

Gravant's Secret or the First Royal Privilege of Vincennes

BY ANTOINE d'ALBIS

English translation by Mary-Louise Galloway-Ohajima

At the end of April, 1745, Jeanne Antoinette Lenormant d'Etiolles managed to fulfil a prediction which had been made fourteen years earlier, when Jeanne was only ten years old. Madame Lebon, the fortune-teller concerned, had foretold that Mme d'Etiolles would one day become the favourite of Louis XV, King of France. As yet unsure whether this new status would endure, but intent on taking advantage of it immediately, Mme d'Etiolles paid a visit to Philibert Orry de Vignory, the Inspector General of Finances, and asked him to grant her husband the post of Farmer General.

Orry de Vignory, who had overseen finances for the past fifteen years, was undoubtedly well-informed concerning the gossip and rumours which were circulating in the King's court. His information must have been somewhat dated, however, for he appeared greatly surprised by the suddenness of Mme d'Etiolles' request and concluded that, in spite of her strategies, she had not succeeded in achieving her goal. Legend has it that Vignory even told her: 'Madame, if what is being said is true, it is not of me that you should make this request; on the other hand, if what is being said is not true, you shan't have the post at all.'

Orry de Vignory would surely have been more circumspect had he known that two months later, Louis XV – in the throes of a new love affair, in the Dauphin's presence and thanks to his own participation – would win the battle of Fontenoy; or that in four months' time, the 'Etiolles girl' Vignory had so imprudently dismissed would receive the title of Marquise de Pompadour. His insolence meant certain and immediate disgrace (1).

If this blunder proved fatal to Vignory, it was also to throw his brother, Orry de Fulvy, into a most cruel predicament. Fulvy had been financially backing the young Manufacture de Vincennes since the spring of 1741. The credit to which he had long had access thanks to his brother's position had undoubtedly been advantageous in this venture. One might even ask if he hadn't on occasion benefited, in the name of this good cause, from direct and confidential financial aid from the Inspector General of Finances.

Orry de Fulvy, then, needed an alternative strategy. To compensate for the privileged protection which was no longer available to him, Fulvy thought of establishing a joint stock company, whose capital would be as sizeable as its shareholders were numerous.

These would be kept to a number which Fulvy could easily control. To attract associates to the budding company, Fulvy thought to provide it with a unique advantage. This would be a question of obtaining – with the help of his brother, who still retained his position of Chief Finance Inspector – exclusive governmental authority to produce Sax-style porcelain, which was then being increasingly imported into France.

Such a privilege, while serving to lure shareholders to the Manufacture de

Vincennes, was to be less providential for the neighbouring factories; it would, in effect, condemn them to irremediable stagnation.

It was going to be a sensitive matter for Orry de Fulvy to make this unjust and excessive request, first to the Bureau of Trade and then to the King's State Council, just as his brother was about to be dismissed from favour. Fulvy thought he could resolve this conflict by simply not appearing at the procedures. In order to remain in the shadows, he set about looking for an intermediary, deciding on the alias of Charles Adam, the name of one of his servants (2).

With the groundwork of Fulvy's strategy being thus laid out, it was then just a question of gathering the associates together and initiating the administrative procedures required to acquire the exclusive privilege.

Approval first had to be obtained from the Bureau of Trade, where Fulvy had old ties; his initial decision, in 1741, to invest in the Vincennes factory had been taken after consultation with the board's former president (3). To avoid making a personal appearance before this authority, which had been discreetly prepared for the event, Fulvy dispatched one of his Vincennes employees, François Gravant, to present the case.

The Bureau of Trade convened on 1 July 1745. Gravant did not appear personally at the proceedings but his written presentation of the request made an eloquent defense of the report. He claimed that 'although there had already been one unsuccessful attempt in the Kingdom to establish a factory which could produce porcelain ware to rival that of Saxö, through his research he had succeeded in creating a product that could stand the comparison. Furthermore, in addition to having mastered the technique of applying gold to the porcelain, Gravant stated that his wide range of colours would permit the production of decorative motifs of the same quality as those on Sax ware. Finally, Gravant asserted that the company could only be founded if it pleased the King to grant Charles Adam the exclusive right to manufacture Meissen-style porcelain, 'peinte et dorée à figure humaine' (4).

