TOP ROW FROM LEFT Detail of a 19th-century Meissen candelabra with putti on the bottle; 18th-century Derby coffee can with putti by Fidelle Duvivier; King Edward's stamp box, made by Royal Worcester in 1902. **MIDDLE ROW FROM LEFT** A 19th-century Wedgwood teapot with two adults suffering from heartbreak and a rather guilty-looking Cupid; putti hunting, Antonin Boullemier painting on a 19th-century Minton plate; Bow putto, c1760.
BOTTOM ROW FROM LEFT Derby figure of Venus restraining naughty Cupid, c1765; Minton bread basket with Parian putto harvesting wheat, 1891; Royal Worcester tazza with Parian putti, 1880; perhaps the most famous putti: Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, 1513.
FACING PAGE Minton comport with Parian putti and doves, dating to 1855.

A romantic interlude...

*As Valentine's Day approaches, **Willa Latham** explores the origins of cherubic decoration in porcelain design*

As we time-travel through Britain in pursuit of the history of porcelain, let's take a moment to pause briefly on our journey. It will soon be Valentine's Day, and what better time could there be to have a look at the significant role of putti in porcelain design?

Putti, also referred to as cherubs, cupids or little angels, are a popular Western design feature and we have been familiar with them since early Renaissance artworks of the 14th century. The word 'putti' is plural for the Italian 'putto', which means a winged angel, or a sweet little toddler boy. Nowadays, putto is deemed to be an old-fashioned word, but it can still be heard in Italy sometimes. In fact, it derives from an ancient word going back many centuries to Persian, Sanskrit and Latin ('putus'). The word has found its way into modern languages, as the word for 'son' is still similar the world over: 'beta' in Hindi, 'putara' in Punjabi and also 'pesar' in Farsi.

The Romans widely used putti in decorations, either sculpted, painted in frescoes or in mosaics. In these ancient times, putti were usually depicted to celebrate the lives of deceased children. Losing a child was a common experience in those days and, to soothe their grief, parents did their best to give them some play and merriment in the hereafter; you can see them lining children's sarcophagi, sometimes stealing apples and enjoying wine. The Greeks had the god Eros (Cupid for the Romans, son of Venus and Mars) who was the mischievous little boy shooting arrows into people's hearts to make them fall in love – and causing, of course, not only love stories but also lots of trouble and heartbreak in his wake.

As Christianity took hold and stamped out the old pagan ways, putti disappeared from Western fine and decorative arts for a long time, giving way to much more stern adult (and always male) angels. However, in the 15th century, the Renaissance artists of Florence rediscovered putti. The word 'Renaissance', meaning rebirth, described the revived interest in the ancient Roman art that Italians were surrounded by. In line with the new Christian belief system of the time, putti came to symbolise God's omnipresence.

And so, putti puttered on! You can see them spreading their wings in countless great Renaissance paintings, and in the next few centuries their role continued to grow. The 17th-century Baroque era was all about a lavish depiction of God's perfection, so it featured plenty of well-fed naked little children. All that flesh was fine, as long as it represented divine omnipresence. When the Baroque style gave way to the more capricious and playful Rococo art of the 18th century, putti continued to frolick around, creating all manner of mischief and being incredibly adorable, while becoming increasingly worldly – their cute factor gradually taking over from their religiosity.

So what about porcelain? As European porcelain was first produced during the Rococo era, putti have always been part of porcelain design in Europe. In the very early 18th century, Meissen in Germany and Sèvres in France already featured them, and the first British porcelain makers wholeheartedly embraced this Rococo trend. Both Bow and Derby brought out series of putto figures that were no longer religious, instead symbolising the four seasons, the five continents or the six senses – or were simply naked little boys, like the Bow putto illustrated here. In a rather repressed society where very few married for love – yet various shenanigans were known to go on behind closed doors – could it be that putti simply became a valid excuse for enjoying some frivolity at the dinner table?

The celebrated porcelain artists Richard Askew and Fidelle Duvivier were both well-known for their beautiful, yet contrasting styles of putto decoration. Askew, working first at Derby and then for Bow, painted his putti with somewhat serious expressions, while Duvivier, who worked throughout Europe and later the US, favoured putti with ecstatic grins. Interestingly, during the neoclassical and Rococo Revival trends of the early 19th century, putti began to fall out of fashion, except at Wedgwood, which depicted a wonderful Cupid on its teapots, complete with adults weeping with heartbreak.

Then, in the later 19th century, when the discovery of Parian allowed potters to sculpt much larger figures (see this month's feature on collecting Parian from page 98), Minton and Royal Worcester created many wonderful putti to carry their tazzas and comports, often accompanied by doves.

So, the question is, how will you be celebrating Valentine's Day? If you fancy giving a little nod to old traditions, why not serve up dinner for a loved one on porcelain decorated with little putti? I can't think of anything more delightful or fitting...

Willa Latham

Read Willa's blog *gentlerattleofchina.com* or follow her *@gentlerattleofchina*

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