



Death and Bereavement on Transfer-Printing

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Database Discoveries – Contribution # 12

Transferware Collectors Club

November 2013

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Foreword

The TCC database provides a wonderful opportunity to sample the images that potters across the 18th and 19th centuries considered significant enough to capture the imagination of their purchasers. Their commercial success suggests that, much of the time, they were right. When I wander through our database, and the collection in my home, I am visiting Keats' '...charm'd magic casements', windows through which I share with my ancestors glimpses of other worlds.

When we group them together under particular topics, as Database Discoveries, we are literally travelling in time to 'faery lands forlorn'. What a privilege!

Introduction

Death is an unpopular topic in our society and we may ask why anyone would want to include death-related imagery on items intended to decorate homes or to be used in the daily consumption of food and drink. A systematic trawl of the current TCC database reveals 104 patterns that are directly related to death. It would be tedious to show every one of them here and the examples that follow have been chosen to shed light on attitudes to death in the 19th century¹. A surprising number of these were found on children's wares as is shown in Judith Siddall's Database Discovery article 'Inappropriate Patterns for Children'. Hopefully the reasons for this 'inappropriate' behaviour will become apparent in this article. In the event the patterns may also teach us something about our own attitudes to death. To aid the flow of my argument I shall reserve technical details to the Endnotes.

Depictions of Dead Animals

In a world before refrigeration, animals and birds for consumption were sold alive and most householders learned to kill and prepare them for the table. Thus, it is not surprising that killing became routine and dead game were no more disturbing than dead flowers.

It is in the nature of human animals to kill other species for food but it is evidence of the pleasure to be gained from killing that hunting has become the privilege of the relatively wealthy. Eleven patterns on the database show animals being killed for sport. They include "Death of the Bear" and "Dead Hog" from Spode's *Indian Sporting* series, and *Fox Stealing a Goose* on a plate by Enoch Wood in his *Sporting Series*. A more intimate

pattern has been titled *After the Kill*². It appears on a water jug and shows the moment when the huntsman has whipped the dogs away from the fox in order to kill it and avoid unnecessary suffering.



Fig. 1 - "After the Kill" (detail)



Fig. 2. "After the Kill" (jug)

Even so, "*Killing the Seals*" with clubs (shown in Judith Siddall's Figure 1) is particularly obnoxious, as it is to this day and was, presumably, shown on an alphabet plate to provoke discussion of cruelty to animals.

Although these folk were killing farm animals, game and vermin, they loved their dogs, horses and pets and grieved when they died. The death of a pet was, and still is, many a child's first experience of grief and throughout the 19th century it was recognized as an important part of death education. Figures 5a and 5b of Judith Siddall's article show "*Early Sorrow*" in which a girl gazes sadly at the dead body of her caged bird. Similar is a mug (below) bearing the pattern "*Death of the Dove*"³ in which a girl cradles a dove that has been killed by a predator.



Fig. 3 – "Death of the Dove" (detail)



Fig 4 – "Death of the Dove" (mug)

Death-related nursery rhymes are not uncommon and transfer-printed versions showing dead animals include "*The Death of Cock Robin*" and the rhyme of Mother Hubbard who "Went to the baker to buy him some bread but "*When she came back the Dog was Dead*"⁴. This has a happy ending for the verse goes on "She went to the undertaker/ to buy him a coffin/ But when she came back/ the dog was laughing".



Fig. 5 – When She Came Back, The Dog was Dead (detail)



Fig. 6 – When She Came Back, The Dog was Dead (plate)

Other lessons are found in Aesop's Fables and Franklin's Maxims, which were used by several potters. Thus, in the series by Spode we find "*The Wolf and the Lamb*" and, on an Aesthetic Style plate by Copeland, "*Ye Eagle & Tortoise*"⁵.



Figure 7 – Eagle & Tortoise (plate)

In both of these patterns the weaker creature is killed by the stronger and a lesson learned too late. Franklin's Maxim "*A Dead Bee Maketh No Honey*" along with the title "*Industry*" is found on a plate by J & R Meakin. Here the protection of the bee from death is commercial rather than sentimental.

Deaths of Human Beings

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries most people had large families, because they knew that many of their children would die, and most deaths took place at home. As a result, children witnessed or were aware of deaths from an early age. Perhaps because of this, death education was considered to be important and needed to start early in life. The pictures on children's wares were presumably intended to trigger discussion with parents and nannies about death and to accustom the child to think about issues which, today, many of us find unthinkable.

