

Le Joyau Des Arts Décoratifs Européens: The Sèvres Porcelain Factory Resuscitation from 1804 to 1815

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Abstract

The following article is a research focusing on the Sèvres porcelain factory restart on the occasion of the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte in the post-French Revolution political scene. The emergence of a new decorative style in the early 19th century, the Empire Style, which seemed to be created in order to meet the aesthetic and political needs of the new regime having as main incentive the ambitious personality of Napoleon, in conjunction with the managerial post occupation of the -until then- decadent factory by the capable scientist Alexandre Brongniart, were the two main reasons for its successful re-opening. But what were the main innovations introduced for its resuscitation and in which sectors? How was developed the production of luxury porcelain objects up to 1815, i.e. until the official cessation of the Empire Style and what were the new prospects of the factory production? What changes were made to the form and decoration of new objects? These are only some of the many issues arisen which will be examined and analyzed.

Keywords: Porcelain, Sèvres, Empire Style, Brongniart, innovation

Introduction

For more than a century of splendor, beauty and luxury mirage of the political and institutional systems through the eighteenth and nineteenth century representatives of the French aristocracy, the national porcelain factory of Sèvres was the leading force of ceramic art not only in France, but throughout Europe until the last decades of the 1800s. Its rather moderately optimistic establishment in the beginning of 1738 in the Château de Vincennes, in an insignificant region at the eastern end of Paris (Ladonne, 2011, p. 4-7), was in the form of a small craft unit engaged in the production of porcelain items, its main material being though the soft - paste porcelain, namely a substitute of the genuine, hard - paste stuff. This expensive and scarce material was invented and put in mass production process no sooner than in 1710 by the factory of Meissen at Dresden, Germany. Of course, the recipe of such a significant raw material should remain secret and this was achieved under the strict supervision of Augustus II, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland or else Augustus the Strong (1670-1733) who protected the royal factory which soon became a firm of public interest and for some time it monopolized mass porcelain production across Europe (Queiroz & Agathopoulos, 2005, p. 211-215). In 1756 the facilities of this new ambitious factory were transferred to Sèvres although the period of its prosperity had begun five years before, that is, at the time when its management was taken over by the famous French painter Jean - Jacques Bachelier (1724-1806). Just at that time, the factory tried and finally managed to get over its initial production and aesthetic line which was based on copying and

imitating many products of Meissen supporting its purely proprietary version of Rococo style porcelain objects, and in this effort it was extremely helped and promoted by Louis XV. So it was no long before that the artisans and artists of the new factory started to explore deeper the sculptural possibilities of porcelain, by designing and manufacturing several collections of small, almost fragile birds, small or large scale pictorial compositions of children in shades of white and ivory, even an extended collection of allegorical porcelain pieces with very detailed features which had a thematic relevance and remained white, masked with a sparkling, charming, transparent glaze. The legendary Madame de Pompadour, the mistress of Louis XV, particularly loved this collection, but soon she seemed to change her mind and to opt for a new, outstanding collection which included petite, very fragile items of 'biscuit' porcelain which remained unglazed, in the natural porcelain color and texture in the form of flowers, erotic or archaic compositions (Bradley, 2015, p. 198). At the same time, the factory developed, through the craftsmen who worked for this, other more sophisticated techniques especially in the field of porcelain decoration, such as multicolored enamels, which made it stand out in style from the already classic Meissen porcelain factory. It is no wonder thus that during this period the factory was officially designated as the *Manufacture Royale de Porcelaine*, a title which was nevertheless lost immediately after the French Revolution of 1789.

