79) and an incised script K; the other has a painter’s mark possibly for Louis-Jean Thévenet (act. 1741–65) and an incised P and a script K.

There could not have been a more distinguished person to catalogue and write about the Sèvres collection at Firle Place than Sir Francis Watson, director of the Wallace Collection. The correspondence file at Firle⁶ reveals that Sir Francis was approached in the fall of 1964 and came down to Sussex in October to begin to catalogue the Sèvres porcelain. Sir Francis’s preliminary list was addressed to viscount Gage some weeks later, on November 21, closely typed by himself—“my copy-typist is still away ill”—on heavy cream-colored foolscap paper bearing the Wallace Collection crest. The ongoing correspondence with viscount Gage spans two years, during which time Sir Francis appears to have visited the house again on two or three occasions. From Sir Francis’s comments one gathers that the task was far greater than he had originally conceived. There were discussions about the best system of numbering and arrangement of the catalogue; Sir Francis offered to stick numbered labels on each of the pieces of porcelain, which he considered a laborious task. He grumbled that he was slowed down when some of the porcelain had been carefully put away in anticipation of a wedding celebration for viscount Gage’s daughter and he could not find certain pieces.

Sir Francis’s letters were also full of anecdotal detail. For example, he wrote on October 12, 1966:

I enclose a photocopy of the entry in the sales book of the Sèvres factory for the oeil-de-perdrix Sevres dinner service at Firle [the Melbourne Service].

It has not come out very well, but if you want to stick it into your illustrated copy of the catalogue of china, it would be a simple matter to have it typed out.

At the date of the bill, the livre was worth approximately 10d. in contemporary English money, so that the cost of the service was something of the order of £250. If you want to convert this into current sterling values, I think you should multiply by at least twenty, perhaps more. Evenso [*sic*], this is a good deal less than the service must be worth today.

It also became evident that viscount Gage had become so taken by this project that, after a while, he further commissioned Sir Francis to write a brief leaflet that would be made available to visitors to the house. Meanwhile, he encouraged Sir Francis to produce a more ambitious publication that would be bound for the library at Firle. Furthermore, viscount Gage consulted Sir Francis in conjunction with a provenance book that he himself proposed to assemble. On April 25, 1966, Sir Francis wrote, “If you would like to spend part of your free time in the summer making up your illustrated catalogue, I think the best thing would be for you to have my under copy of the list, as it is merely a question of getting the numbers right.”

After several notes dealing with corrections and the question of locating a typist and binder, Sir Francis announced in a letter dated October 25, 1966: “I have not answered your letter before as my manuscript was at the Typist and Binders. It has now reached me in its completed form and they have made a very good job of it.” Finally, on November 3, 1966, Sir Francis wrote in a concluding letter, “The cost of having the final typing for the binding was £12.9.11 and the binding itself came to £2.19.0 . . . As you see, there were two undercopies for which no charge was made. I thought of keeping one of these for my own records, and perhaps put one on permanent record in the library here [at the Wallace Collection] which has a rather important reference section of Sèvres Porcelain.”

There is a link between this enterprise and Clare Le Corbeiller. My childhood was spent in Kenya, followed by two years in the United States; my family moved to England in 1966. Sèvres porcelain came as a revelation, and my study of it was encouraged by Sir Francis Watson, whom I met and who asked me to help during the last stages of his project at Firle Place. He inspired in me a passionate interest in Sèvres porcelain that has never waned. Furthermore, he told me with pride about his goddaughter, Clare Le Corbeiller, who lived in New York. At the time, I had little inkling that I would move to New York in 1971 or that there I would meet the person of whom he had often spoken.

I did not imagine, moreover, that I would enjoy a long friendship with this much respected authority at the Metropolitan Museum.

I recall stopping at Clare's desk at the Metropolitan Museum, in March 1999. She looked up and said, "Strange that you should be here at this particular moment. I was clearing through some papers given to me by my godfather, Francis Watson, and have just come across a draft of his catalogue for the Sèvres at Firlé. Would you like to see it?" Clearly, this was the copy of the original three that Sir Francis had decided to keep for himself – and had now come full circle.

NOTES

1. It is of interest to compare the Firlé Vases with another pair in the form known as the *vase hollandois nouveau* in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (see Ronald Freyberger, "Chinese Genre Painting at Sèvres," *American Ceramic Bulletin* 1970–71, p. 31). This pair has identical date marks, painter's marks, ground, and generic decoration. It is logical to suggest that all four vases belonged to the same garniture.
2. David Peters, "Identification of Plates and Services in the Sèvres Sales Registers" (paper presented at the French Porcelain Society Annual General Meeting, London, June 1985).
3. I am grateful to David Peters and Rosalind Savill for their insight and help with my endeavor to identify these *fond vert seaux*.
4. France, Foreign Office, archives and documents, political correspondence, Denmark, vol. 133, gifts to the Danish Court (April–June), cited by Ole V. Krog, "Service Diplomatique," *Connaissance des arts* 500 (November 1993), pp. 152–61.
5. *Ibid.*, vols. 137–39, gift of porcelain to the king of Denmark (January–May).
6. The private correspondence of the sixth viscount Gage, Firlé Place archives.