The Bureau of Trade agreed to accord the privilege, ruling it effective for a period of thirty years. Permission was also granted the company to produce, concurrently with other French factories, 'Japanese-style' porcelain ware (5).

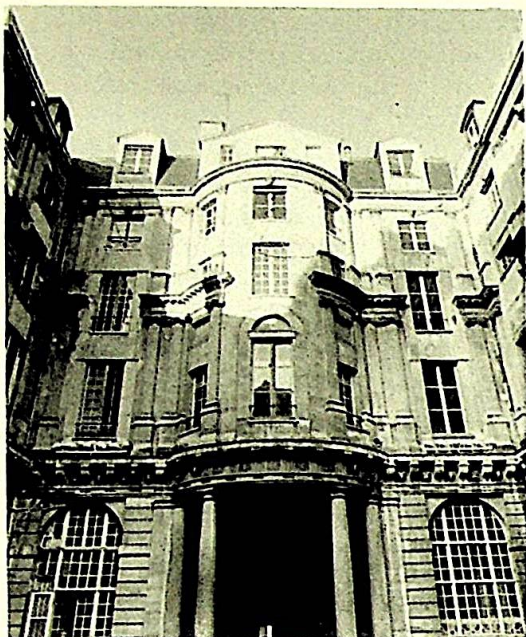
With this hurdle out of the way, Orry de Fulvy's next challenge was to present the same request to the King's State Council – before it was too late. (No one knew just how much longer Fulvy's brother, Vignory, would remain there as State Counsellor and Inspector General of Finances.) Vignory was responsible for presenting the report before the council, which met on 24 July 1745.

Vignory's presentation on behalf of Charles Adam differed little from the case which had been made before the Bureau of Trade. He pointed out, however, that the granting of the privilege to Adam was all the more urgent, in view of the fact that a porcelain workshop had just been opened in England, 'which would cause a considerable amount of capital to leave the country' (6). It would indeed be regrettable, Vignory remarked, if this privilege were not put at the disposal of the Manufacture de Vincennes, whose porcelain had been 'seen and examined by the merchants and licensed tradesmen of Sax porcelain, who approved it and even recognized it as being superior'.

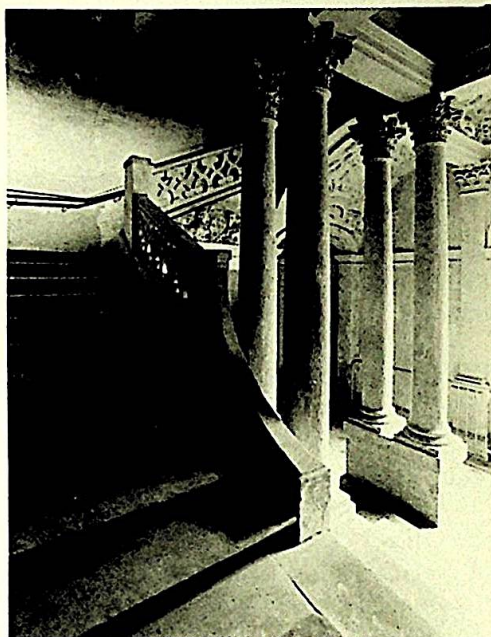
Vignory also requested permission to reside at the royal Vincennes castle, where the factory was situated. In addition, he asked for authority to 'prohibit all sorts of persons' from manufacturing meissen-style porcelain, on penalty of confiscation and a fine of £3,000. Vignory further demanded that the Vincennes workers be forbidden to leave the grounds without permission, on penalty of imprisonment

– stipulating, however, that they should be exempt from hewing and from military service (7). The final provision requested was that officers and noblemen be allowed to participate in the company without losing rank and title.

The King, 'étant en son conseil', * accorded the privilege, which would be effective for twenty years. Its unfair and excessive terms would be more than sufficient to lure potential investors.



