

Pountneys, Bristol: A Case Study of Transfer Printed Earthenware in India

by Jaap Otte

Pountney & Co. (Ltd.) (1849-1969), known colloquially as “Pountneys”, and its predecessors had been based at the Bristol Victoria Pottery, Temple Backs, in Bristol since the late 18th century, until the move to a new, modern factory at Fishponds in 1906 (Godden 1991: 506-507). This article discusses Pountneys’ exports of transfer printed earthenware to India.

Bristol is a major port city in the southwest of England with a prosperous maritime history. Pountneys’ success was to a large extent the result of its proximity to this port and the opportunities it offered for export, as compared to the Staffordshire potteries for which transportation of their wares first had to take place over inland waterways or roads and railways before reaching a port. It is therefore somewhat ironic that we know almost nothing about Pountneys’ exports other than the wares themselves. Known patterns from the factory such as Gem, Khartoum, Lasso, Pekin, and Willow (Carson 2008: 37-38) were certainly at least partially destined for foreign markets. Based on ceramics that can still be found in India today, Pountneys exported suitable but unexciting floral and abstract patterns such as “Weston”, “Lace”, and “Cuba” (Figure 1), as well as a handful of special export patterns for the Asian market. These last ones will be discussed below in more detail.

During the 19th century, the Indian market was of great importance for the products from the British as



Figure 1. Plate with Pountneys’ “Cuba” pattern, D. 7.3/8”.



Figure 2. Rice dish, Pountneys, D. 10.5”.

well as other nation’s industries, but it is questionable if that was as much the case for ceramics. Although India’s population numbered over 240 million by 1900, the approximate time period for the ceramics discussed here, ceramics did not enjoy the same status in India as in other parts of Asia, and, other than fancy special-order wares for the various royal courts in India, it seems there was primarily demand for inexpensive tablewares with indistinct decorations for daily use. This is quite different from the situation in, for example, nearby Iran, with its many patterns for the Persian market and special-order wares for the middle class, or the area that is present-day Indonesia, for which English, Scottish and Dutch potteries created many dozens of highly distinctive patterns adapted to the Malay consumer’s taste during the second half of the 19th century, and where ceramics, in addition to serving food, traditionally were used to decorate houses and treasured as heirlooms. The explanation is likely an economical one: the customer in places like Iran and Indonesia was both more demanding AND willing to pay higher prices for a better product, as compared to India. Reflecting local dining customs, wares in India consisted primarily of plates, bowls and dishes. There seems to have been little demand for tea services or toiletwares and these are rarely found today.

The English transfer printed earthenware used to decorate some rooms in Junagarh Fort in Bikaner in



Figure 3. Rice dish from the Duke of Buccleuch wreck.



Figure 4. Retailer's mark for Abdol Gani Haji Sakoor on Pountneys rice dish.



Figure 5. Retailer's mark for Abdol Gani Haji Sakoor on George Jones & Sons plate.

Rajasthan, India, seems therefore an exception and its significance for the Indian market for British ceramics is not well understood. It may reflect unique, local circumstances, described in more detail by David Hoexter and Judie Siddall in their article about the transfer printed ceramics assemblage at Junagarh Fort. They come to the conclusion that it is likely that decades old wares that were already present in the fort were used for the installation, with the installation tentatively having taken place during the 1870s (Hoexter Siddall 2020: 21). What sets Junagarh Fort also apart as a repository of European ceramics in India, is its position as the seat of the Maharajahs of Bikaner, at the highest strata of society, and it is likely not representative for the wares available to the vast majority of the population in India during that time. In fact, the type of wares installed at the fort are rarely found elsewhere in India.

Although patterns such as J. & G. Meakin's "Genoa", identical to Pountney's "Lace", and the universally beloved "Willow" pattern can be found frequently in India, British and other European potteries may not have created any patterns specifically for the Indian market during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Pountneys' patterns discussed in this article may certainly have been created with the

customer in India in mind, but they are of a more generic, Asian, nature.

Based on the factory marks, the wares discussed in this article were probably made during the Pountney & Co. Ltd. period and can therefore be dated from after 1889, likely up to the early 20th century, with the start of WW1 in 1914 as a logical end date. By this time the wares, after leaving a British port, would be transported through the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and most likely reach India at Bombay, today's Mumbai, or Calcutta, today's, Kolkata, the two most important ports in British India.

Pountneys employed patterns for the Indian market which other potteries had successfully used in India as well as other Asian markets. In particular, a floral Chinoiserie pattern printed in brown with lustre and red enamel (TCC pattern # 19479) had been a success for the Maastricht pottery of Petrus Regout in the Dutch East Indies, India, Arabia, and other parts of Asia since its introduction in 1885 (Figure 2). The pattern, named "Toko" at Regout, would stay in production in Maastricht until 1932. The pattern name of Pountneys' version is unknown (Otte 2020, 12-14, Carson 2008: 56). Other potteries also eagerly copied this pattern for their wares for the Asian market: Nimy in

Belgium, Boch Wallerfangen in Germany, Sacavém in Portugal, as well as several potteries in Japan. Rice dishes with the pattern were found in the shipwreck of the Duke of Buccleuch, which was on its way from Antwerp to Calcutta in India and which sank after a collision in the English Channel in 1889 with 600 tons of glassware and ceramics from Belgium and Holland (Figure 3) (McDonald 1990).

