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Antiques Digest ~ Lost Knowledge From The Past

China And Porcelain - Part 1

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An earthenware jelly mold is a rare thing to run across. But a syrup pitcher, cracker jar, or hatpin-holder is taking up space in many a cupboard. These and other odd pieces of china are not used any more, yet people hesitate to throw them away, perhaps because there is nothing wrong with them, possibly because they're rather pretty. They need not be left to gather dust unless there is a strong sentimental tie. Any piece of china is salable, although the best market may be a slow one because it is made up of collectors. Actually, there are people who collect hatpin-holders, butter

pats or chips, mustache cups, and the like.

The miscellaneous china in any household often consists of a few pieces from tableware sets that belonged to mother, grandmother, or possibly a great-grandmother, for china has been made in sets for the table since the mid-1700's. Seldom is any old set still complete, even the Haviland given to a bride of the 1890's or early. 1900's. Cups and saucers are usually the first casualties.

The largest set ever made was the creamware one Wedgwood produced for Catherine the Great of Russia, circa 1774. It consisted of 952 pieces, each one painted by hand with a different scene, landscape, or monument in England. This was the most important piece of work ever done in creamware. Since it was a special

order, neither its size nor decoration was repeated.

The inspiration for patterns has changed from time to time during the last 200 years. Only a handful have been popular enough to be made almost continuously. Pieces of these timeless patterns that are old enough to be antique are greatly sought after.

The most popular pattern of all time is Willow. It is blue decoration on white that looks as if it could have originated in China. However, it was designed in England by someone who was influenced by the Chinese porcelain he had seen, and was introduced by T. Turner in his Caughley porcelain in 1780. So popular did it prove to be that soon most English potters were producing a Willow pattern in earthenware if not porcelain. The strange thing is that although the blue might differ in shade or tint, the details of the pattern varied hardly at all. It is still being made by the Alfred Meakin firm in Staffordshire, England, who call their pattern "Old Willow," and by firms in the United States and Japan.

The traditional pattern shows a bridge, a river and islands, pagoda-like buildings, two or three figures on the bridge and one or two figures between a building and the bridge, and two birds, sometimes called doves, overhead. The whole scene is framed with trees and shrubs that are exotic if not oriental-looking. Presumably the Willow pattern depicts a romantic and sad tale. The figures represent a princess and the commoner whom she loves, usually shown on the bridge, her father and perhaps one or more associates of his. In fleeing from the irate father, the lovers are drowned; the two birds overhead represent the souls of the lost lovers.

The Willow pattern always has been made in a very complete set of tableware, and because of long-continued and present-day manufacture, there is a wide price range. Any pieces made in Japan will be difficult to sell except at a rummage sale. Most valuable are nineteenth-century pieces made in England, and the older the piece, the more it can be sold for.

Another blue and white pattern of enduring popularity is the so-called Meissen Onion from the famous Meissen porcelain factory in Germany. This pattern, made in sets consisting of as many diverse pieces as Willow earthenware in England, always was a porcelain one, at least when made by German potters. Like Willow, it was derived from Chinese porcelain-but there was no actual onion in the design. The confusion began before the pattern was introduced in 1750. The pomegranates that the Chinese used were unfamiliar to the Germans and they mistakenly called them onions. Thereafter, in the borders of their own porcelain tableware, they reproduced a motif that resembled a pomegranate far more than it did the common onion.

Meissen Onion is almost as popular today as it ever was, and pieces that can be authenticated as having been made in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries sell for a pretty price. During those two centuries, the pattern had several peaks of popularity. It was always basically the same, but there were obvious variations at different times.

The rarest and most beautiful pieces of Meissen Onion were made during the 1700's. They had careful details in a gray-blue color. Around 1800 the design began to be simplified somewhat, and about 1820 the soft blue of the earlier years was replaced by a brighter yet dark cobalt-blue. Occasionally gilding was applied to the borders of the pattern. Large serving plates sometimes had pierced rims.

In addition to the potter's mark, there is another way to tell approximately when a piece of Meissen Onion was made: Before 1800 all onions in the border faced toward the center. After 1800 they alternated, one facing inward, the next one outward. Sets made in the Meissen factory near Dresden always have the mark that was being used at the factory at that time. Meissen marks almost invariably included crossed swords, whatever else they showed.

