

Bustelli the man

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Bustelli the man

His name was Franz Anton Bustelli, porcelain modeller by trade. He was hired on 3 November 1754 as a *figurist* by Count Sigmund von Haimhausen, director of the Bavarian Electoral Porcelain Factory at the small castle of Neudeck on the outskirts of Munich.

The effective foundation of the famous Nymphenburg factory dates to the summer of 1753. Several unsuccessful attempts had been made since 1747 by a number of so-called experts who, however, were not in the possession of the *arcanum*, the art and knowledge of making porcelain. Joseph Jakob Ringler from Vienna, a true *arcanist* and kiln engineer, appeared in Munich in 1753 and gained the confidence and financial support of von Haimhausen. Porcelain was made successfully very quickly, and by 1755 the small concern employed thirty workmen, amongst whom we find F. A. Bustelli, supervisor of the *repairers*. This term was originally used to designate the workers in the modelling shop who were engaged in putting together, prior to the firing in the biscuit kiln, the various parts that make up a figure or a group, coming out of a number of plaster moulds. In some factories, the term *repairer* took on the additional meaning of *modeller*. It is this Franz Anton Bustelli with whom we are concerned here. He was evidently not engaged as a modest *repairer* since his work at the Munich factory amply proved him to be an accomplished artist-modeller. In the six and a half years before the Neudeck factory transferred its workshops to newly-built, more capacious premises on the northern periphery of the Nymphenburg Castle complex in May 1761, Bustelli had completed the majority of about one hundred and twenty porcelain figures and groups – amongst them the eighteen figures of the *Commedia dell'Arte* – which it was his destiny to create in his short life. He fell seriously ill at the end of 1762 and died on 18 April 1763 in Nymphenburg, eight and a half years after his arrival in Neudeck. He was buried in the cemetery of Winthir, in the former parish of Saint-Margareth in Sendling near Munich. A terracotta plaque in his memory was unveiled there in 1971¹. The parish register gives no indication of his age.

During Bustelli's short career at the Bavarian factory, his creative genius rose to the greatest heights of artistic achievement in eighteenth century porcelain sculpture. His figures are inspired by the spark of life, an inner substance which results in a display of *joie-de-vivre*, of great verve, and of a most delicate image of elegance. After his death, that excellence expressed in the light Bavarian rococo style was never achieved again in porcelain.

No records related to Bustelli's life and career before his arrival in Munich are known to exist. Moreover, in the few reports of the Nymphenburg factory, in which his name appears, not one establishes a connection between him and the porcelain models created during his presence at the factory. Until the very beginning of this century, his name was not even known in relation to the Nymphenburg concern². In 1905, Otto von Falke, researcher and curator in Cologne, first made the connection between the plastic production at the factory between 1755 and 1762 and a modeller called «Bastelli»³. By the time Hofmann's three volume history of the Nymphenburg factory was published in the early 1920's, the factory archives had yielded the evidence of Franz Anton Bustelli's employment. The information, buried in a file of old invoices dated from 1755 to 1767⁴, tied up with the contents of an Inventory of Moulds, 1760⁵, and most important, a Price List dated 1767⁶. Being the only modeller at the Neudeck works in the years up to his death, and on the basis of stylistic comparisons, Bustelli's oeuvre could finally be catalogued. Hofmann also pointed out the similarity of the impressed initials FB found on the upper part of the bases on a number of Nymphenburg figures and the same initials seen on either side of an eagle on Bustelli's recently discovered seal (fig. 1)⁷.



1. BUSTELLI'S SEAL.

Indeed, just at the beginning of the first World War, a Swiss heraldist⁸ had found that the armorial device on the seal corresponded with a coat of arms on the balcony railing of the Casa Bustelli in Intragna at the entrance to the Centovalli⁹. Riva demonstrated that these arms were common to all the Bustellis who had originally come from the Ticino.

