

Donation of the Month

Blurring the Lines: Flow Blue China





“Non Pareil” Plate ca. 1891-1919, made in England at the Middleport Pottery for the Burgess & Leigh company.

Donated by Donald R. Murray family, from the collection of the Rogers Historical Museum, 1975.183.3

“Verona” Tea Cup & Saucer ca. 1912-1920, made in England by Ridgway Pottery.

Donated by Vera Key, from the collection of the Rogers Historical Museum, 1975.2.18.2,.4

Blue and white china designs became very popular in the early 17th century as the Western world had its first exposure to Chinese porcelain. English potters began to copy these designs and by the mid-eighteenth century, they had succeeded. By using salt-glazed earthenware to mimic Chinese porcelain, cobalt oxide for the blue color, and transferred prints of Oriental patterns, English potters created a less expensive form of Chinese porcelain. Flow blue china is credited to Josiah Wedgwood II in the early nineteenth century. However, the technique of pattern transfer dates back to the 18th century. Eventually, lower-quality seconds and thirds were sent to America and sold at a more affordable cost. This allowed flow blue to become the china of the masses or “the common man’s porcelain.”

The technique in making flow blue china involved transferring patterns. To transfer the pattern, it was first engraved into a metal plate. Cobalt oxide paint was rubbed into the engraving and then damp tissue paper was placed over the plate. The paint transferred to the paper which was then lifted off of the metal and pressed onto the earthenware piece. The paper was rubbed and removed, leaving behind the transferred design.

Patterned pieces were then fired at high temperatures; however, the firing process was difficult to control. The salt-glazed earthenware was porous and the cobalt oxide often overflowed around the pattern edges during the firing or blurred when the outer glaze was applied. Thus, the result became known as flow blue.

At first this blurring was not a welcome sight, as the potters wanted the crisp lines of the Chinese porcelains. However, the blurring hid flaws made during the pattern transfer and firing and the blurred look became popular among buyers. The popularity of flow blue china increased as potters began experimenting with different blurred effects.

Early flow blue china patterns mimicked Chinese porcelain designs with people, buildings, and landscapes from the Far East. Some of these patterns were named Amoy, Chinde, Chapoo, and Pelew. By the 1850s-60s, Victorian florals and romanticized scenes were popular. Flow blue china became its own art form as potters created more ornate designs using lighter or darker blues. Patterns from the late 1800s and early twentieth century displayed simpler flowers and plants influenced by nature as seen in Art Nouveau and Arts and Crafts movements. Popular pattern names in this period were Normandy, Touraine, Melbourne, and Waldorf.

There are two basic pattern styles that are repeated in most flow blue china patterns. The most common is an image in the center of a piece with a separate border. The second style is called a sheet pattern. A single pattern covers the entire object and there are no separate center images or borders. Sheet patterns are typically florals or marble patterns.

The 1870s saw the rise in popularity of flow blue china as Dutch, French, German, and American potters began creating their own wares. However, by 1910 other inexpensive wares began to supplant flow blue pieces. In addition, an increase in popularity and quality of American wares decreased the demand for the export of English pottery. By the end of WWI only a handful of potters creating flow blue china remained.

By the 1960s collectors sought after the antique pottery still found in large quantities in America. There was also a rise in reproductions of the antique designs and techniques of flow blue china. The first reproductions came from Asia; however, by the 21st century England and Europe started their own modern take on the flow blue designs.

For More Information:

Gaston, Mary Frank. [Gaston's Flow Blue China Comprehensive Guide](#). Collector Books, 2005.

Gaston, Mary Frank. [Collector's Encyclopedia of Flow Blue China](#). Collector Books, 1994.

Snyder, Jeffrey B. [Flow Blue: A Collector's Guide to Patterns, History, And Values](#), 2003.

The Flow Blue International Collector's Club, <http://www.flowblue.com/fbicc.aspx>