

The tourist magnet in Arnstadt's Schlossmuseum is the worldwide-unparalleled miniature town "Mon plaisir" – "My Delight" – of Princess Auguste Dorothea of Schwarzburg-Arnstadt (1666–1751).

She created this gem to a large extent during her 35-year widowhood in her summer residence Augustenburg near Arnstadt. This unique miniature world reflects in detail an image of a small baroque residence town: literally a figurine's town – which in scale and compactness elevates the collection far beyond the ambitions of similar doll's houses in Nuremberg, Amsterdam, Utrecht, Frankfurt am Main or London. Furthermore it enables one to experience a cameo of social history. Beside the court environment of its creator, "Mon plaisir" also shows the living conditions of the other social classes of that era.

Separated into 82 different scenes, the 391 surviving figures and around 2,670 individual catalogued items, it provides an impression not only of courtly life but also of the life of the ordinary citizen, tradesman and farmer, the market bustle, carriage traffic in front of an imperial Post office, monastery life and much more.

If one scrutinises the furnishing of the regal rooms of the "figurine's town" one can recognise in this "miniature world" some of the details of the "full-size" baroque exhibition in the Schlossmuseum.

How the figurine collection "Mon plaisir" was created

This collection was created mainly at the summer residence of Princess Auguste Dorothea, the Augustenburg, built between 1700 and 1708/10 near Arnstadt. In the isolation of her summer palace Auguste Dorothea, daughter of Duke Anton Ulrich of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, from 1697 Prince Anton Günther II of Schwarzburg-Arnstadt, and his spouse, gave rein to her artistic passion for collecting, which included porcelain and paintings as well as jewellery and other hand-crafted objects.

It is known that the Princess in her enthusiasm for collecting artefacts got well into debt, and the expensive purchases for her figurine collection must have contributed to this substantially. Frequent warnings about the debt situation of the "Duchess of Augustenburg", as Auguste Dorothea evidently later called herself, filled the files, for instance the 600 Reichstalers, which the Ursuline Convent in Erfurt lent her in 1707 - although her relationship with the Ursuline Order, as it was in the ensuing period, clearly led to several cloister scenes being designed for the figurine collection.

On the 31st December 1715 Auguste Dorothea converted to Catholicism and shortly afterwards Anton Günther gave his wife and her catholic attendants permission to celebrate divine services at the Augustenburg. In 1751, in line with a previous agreement with the convent, Auguste Dorothea was buried in the Cloister Church of the Erfurt Ursuline Convent.

Although the majority of the figurine collection must have been acquired at the Augustenburg, its beginnings are believed to have occurred during Auguste Dorothea's stay in the Arnstadt residence Neideck. A first invoice for 24 Reichstalers "for doll's things" and once again for six Groats for "1/4 of a lot of doll's things", bought at the Leipzig Easter Market in 1697, must have

been connected with the Princess's intensions.

The date shown on several objects in the collection relate to the main period from 1704 to 1751, but a few of the dates fall outside this scope and may also be fantasy figures. Stylistic criteria as well as recent research into the origin and types of figurines lead to the assumption that the main creation period of "Mon plaisir" the 20s and 30s of the 18th Century, although the collection was more or less continuously extended until the death of the Princess in 1751.

The decoration of the interior is in Regency style, of which the dominant attribute is the ribbon motif. Miniature baroque-style furniture completes the picture. Fleurs de Rocaille, which characterise the Rococo style that emerged around 1740, cannot be found. Many small ceramic items in "Mon plaisir" were made in the Dorotheenthal Fayence works. This was founded in 1715 and was sited in the immediate neighbourhood of the Augustenburg. Several of the products in the figurine collection are marked and signed, and can be attributed to the early phase of the manufacture – until about 1735. On recent evidence, the various miniature containers and crockery can be classified as a particular type of blue pottery, namely Arnstadt Fayence.

Individual items of the "Mon plaisir" figurine collection

In addition to the handmade artefacts already mentioned, many other miniature objects must have been specially made, in order to provide a realistic impression of a small Thuringian residence town, which Princess Auguste Dorothea was undoubtedly aiming to achieve. The number of until now anonymous craftsmen, who worked on "Mon plaisir" at the request of the princess, is unknown. Vague clues show that Auguste Dorothea also involved members of her royal household in the production of the Figurine Collection and it was possibly her ladies in waiting who played a part in the making of the dolls' wardrobe. New research suggests that the figurines that relate to the Ursulines, came from Ursuline Convent in Erfurt.

The delicate dolls' heads

The origin of the artistically produced dolls' heads remains unsolved - magnificently crafted, wax figures made from beeswax with various additives – some of which have a distinct portrait character.

The fate of the "Mon plaisir" Figuring Collection after the death of Auguste Dorothea

In 1765, fourteen years after the death of Auguste Dorothea, the Augustenburg was sold for demolition. The "Mon plaisir" Figurine Collection ended up in the Arnstadt Orphanage and was initially part of a small rarities display chamber next to other art objects, natural specimens and curiosities, which were shown to interested visitors for a small charge.

Diminishing visitor interest, bad accommodation and poor care of the collection must have motivated Princess Marie of Schwarzburg-Sondershausen to have "Mon plaisir" moved at the end of 1881 to the "New Palace". From there the collection was transferred in 1892 to the palace in Gehren, where it was still accommodated in two large rooms on the second floor until 1930. In accordance with the Foundations Charter of 1919, the figurine collection was handed

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over in the year 1930 to the Schlossmuseum in Arnstadt. There on the 24th May 1931 it was opened to the public and has since been part of the Arnstadt Schlossmuseum's collection.

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