The span of Bustelli's career in Munich is limited to just over eight years. They were hard

and unsettled times in which the economic prospects for a porcelain factory were not too promising. The Seven Years War (1756–1763) was being waged across Central Europe and occasionally spilled over the borders of Bavaria, causing havoc to the economy. It was in those years that the artist was engaged, worked and died at the Nymphenburg factory, the man named Franz Anton, latterly *Churfürstlicher Porcelain Fabrique Bildhauer und Modelleur Maister Pustelli*¹⁰. At the factory, he was taken for an Italian. His successor, chief modeller Dominikus Auliczek, called him *Franz Pastalli, an Italian by birth* in his autobiography¹¹. Was he identical with Franciscus Antonius Bustelli, born in Locarno on 11 April 1723, as Simona has put forward¹²? The Ticino origins of the Bustellis go back at least to the fifteenth century, both in Locarno, and in the neighbouring Centovalli and the Viguzzo Valley. During the 17th and 18th centu-

ries Bustellis migrated to the Italian Romagna and also to Southern Germany, some settling in Bavaria¹³. Although Hofmann and Simona believed that the boy born in April 1723 could well have become the porcelain modeller, and Rose Termolen⁹ avers that he was born to an Italian father and a German-speaking mother, there is simply no proof, no further documentation. During his research into the history of the Bustellis, the genealogist Virgilio Gilardoni of Bellinzona has discovered thirteen Bustelli boys, born between 1690 and 1793, all baptized with the ever popular names Francesco Antonio. Moreover, at the age of twenty-one years in 1744, the Francesco Antonio born in 1723 was still living with his mother in Muralto near Locarno¹¹. He was brought up in the Italian language, under the sway of Italian culture. The Munich modeller, even if born in the Ticino, must have spent the greater part of his education and younger years in a German country. He used the German script, as seen in his signature⁷ (fig. 2), although it should be noted that the «e» in the family name is of Latin origin. Additional samples of his handwriting, discussed below – one dated 1756, the second year of his employment show at the least that a lengthy period of his life was spent in German-speaking surroundings before he came to Neudeck¹⁴. In one of these papers, the description of a modelling tool in its Bavarian patois-form also points to a longish stay in Southern Germany or Austria. His spelling was adapted to phonetic Southern German dialects, which was the usage at that time. Hence it is unlikely that the modeller could have left his mother's house in the Ticino barely ten years before his engagement in Bavaria.

The uncertainty about Bustelli's antecedents has led to a great deal of conjecture: an accomplished artist-sculptor, with considerable ceramic knowledge to boot, was employed by von Haimhausen and set off almost immediately to create masterworks of rococo art. It is likely that the factory's director knew about the man he was about to hire and where this artist had studied, in which other factory he had worked before, but no record of any of this has survived. Neudeck was not generous with its salaries. Bustelli's first weekly wage was 4 florins, a miserable amount compared with that earned by modellers in other porcelain factories of the time, who could obtain up to 30 florins a week.

In 1758, having threatened to try his fortunes elsewhere, Bustelli was promoted to chief modeller with a raised salary of 6 florins. Shortly afterwards he acquired the additional post of technical adviser, and by mid-1761, he was the director of the modelling shop with a salary of a still rather modest 10 florins¹⁵. But he had to pester the directors endlessly for this higher remuneration.

The question has arisen sometimes whether Bustelli might have spent time in Vienna and there attended the Austrian Academy of Arts. If that was the case, he would certainly have come into contact with Franz Ignaz Günther (1725–1775), who is known to have been there in 1753¹⁶. Günther later became one of Southern Germany's most prestigious and prodigious rococo sculptors, accredited to the Electoral Court in Munich. The two artists could have continued to meet in Munich in later years¹⁷. Hofmann relates that Günther independantly supplied models for some figures to the porcelain factory, although the only evidence for this in the records is a payment of 29 florins *as per account rendered*, paid to the sculptor in 1769¹⁸. It was not actually recorded for what work or services the invoice had been made out.

On stylistic grounds, on the other hand, Rückert¹⁹ believes that Johann Baptist Straub (1702–1784) had a more impelling influence on Bustelli's earlier work at Neudeck. Until 1760, Straub held a key position in Bavarian rococo sculpture, having come from the Vienna Academy in 1735, and working as an independant artist in Munich until his death. Young Ignaz Günther himself worked in Straub's workshop for several years.

It was usual in the constricted world of eighteenth century porcelain and pottery factories for their directors to cast about amongst the staff of their competitors for technicians and artists to be purloined and lured to their own manufactories. Frequently, introductions and recommendations of suitable candidates were received from sources outside the ceramic industry. There is not a single piece of paper in any archive that Bustelli had benefited from such a manoeuvre. He arrived in Munich with some knowledge in the making and modelling of ceramic figures, but in the absence of any documentary evidence, the considerable speculation as to his previous employments in various porcelain factories seems to be rather futile.



2. BUSTELLI'S SIGNATURE.