WONDERFUL WILLOW

It is the best known of all traditional pottery designs, but what is the history of Willow Pattern, asks Katherine Sorrell, and why is it so eternally popular?

If you were a wealthy Briton in the mid-18th century, it’s more than likely that you would have eaten dinner and drunk your fashionable cups of tea out of expensive, hand-painted Chinese porcelain, illustrated with landscapes in blue and white. The potteries in Staffordshire were, naturally, desperate to compete with the millions of pieces of ‘china’ that were imported by the East India Company, and, until the second half of the 18th century, emulated them with hand-painted ware, often requested by householders desperate to replace a broken piece. A manufacturer called Caughley probably made the first printed copies of Chinese landscape patterns onto porcelain, using a new process, invented around 1775, known as underglaze transfer printing. This involved engraving the design onto a copper plate, then ‘transferring’ it to the surface of the unglazed piece. Its potential was immense, allowing potteries to make Chinese-style ceramics efficiently and inexpensively. Other potters, including Minton, swiftly followed, but it was Josiah Spode I who, more than any other potter, developed the transfer-printing process. Responding to the Chinese influence, he made Willow Pattern, and other Chinese designs, the trademark of his company. Spode probably introduced the Willow Pattern design in about 1795, although he may have produced earlier versions of it, with a pattern known as Gaudy Willow, known as ‘pearlware’, which had a bluish-transfer-printed blue on a clay body and printing processes in the English potteries. It began as underglaze blue-printing than its predecessor, creamware. Early prints, says Copeland, were dark Cyanine or midnight blues, often with a slightly flowing colour. As techniques improved, the blues were better controlled, and medium tones were dark Cyanine or midnight blues, often with a slightly flowing colour. As techniques improved, the blues were better controlled, and medium tones more popular until the 1810s, when paler blues were introduced, says Rogers. Why? Because from the beginning it was printed onto earthenware, decorating utilitarian dinner services rather than fancy tea wares. ‘For the middle classes, blue-printed pearlware was a less costly compromise than expensive hand-painted porcelains from China,’ she says. ‘It is a pattern that has always related to the common people.’ And, no doubt, the story of the pattern has added to its popularity.

The romantic legend that is often believed to be the basis of the Willow Pattern design is, says Copeland, apocryphal. The tale, first published in 1849 in The Family Friend, describes a rich mandarin who has chosen an elderly bridegroom for his beautiful daughter, who is, unknown to her father, in love with a poor clerk. The young lovers escape; but are chased by the mandarin as they flee across the bridge. They travel by boat to an island where they are later discovered. As they die, the gods transform them into two doves, symbolising true love. In fact, says Connie Rogers, author of The Illustrated Encyclopedia of British Willow Ware, there are as many versions of the story as there are of the pattern, but it undoubtedly contributed to the design’s lasting appeal to the masses.

PROCESSES AND THE GOLDEN AGE

The story of Willow Pattern follows the development of clay, colours and printing processes in the English potteries. It began as underglaze blue-printing than its predecessor, creamware. Early prints, says Copeland, were dark Cyanine or midnight blues, often with a slightly flowing colour. As techniques improved, the blues were better controlled, and medium tones were popular until the 1810s, when paler blues were introduced, says Rogers. Why? Because from the beginning it was printed onto earthenware, decorating utilitarian dinner services rather than fancy tea wares. ‘For the middle classes, blue-printed pearlware was a less costly compromise than expensive hand-painted porcelains from China,’ she says. ‘It is a pattern that has always related to the common people.’ And, no doubt, the story of the pattern has added to its popularity.

Further resources

Books: Spode’s Willow Pattern and Other Designs after the Chinese, by Robert Copeland (Studio Vista), The Illustrated Encyclopedia of British Willow Ware, by Connie Rogers (Schiffer).
