

Voices of Potters Past

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When we admire an historical piece of painted or printed ceramics, our focus is likely to be on either the design, shape, or the materials used to make it, rather than on the skills of the proud, hard-working people who performed the many and varied roles required to produce it. Indeed, it is far too easy to lose sight of the fact that ceramics leaving the kilns in vast quantities in the 18th and 19th centuries in Great Britain would not have been possible without the skills and hard labour of those who earned a living in the potteries. Their anonymous voices exist today primarily in the fine ceramics that they strove to produce, products that enriched the lives of many both monetarily and aesthetically.

There are, however, a few cases in which the deliberate voices of the potters themselves can be heard. Such is the case with the two examples illustrated here in figures 1 and 2. On these items, the potters declare that they consider their work to be art and that the pots primarily exist because of their talent and hard work. The rhyme appearing on the mid-18th century salt glazed loving cup shown in figure 1 is an early example of this point of view. The factory that produced the handsome piece is unknown. Incised in scratch blue on one side is the following: No art can with the Potters art compare, we make our potts of what we Potters are. The date 1761 was added below the rhyme along with a floral motif which also appears around the handle terminals. A formal border was added below the interior rim. The cup measures 5.24 inches (13.3 cm) in height.¹

This inscription was intended to convey an important message: From the potters' perspective, their work and the pots they make are, in essence, one. They proudly declare that

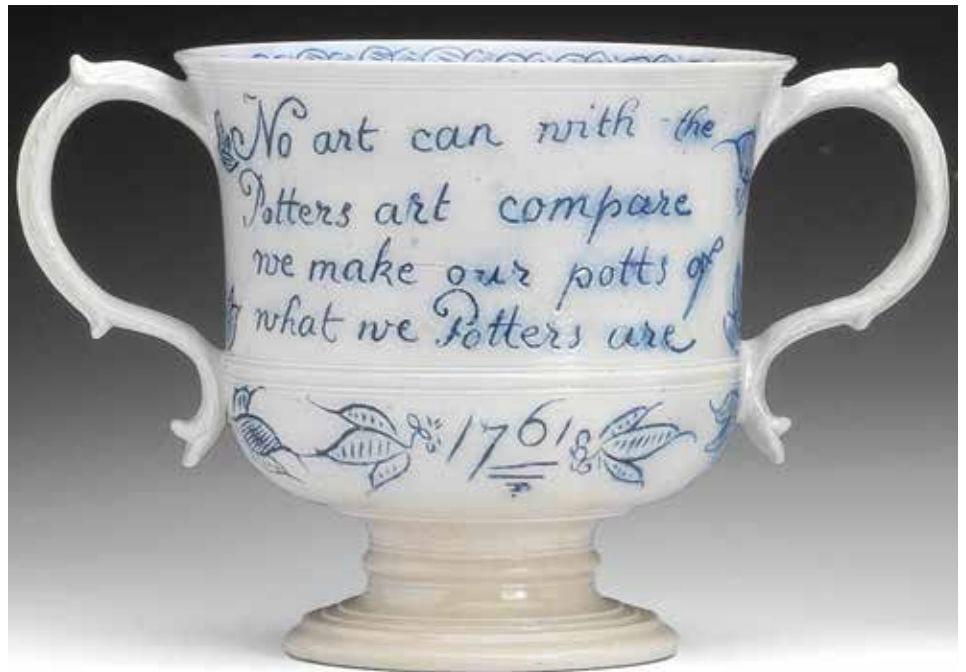


Figure 1. Image Courtesy of Bonhams

their work is not just the result of craftsmanship...it is art, and their message is supported by the cup's elegant shape. This cup was documented in 1906 in the "Notes" section of *The Connoisseur* by an anonymous author who wrote the following: "Pieces of English saltglaze ware, which are both dated and inscribed at the same time, are so extremely rare that the unearthing of an important specimen seems worthy of being recorded in *The Connoisseur*. The piece under notice is of the Saltglaze Goblet. One of the verses was a favourite one with the old potters, who no doubt thought they were not sufficiently esteemed, and wished to impress on the public the importance and dignity of their art."²

There is a second inscription on the reverse that appears to make a statement about workers' conditions: Some times Strong Beer, Some times Small Beer, Some Times water Clear, Let me Not be Starved here.

