

Functional & Fanciful

Pottery in Early America



*Note: Most of the pieces in this special exhibit were on loan.

Therefore, only a few photos are included in this informational packet.

However, links are provided for examples of the types of pottery highlighted.

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The story of ceramics in early America directly parallels the development of the nation itself: a dependency on and identification with England, followed by tentative attempts at autonomy, ending with an acknowledgement of self-worth and an enthusiastic embrace of independence.

Regrettably, this exhibit does not explore the art or history of Native American pottery. Rather, it focuses on Anglo-European production, use, and interpretation of ceramics in early America.

Red Ware:

The Tupperware of Colonial America

From the earliest days of the American colonies (as far back as Jamestown in the 1620s), red ware could be found in nearly every home. It still persisted in New England country districts well into the mid-nineteenth century and beyond. The widespread manufacture and use of red ware was no doubt a direct result of its simplicity—red ware is composed of common red-burning clays found near the ground's surface that require only the simplest kilns and equipment to produce.

Photo of an example may be found here:

<https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/18th-century-colonial-redware-slip-1895711929>

Transfer Ware:

Affordable Finery

Transfer ware featured “hand-painted” graphics replicated by a print-making process. A copper plate is engraved with a pattern, which is printed on tissue paper. The tissue paper transfers the wet ink to the ceramic surface, which is then placed in a kiln and fired at a low temperature to fix the pattern. If the transfer is done under the glaze, the end product is more durable. However, it can be done over the glaze, as well.

This process of transferring a graphic to ceramics was developed in England around the 1750s. Prior to this time, ceramics were hand painted, which was costly and time-consuming. Transferware became tremendously popular in England by the 1800s.



The Porcelain Predicament

The Agency House dining room currently showcases an early Ridgeware porcelain tea service. The images are hand-painted, and the accenting is genuine gold. A set such as this was no doubt reserved for company use.

In the early days of the American colonies, porcelain was an extreme luxury. This was most likely due to the fact that colonial potters couldn't quite figure out how to make the delicate ware. However, demand by social elites required that it be available and, as a result, porcelain (extremely difficult to ship due to its fragility) had to be imported from Europe and China. Thus, it was closely guarded. It is written that when the ladies of Plympton, Massachusetts, went to tea with each other in the 1760s, each carried her own tea cup, saucer, and spoon.

The American success in the production of porcelain has been recently attributed to Bonnin and Morris Pottery of Philadelphia, circa 1770.



Making Sales By Selling Out: Post-Revolutionary Imports

Despite the fact that the War for Independence failed to stem the American desire for foreign imports, the wares themselves did change—at least in terms of decorative schemes. Citizens of the new United States were intensely patriotic and were particularly proud of the technological and architectural achievements of which their young country could boast.

Recognizing these new ideas of the American self, many foreign potteries looking to export their goods quickly incorporated the latest symbols of United States progress and nationalism. Such artifacts fulfilled the desire of proud Americans to publicly convey and display their nationalistic outlook. Ironically, British potteries were more than willing to supply their recent triumphant adversary with wares decorated with symbols of victory.



Phillips-Bagster Jug “The Kill”:

Hanley, Staffordshire, England, circa 1819-23

This small hound-handle hunt jug was designed by James Abingdon for Phillips-Bagster, Church Works, Hanley, Staffordshire, England. Decorated with boar and stag hunting scenes, it was probably the first relief-molded hound handle jug made in England. Its popularity at the time inspired other potters to design their own hound-handled jugs of various sizes and shapes. Hound handle jugs were mainly used in taverns (the restaurants of the time), hotels, and homes. They were often given as prizes to hunters at the end of a successful hunt. It was an age before copyrights and marks when popular designs were quickly copied, usually with small alterations in details to indicate the pottery of origin. Identifying trademarks were uncommon, which meant that most pieces were unmarked.

This jug was imported to the United States and used as an inspiration by the Scottish potters David and James Henderson who emigrated to the U.S. in the 1820s and, attracted by the fine Jersey clays, established a pottery in Jersey City, New Jersey. *Jug from East Coast, US.*

Photo of an example may be found here:

<https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/d-bagster-hound-handle-stoneware-jug-111750149>

Belper-Denby Jug

Belper and Denby were two separate potteries established about 1809 by the Bourne family and named after the towns in which they were located in Derbyshire, England. William Bourne ran the Belper pottery, and his brother, Joseph, was in charge at Denby. They were considered innovators by their peers. They were particularly known for their stoneware. The Belper pottery was discontinued in 1834, and the works merged under the Denby Pottery name. Denby Pottery remains in business to this day.