View of the Courtyard of the Hotel de Beauvais, residence of Orry de Fulvy.



Main staircase of the Hotel de Beauvais.

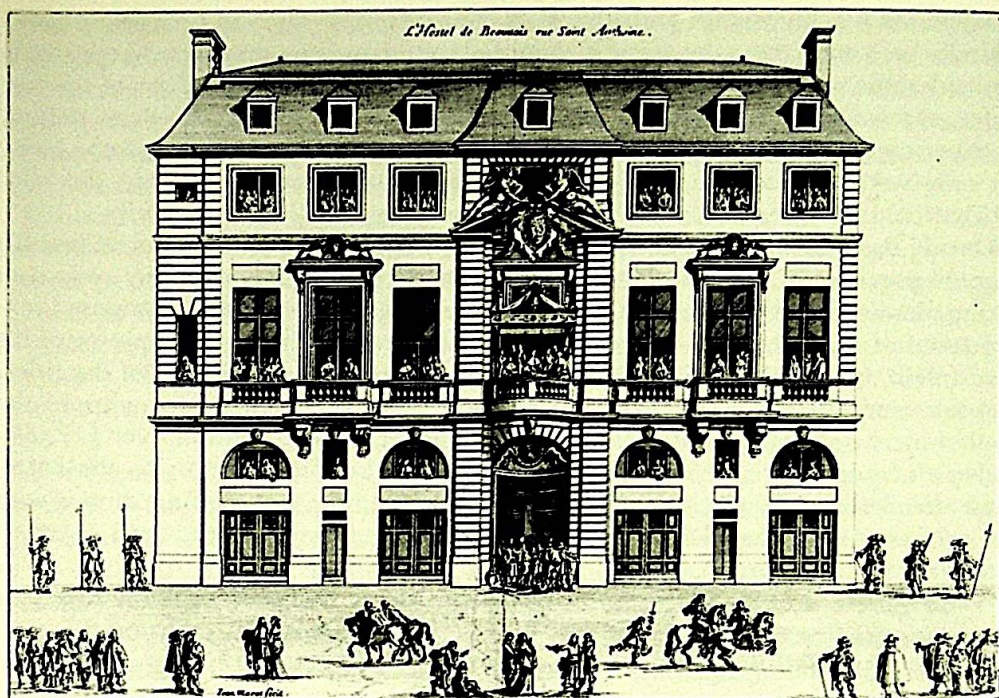
Although conditions were now ripe for him to begin his enterprise, Fulvy feared his trickery might be too obvious, and decided it would be wise to stay in the background a little longer. After all, his brother's fall from grace would have occurred on 6 December, 1745, just four months before he had rendered his services to Fulvy before the King's Council.

The Vincennes associates, then, were to subscribe to the capital of the 'Charles Adam Company'. This capital was set at £90,300, and divided into twenty-one registered shares of £4,300 each. The shareholders were Messieurs Boisement, Parseval, Bouillard, Bonfils, Cury, Douet and Verdun. The last on this list subscribed, in the general interest of the company, to nine shares, or a total of £38,700 (8), with each of the other six buying two shares, at a cost of £8,600 per person. Neither Charles Adam nor Orry de Fulvy were among the shareholders.

At this point a record of the associates' deliberations was begun; the minutes of their meetings, lively and precious documents, are preserved in the archives of the Manufacture de Sèvres (9).

On 7 August 1745 the associates named Sieur Boileau to reside at Vincennes, assigning him duties which fell somewhere between those of foreman and intendant. On 20 August, the company was obliged, according to Article 4 of its statutes (10), to purchase the privilege obtained, ostensibly, by Charles Adam. While the original

* Attending the council (Translator's Note).



Ann d'Autriche watching Louis XIV's entrance to Paris from the balcony of the Hotel de Beauvais
 – engraving from Jean Narot 1662.

price had been fixed at £50,000, the expenses accrued since the founding of the manufactory would raise this figure to £58,914, if the shareholders were agreed. There was no objection, and the payment was made to Charles Adam.

