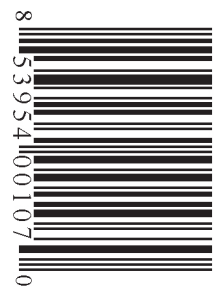


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AntiqueWeek

THE WEEKLY ANTIQUE AUCTION & COLLECTING NEWSPAPER

VOL. 53 ISSUE No. 2668

WWW.ANTIQUEWEEK.COM

NOVEMBER 17, 2020

For centuries Willow in all its colors has fascinated

BY BARBARA MILLER BEEM

Aunt Bee of Mayberry displayed hers in a china cabinet, TV families as diverse as the Waltons and the Munsters dined on it, and all the while, Gunsmoke's Miss Kitty used it to serve her guests. But in most people's minds, this is the china that real-life Grandmoms have used to serve their families for years and years. Few would dispute that there's no other dinnerware that says "Americana" quite like "Blue Willow."

A sentimental favorite (it inspired a romantic legend and several variations on a poem), "Willow" ("Blue" and otherwise) has its own place in history as the oldest china pattern in continual production, beginning in 1790. "No other china can claim that," noted Jeff Siptak, longtime collector and historian and past-president of International Willow Collectors, a club that is some 250-members strong. The roots of this beloved pattern date to 15th-century China, where potters discovered that the blue of blue-and-white

pottery could be produced using cobalt, which could survive the high temperatures required for firing. For hundreds of years, these resulting Chinese blue-and-white wares were exported to England, where they were very popular.

By the 1790s, when the East India Company had ceased to import Chinese porcelains to London, British potters had made advancements in their burgeoning industry. In the 1750s, Irish engraver John Brooks refined transfer printing on ceramics, a process that involved transferring images from inked copper plates to paper, applying that paper to pottery, and then firing the pottery (after removing the paper, of course). This process made it possible to mass produce decorated wares without time-consuming (and expensive) hand decoration.

Recognizing that Eastern wares were widely embraced by Western consumers, English engraver Thomas Minton was inspired to interpret Chinese landscapes on copper plates. Sometime around 1790, he created a design that featured a willow, according to Siptak. The first standard willow pattern was produced on pearlware at the Spode factory in the latter days of the 18th century. By 1830, there were approximately 200 makers of some version of the willow pattern. In 1905, the Buffalo Pottery became the first American company to produce willow ware. Today, it has been estimated that some 400 potteries have produced their version of the quaint pattern.

But as popular as willow ware has been over the years, there were those who did not catch "Willow" fever. Siptak suggested that the pattern is probably more popular in America than in England; indeed, from the beginning, the British aristocracy did not consider it worthy of their tables. Not hand-painted and lacking elaborate gold trim, it was considered to be for the "common man," he said, quickly adding, "but I would beg to differ." And to be sure, not all of the companies that produced these wares would



Above: From spice canisters to frosted glasses, egg cups to footed sherbet dishes, "Blue Willow" has a comfortable feel. image courtesy of Jimmie Bucci

Below: Look closely and you'll spot a tea set for a doll's party, cross-stitched place-mats, and a variety of serving dishes, most of them blue. image courtesy of Jimmie Bucci



Above: This unmarked Toby, made in England in the first half of the 20th century, is a favorite of long-time collector Jeff Siptak. Indeed, these pitchers are something of a specialty for him. Courtesy of Jeff Siptak

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Willow

FROM FRONT PAGE

be considered high-end: “Willow” plates have been offered as grocery store premiums.

There is no one “Willow” pattern. But in addition to the presence of a willow tree, all interpretations have several elements in common: Three men on a bridge, a fence, a boat, a pagoda, and most importantly for the accompanying legend about two star-crossed lovers soaring above, two birds in flight. Also depicted is what has traditionally been identified as either an orange or apple tree, now identified as an Oriental pine. Collectors, the Nashville resident noted, are comfortable with either identification, although in his mind, the former “sounds nicer.”

And not all “Willow” is “Blue Willow,” as it can be red, pink, or green, brown, gold or yellow, or purple, black, or a combination of colors (“Gaudy Willow”). However, blue and white china is the most popular of all china color choices, “Willow” or not.

“The reason this pattern is popular to collect is because you never know what’s going to appear. You just don’t know what’s out there,” Siptak concluded. Many pieces are unmarked, and there is no way of knowing all of the companies that produced it, much less the variety of pieces they decorated with the pattern. Any one of a number of helpful books might be a good place to begin, he said. As for what to collect, Siptak reminds collectors to buy what they like. For him, that includes Toby pitchers. Many collectors favor cow creamers. Ceramic toasters might well be the “holy grail” for serious enthusiasts.

Or inherit something from your grandmother. That’s how “Blue Willow” enthusiast Jimmie Bucci began his collection, at the heart of which is her large platter, originally belonging to his great-great-grandmother and brought to America from Ireland. As much as he prizes the family heirloom (it has a place of honor on his dining room wall), Bucci fondly recalls her recitation of a poem about “Blue Willow,” somewhat altered, substituting “Dover” for the word “China.” “I guess it kind of made sense to her,” he chuckled.

With these childhood memories, the Massachusetts resident began picking up “a little bit here and there,” always with the intention of incorporating “Blue Willow” into his everyday life. Among his holdings, in addition to a cabinet full of dinnerware, are spice canisters, frosted glasses, and flatware (the handles are decorated). He said that his favorite pieces are double egg cups and footed sherbet dishes, as well as children’s dinnerware and toy tea sets, as well as a

Right: A grouping of early Buffalo China, including a plate (1905), a small creamer (1910), and an individual teapot (1911). Courtesy of Jeff Siptak.

“Blue Willow” oil lamp.

As president of the Vintage Tablecloth Lovers Club, Bucci, not surprisingly, owns several vintage “Willow” tablecloths (they were made in pink and green, as well as blue) and matching napkins. Over the years, he has added hand-stitched textiles to his holdings, including a set of placemats and a needlepointed tapestry. Not in his collection, but available, are items as varied as rugs and aprons.

The story of “Blue Willow” is an international one: Inspired by Chinese pottery, made possible thanks to a technique developed by an Irishman, and designed by an English engraver, only to be embraced by Americans. Best of all, Bucci noted, “It is so attractive. It’s timeless.” For more information, go to willowcollectors.org.



Above: Collector Jimmie Bucci gives a place of honor in his dining room for two striking examples: a needlepointed picture and a platter handed down to him by his grandmother. image courtesy of Jimmie Bucci.

Right: The popularity of the “Willow” pattern resulted in its being put on a variety of ceramics, including this unmarked English creamer, dating from the mid-19th century. Courtesy of Jeff Siptak.



Above: Just when you thought you'd seen it all: This “Toastrite” toaster might be the “holy grail” for collectors. Manufactured for only several years before the Depression, this example was made in the 1920s by Pan Electric in Cleveland, Oh. Courtesy of Jeff Siptak



Below Left: An example of “Brown Willow,” a popular choice for the Thanksgiving table. Think “Red Willow” and “Green Willow” for Christmas. Courtesy of Jeff Siptak

Below Right: Beloved for generations, “Willow” has the distinction of being the oldest china pattern in continual production. Courtesy of Jeff Siptak



Above: Because he is president of the Vintage Tablecloth Lovers Club, it comes as no surprise that Bucci includes “Blue Willow” tablecloths in his collection. image courtesy of Jimmie Bucci.