Death education was mainly religious and throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, it was still compulsory for almost everyone to go to church on Sundays. This said, by the beginning of the 19th century religious imagery no longer dominated the arts or the interest of the middle classes who bought most of the transfer-printed ceramics. Most of the patterns that include Christian images appeared in the later part of the century when a new wave of enthusiasm for non-conformism, morality and public education emerged.

Is it sadistic to expose children to images of a man being tortured to death? The crucifixion of Jesus Christ is so important an article of Christian faith that children were bound to become aware of it from an early age. In "*Christ Crucified - John XIX v.34*" the quoted passage reads "But one of the soldiers, with a spear, pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water."⁶



Fig. 8 – Christ Crucified (detail)



Fig. 9 – Christ Crucified (plate)

Religious teaching on death can also be found on items inscribed "*Jesus...Yielded up the Ghost*", "*Jesus my all to heaven is gone...*", "*Behold Him Rising from the Grave...*", "*Be thou faithful unto death*", and, most ominous "*Prepare to meet thy God*". The plaque shown on the following page is inscribed "*For man dieth & wasteth away; yea, man giveth up the Ghost and where is he. Job 14:10*"⁷. The last two patterns are very much in the tradition of Memento Mori, urging the reader to prepare to meet their God.



Figure 10 – For Man Dieth and Wasteth Away (Sunderland plaque)

Subjects from non-Christian religions are shown on British ceramics only as curiosities. For example, the figure in a bowl from an unknown maker (below), is of the Hindu "Goddess Kali", whose necklace of skulls reflects her dominance of death while next to her is an idol to the God Jaganah (a version of Vishnu) who, as Lord of the Universe, can secure salvation from the cycle of death and rebirth. It seems unlikely that these details were known to the purchasers.



Fig. 11 – Goddess Kali (detail)



Fig. 12 – Goddess Kali (bowl)

Perhaps "*The Poor Man's Funeral*" was intended to evoke pity for the poor, who could not afford the pomp and ceremony of the large funerals with which middle and upper-class children were familiar.



Fig. 13 – The Poor Mans Funeral (plate)

Lessons from death were not all religious and several patterns for children included more secular themes. *Soldier at Grave*, on a plate, shows a soldier looking over his shoulder as if interrupted at the grave of a comrade. "*Lion Seizing a Man*"⁹ is on both a children's mug and a plate.



Figure 14 – Lion Seizing A Man (detail)



Figure 15 –Lion Seizing A Man (plate)

This lion is not showing his claws and looks as if he might crush or cuddle the man to death.

Anaesthetics were discovered in the mid-19th century but it was many years before they were in widespread use. Tolerance of pain was a virtue instilled at school by corporal punishment. In my own childhood some boys would choose the transient pain of 'five of the best' with a slipper in preference to the boredom of writing out 'a hundred lines'. On a plate there is a most brutal pattern illustrating the episode in "Uncle Tom's Cabin" when the saintly slave, Uncle Tom, is beaten to death by his overseers with taunts from his owner of "*Pay Away Till He Gives Up! Give It Him! Give It Him!*" This novel by Harriet Beecher-Stowe, published in 1852, played a significant part in the ending of the slave trade in the USA. Similarly brutal is "*The Romish Bishop Bonner/ Burning Tomkins hands before his Martyrdom*". Tomkins was a Protestant martyr who, despite torture, refused to deny his faith in transubstantiation and was burned at the stake in 1555. The pattern may have been intended as a good example of Christian fortitude but was also likely to stir up hatred against Catholics. Both of these plates are illustrated by Judith Siddall (v.s. *Figs 9 & 2*).

Death and War

The ability to distinguish animal companions from dangerous animals is one thing, the ability to distinguish friends from foes can be more tricky. Britain was at war for 43% of the 19th century and wars with France and the USA, both countries with whom it traded, were to influence trade during the century. Once the wars were over the ceramic industry

seems to have been prepared to 'adjust' its patterns to the side that bought the plates, with items for sale, for instance, to both the British and the American markets, and eventually to the French, though France remained too close to home through the first forty years of the 19th century.