A new historical reality, a new style

In the years that followed, Sèvres began to face major difficulties over their hitherto numerous and luxurious production, it being mainly of an economic nature. Being a factory producing generally luxurious items, Sèvres ceased to be a royal company almost immediately after the French Revolution. This resulted in losing all of its elite clientele both in France and elsewhere in Europe though it continued producing smaller quantities of luxury products pending the decommissioning of its production at the end of 1799 (Amsel-Arieli, 2016). However, in the early years of the 19th century, Sèvres began to regain its former glory. It was then that Napoleon Bonaparte, one of the most prominent military and political leaders of history, had already opened with his strong personality a large new chapter in the political and social developments in France. Also remarkable were his military achievements, which besides changing forever the geopolitical map of Europe at the same time they highlighted new tactics of war. Napoleon was a complex personality and while at the beginning of his career he was creative, leading France to new levels of dominance, towards the end of his career he caused unjustified wars and disasters. He was worshiped by his fans and hated by his enemies, while his inexhaustible enthusiasm and unlimited ambition became soon proverbial components of his explosive personality. His glory of a military commander was unsurpassed, but hundreds of thousands of people died at the altar of his excessive egoism, which remained unsaturated even when he had conquered most of Europe and had already been recognized as an emperor. More specifically from May 1802 onwards Napoleon, who had already been voted as a Consul for life by referendum, was en route to become the absolute ruler. Within a year his reckless ambitions led to new hostilities with Great Britain and with the pretext of safeguarding France from any form of conspiracies, he turned the title of the Consul into a hereditary title, so he was soon declared 'Napoleon Emperor of France' in May 1804 (Chilonas, 2014). The period of his consulship, namely from the end of 1799 up to 1804 was named Consular Period, while that of his reign from 1804 up to June 1815 was named Empire Period, that is two different historical periods which were though directly associated with many different art forms at multiple levels. Of course, they were clearly influenced by both his political and military action, and this is reflected in the work of many prominent artists, designers and

architects whom he used largely to promote and establish, in an obviously propagandistic way, his rising status-quo star. He personally had no knowledge of art, but had a strong desire to be surrounded by buildings and objects that would contribute to the visibility of what he called 'glory' given that he always admired the militaristic grandeur of Rome (Perivoliotou, 2004, p. 168). Soon he appointed as official architects of his 'court' two architects / designers, Charles Percier (1764-1838) and Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine (1762-1853), whose works established them as the main representatives of the Empire Style in France (Cabelle, 2016). The works of these two periods were distinguished for their symbolic character which, however, was directly linked with the meaning of militarism and by extension the French valor: symbols of war and battle, victory over enemies, glory and power, imperial badges and superfluous compositions and references to unreal beings such as golden eagles, sphinxes, or winged lions, to mention only a few, revealed the direct relationship of the new French Empire with the corresponding Roman. Almost all areas of applied arts welcomed this new aesthetic intervention the aim of which was to promote and maintain the glory and the victorious imperial greatness of Napoleon himself. This both grandiose and magnificent Empire Style could not but include elements from the famous expedition to Egypt, which soon created a new aesthetic trend that soon became a frenzy for anything Egyptian. This was assisted by the publication of the book titled *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Égypte pendant les campagnes du Général Bonaparte* by the archaeologist Dominique - Vivant Denon (1747-1825) containing drawings and engravings drawn almost unchanged from ancient Egyptian temples and royal tombs depicting wonderful secret symbols of this great civilization including branches of palm trees, mummies of prominent men, reliefs and hieroglyphics (Gontar, 2016). All those elements, new to the French aesthetics, coupled with corresponding archaic symbols –such as the swan, namely the form that Zeus took to seduce women, the lyre, the symbol of Apollo and Eros, the butterfly, the symbol of the Soul, the bee, the symbol of immortality and resurrection etc., formed the basis for the creation of decorative themes and motifs which seemed to form a new order for the decorative arts in France during the period of our interest.

New administration or otherwise superiority of technological modernity

Within this new political, aesthetic theater and ultimately governance model of values that began to develop in France, a prominent role belonged also to porcelain production, a sector which, though fatally affected by the political actions that followed the French Revolution, looked for ways of recovering and restoring the glory and high acceptance levels it had experienced before the fall of Bastille. But what was really missing from the factory was, in the first instance, its technical and administrative restructuring, a very important action that could contribute to the later aesthetic upgrading of its products. The placement of the famous chemist and metallurgist Alexandre Brongniart (1770-1847) in the post of the factory manager who fundamentally reorganized the way it was running, also intervening in reviewing its previously entrenched aesthetical standards, was a catalyst for the technological and consequently aesthetic restarting of the Sèvres' factory (Fig. 1).

