

28. Hirado Underglaze-Blue Decorated Porcelain Hawk on Rockwork

Height: 33.2 cm. (13 in.)

Width: 26.3 cm. (10 3/8 in.)

Depth: 20.0 cm. (7 7/8 in.)

Meiji period

19th century A.D.

Acquired in Japan

The noble bird of prey, realistically modeled with a strong curved beak and piercing eyes, is perched upon a craggy rock, its head sharply turned back, its large talons clinging to the crevices of rockwork, which is stippled in underglaze blue to resemble lichen. Cobalt-blue is used in a variety of ways to effectively characterize different types of feathers and different parts of the bird. The beak and eyes are solid blue whereas pencil-thin cobalt-blue lines detail the overlapping feathers that cover the wings, neck and underbelly while the breast remains white. The well-modeled head and shoulders have feathers aligned in tight rows; the longer wing feathers are two-tone blue and white above dark blue lower wings, one wing tip folded over the other. The long tail feathers curve down and, like the mid-wing markings, are two-tone blue and white. There is an overall greenish tint to the white porcelain. The base conforms to the shape of the rockwork and is smooth and very fine with reddish tinges on one edge, a result of firing. The bird and rock are hollow with a circular aperture created on the underside of the tail to permit a safe firing.



Hirado was the name of a group of islands, an important port city, and an extensive feudal domain located just west of Arita in Kyushu, the center of Japanese porcelain production since its beginnings in the early 17th century. Kilns were established within the domain and operated at Mikawachi and closeby under the local *daimyo*, the Matsuura. Hirado wares (sometimes called Mikawachi or Hirado Mikawachi wares) had been distinguished since the mid-17th century for the refinement of their materials and potting, and the delicacy, grace, and finesse of their underglaze-blue painting. The heyday of production, however, spanned the century between the mid-18th and mid-19th. With the collapse of the feudal system after the mid-19th century, the kilns were forced into broader commercial enterprises and it was thus that Hirado porcelain became the darling of the West.

With the weight of Eastern tradition defining part of the Hirado story, the West came to play another part through its special needs, demands, and tastes and its own ceramic history. Among the great variety of wares suitable for these distant clients were sculptures that included domestic and wild animals and birds. Birds of prey had been a part of the Japanese art world over many centuries. Falconry was a pastime of men of status and leisure, merchants and military men alike, the raptors used in hunting and also symbolic of the might of their masters. A porcelain hawk on a tree stump, approximately the same size as the present sculpture and believed to be Hirado ware, was embellished with overglaze enamels in place of the underglaze blue and is attributed to around A.D. 1820 (fig. 1). A smaller, but also related sculpture depicting an eagle on a rock is datable to A.D. 1830 (fig. 2). Contemporaneous with these is a porcelain sculpture of a lion, which exhibits a use of underglaze cobalt blue not dissimilar to the present hawk on rockwork (fig. 3).

When the Japanese sent their products to Europe from the mid-18th century onward, they were met with some competition and perhaps new expectations. The European efforts to produce a product to vie with and supplement the Chinese and Japanese porcelains that had become an addiction finally succeeded. The initial success of Johann Friedrich Böttger (A.D. 1682-1719) in A.D. 1709 in producing a high-fired ceramic was swiftly followed by improvements that resulted in Augustus the Strong, Elector of Saxony in Germany, establishing a factory at Meissen in A.D. 1720, which would be able to produce on home turf whatever the avid collector wished. Along with wares imitating Chinese and Japanese styles, the "...most ambitious of all of the projects undertaken at Meissen for Augustus the Strong was the production of large-scale animals for the Japanese Palace, the building intended to house all of his porcelain collections. The size of these animals presented enormous technical difficulties, and even though the factory used a more resilient hard-paste porcelain body for the animals, many of them display fire cracks and other evidence of problems encountered during firing. Nevertheless, they represent a remarkable achievement and remain among the most significant of all porcelain sculpture."¹

A Meissen figure of a vulture produced in A.D. 1731, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, is one of several hundred birds and animals produced at that time for Augustus the Strong (fig. 4). It's been noted that Augustus's porcelain collection in the Japanese Palace was destined for three exhibitions or sections: the Far Eastern imports; the Meissen porcelains imitating these wares but also the new and original branch of animal sculpture; and architectural porcelain.² It is noteworthy that the animal sculptures, referring to the A.D. 1731 production, were "new and original," which would seem to imply not in imitation of the imported wares from Asia, This is not to say the Meissen works were entirely independent creations. A good number of imports from the Dehua kilns in Fujian, known in the West as *Blanc de Chine*, included white porcelain birds (fig. 5).³ At the same time, however, the access of the designers and potters to actual birds and animals to use as models, and the astonishing naturalism that resulted, meant that relying on artistic models had been trumped by nature (fig. 6).