Some of the English factories, including Wedgwood and Doulton, also produced an onion pattern during the nineteenth century. However, their products in this pattern are not considered as fine as those of Meissen. A similar pattern in blue on white

earthenware, called Blue Danube, is now being manufactured in Japan. Collectors' interest continues to run high for old specimens of Meissen Onion. Those of the nineteenth century always will remain valuable, for again after 1900 the pattern was greatly simplified at Meissen.

Another pattern derived from the Chinese porcelains is the Indian Tree. Far from being a blue and white design, this one was carried out in shades of pink and rose with some green against white. The central motif is an oriental-looking tree, and the pattern also includes flowers that could be tree peonies and carnations. The Indian Tree pattern was introduced by Coalport in the early 1800's. It was copied by other factories in both pottery and porcelain, and is still being made by at least three English firms.

Napoleon Ivy was designed by the Wedgwood firm, which supplied it as a table service to Napoleon Bonaparte during his exile on the Island of St. Helena (1815-21). This was a Queen's ware pattern with a cream background and a border of ivy leaves in green encircling the rim. This pattern, expressly designed for Napoleon, was sold generally during the nineteenth century. After a lapse of many years, the pattern is being made again currently. As in the case of Willow, Meissen Onion, and Indian Tree, it is essential with Napoleon Ivy also to identify the potter's mark and the period of years during which it was used. Nineteenth-century pieces of this dinnerware, even though not used by Napoleon, have acquired extra value.

Blue Chelsea is a famous English softpaste porcelain pattern that has been popular since 1789 and is currently being made by the Adderly factory. Another name for it is Grandmother's Ware. Sprigs in mulberry color are hand-applied around the rims. A great deal of tableware decorated with flower sprigs was made at many English potteries, but the sprigs on the Blue Chelsea are actually small clusters of grapes. The Chelsea factory near London has been noted for its porcelains (softpaste in the beginning) since 1748. Before and after 1800, a pattern with grapes in a mauve-purple luster was made by Chelsea. It is generally, if perhaps inaccurately, known as Chelsea Grape and is quite similar to the Blue Chelsea pattern.

The rose was the dominant motif of several cherished patterns. The one known as Adams Rose was made by Adams & Son in Staffordshire between 1820 and 1840 and again much later in the Victorian era. The colors were clearer and sharper in the early pieces of Adams Rose. Pink roses were used as the basis of a pattern in almost every English factory from Adams and Davenport through the rest of the alphabet of potters.

Rose Medallion china was decorated in Canton, China, and brought to England, Europe, and America. This one is sometimes called Rose Canton. The pieces were paneled-four and often six panels on larger pieces such as platters. The panels or medallions alternated in being decorated with people and pink flowers, birds and butterflies.

Not as old as any of these patterns, and likely to be passed by as "some more of the cheap stuff from Japan," is Imari china. This was gaudily decorated porcelain that had been made in Japan since about 1650. It was imported here mostly from the 1870's to 1900 and got its name because it was shipped from the port of Imari. The designs were red and blue florals with green foliage. A punch bowl, tray, jardiniere, or vase is as likely a find as plates.

Nineteenth-century families were likely to have a dinner or tea set in one of the patterns that have proved so popular, but they also usually had a set of earthenware or ironstone for everyday use that they kept in the kitchen cupboards. The butler's pantry or diningroom cupboards housed the "best" set of porcelain. During the 1800's, tableware was bought by the dozen and few sets consisted of less than 93 pieces. Usually, there were more than 100. At least three sizes of plates-dinner, tea, and dessert were included. Small butter pats or chips instead of bread-and-butter plates were general, and in the early 1800's soup dishes were desirable. Bouillon cups or cream soups did not appear until close to 1900. Cups and saucers, sauce dishes and perhaps the larger, deeper, round cereal dishes, platters, and various covered and

uncovered serving dishes rounded out a basic set of tableware. This is a great contrast to the modern custom of buying tableware by the place setting, each one consisting of five pieces.

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