



## *The mystery* COLLECTOR

*One of the joys of collecting antiques is that pieces often come to us with stories attached. The story of Murray Pollinger, who built up an important collection of Samuel Alcock porcelain, is like the stuff of fiction – fittingly so, as **Willa Latham** discovered*

To my regret, I never got to meet Murray Pollinger in person. Yet I consider myself fortunate that my life has been enriched by him in recent years. It all started when I first tried to find out more about early 19th-century porcelain by Samuel Alcock. I kept coming across it, but could find no documentation and I noticed that many pieces were misidentified. The pattern numbers made no sense and virtually nothing was marked.

Where to begin? I asked around, and I heard on the grapevine about a gentleman in Norfolk with a large, meticulously researched collection. Rumour had it there was no plan to publish his work. Keen to meet him, I tried in vain to discover his name, before abandoning my search

**ABOVE** Samuel Alcock footed comport with melted snow and flower decorations, c1822. **RIGHT** A Samuel Alcock 'true trio' consisting of teacup, coffee cup and saucer, c1845.



in 20xx. Merely xx weeks later I received a phone call from someone seeking assistance with a large porcelain collection amassed by her father, Murray Pollinger, who had recently passed away. I asked some questions, and immediately knew that the elusive Norfolk collector had come to find me posthumously.

This was to be the start of many trips to Norfolk over the course of the following xxxxx. I stayed with Murray's daughter and her family in the large family home, and they were not only the gateway to this important collection, but also quickly became close friends. By spending long weekends photographing the porcelain as Murray had left it, and delving into his copious notes, the collection and the painstaking research behind it came to life – as did the man himself.

So who was Murray Pollinger? Ask anyone who knew him and you get the same answer: 'a true gentleman'. Getting to know his family I understood this was





**LEFT AND INSET** The Norfolk cottage where Murray lived in his last years; a young Murray Pollinger. **RIGHT FROM TOP** An 'inverted shell' plate Murray bought from Geoffrey A Godden, c1822; a Rococo Revival teapot, c1837; a basket decorated with great tit design, c1855.



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not just a superficial description: Murray really was a gentleman in the full sense of the word.

A tall, dark-haired and handsome man, he dressed impeccably, wearing a suit even when on holiday; until his last days he changed before dinner. With his formal demeanour, yet dry and playful sense of humour, Murray was scrupulously honest, which is why he was such a successful literary agent – representing great writers such as Roald Dahl, Rosemary Sutcliff and JM Coetzee. He formed a formidable team with his beloved wife Gina, to whom we are forever indebted for pairing Quentin Blake with Roald Dahl. It is said that Murray never pressured his writers; he drew out their best by trusting them and politely encouraging their strengths, resulting in works of great art.

Murray was also a romantic; he loved Italy, good food and wine, and he adored Gina. They enjoyed browsing antiques shops, finding rare furniture and paintings. And it was on these trips that Murray fell in love with British porcelain, captivated by its multitude of wonderful shapes and endless array of flowers, colours and gilding. His daughter told me how he would often pick up a piece and show it to her – 'Look at the way the handle is made, the design, the painting!' – undaunted by the fact that no-one at home shared his enthusiasm.

Murray built up a collection of many hundreds of pieces, often bought at bargain prices, either with light damage, or misidentified. He settled on collecting Samuel Alcock porcelain, possibly drawn by the fact

that it was clouded in mystery. For a man who had loved cataloguing and collecting since he was a boy, this was a tempting project, and once he retired in the 1990s the great research work began.

For years, Murray travelled all over the country looking for Samuel Alcock porcelain. He attended every fair and knew every little shop in every village. I asked many dealers, and while they all remember him, few knew he was such a serious collector. Murray was a modest man who didn't believe in talking about himself. I found a dealer friend's receipt for a 'Minton' piece amongst his papers and she remembered the purchase. He would have smiled politely, chatted a bit, left, and added it to his collection, then carefully researched and catalogued it. My friend never had the faintest idea who he was, and just weeks before Murray's daughter contacted me she had assured me she didn't know the identity of the mystery collector I was seeking!

