

# Some Thoughts Regarding a Rare Staffordshire Relief Molded, Blue Transfer-Printed and Enamel-Decorated Thread Caddy

By Rebecca J. Davis

*Editor's Note: TCC member Rebecca Davis is a specialist in Ceramics, Silver and "Objects d'Art" at Northeast Auctions in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Rebecca will be helping to arrange the 2010 TCC Annual Meeting. Below is a condensed version of an article she prepared for the Bulletin. Anyone wishing to read the entire piece, please contact the Bulletin Editor and he will be happy to eMail you a Word file with the complete text.*

I am one of the lucky few who can say they truly enjoy their work. Several rare single transferware objects and important private collections have passed through Northeast Auctions' door since I came here in January, 2002. Typically, when an item or a collection arrives, I identify the maker(s) and the pattern(s), write catalog entries, prepare the items for photography, provide condition reports and then see them off to good homes.

In many instances, my identification work has been done for me, either by the pottery itself, or by previous scholars. More challenging are the pieces that are not readily identifiable and I have to use clues such as the border pattern; in that regard, the *TCC Pattern Database* has proved invaluable.

An example of the latter arrived for our 2009 Summer auction, and it immediately received the "place of honor" on the shelf above my desk: a shelf reserved for things that are "mine" until they are sold! The object was a rare Staffordshire relief molded, blue transfer-printed and enamel-decorated thread caddy. Although unmarked, it was possibly made by John Denton Bagster, circa 1820-28. The sliding cover is decorated in relief with a neoclassical dancer attired in billowing purple robes and play-



**Transfer decorated and molded Thread Caddy With Rural Scenes and a dancing Ceres on the sliding lid. Photo Courtesy Northeast Auctions, Portsmouth, NH**

ing a tambourine. She is flanked by printed floral sprays and each corner is painted with a rose stem in pink and green enamels. The bottom edge of the cover is slightly raised with a vacant reserve, probably intended for an inscription or name, and opens to reveal a divided interior. It is printed on the two long sides with a view of a family group and dog resting in the foreground, before a distant cottage and pair of cowherds tending their cattle. The two short sides depict two

men seated on a tree trunk, eating their dinner and flanked by a dog and scattered tools. The entire caddy is set on dark blue-glazed paw feet.

Height is 2 3/4 inches, width 4 1/2 inches, depth 5 inches.

Phillips & Bagster of Hanley, Staffordshire, acquired David Wilson's pottery (active 1802-1818) in about 1820. When the partnership dissolved in 1823, John Denton Bagster (or Baxter), the possible maker of this thread caddy and noted for his produc-

tion of blue transfer-printed wares, continued until 1828. The factory was then purchased by Joseph Meyer and afterward by William Ridgway & Company. John Bagster marked his wares with his initials "I.D.B." and "J.D.B.," or the alternative spelling of his name, "BAXTER." Apparently this alternate spelling was a misreading of the name. Molded jugs made by both Phillips & Bagster and J.D. Bagster have been found with the spelling "Bagster." In addition the name Bagster appears in the *Belle Vue Papers* in 1823, as well as in a Staffordshire directory of 1828-29.<sup>1</sup>

The two prints on the sides depicting rural scenes are from Bagster's *Vignette Series*. The view depicting the family group is titled *Resting Family*, and the view of the two men seated on a log is called the *Woodcutters' Lunch*. This second view is illustrated on an unmarked tray from a pickle set in A.W. Coysh and R.K. Henrywood, *The Dictionary of Blue & White Printed Pottery, 1780-1880*, vol. II, page 207. Both scenes are printed on a tureen and cover that can be viewed on *The Transferware Collector's Club Pattern Database*, which has a page devoted to nine examples decorated by John D. Bagster. The title *Vignette* is named for the wide border of flowers typically surrounding the central image; however, the long narrow sides of the thread caddy do not permit the incorporation of this border.

Wares from the *Vignette* series are marked with a floral-bordered circular band enclosing Bagster's initials "I.D.B.," the title *VIGNETTE*, and a printed or impressed Staffordshire knot. It is tempting but not possible to definitively attribute this thread caddy to his factory. Coysh and Henrywood note that the scholar Hugh Stretton found a list of Bagster's engraved copper plates offered for sale in the *Staffordshire and Pottery Mercury* of September 6, 1828.<sup>2</sup> The *Vignette* series appears on the list as available for both table and tea sets; thus, the patterns could have been purchased by another maker or later owner of Bagster's works. The patterns were not always printed in blue



**Note the thread Holes on the long sides of the caddy. Michael Weinberg photos.**



**Side views of the Thread Caddy with Rural Scenes. Michael Weinberg photos.**

and the titles may not have been included on the wares (the aforementioned pickle tray is an unmarked piece).