Small hound-handle jug attributed to Belper-Denby Potteries. Made in 1830s. Jug acquired from Isle of Jersey, Channel Islands, GB.

Photo of an example may be found here:

<https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/vintage-bourne-denby-derby-fox-1815092444>

Commemorating People & Places

Once foreign potters decided to decorate using likenesses of American heroes and landmarks, the problem wasn't searching out an image to use, but narrowing down their choices. Existing examples portray variety of Americana, from Harvard College to the Hudson River, from George Washington to the Marquis de Lafayette. Such renderings were often the only glimpse of faraway locations and famed personages that those who owned them would ever see, and they were often painted by people who had never actually seen the subjects they were capturing.

The Staffordshire plate shown here depicts the Erie Canal, which was built in 1825 to nationwide-acclaim in order to increase water-travel commerce.



Baby Steps Toward an American Pottery Industry

As a result of their bulk and fragility in the transport across the Atlantic Ocean, ceramics imported from Europe and Asia had to be sold at prices many times their actual value. The New World's desperate need for more affordable ceramics was well known, and by 1800, as many as 250 potters had relocated to New England to take advantage of the burgeoning American market.

Still, the sales of domestic pottery continued to be outpaced by the steady demand for ceramic imports well into the 19th century. Even the advent of the American Revolution and its accompanying backlash against all things British was unable to stem the tide of imported goods.

This tradition continued virtually unchallenged until the War of 1812, when an outraged Congress imposed an embargo on all English imports. Suddenly, Americans had no outside source of ceramics and they scrambled to set up an independent ceramics industry. English master potters and designers were targeted by investors and entered the United States with their knowledge, skills, and molds. Consequently, the first strictly "American" items were frequently point-by-point copies of English pieces—a phenomenon made possible by the lack of copyright laws that allowed potters literally to pirate European designs.



Henderson Jug

Jersey City, New Jersey, circa 1829-33

The Henderson brothers, David and Joseph, were born in Scotland in the early 1790s. In the 1820s, they emigrated to Jersey City in the United States and bought the Jersey Porcelain & Earthenware Co., which was the first pottery to make porcelain in the US, renaming it D & J Henderson. They later incorporated the company and adopted the name of the American Pottery Manufacturing Company in 1833. David Henderson is considered the father of modern American ceramics, introducing molded pottery from England, the notion of mass production (long before the automobile industry), and later the process of transfer printing. He also brought Daniel Greatbatch, a skilled English designer, to the United States. Greatbatch produced many innovations for ceramics. The master potter acquired new skills as sculptor, designer, and inventor through Greatbatch. David Henderson was killed in a hunting accident in the Adirondack Mountains in 1845. The American Pottery was bought then by John Rouse and Nathaniel Turner and renamed the Jersey City Pottery.

Using the design from the Phillips-Bagster jug, Henderson produced the first US relief-molded jug, including this large hound-handle jug which has a clear glaze on the lower half and a brown glaze on the upper half. This was a revolutionary innovation in US ceramics. Instead of using a potter's wheel, the jugs were pressed in molds that were cast around original, sculpted designs. As a result, ceramics took on an artistic, sculptural quality, which had previously been seen only at the great porcelain manufactories, beginning with Johann Kaendler at Meissen. Creative design became an integral part of the ceramics process and sparked widespread innovations and unique artistic creations. It also allowed for production of multiple copies of a popular design without great expense in terms of time, money, and labor. Beautiful ceramics could now be enjoyed by the general population. The Henderson jug is the "Model T" of the US ceramics industry. It played an enormous role in the development of ceramics as we know it today. There are potteries such as Lenox in Trenton, NJ, which helped to develop the mass production of ceramics for everyday use by borrowing and expanding on Henderson's original ideas.

Jug acquired from Maryland.

Photo of an example may be found here:

<https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/david-john-henderson-jersey-city-nj-1746718257>

Welsh Jug:

Possibly Llanelly Pottery near Swansea, Wales.

Rockingham glaze. Date unknown.

Llanelly, also known as the South Wales Pottery, was founded in 1839 by William Chambers, Jr., who bought up much of the equipment from the recently closed Glamorgan Pottery in Swansea and hired much of its workforce. Some of the jobs listed on the roster were Presser, Fireman, Painter, Transferrer, Handler, Miller, Plate Maker, Slip Maker, Printer, and Thrower. During the Chambers Period (1839-1855), the pottery was known for its wide variety of utilitarian and quality objects for everyday use. It is possible that the Llanelly game jug molds were acquired from Charles Bourne's pottery, as molds and workers were known to go from one pottery to another over time. The Llanelly jug hounds appear to be peering down into the jugs.

