"The Resurrection" Pattern from the Cambrian Pottery in Wales

By Jaap Otte

Several years ago, after I had sold my ceramics collection but not yet started another collection, I was visiting an antique ceramics dealer who I had befriended in Delft in The Netherlands, and noted among many beautiful pieces of Dutch Delftware in the shop window, an oval plate with a blue transfer printed depiction of the resurrection of Jesus (Figure 1). I was struck by the decoration which seemed rare and unusual, so I decided to buy it. I held on to it over the years even if it did not fit in with my new collecting interest at all.

According to the Bible's New Testament, on the third day after Jesus' crucifixion and death, he rose from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus, conquering sin and death as the divine Son of God, is the cornerstone of Christian faith, offering believers hope for salvation and future resurrection. Christians celebrate this day at Easter.

The plate, which is made of refined white earthenware and is finely potted, feels relatively light in weight and is covered with a colorless glaze. It is transfer printed with a pattern depicting Jesus as he rose from his grave, here depicted as a rectangular stone sarcophagus, while three Roman soldiers who are guarding the grave are asleep. The pattern is very different from the border, and although well executed, quite coarse. Richard Halliday, an authority on traditional transfer printing, drew my attention to how odd aesthetically the plate really is, with the incongruence between the finely executed border and the coarse, sparse, center, which also has been engraved in a greater gauge than the border. He went even so far as to remark that it really makes no sense to create an engraving like that. Also, note that the pattern is slightly too big for the well of the plate. The print was also placed way too high, but only because of the run-out at the base caused by the sarcophagus from which Jesus rises in the engraving contacting the inward taper (concave inward curve) of the dish. I will discuss the significance of these observations when trying to unravel how this plate came about.

Figure 1: Plate, refined white earthenware with transfer printed pattern depicting the resurrection of Jesus, late 18th-early 19th C. Dimensions: L. 34.1 cm/13.5", W. 25.8 cm/10 1/8", H. 2.8 cm/1 1/8". Attributed to the Cambrian Pottery. Collection Otte, photography Greg Staley.

The original source for the pattern, although unusual, turned out in no way to be the biggest mystery surrounding the plate, and likely must be sought among one of the numerous prints on paper depicting the resurrection which artists started to create in the 15th century. A particularly dramatic version is the one Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) engraved in 1512 (Figure 2). Several European artists followed suit over the following centuries, creating many variations, but the way the resurrection is depicted always follows a schematic layout: Jesus, holding a staff with a banner with a cross, steps out of a stone sarcophagus, while men, soldiers, asleep or looking dazed, are lying or slumped around the tomb. These prints, and paintings with the same topic, are in most cases titled "The Resurrection", which therefore seems an appropriate name for the pattern.

Although I have not been able to identify the specific source print for the pattern, the style appears much earlier than the late 18th or early 19th century. There are a few explanations, some of which do not exclude each other, which I will discuss below.

The engraver of the pattern may have worked from a printed original on paper, possibly from as far back as the 16th or 17th century, but there is also the fascinating possibility that an old copper plate was re-used. As pointed out above, the center is far coarser than the border, and the gauge is greater too. This incongruity between the border and the center makes it likely that an earlier engraving was used, for example from the 1750-70 period to print on porcelain, or for printing on paper, in which case the engraving could even date from the 16th or 17th century; it is possible to print without difficulties from copper plates made for paper printing on transferware tissue, and vice-versa. Another argument in favor of the re-use of an older engraving, is that the print does not fit the shape of the plate, but it could also be the

case that the pattern was created for a different shape, likely a slightly larger plate, or another medium altogether. The engravers of copper plates for the pottery industry spent much time fitting engravings to pieces well before they even cut a line into the copper.

That said, the print is oddly devoid of the detail one would expect to see on an engraving for printing on, for example, paper, which could point to a (relatively crude) new engraving after an older source, where the image was simplified to save costs. This may have made sense if the number of objects to be printed was going to be small, which the rarity of the pattern seems to point to, with this plate being the only known copy. Even if we assume that the vast majority of the output of the potteries does not survive today, a single known copy certainly points to a relatively small production run.

A one-off production print cannot be excluded either but is highly unlikely. Creating a one-off print was very uneconomical from the pottery's perspective and therefore makes no sense; a hand painted decoration would have been the way to go in that case. Another argument against a one-off print is that a customer who desired a single plate with a custom decoration could have gone to a number of decorating studios in, for example, Delft or Amsterdam and have such a one-off, likely using a blank of English origin at this time, made. The discovery of a credible source in the future may shed more light on some of these mysteries.

Regardless of whether the pattern is printed from a new engraving or from a re-used one, it is possible that the plate is actually a pre-production inspection or trial piece sent to the merchant who placed the order for approval, and that the print did not go into production after all.

Because of the unusual topic of the pattern there was always doubt in my mind as to the origin of the plate: was it a British or a continental product? Based on the chinoiserie border pattern, I leaned towards British, which I was recently able to confirm when I found a yellow printed brownware jug with the same border pattern in the TCC Pattern Database (Figures 3, 4, 5). Although neither the plate nor the jug is marked, there are several blue-printed versions of the main pattern on the jug, a large carnation or chrysanthemum, by Bovey Tracey and the Swansea Cambrian Pottery. Cambrian's "Angry Swan" pattern's so-called 'large fan border' is similar, although not identical, to the plate's border. An authoritative source subsequently attributed the plate to the Cambrian Pottery with near certainty. The Cambrian Pottery was in business from 1783 to 1810, which aligns well with a general date range of the late 18th to early 19th century for the plate based on stylistic and technical grounds. And perhaps the jug with the identical border pattern can now be attributed to the Cambrian Pottery too!

Figure 2: Albrecht Dürer, The Resurrection, from The Passion. Copper engraving print, 1512. CC0 Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1919.

Figure 3: Jug, brown earthenware with transfer printed floral decoration, late 18th to early 19th C. Dimensions and maker unknown. The Transferware Collectors Club Database of Patterns & Sources, pattern number 14849.

Figure 4: Detail: border pattern jug.

Even if manufactured in Britain, the pattern was most likely created for export to the continent, more specifically for Catholics in, for example, the Netherlands, Germany or France.

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Figure 5: Detail: border pattern plate.