

# Elephant Tracks:

## Tracing Britain's Fascination with Elephants on Transfer-Printed Wares c. 1790-1850, Part I

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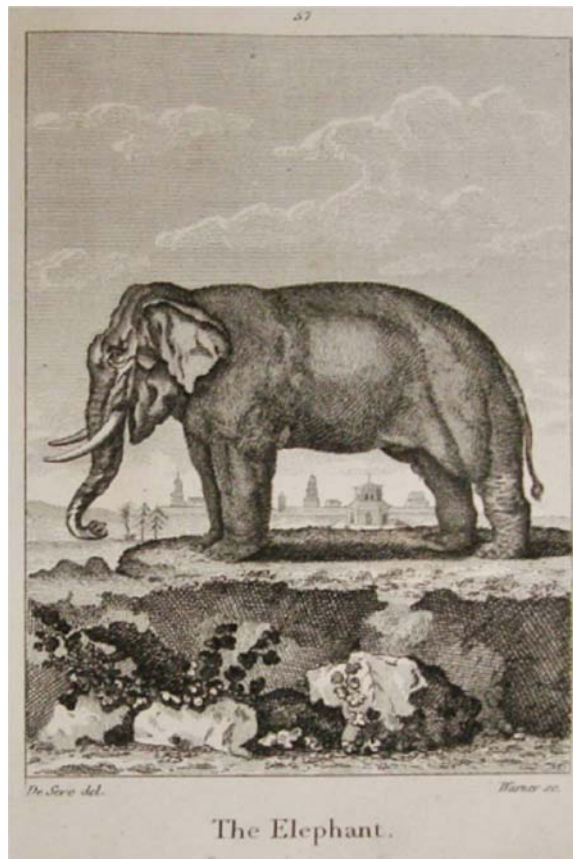
What follows is the first of a two-part review of the role the elephant played in ceramic designs on printed wares in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Part I—appearing in this issue of the *Bulletin*—explores the various ways in which elephants were portrayed as animals in captivity or in the wild. Part II—to appear in a future issue—will trace the path of elephants as beasts of burden and transport.

### Why Elephant Patterns?

Although elephants lived from time to time at the Tower Menagerie in London beginning in 1252, they were only seen by invitation (mainly by the privileged class). It wasn't until the 18<sup>th</sup> century that the general public could visit the Tower Menagerie. The admission price was a dog or a cat (used to feed



**Fig. 1: Elephant Paddock and Wapiti House at the London Zoological Gardens, Regents Park, by George Schraf**



**Figure 2.**

to the animals), or a cash fee. The Zoological Society of London was founded in 1826 and the London Zoological Gardens (the London Zoo) was opened in Regent's Park in 1828. The first elephant arrived at the zoo in 1831. However, the Zoological Gardens were only open to members of the Society or their guests (Figure 1). It was not until the 1840s, when the London Zoo was losing money because it had lost its popularity with the upper classes, that it was opened to the general public.

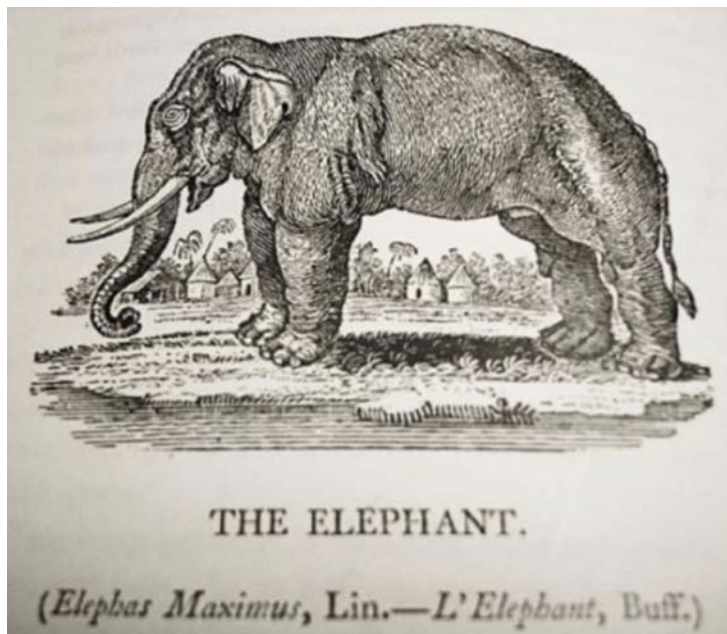
Although most 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century British citizens were not able to see a real elephant, the general public was likely familiar with its image from popular books of natural history, including *Histoire Naturelle* by Georges-Louis Leclerc Comte de Buffon (1749-1788), *A General History of Quadrupeds* by Thomas Bewick (1790), and *The Cabinet of Quadrupeds* by John Church (1805). The Staffordshire potters



