Porcelain figures began to be produced in Russia in the late 18th century. As in Europe, they were initially designed as table ornaments to accompany the dessert course of grand dinners. A dessert service given by Frederick II (the Great of Prussia; r. 1740-1786) to Catherine II (the Great; r. 1762-1796) to commemorate Russia’s victories over the Ottoman Empire in 1770 included figures which Catherine then supplemented with a series representing the ‘Peoples of Russia’ commissioned from the Imperial Porcelain Factory. Factory records suggest that figures from this series were presented as imperial and diplomatic gifts between 1790 and 1810. As the Russian Empire swelled in size, these ethnographic figures served as a visual reminder of its far-reaching power.

In 1766 an English entrepreneur, Francis Gardner, established a porcelain factory in Verbilki, near Moscow, producing high quality figures for the fashionable and wealthy. Gardner’s figures of street peddlers were especially popular and reflected the increasing cosmopolitanism of cities such as Saint Petersburg. This figure of a black musician playing a flute may represent a street character. Africans were a small but significant presence in 19th century Russia. Some were former slaves, others were immigrants from the Americas. Black performers became well-known in Russia in the later 19th century. Visiting performers included the black British actor Ira Aldridge and the American Fisk Jubilee Singers.

**Public access description**

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**Descriptive line**

Figure of black musician, made by Gardner Porcelain Factory, ca. 1825, Moscow

**Physical description**

Porcelain figure of a black flautist painted in colours and gilt. He is standing, wearing red striped white trousers, blue waistcoat edged with gilt, white shirt, crimson cap and black boots, green round base and brown tree stump behind.

**Dimensions**

Height: 7.25 in

**Museum number**

C.322-1930

**URL**

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O124233/figure-gardner-porcelain-factory/