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## Title of Object

Tea Service for Twelve

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## Photo of Object (optional)



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## Object Information

**Artist:** Christophe-Ferdinand Caron;  
**Manufacturer:** Sèvres Porcelain Factory

**Date of Object:** 1807–08

**Accession Number:** 81.101.1a,b through 28

**Material/Medium:** Porcelain, enamel, gilt

**Department:** Decorative Arts, Textiles and  
Sculpture

**Culture:** French

**Country:** France

**File Created:** 9/1/2016

**Author of File:** Susan Arndt

**Reviewer of File:** Kara ZumBahlen

**Last Updated/Reviewed:** 2/1/2017

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## Tour Topics

Group 1, Highlight 1600-1850, Trendsetting, Symbolism, Stories/Storytelling, entertainment, leaders, celebration, animals/birds, ceramics, fashion, food and drink, imagination/fantasy

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## Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

What is the first word that pops into your head when you look at this tea service? Take a closer look. Each piece in this service, which is also known as a Caberet, is painted individually.

What can you tell me about these illustrations? Fables by nature are intended to instruct. Who could benefit from this instruction? Who might have used the service?

When you have a get-together in your home, what do you do for amusement?

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## Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

The Tea Service for Twelve, called a Caberet in French, was produced by using hard-paste porcelain which is comprised of kaolin clay and petuntse stone. In manufacturing, the ingredients are pulverized, washed, filtered and combined in a precise recipe. When mixed with water the resulting clay becomes malleable and can be shaped by hand, wheel or baked in molds. Kaolin gives porcelains their white body while petuntse lends a translucent quality. In combination the ingredients form a strong glass-like product with a delicate appearance and characteristic ring. The pieces in the tea service would have been formed in molds, glazed and fired at a high heat. The specializing artist or artists would have then applied the decorative polychrome enamels and gilding before firing again at a lower temperature.

The service for twelve in Mia's collection is comprised of 28 pieces including a teapot and lid, sugar bowl with lid, creamer, bowl for milk, 12 cups and 12 saucers. Patterned after Etruscan pottery, maintained in the Sevres collection for reference; the new forms appealed to growing neoclassical tastes inspired by the ideals of Napoleon's rising empire. The set reflects the shift in French society away from the Ancien Regime and its taste for rococo frivolity. The service is lavishly decorated with polychrome enamel paintings of animals in landscapes that illustrate the famous and popular fables of Jean de la Fontaine. The paintings are bordered on the top and bottom with gilding that spills over to fill the interiors of the pieces. Let me be clear, there is no surface that is not exquisitely decorated and you can't help but wonder what this set would look like in candlelit salon.

The paintings on the service took approximately six months to complete. They are both realistic and illustrative in their representation of the beloved La Fontaine fables. The animals are imbued with human character that charms and their actions have a narrative quality that is brought to life against realistic and atmospheric landscapes. The style mimics the popular genre of historical narrative painting and serves to heighten the irony and satire of the fables. Caron has purposefully sacrificed the middle ground in the paintings using the blues and greys of the sky and the receding landscape to focus the viewers' attention on the action in the foreground. The strong use of complementary colors allow the paintings to hold their own and stand out against the opulence of the gilding. Each saucer has a single bird painted against a background of white porcelain encircled by a red-violet border highlighted with a stylized vegetal pattern of gilding.

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## Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

At the time of the tea set's manufacture, Sevres had been in production for approximately sixty years. Although the company began as a private enterprise, Louis XV became the principal shareholder and the factory was designated as the Royal Manufacturers, supplying King, court and aristocracy. Sevres became one of the leading manufacturers of porcelain in Europe known for its use of vivid color and gilding. The revolution and aftermath were difficult times for businesses that had served the aristocracy. In Sevres, Napoleon Bonaparte saw the potential to reinvigorate the country's economy and promote imperial ideals. Sevres, now known as the National Manufacturer, received numerous commissions from Napoleon and his government. It is still a government owned business today.

Through marks on the pieces we know the illustrations are the work of Christopher-Ferdinand Caron, (1774-1831). His tenure at Sevres lasted from 1792-1815. Caron specialized in painting animals and birds. He studied animal engravings and made drawings from life often visiting the zoo and botanical

gardens in Paris. He was a member of the academy exhibiting watercolor paintings of exotic birds from 1808-14. Caron retired from Sevres in 1815 due to failing eyesight.