often copied prints from books that were best sellers because it made good business sense to put patterns on pottery that were already popular. Because copyright laws in England had no real teeth until the Copyright Act of 1842, the artwork from books, publications and art galleries could be freely, although not legally, copied by anyone with access to them.

The Comte de Buffon's (1707-1788) *Histoire Naturelle* is an encyclopedia that was intended to cover all relevant subjects, but ended up being limited by Buffon's death to animals and minerals. These topics alone resulted in 36 volumes! Although written in French, Buffon's work was translated into many languages, including English. The natural history is interesting, but the engravings are worth the proverbial thousand words. Buffon commissioned the artist Jacques E. de Seves to do the original etchings (Figure 2).

Thomas Bewick (1753-1828) was a naturalist as well as an artist. He illustrated his books on natural history



**Figure 3.**

with his own woodblock engravings. Figure 3 shows the elephant from his *A General History of Quadrupeds*. With a few small changes, it is easy to see that his work is very similar to that of Buffon, to whom he gives reference.

### The Evolution of Elephant Patterns

The elephant was certainly not the first animal to appear on printed wares. Indeed, another non-European native quadruped, the water

buffalo, was introduced in Britain much earlier on variations of a Chinese export porcelain design. The English potters were quick to seize on the popularity of this design and began producing variations of the Chinese pattern in what is commonly known as the *Buffalo* or *Boy on a Buffalo*. Building on the popularity of the *Buffalo* pattern, several late eighteenth century potters replaced the buffalo with an elephant in their transfer designs. Here, the popularity of the above named books of natural history influenced their choice of animal. Earlier studies by

Robert Copeland and Renard Broughton called our attention to the fact that some of the elephant patterns essentially duplicated many characteristics of the early highly popular *Buffalo* design.

The examples of the *Buffalo* pattern shown on a dinner plate (Figure 4) and the *Elephant, Variation Buffalo*, pattern seen on the molded saucer dish (Figure 5) demonstrate that not-so-subtle transition. A close up of the center patterns for the two reveals the similarities.



**Figure 4.**



**Figure 5.**





Figure 6.

In *Elephant, Variation Buffalo* (seen on the right, Figure 6), virtually every element of the central design, except the animal itself and the birds in flight, was copied from the earlier *Buffalo* pattern. This rather ingenious transition enabled the potteries to expand their product offerings by leveraging an already popular design, the *Buffalo* pattern, in order to introduce another exotic animal, the elephant, which had generated much interest at the time.

### Elephant, Variation of Buffalo

*Elephant, Variation of Buffalo*, best exemplifies the transition from one popular animal design to another. The pattern, seen on the fluted saucer (Figure 5) and on the matching tea bowl (Figure 6a), was printed with a late 18<sup>th</sup> century line-engraved version of the design. This example is unmarked. The same pattern was employed by



Figure 6a.

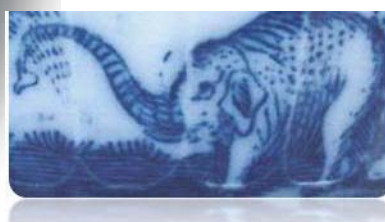


Figure 6b.

George Harrison on this large 8" pouch vase with an impressed "G Harrison" mark (Figure 7). As previously

noted, the design has most of the elements of the *Buffalo* pattern except that the boy mounted on the buffalo is replaced by an enchanting baby elephant (Figure 6b).

A similar version of this pattern is found on this molded cabbage leaf porcelain jug (Figure 8), attributed to Edward Blakeway and John Rose at the Calcut Chinaworks, Jackfield, Shropshire, c. 1794 – 1795. This example would have been produced in the same decade as the earthenware examples. The fact that *Elephant, Variation Buffalo* was also printed underglaze on porcelain suggests the degree of popularity of the pattern. Geoffrey Godden, in his *Guide to English Blue & White Porcelain*, provides additional examples of the pattern printed underglaze on porcelain bodies.