In his final years Murray bought a beautiful Georgian house in Norfolk, where his daughter's family breathed new life into the main house, while Murray tucked himself into a dreamy rose-covered 17th-century cottage in the grounds. With a dedicated porcelain room, it was a place he loved, but after Gina's death in 2017, he spent much of his time exploring the local countryside or tending the garden. Still changing his suit for dinner each evening, he lived out his days as the gentleman he was: dignified, honest, and a romantic at heart, cherishing his family, nature and all things of beauty.



I found Murray’s collection meticulously organised on the shelves of his porcelain room, the research notes neatly packed away in boxes, but with no instructions whatsoever. It was as if he trusted that someone would come along and know what to do – or perhaps he died the way he lived: never dwelling on what wasn’t there, always fully giving himself to what he did in the moment; life was complete that way.

The importance of Murray’s collection can’t be overstated. In order to unlock Samuel Alcock’s legacy, he made it his mission to solve the riddle of the pattern numbers. I stumbled upon stacks of scrap paper with long lists of numbers neatly written in pencil. When going through them, I realised that with his trademark painstaking patience and precision, he had cracked the secret code and worked out the logic behind the pattern numbers, finally enabling us to correctly identify Samuel Alcock porcelain.

Why Murray never published his research may seem a mystery. But after getting to know his family, I started to understand that it might have been exactly because he was a brilliant literary agent. To Murray and Gina, books were about the artistry of writing, so for Murray it was clearly unthinkable to write a book himself.

Now, years after my failed odyssey to find Murray and encourage him to publish that elusive book, I have the honour of selling off his collection and cataloguing his research for publication on a website. Is it a shame to break up such a wonderful collection? Indeed, some collectors will bequeath their entire collection to a museum. But Murray’s family feels that his passion and research should be shared far and wide with fellow enthusiasts. Or, to use his favourite expression, Murray would be ‘tickled pink’ to see countless people take joy in the beautiful pieces he so painstakingly assembled.

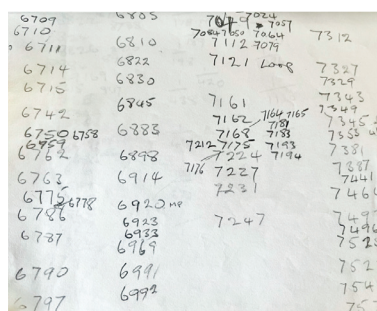
*Willa Latham*

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



**LEFT** A rare, wave-edge vase on a round foot with continuous landscape painting of a river scene, c1826; a wave-edge vase with gilt chinoiserie figure, c1825.

**BELOW AND INSET** Part of Murray Pollinger’s extensive private collection; one of the many sheets filled with pattern numbers – this is how Murray painstakingly cracked the mysterious Samuel Alcock code!



## How to start a **SERIOUS COLLECTION**

- **Find a clear focus:** a style, a type of use, a material, a maker... tune in to what you love.
- **Start simple!** You can branch out and expand as you learn.
- **Do your research:** read books, talk to trusted dealers and visit museum collections.
- **Follow your instinct** when you buy. A good purchase is one that moves you.
- **Collecting is a journey.** As you learn, you’ll see things differently – your taste will change, and things you didn’t like will grow on you, and vice versa. Read up on pieces you’re not sure about, and after a week see if you like them more, or less.
- **Allow for mistakes** – every collector buys pieces they later regret, and eBay is your friend

when this happens, allowing you to send them on their way again, to make space for new things.

- **You are only a temporary guardian** so think about where your collection should go when it survives you. Do you want to sell it off yourself, or pass it on as a whole? There are many good ways to pass on a collection, and the choice is personal.