At a time when monarchies all over Europe were falling, "La Guillotine"¹⁰ (shown below), which was invented to be a humane method of execution, evoked and continues to evoke the horrors of the French revolution. The caption reads "View of LA GUILLOTINE or the modern Beheading Machine at Paris. By which LOUIS XVI, late King of France was Beheaded Jan, 21, 1793". This jug was made before the end of the 18th century.



Fig 16 – View of LA GUILLOTINE (detail)



Fig 17 – View of La Guillotine (jug)

Britain was at war with France from 1793-1814. Combat was face-to-face and bloody. Bravery and disciplined skill at arms were essential to survival. The threat of invasion created fear, anger and a monsterisation of the French akin to the hatred of Germans during both world wars. Several patterns on the database commemorate victories against Napoleon on land and sea and the British heroes who died. Toughness, courage, and the 'stiff upper lip' were the predominant virtues.

While Napoleon remains a hero to the French he was portrayed as the Devil in Britain. The ever-present threats to survival in an age when people at war could not afford to empathise with their enemies, required both adults and children to dissociate tender feelings and treat the enemy as prey. They also learned to face the painful realities of mutilation and death by humour and self-protective indifference to suffering. An example is a triumphalist cartoon "*A Russian Boor Returning from his Field Sports*"¹¹(Figure 18, following page).



Fig. 18 – HOURRAH your SERENE HIGHNESS (jug)

The 'Boor' symbolises the Russian people and the dead bodies hanging from his flintlock musket are the remnants of Napoleon's greatest army, which had been defeated by the Russian's scorched earth policy and forced into the Retreat from Moscow in 1812. The title 'His Serene Highness' was awarded to General Kutuzov whose troops had harassed the French, killing c. 13,000 and taking 26,000 prisoners and 130 artillery pieces.

Further evidence of the lingering fear of Napoleon, that continued after his death, is shown on *Napoleon's Grave and Ghost*¹² (Figures 19 & 20, following page).



Fig. 19 –
Napoleon's Grave and Ghost (detail)



Fig. 20 –
Napoleon's Grave and Ghost (bowl)

This view shows a view of the emperor's grave on the island of St Helena where he died in 1821. Branches of two adjacent trees form the illusion of Napoleon standing looking out to sea. His remains were exhumed in 1840 to be placed in a magnificent tomb in Paris.

Fifteen years after his death the Staffordshire potters began to manufacture patterns showing his battles. This included a notable series "*Napoleon's Battles*" made by C.J. Mason, one of whose patterns was copied by William Smith & Co and sold to the European market under the title "*Napoleon's Victories*". Several patterns show dead soldiers or horses.

By the 1850s Britain was allied with France and Turkey against Russia in the Crimea. Prattware transfer-printed patterns included the first allied battle and victory, "*The Battle of the Alma*", and "*Charge of the Chasseurs d' Afrique at Balaclava*" whose intervention enabled some of the Light Brigade to escape the consequences of their disastrous charge against the Russian guns. Other prints are less belligerent and laud peace over war. They include images that were calculated to cause distress. Yet, like most images, they soon lose their power to shock in everyday use.

On the pot-lid (Figure 21, following page) a terrified horse survives beside the dead bodies of another horse and a cavalry officer of the Napoleonic era. It is titled "*War*"¹³ and twinned with "*Peace*" in which a happy family and some sheep relax beside a rusty canon.



Fig. 21 – War
("Prattware" pot lid)

The series "*The Texian Campaign*", which is thought to refer to the Texas Revolution of 1835-6, when Texas seceded from Mexico, is well described and illustrated both on the database and in the article by Wes Palmer, Andrew Pye and Connie Rogers (TCC Bul. Summer 2008). Perhaps the most remarkable feature of this series of 11 patterns is that there is only one dead soldier and one dead horse (in pattern #5). No deaths are shown in the various patterns depicting the American Revolution, whose heroes are well commemorated, nor the American Civil War, despite enormous bloodshed. It seems that the Staffordshire potters were prepared to acknowledge the glory of these wars without dwelling on the suffering they caused. Perhaps that is what the public now wanted to buy.

Peace, Industry and Plenty.