Acquired from Washington State. Label on jug indicates it was once in an antiques shop in Fenton, Nebraska. There is a possibility that the jug arrived with Welsh immigrants to the Midwest who came to work in mining and agriculture (especially in Wisconsin). How it wended its way from Wales to Washington remains an interesting open question.

Photo of an example may be found here:

<https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/llanelly-welsh-pottery-temperance-514077727>

Mocha Ware Through Time: From Everyday to Extraordinary

This bowl and stein from the Agency House collection are examples of Mocha ware with dendritic tree patterns. “Dendritic” refers to a branching form. Dendritic patterns, including the trees on these artifacts, were made by delicately dropping an acidic ink mixture (sometimes consisting of iron oxide and tea, with at least one historical reference to the use of urine as a component) onto the alkaline slip surface of a wet pottery piece. The ink would quickly branch out from the point of contact. Dendritic designs were a type of decoration that required minimal time and, if the acidic mixture was pre-mixed, minimal skill. For this reason, mocha ware was the cheapest decorated pottery one could find in the early- to mid-19th century and was usually used as kitchen ware or tavern ware.

Mocha ware does not, as one might expect, derive its name from the brown color of the clay or glaze, but rather from the city of Mocha in Yemen. The British associated this Middle Eastern community with the export of dendritic or moss agates (also known as Mocha stone). As often happened in the history of ceramics, the meaning of the term was later expanded to include similar vessels that do not have dendritic-pattern decoration at all.

Mocha ware without dendritic embellishments can be recognized by its subtle base coloring (such as buff, terra cotta, or olive green) set off by the use of decoration in boldly contrasting black and white or intense blues and yellows.



Rockingham Ware:

From Cheap to Chic

The Rockingham ware pitchers featured in this exhibit, with their deep tortoiseshell brown lustrous surfaces and graceful shapes, give the impression of original collector's pieces that are never actually used, but put on the mantel as showpieces. However, Rockingham ware was once an inexpensive and ubiquitous everyday ceramic. Rockingham ware pitcher such as these were found in taverns, boarding houses, and the kitchen tables of every class in nearly all areas of the United States in the mid-19th century.

The term "Rockingham ware" was first used to describe a dark brown glaze created on the estate of Marquis de Rockingham in Yorkshire, England, during the 1740s. Later, the meaning of the elite moniker was expanded to encompass any earthenware or stoneware glazed in a similar shade of glossy brown. Today, Rockingham ware might be defined as any soft cream or yellow ware which is dipped or spattered with brown glaze before firing. Due to the limitless combinations of glazes, clays, and manufacturing processes, Rockingham ware brown is present in a great variety of shades and visual consistencies.

Interestingly, Rockingham ware and yellow ware (a close cousin) were some of the few domestic wares that Americans were satisfied with buying locally. Although Rockingham ware is typically associated with the famous Bennington factory in Vermont, it was produced by dozens of potteries across the country. In fact, D & J Henderson of Jersey City, NJ, is documented as making such brown ware as early as 1830.

From the beginning, Rockingham ware was typically made in molds, enabling manufacturers to create uniform vessels for economical prices and eliminating the need to employ expensive master potters and designers. With the mid-nineteenth century introduction of mass production, prices lowered even more, and Rockingham ware was available to nearly the entire spectrum of socio-economic levels—effectively lowering the esteem of this type of ceramic in privileged circles. Ironically, the pottery that was once scorned by the elite is now a highly sought-after collector's item.

Photo of an example may be found here:

<https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/american-pottery-co-jersey-city-j-1746737550>

New Jersey Yellow Ware Jug:

With Rockingham Glaze. Unmarked.

Possibly by A. Cadmus of the Congress Hill Pottery
of South Amboy, New Jersey. Probably 1840-50.

This jug combines the yellow ware from the rich yellow Jersey clays and a Rockingham glaze. It incorporates different motifs, adding pheasants to the traditional stag and boar with the birds placed more like Pennsylvanian country motifs. The hound has become more of a handle and less of a hunting dog. Cadmus was known to have produced jugs with beaded rims. *Jug acquired from Pennsylvania.*

Photo of an example may be found here:

<https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/bennington-pottery-rockingham-glazed-1897642863>

Bennington Jug:

Rockingham Glaze. Date circa 1850.