It was also the time when the factory needed more than ever a fundamental renewal of its administration and production, but also the knowhow to substantially meet the new challenges of the market which, at the time, operated throughout Europe under quite different economic, commercial and aesthetic conditions. In accordance with contemporary appraisers of the Sotheby's Auction Center, Brongniart '*managed to bring an air of vitality and freshness to the old*

and boring French porcelain by constantly looking for new ways of administration, and new techniques, new designs, new inspirations and new artists' (Reed, 2016).



Figure 1. The Sèvres' factory in early 1800 as it was depicted by the French painter Achille Etna Michallon, (Source: Bibliothèque Nationale de France).

The role of Brongniart in shaping the new factory's operating conditions was crucial in every respect, and that is why today his work is considered as a very important development in the history of European decorative arts regarding the application of scientific data and practices for improving them (Carr-Trebelhorn, 2014, p. 1). Before going to technological innovations introduced by this new director of the hitherto decadent factory, we will have to look at his contribution to its administrative upgrading. In his attempt to 'refound' this famous porcelain factory, he turned his attention to the valuable help of a brave government grant which he received through the mediation of persons close to the circle of Napoleon himself. At the same time, however, he committed himself not only to maintain, but also to further improve the already high quality production that porcelain products enjoyed before the Revolution. Besides, not only for Napoleon, but also for all the leaders of France who followed up to the end of the nineteenth century, the factory of Sèvres seemed to be affiliated with the concepts of innovation, elegance and generally high quality, thus supporting the French effort in the competitive, global arena of the porcelain objects production (Préaud, 1997, p. 32).

Being himself a scientist, almost free from the noisy 'revolutionary' ideology of his predecessors-artists, he tried to work out practical and functional ways that would help the smooth rebooting of the factory. In his not particularly extensive but very important work as a writer which included the book *Traité des Arts Céramiques, ou des Poteries, Considérées dans leur Histoire, leur Pratique, et leur Théorie* and the two-volume *Traité Elementaire de Minéralogie avec des Applications aux Arts*, Brongniart managed to introduce new methods and modes of production and contribute greatly to the research and overall development of the French and world ceramics (Préaud, 1997, p. 126). Guided by deep knowledge in chemistry, but especially in geology and metallurgy, he immediately noticed the changes needed to be made on the already new factory of Sèvres as to the main raw material which would be used for new production. So one of the first and very important innovations that he introduced in this matter was the

definitive cessation of the soft - paste porcelain, given that the discovery of large areas with kaolin in the region of Limoges, seemed to give solution to the use of the only raw material that the factory would use from then on, it being the hard - paste porcelain, the recipe of which he dramatically improved.

Among his many technological innovations were a number of new enamel colors which had never been used before. These new durable and very easy to use enamels were an ideal way of imitation of the rock texture - especially marble - in many ceramic surfaces, a new trend in French pottery which was particularly connected with the interest of Brongniart himself in rocks and the science of geology, in general. Similarly, the invention and thus the use a new type of kiln that had many possibilities of mass production as it had much more capacity than the previous ones, was quicker in firing, more cost-effective and thus it was more efficient in every respect, boosted the factory output in the first decade of 1800 (Munger, 2010, p. 205). Furthermore, he experimented and managed to improve the up to then quite difficult technique of casting, which favored the faster and more accurate production of articles.

In general, Brongniart began to improve the factory production capacity without, however, doing that at the expense of the enterprise which gradually seemed to refrain from the dependence, financially speaking, on the new government. At the same time, he launched a large-scale scientific research on the history and composition of ceramics which included cooperation with many well-known scientists throughout the world, in order to create an extensive, valuable collection of not only prehistoric, ancient, medieval, renaissance but also contemporary ceramics (Rudwick, 2005, p. 473). This very significant shift towards the sciences for the French industry standards had two outstanding results for both the factory itself, and the history of French and world ceramics. First, his systematic research and study around the ceramic factory raised Sèvres to a global data bank that supplied with its technological innovations many other ceramic production units in Europe and America. Second, and equally important, it ushered in the realization of the great, personal dream of Brongniart which was none other than the creation of a large, modern ceramics museum. This idea of his which was conceived just in 1802 began to take place in early 1820 and was completed in mid-1824 (Brongniart, 1845, p. i – iii). The famous Musée Céramique, which today is an integral part of the expanded museum Cité de la Céramique, contained an enviable collection of ceramic and glass objects from all parts of the world, plasterwork molds and casts, and explanations for the many interesting techniques applied by region and culture.