For most of 1814-1854 Britain was at peace and thereafter wars took place in distant lands and made less impact in Britain. The public could thus turn their attention to the prevention of war and premature deaths from poverty and disease, much of it a side effect of the industries that were creating wealth. These were the days when a man could be "...drunk for a penny and dead drunk for tuppence". My great grandfather owned four dockland pubs where the bar tenders chucked the pennies onto the floor and swept them up at the end of the day. Small wonder that alcohol caused many deaths and Temperance became an important issue. Yet industries could also be put to work to promote good works. Moral maxims include those used by the Temperance movement that became active in the mid-19th century and gave rise to a series "*The Bottle*"¹⁴ (Figures 22 and 23, following page), in which Plate VIII summarises its effects:



Fig. 22 – The Bottle (detail)



Fig. 23 – The Bottle (plate)

"VIII The bottle has done its work - It has destroyed the infant and the mother. It has brought the son and daughter to vice and to the streets, and has left the father a hopeless maniac."

At the same time increasing numbers of successful townfolk were forming a middle class who knew, from experience, the importance of education and health care. Many new schools and hospitals were charitably endowed.

Decorative and Commemorative Patterns

Since most patterns are supposedly intended to decorate the item on which they are placed, this category overlaps with the others. It is most obvious in the large group of tombs whose occupants are now largely forgotten, despite the builder's original intention to commemorate a person. They include some of the most spectacular objects of antiquity from the Taj Mahal to the Pyramids. How many of the tourists who flock to see them can name the persons within?



Fig. 24 – The Tomb of the Emperor Shah Jehan (Taj Mahal) (detail)



Fig. 25 – The Tomb of the Emperor Shah Jehan (Taj Mahal) (platter)

*“The Tomb of the Emperor Shah Jehan”*¹⁵, otherwise known as the Taj Mahal, was completed in 1648 by the Shah, out of grief for his much-loved third wife, Mumtaz Mahal. His original intention had been to build an identical building, out of black marble, on the other side of the Yamuna River for his own body, but he was deposed by his brother and eventually entombed in the Taj with Mumtaz.

More recognizably commemorative are the tombs of people within historic memory and it is worth making a distinction between those whose life is a cause for celebration and those whose death is remarkable. In the latter category we have Admiral Lord Nelson and Queen Caroline whose deaths added to their fame and evoked powerful public mourning.

Nelson's story needs no repetition here but Queen Caroline is less well-known today. She was the 19th century equivalent of Princess Diana. Having an arranged marriage to a Prince who was already attached, and illegally married, to Maria Fitzherbert, she was seen by the public as having been wronged. She eventually separated from her husband and moved to live abroad but returned to claim her place as his Queen when her spouse, now King George IV, succeeded to the throne. She died (of unknown causes) three weeks after he excluded her from his coronation. Her popularity gave rise to public grief and anger and the sale of at least five transfer-printed commemorative patterns. *“Sacred to the Memory of Caroline...”*¹⁶ is on a plate (Figures 26 and 27, following page) with embossed floral border.



Fig. 26 –
Sacred to the Memory of Caroline (detail)



Fig. 27 –
Sacred to the Memory of Caroline (plate)

“*Sacred to the Memory of Caroline*” shows Britannia mourning at a tomb which bears the words "SACRED to the Memory of CAROLINE the injured and persecuted QUEEN of great Britain. Born May 17th 1764. Died Aug't 7th 1821".

Literary Patterns

To this day, death and bereavement are the stuff of Tragedy in both fiction and drama. A Prattware pattern shows *Hamlet and His Father's Ghost* in which the ghost of Hamlet's father discloses that he has been poisoned by Claudius and demands that he be avenged. Another example is found in Rogers' "Drama" series in a pattern entitled "*Douglas Act 3, Scene 1*"¹⁷. Douglas is a blank verse tragedy by John Home, first performed in 1756. It was played for many more years and even achieved success in early American theatre. In this scene Douglas staggers onto the stage after being run through by Lord Randolph. He dies in the arms of Lady Randolph, the woman who only now has learned he is her son. While Shakespeare's work has survived, this fiction may be too sentimental for our more controlled age.



Fig. 28 – Douglas Act 3 Scene 1 (detail)



Fig. 29 – Douglas Act 3 Scene 1 (plate)

Lady Randolph Despair! despair!
Douglas. O, had it pleased high Heaven to let me live
A little while!—My eyes that gaze on thee
Grow dim apace! my mother!—O, my mother! [*Die*].s.

