



Transfer-Printed Rice Plates for the South-East Asia Market

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One of the greatest achievements in transfer printing in the last half of the 19th century was led by J. & M. P. Bell of Glasgow, Scotland. The firm was established in 1842 by the two brothers: John and Matthew Perston Bell. They began by producing useful kitchen wares. By the 1860s they were well established, and there was high demand for their decorative and useful pottery. In the 1860s and 1870s there was a large volume of exported ware, from other Scottish potteries as well as Bells, that was sent out to all parts of the world. John Bell became a ship owner and purchased a firm in Rangoon to assist with the continuation of their adventure.

When John died in 1880, Bells became a limited company that began producing a series of unregistered patterns as well as standard designs for export to Asia. It is a surprising phenomenon that at a time when the over-all design and quality of the Bell's products appeared to be declining, they began producing an array of patterns with two-color printing that was rarely used for the home market.



Fig. 1: Four rice plate examples, clockwise from upper left: Kapal Basar, Johore, and Ayam-Jantan, by J. & M.P. Bell; San Soly Toh, by W. & T. Adams.

The use of oriental-inspired designs was popular in the 18th and 19th centuries which is not unusual; however, Bells combined knowledge of the culture of the local people using traditional symbols associated with China, Japan and Indonesia. The patterns were not used for full dinner services, but for rice plates of different sizes. Strangely enough these patterns were unknown in Scotland until the last quarter of the 20th century.

Edwin Robertson, a Scotsman, developed an appreciation of foreign cultures from an early age. Many of his close family lived abroad. He followed suit in 1948 working in the National Service with the Royal Air Force as a Clerk in Africa. He later worked for a Dutch company in West Java and Palembang, South Sumatra, specializing in water supply. In 1979 while hunting through a dilapidated second hand shop in the port of Palembang, he accidentally came across a rice plate with a bold Chinese-style pattern marked J. & M.P. Bell Ltd. Although he did not buy the rice plate at the time, he began to enquire about “Bells” and learned that they were manufacturing potters in Scotland. What a joyful discovery for the expatriate Scot! He began in earnest to search through “pasars” and markets looking for as many of these mysterious plates as he could find. He dedicated 4 years to acquiring an extensive collection of Bells Scottish export pottery.

Meanwhile in Glasgow, Scotland, shortly before Robertson’s return, a research project was underway that uncovered dates and pattern names registered by Bells for export to South East Asia. With this information and excavations of waste pits of various Glaswegian potteries, the puzzle began to unfold. The National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland purchased a large selection of Robertson’s collection.

Five colors of print were used: red, blue, green, brown and yellow. Examples are found in single colors as well as combinations of two colors. The registered patterns from c. 1887-1905 had various sources for names. Many have place names such as “Johore”, “Pekin” and “Borneo”. Other than “Pekin” with a building of sorts, the patterns have little to do with the given place name. “Makassar” as seen here is named after the capital of South Sulawesi, the center of trade for East Indonesia (Figure 2). The unusual center of the “Makassar” pattern features a leopard treading on a snake-like ribbon with stylized flower 'head'. A peacock is looking on. This scene is surrounded by two Chinese dragons. The border features dragon heads repeated from the center alternating with two small peacocks on a diaper pattern background. This pattern was registered in 1890 with No. 147736, seen on the garter printed mark. The impressed letter B in a bell is a mark also found on the registered patterns (Figure 3).

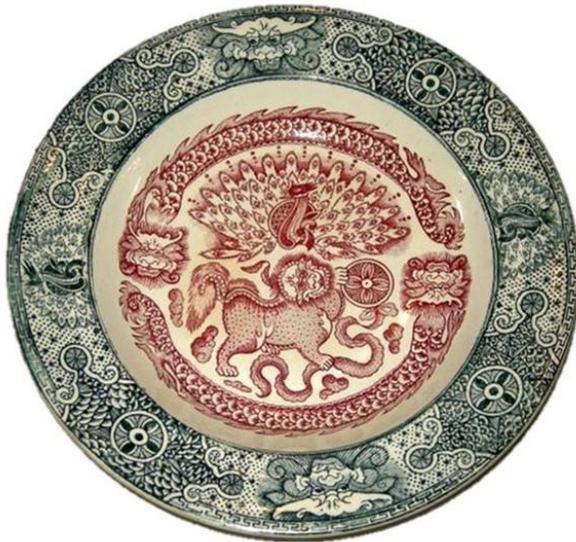


Fig. 2: "Makassar" red and green rice plate.