Orry de Fulvy could be proud indeed of his simple yet original idea. The Charles Adam alias had served to obtain the privilege for the company, and now it would serve a second design: that of reselling this same privilege, anonymously, to the very associates it had been instrumental in attracting in the first place. Having been thus generously reimbursed for expenditures perhaps never even incurred, Orry de Fulvy proceeded, like an 'éminence grise', to direct, protect, take decisions for and shape the shareholders to his liking. For their part, the shareholders, uninitiated as to the mysteries of porcelain production, were probably only too honoured to be sharing in the decision-making of one so close to the hands of power.

By the year's end the company's financial reserves had already been depleted, and at their 12 January 1746 meeting, the associates agreed to raise the capital from £90,300 to £126,000. This measure gained the company some £35,700, but cost those associates holding two shares £3,400 each, and Verdun, who had nine, £15,300. Verdun's personal investment had now reached £54,000, but this was without guarantee, since the Vincennes Manufactory – despite its 'royal' designation – had been deprived of the protection it had enjoyed prior to the fall from grace of Orry de Vignory. And as unfair as it was, the privilege did not bring the slightest profit to the company. Furthermore, the associates did not even have access to the formulas for the porcelain clay and glaze compositions, the remarkable quality of which had first incited their interest.

Three weeks later a meeting was held at the home of Orry de Fulvy, who informed the associates that after having watched the company 'grow before his very eyes',

he would put his 'knowledge and advice' at their disposal. They in turn asked Fulvy to kindly pass on to them the secret clay and glaze formulas, which would constitute a considerable guarantee on their investments. Fulvy, himself ignorant of the formulas, shrewdly evaded the issue and gained some time by asking Boileau to have an experimental kiln constructed, for demonstration purposes. Two months later, not only were the associates still unaware of the clay composition, but the kiln, which would have served no useful purpose anyway, had yet to be built.

During the shareholders' meeting of 20 March 1746, Verdun announced that his original purchase of nine shares, effected for the benefit of the company, was now taking him beyond the financial limits he had envisaged. He therefore proposed selling seven of these shares to Orry de Fulvy, which would bring the amount of his investment down to that of the others. In his eagerness to rid himself of the titles, Verdun even offered to sell them at their issue price, not taking into account the capital increase of two months earlier, which meant a loss to him of over £12,000. Fulvy's acquirement of Verdun's shares marked his official return to the enterprise. While this was at a cost of £30,000, Fulvy had little trouble financing it with the profit he had amassed from the sale of the privilege, at the company's expense, less than a year before.

With one third of the shares in his possession, Orry de Fulvy was able to assure the associates that they were no longer the only one financially supporting the company, citing the fact that each increase in capital now cost them three times less than it cost Fulvy.

Alas, as of the autumn of 1746 the company till was empty; capital had to be increased to £21,000 to bring in some liquid assets. The associates were requested to make a new sacrifice of £42,000 the following January; fortunately, this effort was to be rewarded with an equivalent sum put at their disposal by the Crown.

By this time Orry de Fulvy had spent every cent earned from the sale of the privilege, and the associates had had to expend double the original amount estimated with Verdun personally laying out more than £30,000.

Fulvy's attempt to make a third call for more capital, in the spring of 1748, met with general hostility. The associates had already far surpassed the expenses envisaged; furthermore, the secret formula of the porcelain composition, for which they had made unending sacrifices, was still unknown to them.

In fact, the secret was in the hands of François Gravant, who, on Fulvy's orders, had stolen it from the Manufacture's founder, Claude Humbert Gérin, in 1742 or 1743. As reward for the theft Gravant had been given a monopoly on the clay and glaze production, and had obstinately refused to divulge their compositions ever since.