Although Mintons registered the pattern "Denmark" with the British Patent Office on 10 April 1878 for use on European dinner and tea services, Pountneys likely copied the Maastricht pattern and not Mintons' original (TCC pattern # 16873). At Pountneys this pattern can be found on rice dishes and plates, which often feature a merchant mark with two lions flanking a crowned device with the text "ABDOL GANI HAJI SAKOOR BOMBAY" and a scroll with "MADE IN ENGLAND" below (Figure 4). The rice dish in Figure 3 also has an impressed mark reading "BRISTOL" as well as a painted red number "22", possibly the pattern number under which it was known at Pountneys or a workman's mark. It's also potted notably thinner than the Maastricht dishes, which means it was probably cheaper, but not as sturdy as the Dutch competition.

We know from a retailer's mark

on a plate for the Persian market attributed to George Jones & Sons Ltd. in Staffordshire (1879–1891) that Abdol Gani Haji Sakoor was a glassware and enamelware merchant with the address listed as Shathirara, Mohla Shop No. 160 in Bombay, but nothing else is known about the business (Figure 5) (Otte Floor 2020: 120-121). Abdol Gani Haji Sakoor must have been somewhat of a regular customer of Pountneys because the merchant ordered wares with at least three other patterns at the pottery. One of those is a simple moon star pattern (TCC pattern # 19861), a popular decoration on earthenware made by a large number of European potteries for the Islamic world (Figure 6). This decoration was typically applied with a stencil but Pountneys had reportedly stopped producing hand painted wares and only a transfer printed version is known, so far found printed in blue, red and brown. This pattern is only known with Sakoor's merchant mark but can be attributed to Pountneys because the mark is identical to the mark used on the other Pountneys wares.

Last is an attractive Aesthetic Chinoiserie pattern called "Pekin" (Carson 2008: 38) (TCC pattern # 18210) that was only used at Pountneys, and which can be found in India both with the factory mark and the mark for Abdol Gani Haji Sakoor (Figure 7).

Conclusion

Other British potteries such as J. & G. Meakin, George Jones & Co., Copeland, and Emberton, exported their transfer printed earthenware to India, while large quantities of unmarked hand-painted and sponged wares can still be found in India, likely having been made at a large number of English and Scottish potteries. Pount-

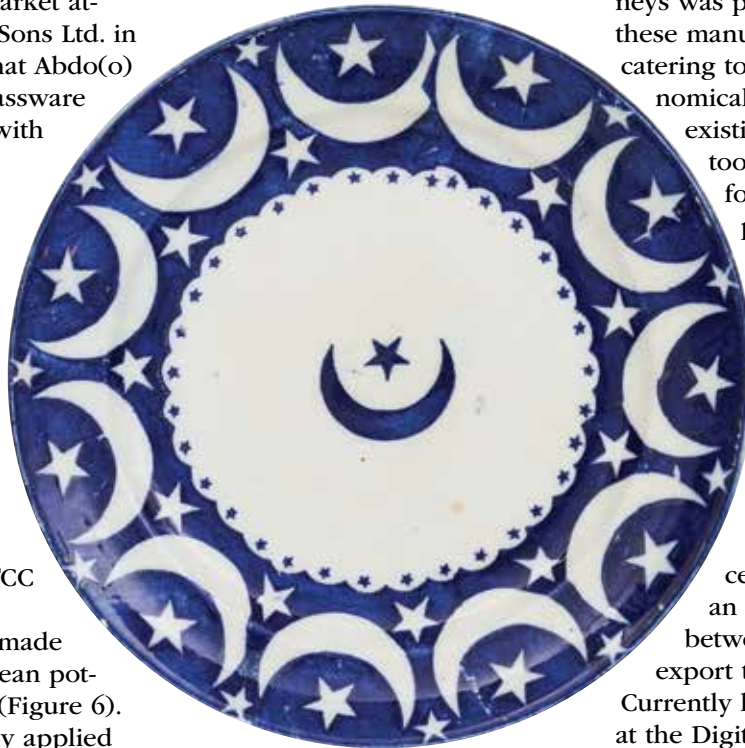


Figure 6. Plate with Pountneys' Moon Star pattern, D. 8.25".



Figure 7. Plate with Pountneys' "Pekin" pattern, D. 8.25".

neys was probably quite typical among these manufacturers in their approach to catering to the Indian market with economical, useful wares, using mostly existing patterns and a few, not too specific, mainstream patterns for the Asian market on inexpensive wares.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Connie Rogers for her tireless efforts to add dozens of new transfer printed patterns for the Indian and other Asian markets to the TCC Database.

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