Fig. 3: "Makassar" red printed and impressed marks.

Another place name pattern, "Bhamo", is the only pattern registered for export to South East Asia by a Scottish pottery other than J. & M. P. Bell. Other export patterns by R. Cochran, Britannia Pottery, were not registered. This pattern depicts a hunting scene with a rider on the back of an elephant preparing to shoot the oncoming tiger with a bow and arrow. The presence of a servant with an umbrella or parasol with a long pole to shade the hunter from the hot sun indicates that he is an important person (Figure 4). The mark here is stamped "Verreville Pottery"; however, as an export pattern it may well be from the Britannia factory of Cochran. Rd. No. (Registry Number) 300812 dates production to 1897 (Figure 5).



Fig. 4: "Bhamo" green and red rice plate.



Fig. 5: "Bhamo" green printed mark.

Another group of patterns have been given foreign names – perhaps Malay and/or a form of African Script. Most titles can be translated. “Burong Supan” is a non-English term meaning Dainty Bird, and it certainly lives up to its name. There are birds of Paradise in the triangular cartouches in the center pattern as well as dainty mythological birds in the keyhole sections. The birds in the border pattern between the floral medallions look like small phoenix. Shown here is an all over red example. The pattern is also found in green or blue and a two-color combination of red and green or red and blue (Figure 6). “Burong Supan” bears Rd. No. 128553 (1889) on the printed mark (Figure 7).



Fig. 6: “Burong Supan” red printed rice plate. Fig. 7: “Burong Supan” red printed mark.

“Kim Ki Soah” is an export pattern produced by Adams in Staffordshire for the South East Asia market. It is not registered, and the pattern name has not been translated. This 8.5 inch plate is a bi-color design with green center and pink border. The additional image in the database has a blue center with green border. Bell did not use blue and green together in their two-color export wares. The pattern is most definitely from the Aesthetic period, and features many of the elements associated with that era: bamboo, water lilies (in the alternating cartouches in the border), oriental vase, plants in low pots on the floor, fabric patterns on odd shapes and openwork boxes. “Kim Ki Soah” by Adams has been compared with “Kwantung” by Bell. According to one author, "Though both soup plates depict similar motifs of flowers in an elongated vase and a rim decorated with lozenges filled with flora, the patterning on 'Kwantung' is more interesting and less European." (Figure 8). The mark contains a registry diamond dated March 23, 1882 for a mark device. The pattern then would have been designed later (Figure 9).



Fig. 8: “Kim Ki Soah” green and red rice plate.



Fig. 9: “Kim Ki Soah” red printed mark.

“Kwantung” is a place name as it refers to an area of northern China where there is a big trading port at the end of the Trans-Siberian railway. A pattern with similar motifs by W & T Adams, titled “Kim Ki Soah”, this pattern also features a vase of flowers on a pedestal. However, there is a dragon form on the vase as in the Jeddo pattern, and another large dragon behind the vase and sheaf of arrows. Other strange creatures lurk around the edges of the center pattern. A two-tiered table supporting flowers in a pot sits on the right side. The center pattern is definitely geared to the South East Asia market. The border is more European with three floral medallions, each seen twice on a diaper background (Figure 10). The mark is printed in green, the same color as the center of the design. The Rd. No. is 162201, c. 1890 (Figure 11).



Fig. 10: “Kwantung” green and red rice plate.



Fig. 11: “Kwantung” green printed mark.

There are Bell registered patterns with names in English that describe what is in the pattern such as “Dragon.” This pattern features a coiled dragon and may have been inspired by Chinese porcelain patterns exported to Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries. The dragon symbolizes celestial and spiritual power in Chinese mythology; however, it remains a complex and universal symbol. The border is related to the center pattern. It has four large medallions with two each of two different dragons. A bush with spikey flowers is set in between the medallions (Figure 12). “Dragon” is one of the later registered patterns, Rd. No. 331870 (1899) (Figure 13).



Fig. 12: “Dragon” red and green rice plate.



Fig. 13: “Dragon” red printed mark.

Besides patterns with Chinese, Japanese and Indonesian symbolism, floral, scenic and Aesthetic patterns, there are also a number of geometrical patterns. The patterns can have place names or foreign names or even a pattern name such as “Sexagon” that actually has a pattern of 6-sided motifs. I urge you to search South East Asia in the Database, using the General Search. There will be 57 patterns to look at, including those from other Scottish Potteries that exported to that part of the world. These include fascinating geography and mythological symbolism.

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