To the Emperor's delight: the search for a new aesthetic

Under the supervision of Napoleon himself, who loved to order large quantities of expensive, luxury items of works not only for his own use, but also as expensive gifts in order to upgrade both his own image in the political circles of Europe and to restore the much hated French diplomacy reputation, in general, the factory soon became the main source of production of original porcelain items which were made in accordance with the dictates of the Empire Style. Therefore it was not surprising that soon many of these items began to be frantically copied by other porcelain factories of royal interest mainly across Europe.

But even before Brongniart had given new sensory guidance to the production of new objects, he took care to remove from the factory a large amount of non-decorated, unglazed porcelain items that were in stock, by selling them to other European manufacturers. The first decade of the reopening of the factory was, in all respects, remarkable in terms of its new

production. The gradual implementation of the Empire Style both in the construction / form of the objects and in that of their decoration was impressive. So, around the end of 1810 he seemed to have already formed the aesthetic type that would prevail in most products for several more decades. According to the taste of the new Emperor anything associated with glorious historical feats, was part of some great ancient civilization, was impressive, shiny, luxurious, or was 'clamorous' and 'wordy' in terms of ornamental decoration had to be employed in order to give to the final products the sense of magnificence. Both to purely utilitarian, decorative utilitarian and purely decorative objects, the extensive use of gilding, the imitation of fossils on small or large surfaces, the application of militaristic victory symbols and the flamboyant border designs and patterns constituted undeniable features of the new style (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. A pair of Empire Style vases depicting the glamour of Napoleon's military activities, Sèvres 1807, (Source: Regents Antique Catalogue).

As for the main body of objects, the factory started to produce a different type of shapes and forms, of which the articles ranged from simple, sharp or finely decorated cylindrical, oval or elliptically shaped vases, tableware and more especially numerous tea or coffee sets, candlesticks, elaborate perforated bowls and jars, mantel clocks, tobacco cases, milk jugs, several types of ewers and basins, busts of great personalities, cameos even individual plaques and hand-painted porcelain parts for furniture or metalwork. All this extensive collection of goods reveals *the inventiveness, the technical mastery, and the stylistic diversity of Sèvres porcelain produced in the years between 1800 and 1850* (Munger, 2002, p. 37, 291).

As for their decoration part, the use of painting on many of them was another very characteristic feature of the new style. The extensive encyclopedic knowledge of Brongniart in conjunction with the imperial demands were the basis for an exquisite collection of themes that formed the broad thematic base of the Empire taste. These included dreamy landscapes, scenes of battles and military imagery in general, forms of important personalities or deities, Renaissance figures and cupids, and even elements drawn through the wonderful world of insects (butterflies), or even themes derived from the sciences of botany and ornithology. During that period, Brongniart urged many of the artists that worked in the factory to start copying on porcelain plaques, partially or even entirely in some cases, works of major artists of the Renaissance such as Titian and Raphael, of the Baroque period such as Poussin and Rubens, as well as of modern French artists such as Girodet and Girard (Leloq & Lederlé, 2010, p. 31, 32). The reason that led

him to such a decision was the possibility that the ceramic art could keep intact many of the masterpieces of world painting, in sharp contrast with the paintings themselves whose decay was often inevitable. The severity of this point was so great that he sent at the expense of the factory one of his prominent painters / colleagues, Marie-Victoire Jaquotot (1772-1855) in Rome, and in Florence in order to study, and to copy, at the same time, original paintings from the vast public and private collections of the two cities. These works of much smaller size than the original ones, while their themes were often used for the decoration of utilitarian objects. A good example of her admirable work is a miniature-on-porcelain tray with the French title *La Belle Jardinière*, a copy of Raphael's original painting *Madonna and Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist*, oil on canvas, painted between 1505 and 1508, part of a fine five-piece breakfast set with the characteristic name 'Great Painters' (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. *La Belle Jardinière*, porcelain tray made by Marie-Victoire Jaquotot, Sèvres 1814, (Source: Le Musée de Céramique de Sèvres).

