"Wanted - Blue Willow in any Color"

Blue and White, Blue Willow, Flow Blue and Asiatic Pheasants China

Transferrers working in a 19th Century pottery. (Drawing courtesy of Spode Museum Trust.)

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When the man from Oregon asked for Blue Willow in any color it sounded odd. Surely, blue is blue, so what are we talking about here color blind potters?

As usual the beginning is a good place to start. Centuries ago in the Middle and Far East early potters used a mineral, that we now call cobalt, to create highly decorative blue designs on their pottery. The Chinese invention of porcelain and its subsequent export to the West ensured a much wider appreciation of the style and beauty of blue and white china.

As the making of china developed in Europe it was but a small step to copy these Eastern porcelains using cobalt in the same way. Much early English porcelain was decorated in blue, but there was one significant development, which was the real cause of a sudden, massive growth in the production and popularity of blue and white china. An inventive young Staffordshire potter, Josiah Spode of Stoke experimented with transfer printing, a method for decorating china which had been around for some years. It involved printing on to thin tissue paper and Spode found that sizing the tissue with soft soap made it stronger, whilst retaining its softness and flexibility. Not far away in Etruria, Josiah Wedgwood had created a fine new white earthenware, known as pearl ware, which had a lovely smooth surface, ideal to print on. By 1784 Spode was using his improved printing process to create lovely designs on this new pearl ware. For the first time a potter was making quality earthenware with beautiful designs, which would not wear off or fade from use, as they were under the glaze. It was tableware that was both durable and affordable and a mass market was born.

Transfer Printing

Conceptually, transfer printing is simple, but to be successful it depends on the skill of execution. First select your design and ask your highly skilled engraver to carefully engrave the design on a copper printing plate. After 6 to 8 weeks of painstaking work the engraver has finished one printing plate, which will be used to decorate the dinner plate. He now starts to engrave the next copper plate to be used for the lunch plate and so his work goes on. Taking the freshly engraved plate, you hand it to your equally skilled printer, who covers the printing plate with warm printing ink mixed with cobalt, wipes off the excess ink leaving just the engraved lines and hatchings full of ink, then prints an exact image onto fine, but strong tissue paper.

The transferrer takes an earthenware plate, which has already been fired in the kiln, cuts out the tissue and lays it down on the plate and scrubs it firmly into place with a bristle bush, using considerable vigour for something of such fineness. The positioning and exact laying down of the wet ink on the clay depends on the sharp eyes and steady hands of the transferrer, using skills she has taken several years to perfect. The plate is left in a tub of cold

An engraver creating a copper printing plate. (Courtesy Spode Museum Trust)

An early 19th Century plate in the traditional Willow pattern. (Photo courtesy of Lovers of Blue & Wnite)

water for an hour or two, the tissue paper is peeled off leaving the ink on the clay plate and fired again in the kiln to harden the ink on the clay. After dipping in liquid glaze the plate is fired for a third time and finally it is finished, after three kiln firings and the involvement of seven or eight people at the various stages.

It is the pottery version of mass-production, but not quite in the way that Henry Ford would eventually apply it to automobile manufacture. The attraction for the potter is that each plate is the same as the last and many thousand of plates later the design is as fresh as the day it was introduced. The same copper plate produces print after print, which is laid down in the same way on plate after plate.

Blue was the original colour, but potters have never been ones to sit still and experimented with other minerals to create other colours and by the 1820s were printing in red, pink, green, brown, black and mulberry. These new colours all developed their own followings, but despite all the efforts blue remained the most popular and this has continued through to today.

You may be wondering, where "Blue Willow in any color" comes into this story. Well over the years Spode's original blue printed transferware was copied by hundreds of potters in Staffordshire and elsewhere in Britain. It became a staple product in The Potteries and was widely exported. When speaking, blue printed transferware is quite a mouthful and Blue Willow became a shorthand way of referring to it, even extending to covering transferware in other colours. So you really can have Blue in any color, but are all transfer printed patterns called Willow? The straight answer is no they are not.

Willow Pattern

Josiah Spode having perfected his new printing technique needed some designs to make best use of it. He took the obvious route and copied the designs of the Chinese, who had been producing china for export to Europe for centuries. Taking one such design Mandarin he created an exact copy, producing it on his new transferware. Inspired by its success, it is believed that he commissioned the freelance engraver Thomas Minton, who was later to found his own famous china works, to produce a more spirited version of Mandarin and the result was Willow pattern. This has become the best-known and most ubiquitous china pattern of all time. Willow was inspired by the Chinese, created in England and is loved by the World.

Allowing for some minor variations, though, Willow is in reality one design. There is a mandarin's house, with path and fence and in the garden a willow tree and behind an orange tree. To the left three people on a bridge, boat beyond and two doves flying in the sky. This is Willow, so accept no imitations! To the purist this is the only true Blue Willow, but for the general collector Blue Willow may be found in any pattern and any colour.

Flow Blue

On certain Internet auction sites Flow Blue may be found used as a description of almost any china printed in blue. It has become another catch all term that today is used far more widely than it should be.

Cobalt has a natural chemical tendency to mix with the lead glaze applied over the design. Hence the luscious soft pearly appearance of much early transferware. Indeed a little cobalt was often added to the glaze mix to enhance this effect. Then an unknown potter went further and discovered how to make the cobalt ink really fuse or flow into the glaze, which gave a fuzzy or blurred look to the design. This new flow blue was printed in exactly the same way as other transfer printed wares using cobalt as the blue colorant in the ink. The difference comes at time of firing in the glost kiln, which is when the glaze is fired onto the printed wares. Lime in some form or other is introduced into the kiln and becomes gaseous when heated and acts as a flux inducing a chemical reaction between the cobalt and the glaze. In simplistic terms it explodes.