This verse refers, it would seem, to the working conditions desired to produce their art. In many parts of Ireland and England "starved" or "starving" meant being cold or freezing instead of the more contemporary connotation, that of being very hungry.³ The piece poses some intriguing questions: Was it a "one off"? Given the nature of its message, would the factory owner have authorized quantities produced? Only one example of this piece appears to have survived which suggests that only one or a small number may have been made.

Approximately a half century later, c. 1810-1820, the same potter's rhyme appeared on the earthenware puzzle jug illustrated in figure 2. Its reappearance seems to support the observation by the author of the note in *The Connoisseur* cited above that the rhyme was "a favourite one with the old potters". This time the rhyme was hand-painted in an oval directly under the jug's spout. The puzzle



Figure 2. Author's Collection

jug itself was transfer-printed in blue underglaze with the Two Temples II Variation Broseley pattern, reversed. It again serves as a tribute to the proud pottery workers of a later generation and emphasizes the importance of their craft which they, too, consider art. The collar and spout are punched with uniformly placed round holes adding to the decorative appearance of the jug. These punched holes are often found on puzzle jugs and were intended to add to the puzzle by defying anyone to pour from the vessel in the traditional manner. As in the example from a half century earlier, the maker of this piece is also unknown.

The two examples just illustrated gave a voice to potters as a group and were intended to make a statement publicly about the role they played in the production of ceramics in their time. They were a voice of the pot-

ters as a whole and their message was intended to be seen by all. There are also a few examples in which an individual potter chose to inscribe his own name on a piece documenting the individual's presence and contribution to the production of the item. Some of these "hidden voices" also included the date in which they were inscribed. Because the inscriptions were made in the body of the piece before its first firing, their authors more than likely worked in the area where the items were formed before the first process of hardening. Their individual inscriptions were placed either on the underside of the piece or in a position where the pattern would have been printed over it. As a result, they were probably less visible to the consumer.

The earliest example of these individually signed transfer-printed pieces that I have found is the footed earth-



Figure 3. Author's Collection

enware moon-shaped flask printed in blue underglaze with the Diving Duck pattern, shown in figure 3. The pattern is a pseudo-Chinese-type design that features a house near water beside which are seen two ducks, one diving, the other floating. The ducks were added twice under the foot of the flask. Inscribed by hand on the flat surface of the body before hardening are the lines "July 14", over "1807", over the name "Thomas Osborn". So, who was Thomas Osborn? The truth is, we will never know for certain but what is probable is that Thomas or someone who wished to remember or honour Thomas worked in the section of the pottery where the shape was formed from the clay. It is only at that phase, that an inscription could have been effectively added prior to hardening the flask.

The rare earthenware inkwell seen in figure 4 is another example con-



Figure 4. Author's Collection



Figure 5.



Figure 6.

taining an individual's inscription. It was printed in blue with the Chinese Family in Garden pattern. This pattern was inspired by a Chinese export porcelain design. On the reverse side of the inkwell is another Chinese-inspired pattern named simply Large Vase on Table (figure 5). Hand inscribed on the base of the inkwell (figure 6) is the name "William Roberts", and the date "September 15th, 1808". The inscription is somewhat difficult to read, and it is possible that the person who purchased it was not even aware of it. It is, of course, also possible that it was retained, after its completion, by the worker who signed it. We will never know. Herculaneum scholar Peter Hyland confirmed that the piece was made by Herculaneum and stated the following regarding the inscription: "I do know that a Roberts family lived and worked at Herculaneum. Ralph Roberts is listed in 1820 as working in the green warehouse. I am going to speculate here – it is possible that William Roberts was either an elder brother or the father of Ralph and had died by 1820. He would have come to Herculaneum from Staffordshire, but I cannot find him in the Staffordshire lists that I have. It is a sad fact that many pottery workers were not listed anywhere. As Ralph worked in the green warehouse, it may be that he was taught the necessary skills by his father, and if the father was William and had also worked in the green warehouse, then it makes the inscription on the ink pot more than likely. 'Green ware', of course, means ware which is formed but not yet fired, and is hardening and drying out. It is only at that stage that the inscription could have been done." This early inkwell with its rather clandestine signature gives a voice, although less publicly, to the potter who played a role in its making.⁴