Gravant's wife, Henriette Mille, was the director of the porcelain flower workshop, considered a vital part of the enterprise. The privileged position enjoyed by the Gravants made it unthinkable to displease or merely to disturb them; Orry de Fulvy's mission of negotiating the return of the formulas was to be a humiliating one. After much deliberating, and much denying on the part of Gravant, Gravant presented his extravagant terms: he would gladly sell the secret – at a price of £24,000, or the equivalent of a hundred years of his Vincennes starting salary. The sum could be paid as much as eight years later, Gravant allowed, provided the quality of the clay produced during that period remained the same as it was at the time the contract was signed. In addition Gravant demanded an annuity of £1,200, or five per cent interest on the total amount.

The Vincennes associates categorically refused to even consider such an expense, obliging Orry de Fulvy to personally guarantee the payment. The details of the contract finally drawn up between Gravant and the company are recounted in the minutes of 11 April 1748 meeting, under the title 'Reward of £24,000 to Gravant'.

Gravant delivered the clay and glaze formulas in a sealed, undated letter, which was entrusted to Fulvy's solicitor, Maître Bouron (11).

Although reassured by these events, a month later, on 24 May 1748, the shareholders found themselves once again obliged to make a new sacrifice, this time a payment of £2,000 per share. On 11 January 1749 an equivalent sum was imposed, and on October of that year another thousand pounds per share was found to be necessary. Granted, the Crown had twice alleviated this financial burden somewhat with a measure of accompaniment of £40,000, in 1747 and 1748. This brought the total royal contribution to £110,000 since the inception of the enterprise (12).

In the space of four years Orry de Fulvy had depleted his associates' financial resources. They had initially been prepared to provide £90,000, but this sum had climbed to £294,000. The royal aid brought to £400,000 the total amount swallowed up by the company; its creation and maintenance had cost more than four times what had been expected.

In terms of the product being developed, however, the company was enjoying tangible results; the colour range, apart from the coloured grounds, included some one hundred hues.

Since 20 October 1748, the Manufacture had had in its possession the secret gold composition, which was of a superb quality. The Dauphin's wife, Marie Josepha, had acquired an exceptional piece, a bouquet of porcelain flowers, which she delightedly offered her father, the elector of Saxony, August III. Furthermore, the company had procured the services of esteemed artists such as Duplessis, Bachelier around 1750, and F. Boucher, who was engaged as a consultant (13). Even if the style of the work was still too similar to Meissen ware, it was felt that conditions were now such that original creations, more representative of French taste, could soon be expected to come out of the Vincennes workshops.

Although these encouraging developments gave the associates new hope for the future, they still had to deal with the current financial crisis, and new resources were being sought. To this end nine additional registered shares were issued, no longer at £4,300 each but at their real cost price of £14,000. This transaction was to bring the company £126,000, but it also meant risking some of its independence, should the new subscribers prove to be poorly versed in the difficulties of the profession. It was the responsibility of 'ces messieurs de Vincennes', and particularly of Fulvy, to propose individuals with whom everyone could get along. Five new shareholders were thus recruited, and divided up the nine titles. Saint Martin, Calabre, le Roy and Souchet de Bisseaux subscribed to two shares each, while the fifth member, Ubulesky, acquired one share representing three per cent of the capital. On 11 May 1750, the new associates officially received their titles.

A little over a month later, by private agreement, Saint Martin bought Parseval's shares, le Roy acquired Douet's, and Ubulesky obtained four from Cury and Boise-mont and another from Bouillard. From then on this group owned 43 per cent of the company's capital. Before 9 October 1750, Ubulesky had bought up two additional shares, one from Bonfils and the other from Verdun, increasing his participation to the same level as Fulvy's.

Within five months a pressure group had emerged. Its members had managed to acquire fifteen shares, thereby increasing their capital ownership from sixteen to fifty per cent; with just one more share they would have held the majority. In December 1750, with this aim (unsuspected by the original shareholders) in mind, the group effected an important change in the company statutes. Instead of registered shares, the company would now deal exclusively in bearers shares. Each title's issuing value was set at £2,500, and in such a way as to assure that future capital gains would be smaller for those who no longer wished to invest important sums. The group's assertion that the shares would now 'be bearers in order to facilitate exchange, as in the Compagnie des Indes' did not appear to arouse the suspicion of the original associates. This measure of flexibility was no doubt conceived of by Ubulesky, who wished to take over the company, owing to a capital increase expected in the future. In point of fact, this act was already allowed for according to Article II of 9 December 1750 statutes.

