

Traditions and Trends in British Ceramic Collecting.

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Introduction

Although the range of things that are collected has increased considerably over the past two hundred years, an increase largely due to the effects of industrialisation, there are certain areas of mankind's capacity for creativity that have since antiquity stimulated our acquisitive instinct. For many minds the wish to collect is inseparable from values associated with rarity or perhaps objects that reveal evidence of impressive artistic and technical skills, perhaps novelty, and the sense that they represent cultures and traditions that are remote from those which constitute our normal experiences. With the advent of activities that render these experiences more accessible what we choose to collect has changed accordingly.

Differing activities, directly or indirectly, provided the incentives that were fundamental in the emergence of collecting from military conquest, ventures undertaken by explorers and travellers (a very large and diverse group) to missionaries, especially from the West, who concurrently exercised the will to convert and to alleviate, via their various charitable deeds, suffering in its numerous forms. Anyone who had an unusual experience, especially if it involved travels over long distances, might have sought mementos of their experience.

Adventures were organized with aims to observe or acquire animal and plant species. In the case of zoological projects there was the added incentive of bringing live species back for exhibition purposes, hence the establishment of zoological gardens. One only has to consult publications which appeared as late as the early 1800s for examples of naive representations of animal species. It was not until the invention of photography and access to zoos (living collections) that the average citizen was able to experience creatures that book illustrations alone had often failed to represent without the distortions attributable to artistic licence, ignorance and misrepresentation. Museums served a similar purpose for the products of human creativity and invention. 'Cabinets of Curiosities', a feature of the Renaissance, were museums in microcosm. Their educational value in the late medieval period took on a special importance when they contained artefacts for which there were no equivalents in European history. Before Marco Polo returned from his travels in China he obtained examples of a commodity that was ultimately to have a profound influence on potters who held ambitions to replicate a translucent material, the true composition of which was to remain a mystery until the early years of the eighteenth century, a subject which, incidentally, was ultimately informed by letters written by a Jesuit missionary describing a visit to China's ceramic-making region of Ching-te-chen (Jingdezen).

That Italy is thought to have been preeminent in the in the earliest experiments to recreate the qualities of Chinese translucent porcelain is attested in the existence of wares made under the patronage of Francesco de Medici at a workshop established in Florence in the 1570s; hence the now extremely rare Medici porcelain. The invention of ceramics in antiquity and especially Western attempts at recreating the special characteristics of Chinese porcelain gave rise to a technology that has been important in stimulating the establishment of scientific principles within and beyond the medium, principles which have an ongoing relevance for art and industry. Predating the advent of porcelain there were, of course, an infinite number of ceramic traditions which have and continue to attract the collector's acquisitive instincts.

The eminent art critic and historian, Sir Herbert Read summarised in a sentence why our interest in what is arguably mankind's oldest technology continues to warrant our serious consideration;

'Judge the art of a country, judge the fineness of its sensibility, by its pottery; it is a sure touchstone.'*

*Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art*, A Pelican Book, (Faber & Faber, 1931.)

Collecting: origins and Development

In the first half of the twentieth century manufacturers of, for example, cigarettes and tea recognized the commercial potential in enclosing with their products small pictorial cards which could be made up with further purchases into sets. Unlike many other areas of collecting opportunities for acquiring every card in the series were largely predetermined and, indeed, facilitated by the issuer. The situation regarding most other areas of collecting, such as antiquities and natural history specimens, was in contrast challenged by factors as diverse as the collector's income, leisure time, geographical location and, not least, knowledge. These are some of the important differences which separate certain collectables such as cigarette cards and other items from the immensely diverse range of objects, both natural and man-made, originally located in distant lands.