However, only two pieces of this commission were finally completed: this particular tray and a cup saucer which depicts the portrait of Elisabeth de Bourbon. In this work, which was completed around 1814, we can notice its beautiful details that render this utilitarian object to an actual artwork. When we observe closely the face of the Virgin we can only admire the mastery of painting which is free of any kind of brush stroke: the facial skin is absolutely pure, free of any technical inconsistency, keeping, though, the grace and the elegance of the original painting (Miel, 1817, p. 463).

The shift of Brongniart to the ancient Greek, Roman and Etruscan art in order to borrow decorative patterns, colors, shapes, and symbols - such as the stylized palm leaves, a classic ancient symbol of victory or even the Imperial Roman Eagle, a symbol that became the main inspiration for Napoleon's French Imperial Eagle - and to adapt them to new aesthetic data, has also influenced the shaping of the Empire Style (Amsel-Arieli, 2016). This trend in the decoration of porcelain items, which fell into the aesthetics of Neoclassicism, had also already been known since the time of Louis XVI and constituted the favorite decorative style in ceramics of both himself and Maria Antoinette. But Napoleon was not put off at all by this 'simple aesthetic

coincidence' which was also directly affiliated with both the splendor of ancient Rome, and his own imperial regime (Schwartz, 1992, p. 163). The range of the objects produced in this particular decorative or thematic style was vast and it included different types of vases, dishes, mantel clocks, and dessert sets. (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. Elaborate dish of a Desert Service in ancient Greek decoration, Sèvres 1808, (Source: © 2000–2016 The Metropolitan Museum of Art).

One of the most characteristic works of this type is one of the seventy-eight plates belonging to a set described in one of the 1808 factory's catalogues as a 'Dessert service with dark blue ground, figures in brown heightened with gold on pebbled ground' (Metropolitan Museum, 2016). According to the same catalogue the way these pieces were decorated is elaborate and shows clearly the high skill of the labor. The wonderful blue ground of the border with the repeated motifs of the ancient Greek anthemion is nicely combined with the marbled ground of the centre, while the gilding of the border enhances the central seated classical figure which is also gilt highlighted.

Napoleon's famous campaign in Egypt could not leave unaffected the ceramics sector in terms of its subject matter, but also in terms of decoration in general. In a mixture of militaristic style and orientalism, sweeping 'Egyptomania' prevailing in the French decorative arts of the time, began to cover with the same imperial extravagance either single porcelain items or even whole series of them with motifs, patterns, scenes and landscapes that made reference to the ancient or late 18th century Egypt. The collection in question included many types of utilitarian objects, the most typical of which were tea sets. Many of these sets depicted ancient Egyptian temples, the glorious ancient city of Thebes, the Pyramids, even and one from the Seven Wonders of ancient world, the Lighthouse of Alexandria. Other sets depicted landscapes from the Egyptian desert, heads of Bedouins or religious people of Islam, caravans of camels, oases while the teacups and tea saucers edges were mostly decorated with decorative motifs derived from hieroglyphics (Fig. 5, 6).



Figures 5, 6. Coffee set cup and saucer with Egyptian motifs and images, Sèvres 1808-1812, (Source: Apsley House Collection, London).

The famous book of Denon was a real treasure for the excellent painter Nicolas-Antoine Lebel (active 1804-1845), but also for the famous for his work, the ornamentalist and, at the same time, intimate partner of his, Pierre-Louis Micaud (active 1794-1834), who immortalized with great skill the Egyptian culture on the porcelain tea sets designed especially for the Emperor and his wife Josephine (DeLorme, 2005, p. 125). From the same book are taken the theme and the motifs of a very interesting coffee set produced in Sèvres between 1808 and 1812. The exoticism and the mystical magic of Egypt is depicted, in a unique way, both through the landscapes and the dark-skinned faces of contemporary Egyptians which are either real or representative of that particular culture. The earthy colors combined with the mysterious black and the expensive gold refer to the beauty and the sacred solitude of the Egyptian desert, while the imaginary hieroglyphics play a rather decorative role, without any particular meaning. This coffee set was commissioned twice: the original one was offered by Napoleon to the Emperor of Russia Alexander I, whereas the second one was given to Josephine who was a great fan of the Egyptian culture.

