



# Samuel Alcock & Co reassessed

Huge collection shines light on the once common Staffs porcelain that nonetheless is often misidentified

by Gabriel Berner

In its heyday, Samuel Alcock & Co was one of the biggest factories in Staffordshire. Its domestic wares – especially its line of rococo-inspired ceramics – populated the homes of the Victorian middle class.

Founded in the 1820s by Samuel Alcock (1799-1848), it operated for over three decades producing vast quantities of high-quality porcelain and earthenware.

Its pieces came in a multitude of styles and designs, including floral vases, miniature statuary, dinner services and relief-moulded picture jugs. At its peak, the factory employed a workforce of around 700 before the bankruptcy of two of Alcock's sons who had taken over running the firm forced its closure in 1859. It was subsequently bought by Sir James Duke & Nephews.

Despite its popularity, comparatively little is known about the firm today. Its pattern books are lost and many pieces were left unmarked. In ceramics circles, it has a reputation for being difficult to identify.

"Samuel Alcock porcelain is everywhere but the majority of it is misidentified as made by other factories, due to the lack of knowledge," says porcelain dealer Willa Latham of Gentle Rattle of China.

The firm's rococo-inspired tea wares, produced in the 1840s-50s, are among the most common to be mistaken for other potteries. Confusion, Latham says, also stems from the "dazzling array of designs" the factory produced and its method of numbering its patterns that "seemed to make no sense at all".

## Extensive selection

That is, until now. She has been tasked with bringing a vast private collection to the market which sheds new light on the factory, including its pattern numbers.

"Having this collection in the public domain will change everyone's view of Samuel Alcock and it will have many collectors scratching their heads about what they thought were pieces from other makers," says Latham.

It was assembled by Murray



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**1.** Large complete dessert service decorated with Persian inspired 'Alma' moulded borders and bird paintings, made by Samuel Alcock & Co in c.1855 for an important family. It is priced at **£4250** by Gentle Rattle of China.

**2.** Rococo revival serpent handle vase with pale green ground and painted landscape on one side, 8in (21cm) high, pattern number 3376, was made by Samuel Alcock & Co in c.1832. Several of these sold at auction recently misidentified as Ridgway. It is available for **£475**.

**3.** Rare Samuel Alcock one-handed dish with a central painting of a pink rose made in c.1827, pattern number 1284, and priced at **£225**.

**4.** Murray Pollinger (1932-2022) spent years researching Samuel Alcock & Co, amassing a vast collection of its wares. He deciphered the factory's byzantine system of numbering its patterns, making it easier to identify its wares.

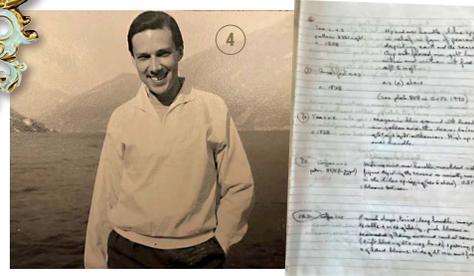
**5.** A page from Pollinger's notes on Samuel Alcock & Co. His research will be published by porcelain dealer Willa Latham in the coming year while his collection is being dispersed gradually via her website, gentlerattleofchina.com.



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Pollinger (1932-2022), a porcelain enthusiast and successful literary agent who worked with well-known authors and illustrators such as Roald Dahl, Quentin Blake and Rosemary Sutcliff.

In the mid-1980s, Pollinger quietly set about researching the factory with the help of his friend and fellow collector Stephen Bressey. Over the years, he made numerous trips to Staffordshire and purchased thousands of pieces, meticulously cataloguing each one.

Rumours of a knowledgeable collector circulated in the trade, but Pollinger's identity remained unknown until after his death last year when Latham was contacted by his family.

"He attended every fair and knew every little shop in every little village. I asked many dealers, and many remember him – yet nobody knew he was such a serious collector," says Latham "He would buy a piece of 'Minton', smile politely, leave, and add it to his Alcock collection, carefully researched and catalogued."

In Pollinger's 'porcelain room', located in an outhouse of his Georgian home in Norfolk, Latham discovered stacks of scrap paper with long lists of numbers scribbled down from which Pollinger had deciphered the firm's pattern number system.

"Murray cracked the secret code and found the logic behind the pattern numbers, finally making it possible to correctly identify Samuel Alcock porcelain," says Latham.