A similar scene is shown in another pattern "*The Death of Paul*" from the Gothic novel 'Paul and Virginia' by Jaques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (published in 1787) of whom it was said, "He made the world weep".

Conclusions

It seems that we are both attracted to and repelled by images of death. Fictional representations attract because we can distance ourselves from too close an emotional response. Like children, we continue to enjoy 'death games' as a way of mastering our greatest fears.

We have seen how, in the course of the 19th century the world was to change from a 'vale of tears' to one of wealth and relative security. Death grew less 'in your face' and more controlled. Day-to-day heroism was less essential and, as transfer-printed pottery became, by 1854, 'so cheap and common in every house' ¹⁸, it became, to an increasing extent, a vehicle for public education.

Today we find the very notion of death education rather ghoulish. We remain horrified by the exposure of children and adults to images of torture, death, and injustice. Yet these very lessons may have helped to pave the way to a more kind and secure world. It is tempting to ridicule or judge the behaviour and tastes of our forebears but they were less afraid to face the facts of pain, misery and death than we, and their vaunted morality did much to abolish slavery and to improve conditions and decrease exploitation of the poor and other side effects of the new world that they had pioneered and that we now take for granted. It took the 20th century advent of the Hospice (Palliative Care) Movement to remind us that, despite all the advances of modern medicine, life is still 100% fatal.

Endnotes on following page.

Endnotes

1 Items showing death-related patterns were identified by first using the excellent search facility of the TCC database to find patterns with the words Death, Dead, Die, Kill, Grave, Tomb, Mausoleum and Funeral in the Title. This identified 45 titles. I then scanned the titles in all categories, except Floral patterns, for anything that looked likely and checked with the pictures, and the Additional Information section for confirmation of my guesses. I was able to identify another 39 patterns, for a total of 84 patterns.

2 "*After the Kill*" - on a 5 inch high jug by an unknown maker.

3 "*Death of the Dove*" - on a 3 inch children's mug by an unknown maker

4 "*When she came back the dog was dead*" - on a 7.5 inches plate with alphabet border, maker Unknown.

5 "*The Eagle and the Tortoise*" - an aesthetic style pattern on a 9 inch soup plate made by Copeland and registered in June 1878.

6 "*Christ Crucified*" - the pattern is on a 6.3 inch plate with embossed floral border and clobbered in five colours. The maker is unknown.

7 "*For man dieth & wasteth away...*" - inscribed in a lustre-bordered 10 inch plaque by Dixon, Phillips & Co. of Sunderland (1840 – 1865).

8 "*Poor Man's Funeral*" - on a 6.3 inch plate clobbered in three colours and with an embossed border, maker unknown.

9 "*Lion Seizing a Man*" - is on a 5 inch plate with a blank border. Maker Unknown.

10 "*La Guillotine*" - on a 5 inch mug by Haynes, Dillwyn & Co, Cambrian Pottery, Swansea 1786 - 1817. The mug would have been made after 1786 but before 1800.

11 "*A Russian Boor Returning from his Field Sports*" - on a water jug 6.5 X 4 inches by an unknown maker. This print was titled and copied by George Cruikshank from a Russian original. It was published in 1812.

12 "*Napoleon's Grave and Ghost*" - on a 3 inch bowl by an unknown maker. The title is from the source print by the American firm of Currier and Ives (fl. 1834-1907).

13 "*War*" - pot-lid 4.25 inches by F & R Pratt from an 1846 painting by Landseer.

14 "*The Bottle*" on a 6.5 inch plate with embossed daisy border. The series is copied from engravings, by George Cruikshank, published in 1847. This item has no maker's mark but the pattern is also found on another version of the series made at the Middlesbro' pottery.

15 "*Tomb of the Emperor Shah Jehan*" - on an 18 X 14 inch platter made by John Hall of Burslem in his 'Oriental Scenery' series. The source print is by Charles Ramus Forrest.

16 " *Sacred to the Memory of Caroline...*" - on a 5.25 inch plate embossed with overlapping leaves. Maker unknown.

17 " *Douglas Act 3, Scene 1*" - on a 3 inch high mug by an unknown maker.

18 "*The Child's Guide to Knowledge: Being a collection of useful and familiar questions and answers in every-day subjects*" - 23rd edition by A Lady. Published in London, 1854. p. 198.



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