It is entirely possible that the actual completion of the two examples with inscribed dates just illustrated was a bit later than the year in which they were inscribed, given that the dates were added to them prior to hardening. That would also be the case in



Figure 7. Image Courtesy of Dr Richard Halliday

this third example seen here in figure 7 with yet another "hidden signature", however, since the mug also has a date painted on the base, it is likely that it was produced that same year. This delightful, named and dated frog mug was printed with the border used for the Indian Sporting pattern and eight different animals taken from *A General History of Quadrupeds*, by Thomas Bewick, published in 1790.⁵ The base of the mug (figure 8) was inscribed with the name "James Swinn" along with an indistinct address. Also on the base are the hand painted letters "T, M & B" and the date "1829". Given that the initials and the date were added before the final firing of the mug, we can assume that it was either a made-to-order item, or that the mug was made and signed by someone in the factory. What makes the mug quite exceptional is that, in addition to its wonderful design, we find in essence the presence of at least two distinct individuals on it; the person or persons to whom the three painted initials refer, and the owner of the inscribed signature, James Swinn.

While all the examples I have found to illustrate are quite unusual, given their interesting form, their varied patterns, and methods of decoration, I believe the real story is about the messages, both public and clandestinely presented, that provide a glimpse into the lives of the individuals who applied their skills to

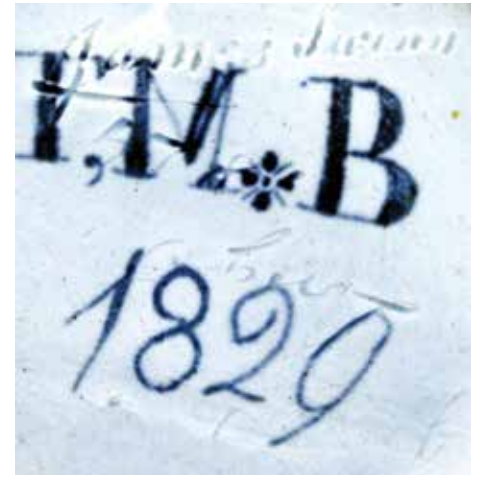


Figure 8. Image Courtesy of Dr Richard Halliday

produce them. The verse found on the salt glazed loving cup and the transfer-printed puzzle jug publicly documents the potters' pride in their work. They dedicated their lives to what they produced, and they proudly declared that their work was art. The "hidden voices" inscribed in the still soft forms of the other examples illustrated here record the contribution of individual potters who also felt compelled to make their voices as potters known. These voices, whether public or hidden, remind us that appreciating an historic ceramic piece for its beauty or even for its function must also include admiration for the potters who made it.

Notes:

1. The loving cup sold at Bonhams Fine British Pottery, Porcelain & Glass sale in London on 3 Oct 2012.
2. January 1906, Vol. XIV, No. 53-A, p. 112.
3. The MacMillan Dictionary Blog. The term "starved" often appeared in a longer set phrase, such as starved/starving with the cold. My thanks to Pat Halfpenny who pointed out that it was a term used well into the 20th century.
4. Both the moon-shaped flask and the inkwell are documented in Halliday, Richard & Zeller, Loren, *Chinoiserie Printed British Ceramics in the Chinese Style 1750-1900*, Wales, U.K. Gomer Press, 2018.
5. This mug was first documented in Halliday, Rosemary & Halliday, Richard, *Extraordinary British Transferware 1780-1840*, Atglen, PA, USA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd. 2012.

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