You might think that this lovely tea service with its instructive fables was for use in an aristocratic nursery or as a source of witty repartee and amusement in a fashionable salon, a conversation piece. The intended recipient however was not a child and may have viewed its intended message very differently... In June 1807 the treaties of Tilsit made between France, Prussia and Russia brought an end to the war of the fourth coalition against France. Napoleon held the view that it had been reckless for Prussia to become involved in the coalition let alone to draw his army into a costly, bloody, devastating battle. After crushing Prussia at Jena-Auerstedt, he was determined to punish the kingdom for their involvement. Prussia was forced to give up almost half of its landmass and saddled with an enormous debt. The King of Prussia sent his wife to charm and plead lenience with the emperor. Napoleon rebuked her and writing to Josephine stated that he had not been persuaded by her charms. The king sent his brother, Prince William of Prussia to France to seek a reduction of the Prussian debt. He was also denied. However, Napoleon sent him the lovely moralizing tea set as a diplomatic gesture. And this brings us back to the 20 fables illustrated on the service. They include as subjects the destructive qualities of pride, vanity, deceit, indolence, arrogance, ignorance, temperament and tyranny to name a few. The fables are a window into the mind of the emperor Napoleon and can be seen as harsh criticism of Prussia and her leadership. In a culture that valued repartee this would have upped the game to a level of contemptuous mockery. When valued in its entirety it is somewhat surprising that the service still exists today.

**Teapot:**

The Lion and the Gnat: Morale, pride goes before the fall.

The Elephant and Jupiter's Monkey: Morale, don't over estimate your own importance.

**Sugar Bowl:**

The Rat and the Frog: Morale, deceit often falls back on the cheat.

The Dog Who Carries his Master's Dinner Around his Neck: Morale, Don't stop to argue with temptation and then become the first and biggest cheat.

**Creamer:**

The Frogs who asked for a King: Morale, be sure you can better your condition before you seek a change.

**Bowl:**

The Tortoise and the Two Ducks: Morale, foolish curiosity and vanity lead to misfortune.

The Two Cocks: Morale, fortunes vary, be humble in victory.

The Rat and the Oyster: Morale, a lack of experience exposes greed and ignorance and cause destruction.

The Two Dogs and the Dead Ass: Morale, misplaced fidelity and focus on vain desires can lead to demise.

**Teacups:**

The Eagle and the Magpie: Morale, there is no substitute for honesty and good manners in society.

The Hare and the Tortoise: Morale, Natural abilities will not make up for indolence, hard work and persistence pay off in the end.

The Wolf and the Lamb: Morale, a tyrant can always excuse tyranny.

The Bird Wounded by an Arrow: Morale, we often give our enemies the means for our destruction.

The Kite and the Nightingale: Morale, an empty belly has no ears.

The Ape and the Dolphin: Morale, Lies are not rewarded.

The Swallow and The Little Birds: Morale, we listen to no instinct but our own and heed no danger till we're overthrown.

The Fox and the Bust: Morale, many great lords are empty heads in disguise.

The Fox and the Stork: Morale, When others follow your example, you have to accept it. (2cups)

The Cock and the Pearl: Morale, it is ignorant the reject wisdom.

The Heron: Morale, if you are difficult to please you may have to be content with the worst or nothing at all.

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**Current Mia Label Information (optional)**

The Emperor Napoleon commissioned this service in 1807 and presented it to Prince William of Prussia in September, 1808. Each piece of the set, called a cabaret, is decorated with at least one scene derived from Jean de la Fontaine's (1621-95) Fables. The high quality of all the painted scenes marks this service as one of Christophe-Ferdinand Caron's greatest achievements while working as an animal painter at Sevres between 1792 and 1815. Caron studied plants at the botanical gardens in Paris as well as books on various animals and birds to create detailed scenes of the fables. Stories illustrated on the set include the tortoise and the hare and the fox and the stork.

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**Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)**

French Porcelain in the Eighteenth Century, Met Museum essay:

[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/porf/hd\\_porf.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/porf/hd_porf.htm)

Khan academy - Napoleonic wars: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/world-history/1600s-1800s/napoleon-bonaparte/v/napoleon-and-the-wars-of-the-first-and-second-coalitions>

The Fabulous Kingdom of La Fontaine By FRANCINE DU PLESSIX GRAY; Published: February 17, 1995:

<http://www.nytimes.com/1995/02/17/books/the-fabulous-kingdom-of-la-fontaine.html?pagewanted=all>

Personal Table Service of the Emperor: <https://en.fondationnapoleon.org/chef-d-oeuvre/personal-table-service-of-the-emperor/>

Sèvres Manufactory: <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/artists/1200/svres-manufactory-french-1756-present/>

V&A Museum, The Rejected Divorce Gift & The Egyptian Pharaoh: <http://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/creating-new-europe-1600-1800-galleries/the-rejected-divorce-gift-the-egyptian-pharaoh>

Steven Adams, Sèvres Porcelain and the Articulation of Imperial Identity in Napoleonic France: <http://jdh.oxfordjournals.org/content/20/3/183.full>

Napoleon at War: [http://www.pbs.org/empires/napoleon/n\\_war/campaign/page\\_8.html](http://www.pbs.org/empires/napoleon/n_war/campaign/page_8.html)