



China Syndrome

FANS OF THE 18TH-CENTURY ENGLISH CERAMICS KNOWN AS TRANSFERWARE COLLECT A BIT OF COLORFUL PHILADELPHIA HISTORY WITH EVERY PIECE

By Caroline Tiger | Photographs by Ed Cunicelli

IN A HIGH-CEILINGED HALLWAY IN THE bowels of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, an eager group is trying their best to remain patient as they wait their turn to approach a table laden with rare pieces of pottery known as transferware. Most of the platters, jugs and plates come from a collection donated to the museum in 1940 by R. Wistar Harvey, a wealthy bachelor

who'd amassed hundreds of pieces by the time of his death. This group can relate to Harvey. They're the Transferware Collectors Club (TCC), and they've come to Philadelphia from as far away as England and California for their annual meeting, held in a different location each year. The objects of the club's obsession are English ceramics made between 1760 and 1900,

well plated

Pieces such as this blue-and-white platter, which depicts a local scene, "Fair Mount Near Philadelphia" (circa 1820), have gained mass appeal in recent years.



transfer trio

"Upper Ferry Bridge Over the River Schuylkill," appears in three colors, ABOVE; "Wisdom and Justice Dictating to Dr. Franklin," graces a Liverpool creamware tankard, BELOW; and a tall dome coffeepot, RIGHT, is glazed with a scene dubbed "Lafayette at the Tomb of Franklin."

and decorated by transferring patterns via tissue paper from inked, engraved copper plates onto white and cream-bodied pottery. The pieces were then placed in low-temperature kilns so the detailed patterns would fix.

The blue-and-white pattern emerged when English ceramics companies began reproducing Chinese porcelain designs. By the 1830s, more than 200 English manufacturers were using some variation of the Chinese porcelain patterns. One particular variation—"Blue Willow"—is especially well-known and widely popular.

On the Rise

ONCE YOU KNOW ABOUT TRANSFERWARE, you'll start to recognize it everywhere, including echoes of it in modern tableware, on which designers are interpreting patterns that have the look of etching. The wide range of colors, makers and subject matter provides many different entrées into collecting, as does the range of prices, which can run from one hundred dollars to thousands of dollars per piece.

"You can fall in love with it—and then you can actually buy it," says Leslie B. Grigsby, curator of ceramics and glass at Delaware's Winterthur Museum & Country Estate, which showcases

antiques and Americana. "I love it because it's a window into the tastes and thoughts of the people of the period who produced it."

When the transfer-printing technique was perfected in 1783 for earthenware, transferware became the fashionable, everyday china in upper- and middle-class homes. With its low labor costs, transfer-printing provided an affordable alternative to handpainted tableware. People could buy entire sets of dinner services with matching platters, potato bowls, pickle trays and soup tureens that were as decorative as more expensive Sevres and Meissen porcelain.

Of course, the transferware laid out on the table in the museum's basement is not what you'd call affordable today. There's an "Arms of the States" plate, from a series made in the 1830s. It's an example of Historical Blue China, made



for the American market after the War of 1812 when trade opened between England and its former colonies. In 2006, a Pennsylvania "Arms of America" platter sold at auction for \$17,600.

Potters in Staffordshire, the tiny, clay-rich district in England's West Midlands area that was the center of the country's pottery production, capitalized on early America's patriotism by selling plates depicting important American buildings, people, events and ideals. Today it's the most highly collectible category. Fred Buch, an Ephrata businessman, has been collecting another historic pattern, the dark blue "Landing of Lafayette" series,

Where to Buy Transferware

WILLIAM R. & TERESA F. KURAU
Lampeter 717-464-0731, historicalchina.com
See a list of shows and pictures of the most commonly stocked items online.

NEW CASTLE ANTIQUES Wilmington
302-998-7651

SAMUEL T. FREEMAN & CO. Philadelphia 215-563-9275, freemansauction.com
The second half of the Eugene Fleischer Collection containing a variety of pieces will be auctioned on November 16.

POOK AND POOK Downingtown 610-269-4040, pookandpook.com
Look for auction schedule and catalogs online.