The distance factor played a part in the emergence of stamp collecting at a period when most ordinary people rarely had opportunities, members of the armed forces and sailors being the exception, for travel beyond the shores of Britain. For anyone outside these occupations the, albeit small, printed images of exotic peoples and locations could convey a sense of mystery and distance between the countries they depicted and one's often isolated environment. The matter of rarity was incidental to the knowledge that they were from parts of the world that for most were limited to one's imagination. So while postage stamps were not issued just for collectors, a combination of their distant origins and low cost, as in the case of Britain's Penny Black and Two penny Blue, were undoubtedly instrumental in promoting their popularity and establishment of what became philately. In due course, and in response to a growing demand from collectors, the world's postal services quickly recognized the commercial potential in printing issues for reasons beyond their more obvious purpose.

In this age of world-wide communications it is, perhaps, difficult to imagine the sense of wonderment that a citizen of late medieval Europe would have experienced upon seeing for the first time a live elephant or some other equally remarkable creature. Perhaps it was comparable to the experience that anyone in the period from 1969 would have felt upon coming into close contact with either mineral specimens brought back to earth by the Apollo moon landing of that year or a previously unseen fish species such as the Coelacanth (a 'living fossil') from one of the world's deepest oceans. However, my boyhood imagination was stimulated by events and objects with their origins nearer home. I can recall my sense of anticipation and pleasure upon receiving a curio brought back by an uncle from his war-time travels in Italy and Egypt. This was at a period (the late 1940s) when holidays abroad were something generally limited to a privileged few. I reached a point when adding to these modest acquisitions became a favourite pastime with the result that I soon had a collection of curios that at a much earlier period would have possibly qualified as a 'cabinet of curiosities'. I was unaware at the time that my interest in the exotic and unusual was part of a long tradition stretching back into antiquity. It was during the late medieval period that descriptions of 'collectors' cabinets' first appeared in documentary records. Paintings exist which show assemblages of miscellaneous objects ranging in type from minerals via natural history specimens to rare curios and, by the fifteenth century, examples of Chinese porcelain. Limited knowledge of the wider world led to certain objects being incorrectly classified and as a consequence wrongly attributed. What we know to have been Ostrich eggs, for example, were sometimes described as 'Griffins' eggs' when sold to their trusting purchasers. Similarly, skeletal remains, perhaps acquired from a relatively common species, but which allegedly came from creatures which in reality only existed in mythology, were passed off as genuine. There were, however, other items which justified their owner's belief in rarity and which became treasured possessions. In the present context it is instances of Chinese ceramics appearing in Europe which are of particular interest. Well-documented examples

have survived and are held in existing collections, typically the Warham bowl bequeathed to New College, Oxford by Archbishop Warham in 1530, in a composition identified as celadon, with silver-gilt mounts applied in Europe to identify its importance. At the time of the bowl's appearance in Oxford in 1516 it was an object of extreme rarity, at least in the context of Britain. In other areas of Europe there existed by the end of the sixteenth century small collections of Chinese ceramics, notably that belonging to Italy's Medici family. Francesco de Medici's interest in porcelain led him to commissioning Bernardo Buontalenti in attempts at formulating a European equivalent, a venture which led to the creation of what became Medici porcelain. Although Buontalenti failed to replicate China's achievement in totality he succeeded in producing a softer glassy paste which in the absence of close examination provided an acceptable imitation of hardpaste. The collecting of actual Chinese porcelain was limited to, at best, a few examples prior to the foundation of the East India Companies. The rare examples which had arrived in Europe were usually displayed alongside generally unrelated artefacts and specimens of natural history. Mention of the Warham bowl identifies the important point that forming a collection of objects of a similar type was then as now dependent on the existence of a significant number of available examples. Indeed, until the seventeenth century most curio collections consisted of a varied mix of disparate objects. A seventeenth century engraving depicts a corner of what was known as 'Ole Worm's Cabinet of Curiosities' Stuffed fish and reptiles, some preserved in alcohol, may be seen, in the first mentioned case, suspended from the ceiling alongside mounted antlers and miscellaneous geological specimens. It was collections of this sort which often led to the creation of public museums. In Britain we have the example of John Tradescant's 'Collection of Rarities' which was subsequently bequeathed to Elias Ashmole who in turn along with objects he too had collected led to the establishment of what became the Ashmolean Museum.