

Exhibition, British Museum

Pots with Attitude

Room 90a, British Museum 12 January – 11 March, 2018

The display explores political and satirical prints transfer-printed on British ceramics.

Ceramics with an Agenda

Ceramics are rarely confrontational, but the pugnacious mugs, jugs and plates in *Pots with Attitude: Satirical and Political Prints on Ceramics*, in Room 90a, a display at the British Museum, supported by the Monument Trust, are exceptions. Here, utilitarian creamwares and pearlwares are transformed with images appropriated from contemporary engravings into militant wares, fragile platforms criticising the latest political propaganda or blunder. Humour dissipates the uncomfortable truths in these satirical prints published in London between 1770 and 1830. Transferring printed images direct from copper plates onto ceramic bodies was an innovation embraced by the English potteries in the 1750s. They quickly exploited its possibilities to international acclaim and commercial gain. This interdisciplinary display uniting political prints and transfer-printed ceramics, two great British traditions, is part of a one-year Monument Trust funded curatorial project to champion interactions between 18th-century prints and ceramics.

The British Museum has one of the largest collections of satirical prints in the world. The earliest were acquired by Sarah Sophia Banks (1744-1818), the sister of the naturalist Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820), who collected 800 caricatures, as they were then known. Despite their popular appeal, these costly, hand-coloured etchings were aimed at the affluent and sold at Mayfair 'Caricature Warehouses' from the 1780s. The aristocracy pasted them into albums or lined print rooms with them as at Calke Abbey, Derbyshire. Samuel Fores (1761 – 1838), an enterprising London publisher, at No. 50, Piccadilly, offered 'Folios of Caricatures lent out for the Evening'. Others charged an entrance fee, but many enjoyed them in the windows of print-shops for free.

Mass-produced pots with political prints were marketed at a broader social level and appeared on inexpensive earthenware, more at home in an alehouse than a drawing room. Most were

printed over the glaze. New copper plates were engraved, scaled to the size of the pots. The small but choice collection in the British Museum is primarily from the 1887 gift of Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks (1826-1897), the first Keeper of the newly formed Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities and Ethnography, who believed that the Museum's collection should reflect historical events. Many of the pots in the display are on loan from a generous private collector.

The images became increasingly cruel, especially during Napoleon Bonaparte's threatened invasion in 1803, when prints as government funded propaganda stirred up the populace with nasty images of the Corsican tyrant. Just weeks before the collapse of the Peace of Amiens in May 1803, a caricaturist captured a colossal 'Boney' with a foot firmly planted in Germany about to straddle the English Channel. A feisty, pint-sized John Bull with a blood stained sword has sliced off his toes, while exclaiming 'Paws off, Pompey', associating Bonaparte with the hero of a popular novel, a lap-dog, known as 'Pompey the Little'.

The image was used by a number of potteries in Liverpool, Staffordshire and Sunderland. The reverse of this creamware ale or wine jug, transfer-printed in iron-red, is inscribed 'Success to the Volunteers' within a Bacchic grapevine border. The Volunteers were a civilian militia formed following the Defence of the Realm Act 1803, when the heightened threat of invasion easily mobilized a 380,000 strong force by the year's end. What role, if any, these humble printed pots played in encouraging their decision to volunteer is debatable, but they clearly supported their agenda.

Patricia Ferguson, Project Curator: Monument Trust, 18th Century Prints and Ceramics

Images:

1. Creamware jug, probably Liverpool, transfer-printed in red

The Governor of Europe Stopped in his Career, c.1803; 130 mm; 1922,1220.2

2. Other side of jug: *Success to Volunteers*

3. Charles Williams (active 1797-1830), *The Governor of Europe Stopped in his Career*, Published by Samuel William Fores, 16 April 1803; Hand-coloured etching 352 x 249 mm; 1868,0808.7101 BM Satires 9980; From the collection of Edward Hawkins



