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)
made Imogen Desborough (1905–1969) in 1931. She
came one of the inheritors of the celebrated
Cowper collection, from Panshanger in Hertford-
shire, upon the death of her mother, Ettie Desbor-
ough (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 monumen-
tal 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 pur-
chased 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
chant 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 commis-
sioned 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” con-
structed at Panshanger; contemporary accounts fre-
cently 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 exam-
ple, 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

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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 Firle. 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 Firle Place. The paintings were accompanied by magnificent French furniture; the celebrated Panshanger Cabinets by Thomas Chippen-dale, 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.
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 Sévres 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 Sévres 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 4. Vase hollandois nouveau, French, Sévres, ca. 1760. Soft-paste porcelain, H. 9¼ in. (23.5 cm). Firle Place, East Sussex

Figure 5. Flower vase (vase hollandois nouveau), French, Sévres, 1761–62. Soft-paste porcelain decorated in polychrome enamels and gold, 8½ x 6¼ x 5¼ 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 Firle Vases and a *vase hollandais 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 Firle 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 hollandais 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 skilfully 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 hollandais 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 Firle Place. Sir Penistone Lamb, first viscount Melbourne (1744–1828), married Elizabeth

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Figure 6. *Cuverte 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)

Figure 7. Portion of the Melbourne Service displayed in one of two showcases in the Long Gallery, Firle Place, East Sussex
Millbanke (1744–1828) in 1769, and later their
dughter 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 Pic-
cadilly (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 Sévres 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 Sévres archives. Sir John Lambert (and later his
wife) appears to have supplied other members of the
English aristocracy with Sévres porcelain, which he
obtained directly from the factory or through
marchands merciers. No doubt the English taste for
great Sévres services dates to the gift by Louis XV of a
magnificent diplomatic presentation service for six-
teen 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 Sévres 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 Sévres ser-
dvice in 1769. Between 1765 and 1775, leading figures
of English society bought Sévres 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 commis-
sioned 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 Sévres 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 Eng-
lish 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 Sévres lead one to conjecture whether it
was created especially for this service. Even more
intriguing is a comparison undertaken by David Peters9
relating to equivalent components of expensive ser-
dvices (mostly with ground color) produced at Sévres
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 Ser-
dvice 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 8. Pieces from the
Melbourne Service. The oval
jattes anglaises and the composieurs
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.
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’aîné (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 vert qui est beaucoup plus beau et que Sa Mété en veut donner les premices à Sa Mte 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 reconnais-

sance infinie d’un present aussi magnifique qui lui est un gage precieux de l’amitié de Sa Majé.”

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 Méréaud (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 Sévres collection at Firle Place than Sir Francis Watson, director of the Wallace Collection. The correspondence file at Firle reveals that Sir Francis was approached in the fall of 1964 and came down to Sussex in October to begin to catalogue the Sévres 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 spanned 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 Sévres factory for the œil-de-perdrix Sévres 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. Even so [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 Sévres 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. Sévres 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 me in a passionate interest in Sévres 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 Firle. 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 Firle Vases with another pair in the form known as the *vase hollandais 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.


3. I am grateful to David Peters and Rosalind Savill for their insight and help with my endeavor to identify these *fond vert seaux*.


5. Ibid., vols. 137–39, gift of porcelain to the king of Denmark (January–May).

6. The private correspondence of the sixth viscount Gage, Firle Place archives.