Believing that with the adoption and combination of many different historical and cultural styles, he would have been able to make the Empire Style in porcelain items, irresistible throughout Europe, Brongniart has had a keen interest on historicism and eclecticism. All this led him very early in adopting one more impressive historical style that had its roots in medieval times, the Gothic or medievalizing style, in which he remained loyal until the end of his term of office as director at Sèvres which coincided with his death in 1847 (Hildyard, 1999, p. 95). However, what should be noted is that Brongniart did not try to copy that style, but to introduce many of the medieval aesthetics patterns and motifs in a specific part of the factory's production. So we cannot find objects in that period which are strict copies of the Gothic style, but we can easily identify items that strongly invoke this characteristic style. More specifically, the gothic elements borrowed by the Sèvres artists hardly concern the form of objects, but are closely related to their relief and painting decoration. However, this particular type of decorative and functional objects thrived mainly during the 1820s and especially 1830s, but the first traces of its emergence are detected around mid-1810s.

The decoration of objects of different types of decorative arts such as wooden or metal boxes, mantel clocks or furniture with porcelain elements was not Brongniart's new idea as we can find many such articles in the 18th century France, but also in other countries such as Germany and England. However there is a plethora of objects, mainly various types of Empire

Style furniture, which are well combined with the use of large or small porcelain elements or plaques which are of great interest. This is because the application of fine porcelain elements of extraordinary craftsmanship and decorative quality was successfully combined with specific types of furniture which were typical examples of furniture of that period. For example Guéridon or table à thé, Commode de Style Empire and many more types of furniture, were often inlaid with porcelain plaques in different shapes and sizes, beautifully hand painted and decorated with gilt bronze or copper mounts (Sassoon, 1991, p. 193). All of them were often beautifully combined with a vast color range of enamels, gold or silver leaves and of course high quality types of metal and wood. The main arrangement of the Guéridons or other round table porcelain plaques design was a circle of several clockwise round plaques showing people or situations surrounding a central, bigger plaque depicting the main character or theme of the whole composition. One of the most elegant and well-made furniture is a rare piece of a low, Gueridon type, table, well known in his time as *Table des Grands Capitaines* (Table of Great Commanders), designed and manufactured between 1806 and 1812 (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. The elaborately made *Table des Grands Capitaines*, 1806–1812, (Source: Royal Collection Trust, London).

The particular table, covered with a circular Sèvres porcelain plaque was commissioned by Napoleon and it was one of four luxurious presentation tables to immortalize his reign. The round porcelain top, distinctively Neoclassical in style, is beautifully decorated with chased gilt bronze mounts and contains, in imitation, flat, hand-painted ancient Greek cameos which are so well executed that their raised reliefs look almost real. In the centre of the round plaque there is the dominant figure of Alexander the Great - a historical figure that Napoleon admired much - while the smaller circles that surround it, depict the heads of twelve commanders from Antiquity. The whole table is a work of art which reflects Napoleon's strong wishful thinking to become a new world leader, as Alexander the Great was, and constitutes one of the most important items of the Empire Style both in terms of luxury and symbolism.

Conclusion

The Sèvres porcelain factory was the spearhead of the political and social stratification in the late 18th and early 19th century France. Being a factory closely related to the political system of the

country, it fatally could not remain unaffected by the new order. However, we do not know what would finally be its evolution if, according to the new socioeconomic changes that had been introduced by the French Revolution ideology, its restart meant its definitive distancing from the production of luxury goods. The new conditions defined by the Napoleonic militaristic power and especially by the controversial personality of Bonaparte himself, maintained and perhaps increased the sense of luxury in the production of expensive porcelain items. It was not a coincidence that the revival of the factory was closely affiliated with the notion of vanity of the Emperor, but also with the broader political propaganda of the time. The famous Empire Style, within which Sèvres factory was reborn, was widely adopted, if not imitated, by many royal courts across Europe such as Austria and Germany but mainly Russia where it was transformed into a new national art style. At the same time Sèvres new production created a new fashion in ceramics throughout Europe and its products started being imitated and occasionally copied until the end of Napoleon's reign in 1815. It is worth mentioning that while the Empire Style continued thriving for some more years after that date, the factory stopped, almost immediately, being a leader in the porcelain world. This can also be proved by the fact that after the Egyptian and Neoclassical style in luxurious porcelain production - which were fully associated with Napoleon's Empire Style - the factory did not produce any particular style of this caliber.

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