



Creative CHAOS

The road to British porcelain never did run smooth, but that's precisely why it is so revered, says Willa Latham

For nearly three years, these columns have been traversing Britain in pursuit of porcelain. We've crisscrossed the country, exploring different eras and styles. We've traced the journey from China's early innovations, 2,000 years ago, to porcelain's arrival in Europe around the year 1700, when Augustus the Strong, King of Poland in the German town of Meissen, employed an alchemist to find the secret of the Chinese 'White Gold'. Meanwhile, a wily French Jesuit priest managed to appropriate the guarded Chinese recipe, enabling porcelain production elsewhere in Europe. A few decades later, porcelain finally arrived in Britain, brought over by Huguenot refugees and, right from the start, it followed a different path from its European counterparts.

So let's pause a moment, and remind ourselves why British porcelain is so unique. When compared to the famous European porcelain of the time, British porcelain exhibits a charmingly eclectic and free-spirited aesthetic, reflecting a mishmash of styles. Unlike European porcelain, no single piece seems to

be perfect; blemishes and crazing were common with even the best porcelain. Few potters marked their wares prior to the 1880s, making attribution difficult, while styles darted hurriedly from one trend to the next: playful rococo to Japanese Imari; neoclassical restraint to Regency opulence; East Asian imitations to English floral motifs and landscapes. The spectrum is vast and varied.

All in all, navigating the landscape of British porcelain can be a daunting task, especially for collectors. How do you distinguish the makers? How do you date the styles? Who were the main potters, and how did they relate to each other? And how on earth could a small country harbour at least 300 factories at once? There must be a book about that... But then you'll have discovered that no, there is no one book about that, and a comprehensive source remains elusive.

I have built up a library of wonderful books, but most choose to focus on one small area of this grand landscape, or try to tell the story of British porcelain through the better-known makers. Perhaps some of

ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Derby lobed dish, attributed to John Brewer, c1795; Spode blue-and-white transferware platter, c1820; English vase imitating the French style with caryatids, but with very English flowers, c1815; Samuel Alcock teapot, Rococo Revival, c1837; neoclassical Flight Barr & Barr coffee can, c1813.

the most helpful books for understanding the background are those that completely step back. Edmund de Waal's riveting account of the global history of porcelain, *The White Road*, is a good example, as is *The Radical Potter* by Tristram Hunt, which goes into great detail about the historical, economic and political landscape surrounding Josiah Wedgwood, and opens up a wider understanding of British society during the Industrial Revolution. Yet they still don't reveal the whole picture of British porcelain.

Why, you ask, does this specialism remain such a chaotic field of study? The answer lies in the way in which the industry was financed. In Europe, the secret of porcelain production landed in the hands of royalty, who not only provided the factories with limitless funds, but also imposed exclusivity and tightly controlled traditions. Royals, as we all know, do love tradition!

In Britain, however, porcelain arrived with enterprising immigrants, who partnered with British businessmen. They set up shop in competition with one another, as well as rivalling the European factories and the thriving British earthenware industry. Competing factories vied for the nobility's commercial patronage, and this competition drove innovation and rapid stylistic changes, with every factory aiming to delight their clients and secure more orders than their competitors. Designs evolved, artists were poached, and creativity flourished. Did someone paint beautiful flowers? We'll make ours bigger... Or we can add some birds... How about a landscape? The choice was endless, and the result a kaleidoscope of ever-changing shapes, patterns and motifs, fueled by relentless competition and a steady influx of skilled artisans seeking refuge from mundane labour. If you had to spend your life in a factory, wouldn't you rather paint flowers than operate a loom?

Porcelain travelled around Britain, starting in London's Chelsea and Bow, then on to Derby and Worcester, briefly in Wales and eventually, via short stints in Plymouth and Bristol, to Staffordshire, where this previously rural area was quickly transformed into a globally dominant hub of the industry.

Out of this tumult grew the enduring legacy of British porcelain. And if ever you feel confused, comfort yourself with the knowledge that it was precisely this chaos that encouraged the boundless creativity we still admire to this day.



ABOVE FROM TOP Neoclassical Herculaneum cup trio, c1810; Derby figure of Juno, c1760, imitation of Meissen, but more free-flowing and wilder. BELOW Caughley teapot, c1785. Note how this is directly derived from the Chinese style.

Ways to identify BRITISH PORCELAIN

- **The porcelain body itself** – is it bone china (generally post-1800) or earlier? White or greyish? Blemished or perfect?
- **Look at the shape** – playful rococo, stark neoclassical, opulent Regency, or capricious Rococo Revival?
- **The decorations** – each factory had its own defined style that is preserved in pattern books and/or described in literature. You might need that shelf full of books!
- Michael Berthoud compiled **guides to the exact shapes** of cups, teapots, and jugs; various decorative wares were detailed in compendiums by others (Coalport, H&R Daniel)
- Some factories had their **pattern books** preserved, so in those cases the pattern numbers written on the underside can help us identify pieces
- **Never believe any one single source...** many experts disagree, and even the best get it wrong from time to time!

Willa Latham

Read Willa's blog gentlerattleofchina.com, follow her @gentlerattleofchina