Aside from writing one article with Bressey (which is not widely available), Murray did not publish any of his research. Latham suggests that it was probably because he did not consider himself a writer.

"For Murray, who did not excel at school but turned into an extraordinary literary agent representing authors of great talent, publishing a book himself was clearly unthinkable."

## Released in batches

So as not to flood the market, the collection is being released in batches over the coming year.

The first instalment features some



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100 highlights spanning the factory's entire period of operation and including vases, dishes, pen trays, dinner sets, plates and jugs.

Though many have light damage, says Latham, they include "the most interesting, beautiful and, in many cases, rare items of interest to collectors" and come in shapes and patterns previously misidentified as Coalport, Minton or Ridgway.

These include a rococo revival serpent handle vase commonly thought to be Ridgway (several

were miscatalogued as such at an auction recently) and a cobalt blue gilt flowered teapot mistaken for the work of H&R Daniel.

The collection is currently available to view via Latham's website exclusively to those signed up to the mailing list. Prices range from around £100 for a floral cup and saucer to £7000 for an early, complete dessert service. A website dedicated to Pollinger's research will follow in the coming year. ■

gentlerattleofchina.com

## Samuel Alcock timeline:

**1799** – Samuel Alcock is born in Kingsley, Staffordshire, the youngest of nine children.

**1822** – Alcock goes into partnership with Ralph Stephenson, a potter of blue-painted earthenware, manufacturing pottery in Cobridge under the name The Hill Top Pottery.

**1826** – The factory is renamed Samuel Alcock & Co and over the next decade expands to employ around 700 people, becoming one of the biggest factories in Staffordshire.

**1840** – Alcock opens another factory in Burslem, built in the Venetian style. He holds a grand ball and banquet hosting fellow potters and local nobility and providing food for 900 friends and employees.

**1842** – As chief constable of Burslem he helps put down the Chartist-inspired uprising, which was focused on the Staffordshire potteries including his own factories where the workers were paid low wages.

**1848** – Alcock dies. The firm is taken over by his wife Elizabeth and two sons, Samuel and Thomas, whose bankruptcy forces the factory to close in 1859.

## 5 Questions

Marine Edith Crosta and Daniel Smith of Crosta Smith Gallery are among the exhibitors at the upcoming LAPADA Berkeley Square Fair (September 27-October 1). crostasmithgallery.com



antique but a live animal that the main character, a dandy named Des Esseintes, decides to purchase and on a bizarre whim, to adorn with precious stones, in order to balance out the sheen of a gold and plum-coloured carpet.

**1 How did you get your start?** A common passion for art and design led us to start building our own personal collection and set up our gallery in 2018. We specialise in rare French pieces from the 1920s to 1940s. We also have a collection in our home which we hope to grow. But we refuse to live in a museum-like home, so our antique furniture is very much used and lived with!

**2 What projects have you worked on recently?** We recently organised a photoshoot with our collection at Eltham Palace, an Art Deco mansion in the south of London. We will be exhibiting a selection of pieces at this year's LAPADA Berkeley Square Fair alongside fellow gallerist and friend Laurent Guelfucci, owner of Guelfucci Gallery.

**3 What is one great discovery you have made?** A very rare Jean Michel Frank armchair from a private collection, in untouched condition.

**4 What is your favourite appearance of an antique in a film, play or book?** The tortoise in *A Rebours* by Joris-Karl Huysmans is the first decorative object that springs to mind. In fact, and as incongruous as it is, the tortoise isn't an

**5 What is one thing you couldn't do without?** Folding screens. Lacquer, straw marquetry, carved wood, hand painted, leather clad... we think they look fantastic in any interior and should take pride of place in a collection. This decorative object originates from China and Japan, but multiple variations and uses have occurred throughout history. During the Art Deco period, which Crosta Smith Gallery focuses on, remarkable examples can be observed, such as the wonderful Destin by Eileen Gray, or straw marquetry clad little screens Jean Michel Frank designed to frame a sofa or a piano, while he also collaborated with artist Christian Berard on a handful of beautiful hand painted screens. Jean Dunand's folding screens in lacquer with inclusions of gold leaf or eggshell, or Katsu Hamanaka's impressive pieces are definitely something we will always have our eye on.

Right: two folding screens in burnt red lacquer, France, c.1925, offered at LAPADA fair for **£40,000**.



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