The diaphanous dancing figure on the cover is colorful, exotic and does not seem to be in keeping with the rustic genre scenes depicted on the sides. The only connection to the printed views is that she appears to be dancing on a log. Why was such an incongruous subject on the cover of this thread caddy? I began to puzzle over who the caddy was intended for and how the woman using it would interpret the decoration. I arrived at several possible conclusions from both iconographic and aesthetic perspectives, while at the same time placing the thread caddy within British social context.

The neoclassicism evident in ceramics of the eighteenth century continued into the first half of the nineteenth century. Factories in Staffordshire and other areas, and mak-

ers such as John Walton, James Neale, Enoch Wood and Felix Pratt produced numerous versions of gods, goddesses and allegorical figures. These subjects were integrated into the decoration of other types of pottery as well and can be found on plaques, tea caddies, teapots and jugs. For example, the circa 1800 vase is molded and decorated in underglaze colors with a procession of female figures after John Flaxman's *Sacrifice to Ceres*.

Based on the views printed about the sides of the thread caddy, it is conceivable that the relief molded figure on the cover represents an attendant of Ceres, Roman goddess of agriculture and the harvest, women, fertility and motherhood. Ceres is associated with the ground from which crops grow, the bread produced from grain, and the labor necessary to produce crops, which by extension connects her to the countryside and the "common" people who live there and farm the land.

There are numerous myths associated with Ceres and these are undeniably represented on the sides of the thread caddy. Devotion is unmistakable in the depiction of the close-knit family group seated before the tidy



**Molded and decorated in underglaze colors with a procession of female figures after John Flaxman's *Sacrifice to Ceres*. Source: John and Griselda Lewis, *Pratt Ware: English and Scottish relief decorated and underglaze coloured earthenware, 1780-1840*, p. 238, with permission of Antique Collectors' Club, Ltd. Original located in the V&A Museum, London.**

cottage, the husband doting over his wife and child. The workers, with basket and spade at their feet, are depicted paused in their tasks of clearing fields and planting. The farm is prosperous, evident in the distant haystack and the herd of cattle behind the family group. The middle class wife of a merchant, factory owner or clergyman, the probable owner of the thread caddy, surely encountered similar views of workers laboring in the fields and devoted mothers and wives. While mending garments and household linens, she might identify with the concepts of motherhood, fertility and prosperity implicit on the cover, but made visually apparent on the sides of the caddy. The dancer prominently displayed on the cover, flanked by abundant summer blossoms and perhaps engaged in a procession honoring Ceres, could also be considered an acknowledgement to the owner of the caddy whose influential roles as mother, helpmate and nurturer were reflected in the printed images on the sides.

The figure of a dancing tambourine player taking part in a festival or procession is a more aesthetically pleasing alternative to the usually staid depictions of Ceres, whose attributes include a sickle, a basket or cornucopia filled with flowers and fruit, and a crown or wreath made of corn ears, wheat or barley.<sup>3</sup> Britain's long tradition of holding festivals in honor of Ceres, from Roman times into the nineteenth century, was usually done in the countryside; these *fetes* were seasonal rituals held to commemorate May Day or a successful harvest, and included food, games, music, processions and dance. The tools set aside, the up-tilted cart in front of the cottage, the visiting cow herds, and the addition of a dog in both scenes on the caddy represent a break in the cycle of work, a rare occasion for the farm worker and laborer to celebrate with dancing and rest.

A lady belonging to the aristocracy or the wife of a country gentleman, if educated in the history of art, would know that Ceres was usually depicted standing stoically, holding a sickle and wearing or carrying a wreath of grain. If she did make a connection between Ceres – champion of the lower classes – and the processional dancer, the cover would then become a blatant and unpleasant reminder of the people laboring to facilitate her life of ease, while also alluding to pagan celebrations of fertility and the harvest. The printed views of country inhabitants, similar to those that might be viewed out of the window, would serve to reinforce the disagreeable reality.

I considered that such iconographic interpretations might be too far-fetched. More likely, the caddy was fashioned for someone who was unconcerned about, or oblivious to, the real life conditions of farm workers and tenants. The dancer could have been modeled after a less symbolically-charged Herculean figure; the painted figures of mythological and Bacchanalian scenes, dancing nymphs and aerial muses found in the ruins of Herculeanum. In this case, there may have been a conscious decision to attire the dancer in purple robes, symbolic since antiquity of royalty and nobility, and by extension, of wealth and rank. In the printed floral sprays and deli-



**An original image from Pompeii, found in the House of Cicero; Carol Macht, *Classical Wedgwood Designs: The Sources and Their Use and the Relationship of Wedgwood Jasper Ware to the Classical Revival of the Eighteenth Century*, with permission of Antique Collectors' Club, Ltd.**

cately painted rose stems, a lady would have before her the inspiration to strive for equally fine stitching in her needlework. The scenes depicting country people engaged in mundane daily activities- relegated to the sides- might have been perceived through indifferent eyes as quaint and sentimental.