In this example, a large portion of the pattern is repeated on the neck of the jug.



Figure 7.



Figure 8.



## Elephant

In the *Elephant* pattern by Rogers, the elephant appears in a somewhat different setting. Roger's pattern must have also been very successful, as many examples can be found in the market even today. These examples frequently have an impressed ROGERS mark and are c. 1815-1836.

The pattern was more commonly produced in blue, without enameling, and was used principally for dinner and dessert wares. Brown printed pieces are also known. The example featured here is an 8" pearlware dessert plate printed in blue underglaze with over the glaze enameling in red and pink and with gilding added (Figure 9). The design consists of an elephant and his trainer standing in a garden or zoo-like setting near a river, or possibly a lake. A large gazebo sits high on a rock on the left side of the scene. The large floral border contains flowers and leaves. A small border of geometric design similar to the border Rogers used on its *Zebra* pattern is also used for both an inner and extreme outer border on the pattern.

The second example in the *Elephant* pattern is this large 7.75 inch globular pearlware teapot printed in blue underglaze (Figure 10). It is c. 1800-1805 and earlier than the well-known Rogers version of the pattern. The pattern is printed in the reverse and it includes birds similar to the New Hall version shown in Figure 11 below. It is



Figure 9.



Figure 10.

also printed with a different border pattern.

The third *Elephant* pattern, seen on this porcelain saucer dish printed in blue and enamelled and gilded (Figure 11), was produced by New Hall. It is the factory's *Pattern 876*. Most notably, the elephant's trainer is no longer included in the design and the lake or river in the previous two examples is not apparent in New Hall's design. In this version, New Hall employs a simple gild border consisting of a geometric wavy design framed by two solid lines.

As taste gradually changed from the Chinoiserie patterns of the late 18th and early 19th centuries to interest in more realistic subjects in the 1820s and 30s, the potters not only used the inspiration of the books on natural history but actually copied the source prints.

## Menageries

In the next example, the elephant is found on this interesting c. 1835 molded jug with the pattern titled *Menageries* (Figures 12 & 13). In this case, while the elephant is printed in a prominent place on the item, it is used as one of a number of animals that appear on the piece. Its striking resemblance to the Buffon and Bewick interpretation of the animal is still apparent. Other animals on the jug, which are copied from Bewick, are the tiger, the golden eagle, the common squirrel, and the hare.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 11.



Figure 12.

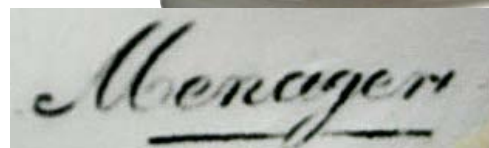


Figure 13.



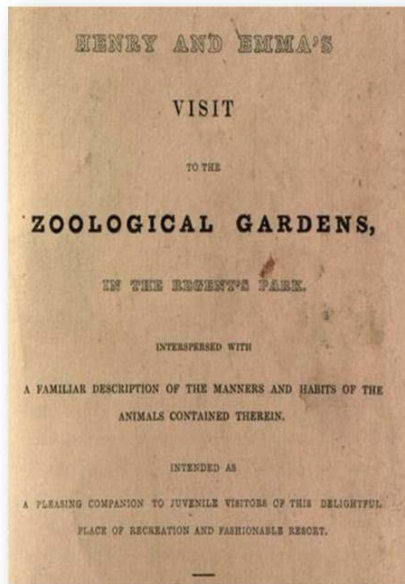


Figure 14.

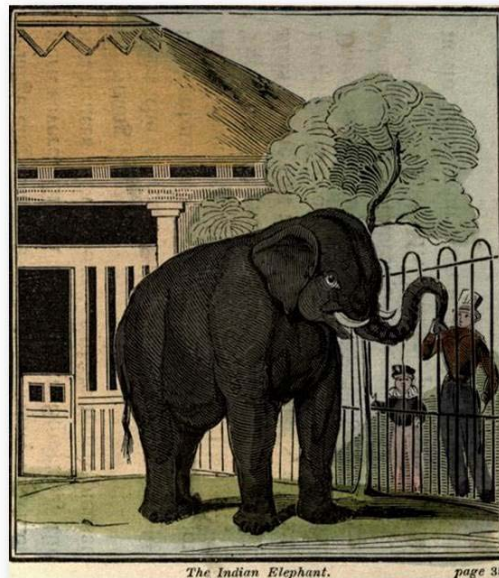


Figure 15.



