



**FROM LEFT** Coalport Coalbrookdale taperstick c1835; Chamberlain Worcester potpourri basket in Coalbrookdale style, c1830; spectacular Samuel Alcock writing desk set in Coalbrookdale style, c1830.  
**BELOW** Belleek 'Princess' vase with encrusted flowers, c1900.



# FLOWER Power

*Over the top yet undoubtedly joyful, the Coalbrookdale style of encrusted porcelain first produced by Coalport was quickly imitated, says Willa Latham*

**L**ove it or hate it, as we have been looking at 19th-century Rococo Revival porcelain we must talk about the 'Coalbrookdale' style. Encrusted with countless little blooms, it is not my natural favourite. But then there are some items that I can't help but utterly love, because they are so beautifully made, so pleasing in their shapes, and so boundlessly uplifting in their sheer 'flower power'.

The name Coalbrookdale came from a village in Shropshire, recognised as 'the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution' thanks to the world's first coke blast furnace. It was also an early name used by the nearby Coalport porcelain factory, which was the first to popularise the encrusted porcelain style. Ironically, this village – the cradle of the environmental destruction we are facing today – also lent its name to this delicate style of flower-encrusted porcelain.

From the mid 1820s to about 1850, many factories produced this style, but it all started with Coalport. When the Rococo Revival fashion emerged, Coalport took some 18th-century German items from Meissen as an example: the 'Schneeballen' style (German for 'snowballs') with

thousands of tiny encrusted blooms. From there, it quickly developed: floral details were added, and sometimes birds.

The Coalbrookdale style had earlier roots also in Britain; encrusted flowers had been used on the 18th-century porcelain figures, as 'bocage' or a background of trees and bushes. Chelsea made some crazy-looking 'frill vases' with large encrusted flowers.

But, back in the 18th century, encrusted flowers were not the main event, just an embellishment.

With the emergence of the Rococo Revival and the new-found taste for exuberance, Coalport took this style to the extreme. It didn't take long for others to follow suit: Samuel Alcock, Minton, Henry Daniel, Chamberlain, Spode, Rockingham and also some minor factories whose more inferior wares are still around and often sold as Coalport.

An endless stream of decorative and what I call 'half-useful' wares appeared – as yes, many were what is called 'useful', but only if you were willing to pay a lot of money for something you'd probably never use. Vases, potpourris, desk sets, pen trays,



Willa Latham; Gentile Rattle of China; The Murray Pollinger Collection

candlesticks, tapersticks (which are smaller), baskets, pastille burners, watch stands, vanity sets, scent bottles, rosewater sprinklers, tureens, bowls, even whole tea sets... there seemed to be no end to the variety of items you can encrust. There was even a curious device called an 'instantaneous light vase' or 'pyrophorus vase' that held a vial with sulphuric acid and a little rack for wooden matches dipped in chlorate of potash and sugar. The matches could be lit by dipping them into the acid, where they would self-ignite. This might seem useful, but with its encrusted flowers, which easily catch on the clothes of a passing person and pull the whole vase over, a rather dangerous thing to have standing around the house, I would think!

Many of the items in the Coalbrookdale style were known shapes that were initially made without encrusting. It was just a matter of adding the flowers, which was time consuming and expensive. Tiny petals were crafted from porcelain clay, which were then glued to the item with liquified clay or slip. Then the items had to be fired, and after that the decoration process began. These were colourful wares, needing several rounds of firing. You can imagine how much risk each item was exposed to, as every potter can tell you that you never know what will happen inside the kiln; all manner of things can go wrong. So all this would add to the cost of encrusted wares, making them only more sought after.

Today, most Coalbrookdale-style items are attributed to Coalport, often wrongly. And, to be fair, makers of the Coalbrookdale style are hard to distinguish, particularly because Samuel Alcock imitated the early Coalport/Coalbrookdale 'CD' mark, and Minton and Coalport both used an imitation of the Meissen crossed swords mark. However, there are some ways to identify the right maker, and I've listed them above right. A big steer when identifying Coalport is the two 'Travellers Design Books' with their beautiful drawings, which a travelling salesman used to sell the wares. Pages of these are reproduced in excellent tomes by Geoffrey A. Godden, Michael Messenger, and Gordon Bushnell.

And then, in the 1860s, just when we thought the Coalbrookdale style was finished and everybody was moving on to much smoother and sleeker Victorian styles, yet another incarnation came along. The Irish Belleek factory did it all over again but in the very light, white parian that Belleek porcelain is famous for – gorgeous vases, ewers and baskets encrusted with wonderfully delicate flowers, some of which are still made today. Who knows where the style will pop up next? But, first, there are plenty more floral styles from the Staffordshire factories to explore, and we'll continue with these next time...

*Willa Latham*

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

## HOW DO I KNOW WHO MADE A COALBROOKDALE?

- **Basic shapes** – all factories used shapes with or without encrusting, and for some shapes pattern books have survived with detailed design drawings (particularly from Coalport)
- **A pattern number** – Samuel Alcock systematically numbered its decorative items, but many others didn't
- **Colours and placing of encrusted details** – Minton and Alcock focused on the centre of a vase, while Coalport spread them around more. Coalport used many pastel shades, while Minton and Alcock could be brighter
- **Details of the foliage** – Coalport made finely veined leaves, while others made them coarsely or without veins

### CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT

Superb Minton vase with fruit paintings by Thomas Steele, c1835; 18th-century Chelsea 'frill vase' with applied flowers; Coalport/Coalbrookdale taperstick c1835.