Regardless of any intrinsic meanings, the relief molded and brightly enameled cover is the obvious focal point of the piece. Bagster produced several additional views in the *Vignette* series and one wonders why he (or the maker) didn't incorporate four different views on the sides instead of using two in repeat.<sup>4</sup> If the maker intended the printed views to be of little or no significance, other than for decoration, then the question becomes: why not print the sides with a pleasing pattern of neoclassical figures, cupids, urns, and flowers that would have been more in keeping with the primary subject and with the popular *Greek* patterned wares of the day being produced by pot-

teries such as Elkin, Knight & Bridgwood, The Herculeum Pottery, Spode and Wedgwood. Perhaps by the time the caddy was manufactured, the fascination with neoclassicism had begun to wane, beginning an early transition toward a preference for romantic scenes.

It is also conceivable that the thread caddy was designed solely for commercial purposes with no thought of encoded meaning- an everyday object destined for domestic use or export abroad. From a marketable point of view, it should not have been a difficult sell; the cover is beautifully embellished and the pastoral views on the sides are benign and pleasing. Since undertaking the cover decoration seems to have been the primary artistic focus of the maker, using two printed images was probably more economical, quicker and required less labor than incorporating four. In this simple utilitarian object the factory demonstrated its adeptness not only in the technique of transfer-printing, but also in integrating the additional skills of relief molding and enamel-decorating. From an aesthetic standpoint, it presents a happy marriage between the neoclassical and the rustic. After all, while they were busy making gods and goddesses, the same potters and factories were producing bucolic figures such as shepherds and shepherdesses, haymakers, gardeners, cow creamers and milking groups.

Finding examples of transferware incorporating the same type of relief and enamel decoration proved difficult. John and Griselda Lewis illustrate a flask relief decorated on each side with a figure of Admiral Nelson. The figure is painted in the typical Pratt colors of ochre, yellow, blue and black, and is surrounded by clusters of blue transfer-printed floral sprays. The flask bears the initials D R penciled in blue beneath the base, but the authors believe these were the initials of the recipient stating it "...looks like a gift or a tourist trophy..." and thus the maker appears to be anonymous.

Locating an example of another transfer-printed thread caddy was nearly impossible: only one has surfaced and it appeared in William R. & Teresa F. Kurau's catalog *Histori-*



**Relief and transfer decorated flask showing Admiral Nelson. Source: John and Griselda Lewis, *Pratt Ware: English and Scottish relief decorated and underglaze coloured earthenware, 1780-1840*, p. 158, with permission of Antique Collectors' Club, Ltd.**

*cal Staffordshire and Collector's Items #22* (lot 882, a Federal period mahogany sewing box, the cover printed with a view of *LaGrange- The Residence of the Marquis Lafayette*, and opening to reveal a divided tray).

I have enjoyed spending a little time attempting to interpret this thread caddy. If anyone knows of the existence of a similar example, I would like to hear about it and, of course, additional comments or opinions are welcome. I am looking forward to seeing all the collectors, curators and dealers who have now become friends at the TCC Meeting in New Hampshire next year.

### End Notes

1) A.W. Coysh and R.K. Henrywood, *The Dictionary of Blue & White Printed Pottery, 1780-1880*, vol. I, p. 31; and W.L. Little, *Staffordshire Blue: Underglaze blue transfer-printed earthenware*, pp. 49 and 88.

2) A.W. Coysh and R.K. Henrywood, *The Dictionary of Blue & White Printed Pottery, 1780-1880*, vol. II, p. 24.

3) Some of these attributes are also associated with *Autumn*, one of the four allegorical figures or views representing the *Four Seasons*. In late eighteenth-early nineteenth century ceramics, there are variations in the interpretation of *Autumn*; for example, figures can be male or

female, attired in classical or contemporary costume, carry various attributes including grapes, vine leaves, wine, ears or a sheaf of corn, a wreath or cornucopia, and a sickle or scythe. Autumn (sometimes called *Summer*) is often modeled or depicted as a classical robed female figure, holding a sickle or scythe and a sheaf of wheat.

4) Additional scenes listed in *The Dictionary of Blue & White Pottery, 1780-1880*, vol. II, p. 207. (titled and including a brief description) are *The Meeting, The Topers, Woman with Basket* walking with a boy, church and cottages in the distance, *Rural Beggars, Scottish Shepherd, Reaping Scene, Haymaking, Sheep at Hay Rack, Horses trotting across a field before a cottage, The Cows' and 'Watering Place.*