



**FROM LEFT** A Spode 'Tiber' platter with a famous Roman view c1820; a Yates trio of a very English design with Greek keys and Etruscan sprigs on the rim c1825, all *Gentle Rattle of China*.



**FROM LEFT** Bloor Derby dessert plate with Etruscan decoration c1815, £150, *Gentle Rattle of China*; Derby sauce tureen in neoclassical style c1795; Yates coffee cup with English roses and the 'Etruscan' shape c1825, *Gentle Rattle of China*.



# Neoclassicism and The Grand Tour

*While light-hearted rococo was a backlash against the order of baroque, neoclassicism grew out of a desire for restrained grace, says Willa Latham*

Last month we looked at the emergence of the rococo style; a feast of frivolity, sensuality and light-hearted grace, and the dominant style when British porcelain emerged in the mid 1700s.

But no style lasts forever, and not long after the new medium of porcelain had established itself in the rococo style, a new fashion emerged: neoclassicism. This was sparked by excavations in the Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. In an age of excessive ornamentation, the way classical material splendour expressed itself through simplicity, restrained grace and rational functionality was a novelty in the 1730s. The German scientist Johann Joachim Winckelmann wrote about it extensively and his books became bestsellers all over Europe, inspiring the new classical style in the decorative arts.

Neoclassicism was everything rococo was not: where rococo was unpredictable, sensuous and highly ornamental, neoclassicism was rational, symmetrical and showed elegant simplicity. According to

Winckelmann, the inspiration was Greek art with its highly idealistic beauty. In reality, Greece in those days was still a dangerous Ottoman-occupied backwater, so neoclassicism was actually predominantly influenced by Etruscan (pre-Roman) art alongside Roman copies of Greek art that were dug up in Pompeii. In fact, much of it was hand-picked by British or German 'experts' according to their personal tastes.

Even so, the role that art played in ancient Greek culture became once more relevant in the 18th century. The Greek cultural ideals were simplicity, symmetry and mathematics; the role of art was to civilise, educate and idealise. While rococo had been a way to enjoy the here and now, neoclassicism became a means to forge a new path for society and find one's higher self in simplicity.

This didn't occur in a vacuum, of course: as well as being the era of Enlightenment, the 18th century saw the birth of the Industrial Revolution. It was a time of great change: people chose rationality and science over frivolity and superstition. The French and American

revolutions were fundamentally reshaping society and, in Britain, mechanisation created a new social mobility. As it became dangerous for the powerful to show off their wealth in the streets, less became more and moderation was the new luxury.

Social mobility also meant that the neoclassical ideal of self-betterment could provide a young person with access to higher society regardless of the class they were born into, suddenly making them 'eligible' by diligently applying themselves to the new ideals. If you could buy respect through a sophisticated tea service and your knowledge of Plato, would you not wish to join that exciting cultural change?

The great vehicle for this movement was the 'Grand Tour'. Young gentlemen were sent out to be educated in the cultural history of Europe for what today we would call a gap year. The destination was the great cities of Europe: Rome, Florence, Venice, and sites such as Pompeii and Herculaneum. Being already well-versed in the Classics, the Grand Tour became an essential part of their further education. And, no doubt, in preparation for producing heirs to their family fortunes, the lads would also learn a few tricks in the red light district of Naples... but they no doubt left that out of the gushing letters they wrote home.

These gentlemen would return with trunks full of treasures they'd bought, commissioned or looted, and this formed the basis of many of the British cultural treasures we see today in museums and stately homes. The ladies at home, who had been busy perfecting their piano-playing and painting skills, spent hours discussing the Grand Tour treasures. The Grand Tour had become the medium for what at the time was called the 'True Style' or the 'Revival'. This

became so prominent that today, auction houses put on special sales themed around the Grand Tour.

It didn't take long for British porcelain factories to take note and adapt their style, just a few decades after the French factories did. Remember Wedgwood? He called his new factory Etruria after the Etruscan discoveries, and sent out a team of designers to live in Rome. The Worcester factories enthusiastically embraced the new fashion, and neoclassical elements started to show up in porcelain designs all over Britain.

None of this happened overnight; rococo was still produced alongside neoclassicism, while at the same time the British style of flower-painting, which had nothing to do with either style, took hold. Cultural movements are fluid! If you look carefully you can discover some Etruscan garlands in the moulding of a Nantgarw plate, Greek keys on a flowery Staffordshire design, Roman ruins on a blue and white Spode plate, or an elegant Greek shape to a rose-decorated teacup. And once Parian porcelain had been invented, the influence of Greek sculpture would last well into the 19th century. But that's for a later time... first of all, next month we'll look at some wonderful neoclassical makers.

*Willa Latham*

Read Willa's blog [gentlerattleofchina.com](http://gentlerattleofchina.com), follow her @gentlerattleofchina

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