



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 five years previously.

COMMON FEATURES

According to Robert Copeland, author of *Spode's Willow Pattern*, the design was developed from an original Chinese pattern called Mandarin, one of the most popular of all the imported patterns. Standard Willow Pattern contains some essential features: a willow tree in the centre leaning over a bridge, a tea house with three pillars forming the portico and a large orange tree behind it, a bridge with three people crossing towards the island, a boat with a man in it, two birds flying towards each other, and a fence across the foreground of the garden.

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, unbeknown 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 clays, colours and printing processes in the English potteries. It began as underglaze transfer-printed blue on a clay body known as 'pearlware', which had a bluish-white colour that was better suited to 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 colours became more fashionable. The Victorians, however, produced a wide variety of blues, from grayish to very dark, some of which flowed so much it was barely possible to make out the pattern. Early plates were hexagonal, then lobed and then, eventually, circular. The 'golden period' was between 1805 and 1825, says Rogers, when the quality of engraving, the refinement of transfer printing and lightweight pearlware body with pale blue glaze made it possible to produce very fine quality printed ware. From about 1825, Willow began to appear on heavier earthenware and stoneware. Then, in the late-19th century, alongside

the revival of interest in Chinoiserie (intricate Chinese patterns) Willow Pattern was printed onto bone china.

JUMPING ON THE BANDWAGON

Of course it was not only Spode that produced Willow Pattern: a roll call of the great names of British pottery have made their versions of the classic design, including Royal Worcester, Wedgwood, Davenport, Crown Staffordshire, Coalport and Carlton Ware, not to mention factories throughout the rest of the world. And not always in blue, either – other single colours, such as red, purple, black and green have featured, sometimes gilding has been added and, especially in the 1920s and 30s, multi-coloured Willow Pattern, known as Gaudy Willow, had its share of popularity. The design did not remain static, either – in the 20th century the borders were often changed or eliminated, and the central pattern simplified, says Rogers. Whatever the difference in its details, and whoever it was made by, Willow Pattern has been eternally popular – the most commonly used pattern in history, 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).
Societies: www.willowcollectors.org, www.thepotteries.org, www.spode-society.co.uk, www.spodeceramics.com.
Where to buy: Lovers of Blue & White, 01763 853800 www.blueandwhite.com. Beauville Antiques, 020 8291 5221, www.beauville.co.uk.

TOP: ST CHARLES GALLERY; FOR SIMILAR AUCTION PIECES, VISIT WWW.THE-SALEROOM.COM; LEFT: A PLATE BY GATER, HALL & CO WITH CLOBBERING (OVERPRINTING ON AN ALREADY COMPLETE PIECE, OFTEN CREATING CLASHING DECORATION), FROM 1806-43; RIGHT: A COPELAND PLATE WITH A WILLOW PATTERN CENTRE AND FLORAL BORDER, FROM THE MID-19TH CENTURY; BELOW: A XXX BY CHURCHILL, XXX.