A dish believed to have been made about 1840 by John Meier & Son in their Mazara pattern, printed in deep cobalt flow blue, with added gilt decoration. (Photo courtesy of Lovers of Blue & White)

The degree of flowing varies between makers and even on the same pattern. It does seem to have been a fairly unpredictable process, which is probably why potters sought better ways of creating a flow blue effect. In the latter part of the 19th century, rather than place lime in the kiln, they began to mix the flux with the cobalt ink in well measured pre-determined quantities so that the degree of flowing was controlled and more subtle effects could be achieved which better matched changing tastes and fashions.

Flow blue was first made around 1825 to 1830 and became especially popular in the 1840s. At this time the ever-growing population of the United States of America was a major market for Staffordshire potters. As contemporary correspondence shows, the American importers regularly demanded darker and heavier blue designs and flow blue is but a natural progression to satisfy this demand. This early popularity of flow blue in the USA does mean that America has always been home to far more flow blue than can ever be found in the UK. Indeed some makers or patterns are found generally only in the US as their entire output was intended for export.

As flow blue is a top collectable today, virtually any blue printed ware that is not as sharp as a pin can end up classified as flow blue. It is difficult to know where to draw the line. Are early pieces with some natural blurring flow blue? Not really. We think the best definition came from a recent writer, who said that it is only flow blue if the maker intended it to be. Meaning that a chemical flux was deliberately introduced to the glost kiln to induce the ink and glaze to fuse.

This does mean that Doulton Norfolk, Spode Tower and George Jones Abbey along with many other patterns are not flow blue and should be omitted from flow blue reference books, although one should remember that some patterns were produced in ordinary and flow blue versions.

There is another myth about flow blue to clear up. On the backs of early flow blue pieces, especially plates, you may find a virtual mirror image of the design on the front. This is said by some to be the ink seeping through the clay and coming out of the back, as another consequence of the flow effect. Ink flowing through fired clay is a trick worthy of any magician. What actually happened is the plates were stacked close to each other in the kiln and the mini-explosion when the glaze and ink fused caused ink from the front of each plate to project onto the back of the next plate in line and so on.

Asiatic Pheasants

Asiatic Pheasants was a pattern of mass popularity. It is said to have been the second most popular pattern after Willow in the 1880s. In fact, it was probably the most popular, as Willow was out of favour at that time and Asiatic Pheasants was a mainstay design throughout the reign of Queen Victoria and into Edwardian times

The origins of the pattern are lost, but it was probably inspired by an Oriental floral design and may even be a direct copy. Introduced about 1835 by Podmore Walker & Co of Tunstall, Staffordshire, it reflected the emerging taste for more subdued romantic designs, after the crisp realism desired in the 1800-1830 period. It is surprising that this single design introduced by one pottery should grow quickly in popularity and be taken up by so many other potteries. The second surprise is that virtually every pottery, used the same pale blue, often used similar shapes and applied a standard backstamp, usually with just initials added for identification of the maker. Time for another china myth to be demolished. The pale blue is the original colour and has not faded in the sun. Transfer printed wares do not fade.

Asiatic Pheasants plate circa 1880. Bird figures have been enhanced for viewing.

On some prints there is only one pheasant, although invariably there is also a butterfly. Occasionally the design may be found printed in dark blue, brown, green, pink or mulberry, but early examples in these other colours are rare. Virtually every potter used the name Asiatic Pheasant or Pheasants for the design.

It is sometimes suggested that Asiatic Pheasants was the tableware of choice for "below stairs" and in a sense this could be true. It was introduced at a time potters were making different qualities of earthenwares with a range of

price levels, aiming to widen the market for their wares. The introduction of transfer printed earthenware in the 1780s had resulted in it becoming the dinnerware of choice for the better off, but by 1830 this market had largely been satisfied and makers were looking to make their wares truly mass-market and affordable by as many people as possible.

Asiatic Pheasants was central to this development, which is why you find that quality and condition varies so much. Quality is about the skill of the engraving and printing as well as the physical quality and fineness of the potting of the wares. Generally, good quality printing goes hand in hand with quality potting. Obviously heavy or rough usage will cause poor condition, but it is also clear that many pieces were simply poor quality from the start.

A selection of modern Asiatic Pheasants, still made in the traditional way by Burleigh. (Photo courtesy of Lovers of Blue & White)

In the 19th Century Asiatic Pheasants was predominately used on dinnerware, which is why today you find many meat platters, vegetable dishes and various sizes of dinner plates. Sauce boats, comports and dessert wares are less common. Cheese stands, cake stands, drainers, are uncommon. Small everyday items such as meat pots and open salts and the large toilet wares (jugs and bowls) are rare. Tea ware is so rare as to be virtually non-existent. Well-known makers of quality wares include Adams, Burgess & Leigh, Doulton, Hollinshead & Kirkham, Keeling, John Meir, Ridgway and Wedgwood & Co (successors to Podmore Walker).

Today in Staffordshire only Burgess, Dorling & Leigh successors to Burgess & Leigh are left making Asiatic Pheasants and still employ the traditional skills of hand manufacture.

As collectable china Asiatic Pheasants was also out of favour for much of the second half of the 20th century, but since the 1990s there has been a strong resurgence of interest and many have come to appreciate its charm and the opportunities it offers to establish a rich and varied collection. It has regained its rightful position as a 19th century classic.

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