The death of Orry de Fulvy on 3 May 1751 precipitated events. Ubulesky, now holding the same number of shares as Fulvy, no longer concealed his desire to take over direction of the company (14).

The surprised and distraught shareholders gathered round Verdun, who, in order to keep the majority of the capital with the original associates, bought up as many shares as he could. These included a third of Fulvy's, the remainder of which stayed with his estate.

As the unexpected developments were unfolding, Verdun sent a comprehensive report of the situation to the Inspector General of Finances, asking the Crown to intervene. He hoped that this might prevent the original shareholders from losing their investments to the pressure group, as well as ensure the safeguarding of the company's secrets (15).

The King agreed to Verdun's request, on the condition that the secrets become Crown property. The original shareholders were only too happy to accept the royal terms, and on 25 June 1751 – just two months after Fulvy's death – Jean Hellot, director of the Academy of Sciences, was commissioned to 'state with certitude the various secrets relative to the operation of the Manufacture of porcelain established at the Vincennes castle'. This mission soon became a search which included even the factory employees – for His Majesty had ordered the 'so-named Gravant and anyone else concerned to disclose everything on this subject to the so-named Sieur Hellot without difficulty or disguise and at his first asking' (16).

Accordingly, Fulvy's solicitor, Maître Bouron, gave Hellot Gravant's sealed letter, which had been kept in deposit since 1748, not to be opened before 1756 (17).

After copying out the formulas, 'correcting the spelling' along the way, Hellot accompanied a Gravant 'much more meek and accommodating than one had supposed' (18) to carry out an on-the-spot investigation at the village on the banks of the Marne in Brie. What he found there was 'a rural boat on which a mill had been mounted, where the frit incorporated in the porcelain clay was ground'.

In his report of 7 October 1751, addressed to Machault, Hellot confirmed that he had been able to 'verify the secret and obtained entire certitude that the Sieur Gravant had told the truth in the letter deposited, as well as in the two parchment books' (19).

Jean-François Verdun had thus managed to prevent a takeover by Ubulesky, and the disastrous consequences which would have ensued. Moreover, no one at the Vincennes Manufacture could have hoped for a better safeguard than to have its

kaolin. Gérin might have remained in possession of the secret if Gravant, on Fulvy's orders, had not stolen it and promptly resold it to the Vincennes shareholders, at a price equal to one hundred years of his starting salary.

Since losing his business, Gravant had been working in the Vincennes workshop as an unskilled labourer, at a daily wage of one pound and five sols; this was a favour granted by his old friends, Gérin and the Dubois brothers. With the secret now in his possession, however, it was only a matter of time before Gravant became master.

Gravant never did receive the £24,000 promised him, but the fortune he left behind him was of an exorbitance known only in the 18th century.

One question remains unanswered to this day. Did Ubulesky want the secret for himself – or did he intend to turn it over to another factory which, suffering from the stiff Vincennes competition, thought it had found a way to obtain not only the company's technical expertise, but also the privilege which the Inspector General of Finances had so unjustly granted his own brother, masked behind the alias of Charles Adam?

