Saxon survivor

Three years ago, the 300-year-old porcelain manufacturer Meissen was about to bite the dust. But now, thanks to a rapid brand extension, from jewellery to furniture, the state-owned company is back on the luxury label rich list

PHOTOGRAPHY: HENNING BOCK WRITER: SOPHIE LOVELL

CHINA TOWN
The new Meissen Home collection pictured in Albrechtsburg castle in Meissen, where, in 1710, the porcelain was first produced in secret

POT LUCK
A porcelain vase being hand-painted in the Meissen workshop. The company has a colour archive of some 100,000 shades

Three years ago German business strategist Christian Kurtzke was offered mission impossible: transform a loss-making, manufacturing national treasure into a global luxury brand without any additional financing.

The treasure in question was the 300-year-old, state-owned Meissen Porcelain Manufactory, Germany's oldest and most esteemed porcelain firm, rich in tradition, heritage and standards of excellence, and the symbolic heart and soul of the state of Saxony. But in 2008, after years of stagnation, Meissen was in trouble, choking on the dust of its own antiquity and haemorrhaging millions.

The challenge on the table for Kurtzke was not just about blowing off the dust, implementing new entrepreneurial structures, launching new products and setting up new business areas, but also 'reinventing the company from scratch while remaining loyal to its DNA'. The catch was that, being owned by the state, the turnaround could only be implemented using purely operational capital, otherwise it would contravene European law. 'That really was a mission impossible,' says Kurtzke.

A diminishing demand for full dinnerware services is a difficulty facing the whole European porcelain industry, not just Meissen, and for Kurtzke, the first problem he identified at the company when he took over as managing director in 2008 was an over-concentration on this saturated and declining market. The second was that internally the company was filled with highly skilled craftspeople, yet had barely changed structurally since the Second World War. The GDR ended over two decades ago, yet 'the Wall came down for Meissen just three years ago', says Kurtzke. His third problem was that he took over right in the middle of the global financial crisis. Nevertheless, he managed, through a radical shake-up of staff and structuring and some surprising diversification to generate double-digit growth within two years.

'I changed everything so that everything would stay the way it is – I had to,' he says. This included causing a scandal by smashing skip loads of unsellable stock and also dismantling the entire design team in favour of a global network of external designers. 'Meissen is unique in craftsmanship, but don't ask us to design,' he says. There then followed the lightning development of a new Meissen architectural tile range, new flagship stores in China and Taiwan, a second HQ in Milan to be called Meissen Villa, a jewellery range, Meissen ArtCampus for guest artists to produce limited-edition works and now, exclusively previewed by Wallpaper*, a furniture and furnishing fabric collection.

'The speed of it all sometimes scares me,' says Kurtzke, 'because I am violating every rule in every management book. Normally you have to be really cautious with this kind of brand diversification, slowly introducing new products and lines over years not months, but I don't have the time. To cope with crisis you need to create diversity and you have to reach a critical speed; it's like with a stuck car – you need to gain momentum to get out of the rut.'

So far, his breakneck velocity seems to be paying off; the company with its 600-strong staff is already back in profit with a revenue of some €40m. But, says Kurtzke, the company is not quite out of the woods yet. 'The revenue needs to be at least 80 million euros to ensure the company can sustain itself', and this, he believes is only possible through diversity in order to absorb any knocks that the markets might throw at it.

Kurtzke and his guest designers spend a lot of time in the archives, taking care »

Hilzinger likens the whole ensemble to 'a little black dress from Chanel'

to root any product innovation firmly within the company's historical context. The new Meissen Joaillerie collection, for example, designed by Milan-born Ornella Pasquetti, has its roots in the fact that Johann Friedrich Böttger, who first developed porcelain, was actually searching for a recipe for gold, but nevertheless pitched his new invention to the Saxon prince who later founded Meissen by getting the court jeweller to make precious jewellery out of it.