A flock of ceramic birds filled the 18th-19th century scene including Chinese Kangxi era biscuit wares from Jingdezhen to several centuries of white porcelain wares from Dehua to products from Delft to Staffordshire to Meissen. It is most difficult to date the late Hirado material and find its place in this menagerie, which has resulted in two schools of thought now current concerning the direction of influence. Either Hirado's marvelous hawk on rockwork and its mates were the models and inspiration for European porcelains, or the West was first to step up to the plate and the Japanese followed suit. If we agree to a 19th-century dating for the present piece—supported by an observation that the larger sculptural pieces at Hirado, those over 25 cm. in height, were not made until the 19th century—,⁴ then Hirado potters should have been influenced by developments in the West, where already in the 18th century ceramic sculptures of fowl of various types had appeared. It has been noted in regard to Japanese ceramic art that "attention to heightened realism in Meiji painted wares derived from recently introduced Dutch prints and scientific drawing."⁵ And thus why not a strong influence from Western ceramic art as well?

1. See Robert T. Singer and Hollis Goodall, *Hirado Porcelain of Japan From the Kurtzman Family Collection*, Los Angeles, 1998, p. 17.

2. See Dawn Hoskin, “The King Vulture & White Gold,” Nov. 17, 2004, www.vam.ac.uk/.../the-king-vulture-white-gold.

3. Donnelly notes that Augustus the Strong had four white parrots, ten inches high and three five inch ones in his inventory by 1721 and more were acquired after 1727. See P.J. Donnelly, *Blanc de Chine*, London, 1969, p. 186.

4. See Louis Lawrence, *Hirado: Prince of Porcelains* (Encyclopedia of Japanese Art Series), Chicago, 1997, p. 142. Also to note, in Lawrence’s list of dated examples is a white hawk on rockwork base, in a private collection in the UK, dated to 1868.

5. Singer, *ibid.*, p. 21.



Fig. 1: Hirado enameled porcelain “Hawk on a Tree Stump (h. 32.1 cm.), late Edo period, c. A.D. 1820, Metropolitan Museum of Art (Dr. & Mrs. Roger G. Gerry Collection and Bequest), New York City, after “Birds in the Art of Japan,” Feb. 2-July 28, 2013, after www.metmuseum.org



Fig. 2: Hirado porcelain eagle on rock (h. 13.3 cm.), late Edo period, A.D. 1830, Metropolitan Museum of Art (gift of Mrs. V. Everit Macy), New York City, after the “Collection Online,” after www.metmuseum.org



Fig. 3: Hirado underglaze-blue decorated porcelain lion (h. 24.7 cm.), Meiji period, 19th century A.D., after Louis Lawrence, *Hirado: Prince of Porcelains* (Encyclopedia of Japanese Art Series), Chicago, 1997, cover image.



Fig. 4: Meissen hard-paste porcelain and unfired colors, “King Vulture,” (h. 57.5 cm.), A.D. 1731, by Johann Joachim Kaendler (A.D. 1706-1775), Victoria and Albert Museum, London, after www.vam.ac.uk/page/t/the-collections



Fig. 5. White porcelain kestrel (h. 18.4cm.), Ming-Qing dynasty Dehua, Fujian province, after J.P. Donnelly, *Blanc de Chine*, London, 1969, pl. 109B.



Fig. 6: Meissen hard-paste porcelain and unfired colors, vulture on tree stump (h. 80.0 cm.), A.D. 1734, by Johann Joachim Kaendler (A.D. 1706-1775), after Otto Walcha, *Meissen Porcelain*, New York, 1981, pl. 78.