Figure 16.



Figure 17.

## Elephant on Children's Wares

It would come as no surprise to find that, in the 1830s and '40s, the charming elephant portrayed by both Buffon and Bewick would find its way onto a variety of children's ware. Children were encouraged to visit the Zoological Gardens in Regents Park and, if they couldn't visit it in person, they could read about the elephant in publications like *Henry and Emma's Visit to the Zoological Gardens in the Regents Park* (Figure 14 & 15). A small selection of these wares is shown here (Figures 16-19).

An important third source for elephant patterns is found in John Church's book of natural history, *The Cabinet of Quadrupeds*. It was used by Enoch Wood & Sons for the *Sporting Series*, Job Meigh & Son for the *Zoological Sketches Series* and John Hall for the *Quadrupeds Series* (Figure 20). These were and still are immensely popular transferware series. For example, the Transferware Collectors Club *Pattern and Source Print Database* currently includes 32 patterns from Wood's *Sporting Series*, 18 patterns from John Hall's *Quadrupeds Series* and 18 patterns from Job Meigh's *Zoological Sketches Series*. Church, like Buffon, did not do the artwork. The engravings are by James Tookey (c. 1800-1830) from the paintings of Julius Ibbetson (1759-1812).



Figure 18.



Figure 19.

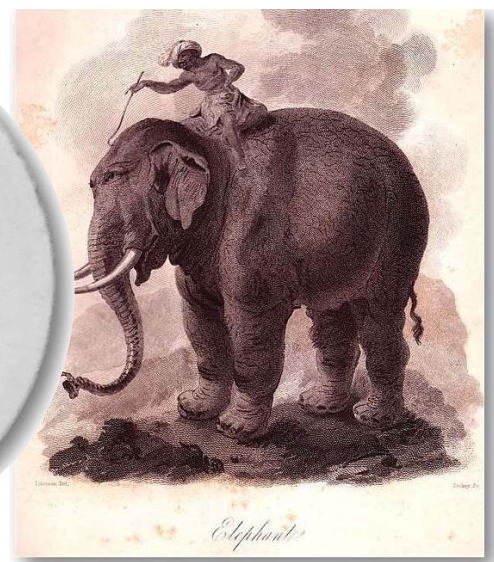


Figure 20.



## Elephant – John Hall

Ibbetson's interpretation of the elephant that appears in Church's *The Cabinet of Quadrupeds* differs from that of Buffon and Bewick in that the trunk of the elephant is curved outward while the trunks of the Buffon and Bewick elephants are turned inward. Shown here in Figure 21 is Hall's elephant printed on an 18" X 15" platter (1814-1832). In the *Quadrupeds Series*, Hall chose to feature Ibbetson's large elephant at the left without a mahout (rider). In Part II, we will see that the mahout in Ibbetson's painting appears with the elephant in both Wood's and Meigh's version of the pattern.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have demonstrated through a small selection of printed wares the various ways in which elephants were portrayed as animals in captivity or in the wild and, in some cases, we have identified logical sources of inspiration for these delightful patterns. Seen in the background of Hall's central design (Figure 22) is a second elephant. This animal appears with a howdah. In Part II of *Elephant Tracks*, we will review examples of elephant patterns from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in which this popular animal was portrayed as a beast of burden or of transport. Examples by Wedgwood & Co., Turner, Enoch Wood & Sons, Job Meigh & Son, Spode, and other makers, will be included.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 21.



Figure 22.

## (Endnotes)

1. For more information about the other animals and their source prints seen on the *Menageries* jug go to the following blog post: <http://dishynews.blogspot.com/2013/08/menageries-jug.html>.

2. The Transferware Collectors Club *Pattern and Source Print Database* currently contains 39 elephant patterns and serves as an excellent resource to further explore this subject. For more information about animals on printed wares, also see Zeller, Loren, "Animals on Printed Pots: Understanding the Role Animals Played in Early British Wares c. 1790-1820", *Northern Ceramic Society Journal*, Volume 29, 2013, pp. 97 -136.