Meissen's first furniture collection, Meissen Home, due for release next year, is designed by Berlin-based Markus Hilzinger who designed the interiors at the China Club in Berlin (see W*80). The collection has an eclectic, yet classical feel and includes porcelain elements in the bases of the sofa and chairs, and in the lamps, vases and table surfaces. The Meissen court dragon is woven in gold thread into the damask fabric of the cushions, as are interpretations of the crossed swords brand motif and some geometric patterns from the archive that hold their own next to Gucci, Louis Vuitton or Chanel.

The first Meissen furniture collection, says Hilzinger, should give the impression of 'European luxury' with a mixture of influences from the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s and 1970s. He likens the whole ensemble to 'a little black dress from Chanel' in its elegance and adaptability, and there are also stylistic echoes of the great British interior designer David Hicks (see The Dish, page 166). In just five months, an inconceivably short space of time, Hilzinger and his team have come up with prototypes for a sofa, armchairs, coffee table, dining table, vanity unit, six different silk and wool rugs, a collection of table lamps and vases, not to mention designing all the fabric variations. But the designs look anything but rushed. 'The treasure of Meissen lies in the finishing,' says Hilzinger and promises nothing short of perfection when the pieces come onto the market next year.

Kurtzke agrees that with 300 years' worth of examples to compare with, the benchmark is very high. 'Nobody can build like Meissen can; if a new piece is not as good as the best of what we have already produced, then it is not good enough,' he says. He may have an advantage in that Meissen's crossed swords branding on its porcelain has been known the world over as a symbol of excellence for centuries, but at the same time this brings a burden of responsibility and everyone involved is very aware that any real or apparent loss of quality could spell disaster.

Meissen also has an extraordinary colour archive of some 100,000 shades, not to mention a seemingly endless back catalogue of patterns, images and forms. The company intends to take advantage of this unique database together with its in-house team of skilled decorators and craftspeople to provide an additional bespoke service to customers, enabling them to order hand-decorated elements such as silk paravents and ceramic tabletops for their Meissen furniture in just about any colour or Meissen form they could imagine.

It is hard to believe that Kurtzke has pushed through all these changes in such a short time without having to do a lot of convincing both internally and with the state owners of Meissen, but his is a powerhouse of a personality and it is not hard to believe him when he says: 'They don't give me freedom, I take it. As long as I am successful I don't care what others say.' Like the Saxon princes of old, Christian Kurtzke is the new lord of Meissen. How the company adapts and survives in the coming months, years and centuries will depend to no small extent on whether his mission impossible strategy pays off and you can be sure that there will be a lot of people in the industry watching very, very closely. ✱

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MEISSEN TIMELINE

1708 Alchemist Johann Friedrich Böttger is credited with producing 'white gold' – Europe's first porcelain

1710 Meissen Porcelain Manufactory is set up in Albrechtsburg castle

1722 The crossed swords trademark is introduced to identify the brand

1739 Meissen's most iconic pattern, 'Blue Onion', first appears

1916 Museum of Meissen Art opens as a company showroom

1991 Post German reunification, Meissen is run as a public limited company with the federal state of Saxony the sole shareholder

2000 World's first organ with a perfectly tuned set of pipes made out of Meissen porcelain is created

2008 Christian Kurtzke is appointed managing director of the company

FEB/MAR 2011 Meissen Joaillerie launches at the Inhorgenta trade fair in Munich and BaselWorld

SEPT 2011 Meissen ArtCampus is launched in Leipzig

NOV 2011 Wallpaper* previews the Meissen Home furniture and furnishing fabric collection

APRIL 2012 Inauguration of Villa Meissen, an exhibition and the official launch of Meissen Home in Milan

RIGHT LINES
Designer Markus Hilzinger drew on Meissen's heritage when designing the new homeware range; the company's court dragon is woven in gold thread into the damask fabric of the cushions and porcelain elements appear in the furniture and accessories

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Fonte: Wallpaper, London, n. 153, p. 66-70, Dec. 2011.