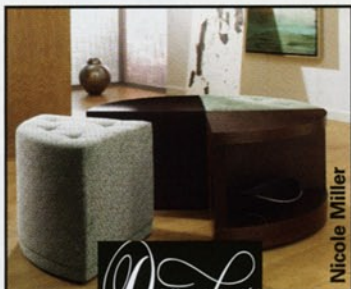
CONESTOGA AUCTION COMPANY
Manheim 717-898-7284, conestogauction.com
Antiques auctions are the last Tuesday of every month. Check online for the catalog.

RESOURCES

To learn more, visit the website of the Transferware Collectors Club:
transcollectorsclub.org

To see a comprehensive collection of transferware in context, visit Winterthur Museum & Country Estate, Winterthur
800-448-3883, winterthur.org

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blue mood

A pitcher, ABOVE, shows the Fairmount Water Works, while a beaded bowl, TOP, depicts Philadelphia's original waterworks; and "Eagle at War With Arrows," a relief molding, decorates a soup tureen, TOP RIGHT.

since he was a kid. At 12 years old, he became friends with an elderly dentist who had a large china collection. "He told me to spend my allowance on that instead of on hot rods," says Buch. Once Buch saw patterns featuring his childhood heroes, Lafayette and Ben Franklin, he was hooked. He remembers stopping at a Pine Street shop on his way to school and buying a coffee-pot with a transfer of Lafayette visiting Franklin's tomb for \$100. Today the pot would fetch around \$2,000. In November 2005, a "Landing of Lafayette" soup tureen and ladle sold for more than \$19,000 at Samuel T. Freeman & Co.'s auction in Philadelphia.

Developments in underglazing allowed transferware to be made in col-

ors other than cobalt blue—beginning with green in the 1820s and followed by pink, brown, mulberry (purplish-black), black and lighter blues.

Colorful Past

IN THE 1840s, "ROMANTIC TRANSFERWARE" was the most prominent style. Engravers depicted nonspecific pastoral scenes with lakes, castles and pagodas, weaving in florals, fruit and animals.

Many collectors are attracted to the transferware miniatures—small dinner services, and plates and cups with animals, ABCs and Aesop's fables themes. Terry Kurau, who, along with her husband, Bill, has been selling transferware since 1975, first in New York and now from their home in Lancaster County, collects these miniature pieces. Visiting their home in Lampeter is part of the TCC's weekend agenda. "These are my little girl things," she tells the members who've wandered over to a hutch packed with miniatures.

"Would you sell one?" says a woman eyeing a miniature canary-yellow creamer with a black transfer. (Yellow is extremely rare.)

"No, these aren't for sale," says Terry. None of the items in her dining room are for sale, but of course everyone wants them. "Not for sale," Terry has to keep repeating.

The group is encouraged to pull out their wallets on the last day of the club's meeting, when a mini show is staged

at their hotel. Some are only buying pink-and-white pieces. Some prefer brown-and-white. Others seek images of historic views or specific series, like the one of English manor houses. Some are looking for pieces to match those they already own.

Condition and rarity determine price, as does the quality of the transfer. Transfers were cut and pressed by hand, leaving plenty of room for error, especially on shaped pieces like teapots.

Age is also important. Transfer-printed pieces are still being made now. After a few shows and sales, a collector begins to have a sense for how to date a piece by looking at the pattern and checking the marks on its base. There are tricks—due to trade requirements, a “Made in England” stamp means the piece was made in 1921 or later. If it simply says “England,” it was made between 1891 and 1921. Stamps that are clear and haven’t been glazed over increase the worth of a piece.

“Most important is rarity of form and rarity of pattern,” says Lynda Cain, vice president of American furniture and decorative arts at Samuel T. Freeman & Co. “Transferware was brought over to America in great numbers, but many things didn’t survive.”

That’s why a soup tureen with unharmed pieces—undertray, lid and ladle—costs more. So do larger serving pieces, which were more often in use, as well as easily breakable cup-plates. It’s something that transferware collecting shares with all forms of collecting: A rare item, to a collector, is more important than money. ■

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