Notes

1. Gallet (Danielle) *Madame de Pompadour ou le Pouvoir Féminin*, Paris, 1985.
2. Sergène (André) *La Manufacture de Sèvres Sous l'Ancien Régime*, Volume 1, p. 59, Nancy, 1972.
3. Albis (Antoine d') 'Les Premières Années de la Manufacture de Vincennes', *Faenza*, LXX, 1984, No. 5, 6, pp. 479–493.
4. We could suggest that 'Façon Saxe, c'est à dire peinte et dorée à figure humaine' means that porcelain was decorated with a range of 30 or so colours, which are for the most part opaque, that is, they cover and allow for a variety of effects according to the thickness of the coat, shading effects, trompe d'oeil and views in perspective. This palette made it possible for Meissen, from 1725, to break new ground in comparison to the porcelain ware from Far East Asia. Préaud (Tamara) et Albis (Antoine d') 'Les Eléments de Datation des Porcelaines de Vincennes Avant 1753', *The French Porcelain Society*, London, 1986.
5. One could, in the same spirit, say that the expression 'Façon Japon' applied to the Saint Cloud and Chantilly ware of that period. It was decorated with a palette limited to five or six colours, of which the majority were transparent and did not permit shaded effects since they had to be built up of even coats.
6. 1745 is thought to be the date when the Chelsea factory was founded by Nicolas Spirmont of Liège.
7. Milice. 'This name applies to peasants, workers or farmers who are forcibly enlisted in the army. During wartime the laws of the Kingdom stipulate that the army be recruited among the rural population which is obliged, indiscriminately, to draw straws. The fear that this order inspires extends to the poor, middle class and wealthy workers as well'. Diderot and d'Alembert, *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts, et des Métiers*, Paris, 1751–1765.
8. This amount is the equivalent of roughly 125 years of a manual labourer's salary at Vincennes at this time.
9. Unless otherwise indicated, all the records quoted come from the 'Livre des Délibérations'. MNS, Archives, Notebook YI, Passim.
10. The statutes of the Charles Adam Company have yet to be found. However, Articles 3, 4 and 5 of these statutes are recorded in the minutes of the meetings of 20 August 1745 and 20 April 1750. It can be imagined that the company's stock from 1745 to 1750 was in the form of registered shares. That is, the shareholders, even though they were authorised to sell their shares among themselves privately, were on the contrary not authorised to sell them to anyone outside the company.
11. Albis (Antoine d') 'Procédés de Fabrication de la Porcelaine Tendre de Vincennes d'après les Livres de Hellot', *Faenza*, No. 3–4, pp. 202–216.
12. Royal assistance amounted to 40,000 pounds in 1747, 30,000 in 1748 and 30,000 in 1749. MNS, Archives, Notebook FI, Sections 1–2 and 4.
13. Savill (Rosalind) 'François Boucher and the Porcelains of Vincennes and Sèvres', *Appollo*, Vol. CXV, No. 241, March, 1984, pp. 162, 170.

14. Hellot said of him: 'Ubulesky: he who calls himself the friend of the late Monsieur de Fulvy who lived at Vincennes for the past 15 years and who has seven shares at £14,000 each. He is the one who wanted to know the secret. Hated by the workers'. MNS, Archives, Notebook Y 51 Bis, Transcription p. 2.
15. Like the Charles Adam company statutes, Verdun's memoirs have never been found. Hellot refers to them several times in his book: 'It is he (Verdun) who proposed to the Minister that no one in the company should have the porcelain secret and that the only one who should know it be the person who came from the court. I was the one designated in his memoirs. A nervous man, not an expert, but active and zealous in order to woo Monsieur de Machault and Madame de Pompadour. MNS, Archives, Notebook Y 51 Bis, Transcription p. 2.
16. MNS, Archives, Notebook Y 51 Bis, Transcription p. 104.
17. On 6 July 1751, Hellot gave to Maître Bouron, Fulvy's solicitor, the following order signed by Machault: 'Deliver to Monsieur de Courteilles the sealed envelope which is in your possession and which contains Gravant's secret of the Vincennes porcelain'. MNS, Archives, Notebook Y 51 Bis, Transcription p. 106.
18. Hellot's report which was addressed to Machault d'Arnouville on 7 October 1751. Document graciously offered by the Comte de Panouse.
19. MNS, Archives, Notebook Y 71, p. 5.
20. MNS, Archives, Notebook Y 51 Bis, Transcription p. 161.
21. Réamur (René Antoine Ferchault de) *Some General Ideas on the Different Ways of Making Porcelain and Which are the Raw Materials Used in the Chinese Ware*. Report for the Academy of Sciences dated 6 April 1727.
22. I would like to express my gratitude to Tamara Preaud and Clare le Corbeiller for rereading both, the French and the English versions of this text.