After Henderson's death, Daniel Greatbatch moved to Bennington, Vermont, and became the lead designer at Bennington for Christopher Fenton of the Norton-Fenton partnership there, generally known as the United States Pottery. Bennington became a leading site for producing early American ceramics. The jug from a private collection that was on display in this exhibit was possibly designed by Daniel Greatbatch after he went to work with Christopher Benton in Bennington, Vermont. It repeated the design of an English hunting jug but added the Rockingham glaze that—along with yellow ware, Mocha ware, and stoneware—was so common among US households of the day. Daniel Greatbatch later developed his own original hound handle designs at Bennington. Bennington was a source of great technical and design inspiration in its age and won many awards and followers. Greatbatch remained there until Fenton's US Pottery failed under the increasing expenses of fuel and clay that had to be brought by wagon from Jersey, etc. From there, Greatbatch followed Fenton across the country in 1859 to Peoria, Illinois, where he worked for the American Pottery and later the Peoria Pottery which produced decorative and utilitarian wares. In antique shops across the Midwest, one occasionally finds designs by this great designer who helped shape American ceramics. The pieces were sold by traveling salesmen who took samples of the pottery by horse and wagon to homes and businesses throughout the territory.

Photo of an example may be found here:

<https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/pr-antique-bennington-toby-jugs-2005488147>

Hound-Handle Jug:

Attributed to Vodrey & Brother Pottery, East Liverpool, Ohio, circa 1858-76

As America expanded westward beyond the Appalachians, potters and hound handle jugs followed suit. Jabez Vodrey was born in Tunstall, England—one of the centers of English ceramics. In 1827, he and his wife, Sarah, emigrated to Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. He operated a pottery there for two years and then moved on to Louisville, Kentucky, drawn by the rich clays of the Ohio River Valley. In March 1847, he went to East Liverpool, Ohio near Cincinnati where he found work in an area pottery. In 1848, he formed a partnership with William Woodward, and they began producing yellow ware and Rockingham ware. Vodrey went into business for himself with his sons in 1858 in East Liverpool, from whence this jug originated. Jabez Vodrey died in 1861, but the family pottery continued on until its closing in 1928. East Liverpool became the third major center for early American ceramics. *Jug acquired in Maryland.*

Photo of an example may be found here:

<https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/antique-victorian-vodrey-china-fish-473330081>

Portage Pottery

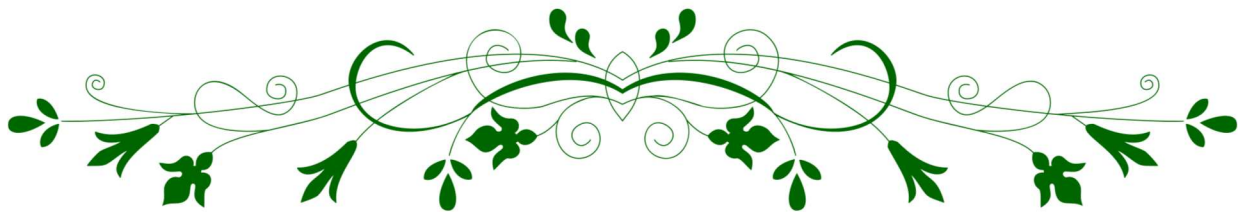
The pottery fragments here once made up a crock that could hold four gallons. The outside of the crock was covered with an olive glaze, with the inner surface done in a very dark gray slip. A floral design and number “4” were rendered in a blue under-glaze on one side. The prominent makers’ mark reading “Farrar & Russell” attributes the piece to a Portage pottery that was in operation from 1860 to 1862.



Home-Grown Pottery Takes Hold

Once American potters had learned the techniques from their immigrant counterparts, they began experimenting with glazes, designs, and new forms. (Innovative products of this creative process include the multi-colored flint enamelware and Bennington's porcelain counterpart, Parian ware.) The confidence and technical expertise that these potters gained quickly translated into original designs and molds—some of which were highly decorative and represented the landscapes, social life, and needs of the fledgling country.

One branch of American ceramic production was strictly utilitarian, producing items for industry and sanitary wares such as sinks and chamber pots for domestic use. Another branch focused on tableware for the American household—a category of pottery that quickly expanded into mass production methods. A third branch focused on the aesthetic qualities of ceramics, producing art pottery and maintaining the handicraft tradition of the potter's wheel. A final branch dedicated itself to innovations of design and technology.



Suggestions For Further Reading

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