

Giraffomania

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The first time I saw a piece of John Ridgway's *Giraffe*, I knew that transferware would change my life. Having bought some brown aesthetic transfer printed wares over the years, I was always drawn to patterns with animals. Brown aesthetic wares were cheap back then, so I managed to build a nice little collection in a short period of time.

Then came a visit to the antiques show in Union, Maine, in 1989. I saw a tall brown *Giraffe* coffee pot with the 1836 backstamp of John Ridgway...marked SOLD!! It made my heart skip a beat and suddenly, I could think of nothing else: I HAD to have a giraffe in my collection.

Year after year, living in Florida, I combed the local antiques shops and shows for a piece of *Giraffe*, without any luck. I found the pattern in a book (my first introduction to 'Petra'). I saw a platter at a show: it was green, gorgeous, expensive, but Nope. *Gotta be brown!*

Then, in the mid-1990s, at the Miami Beach Winter Antiques Show, I met Dennis Berard. I spent time picking through his booth, getting an eyeful and developing an appetite for his earlier wares. But still NO *Giraffe*.

The following summer, on another New England vacation, I was in New Hampshire and called the Berards from Keene. Dennis said that it was okay to stop in Fitzwilliam. I drove there, totally unprepared for what I was to find.

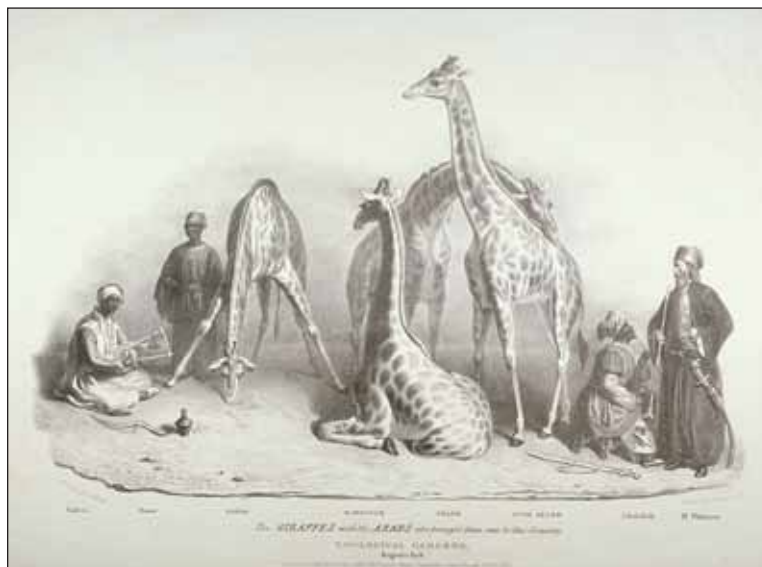
Walking into the house, my first words to Dennis were "What I really want is a piece – any piece – of brown *Giraffe*...I have to have it!" He said, with that twinkle he gets in his eye, "How funny, Ann just found *this* at 'The Pick' this morning!" And there it was, a 15 inch platter in brown *Giraffe*. It was love at first sight. And the birth of a lifelong friendship with Dennis and Ann.



What is it about giraffes?

Graceful, yet gawky, exotic, mysterious, bizarre – the early scientists called them 'camelopardalis' reflecting the peculiar cross between a camel and a leopard.

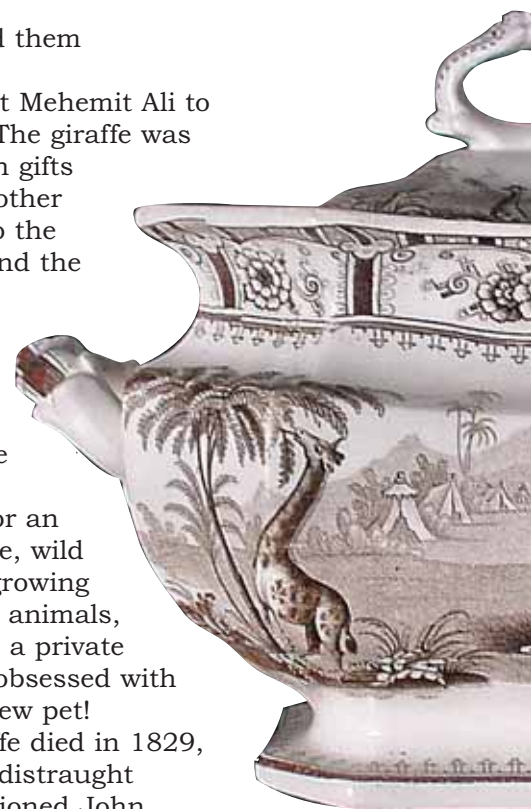
The first giraffe arrived in England in 1827, a gift from the Viceroy of Egypt Mehemit Ali to King George IV. The giraffe was one of three such gifts from Egypt, the other two being sent to the King of France and the Emperor of Austria.



The Giraffes with the Arabs who Brought Them Over to This Country, George Scharf (1788-1860), 1836, colored lithograph. Giraffes (L to R): Zaida, Mabrouk, Selim, and Guib, with their three native attendants and M. Thibaut (far right). Image courtesy of Guildhall Library, City of London.

George IV was showing signs of insanity when he took the throne in 1820. He was known for an indulgent lifestyle, wild parties and his growing collection of wild animals, which he kept in a private zoo. He became obsessed with his 18 foot tall new pet!

When the giraffe died in 1829, the King was so distraught that he commissioned John





Gould, a well-known taxidermist and naturalist, to stuff his beloved creature. Gould had been recently appointed as Curator and Preserver to the Museum of the London Zoological Society. In 1831, the Zoological Gardens were created in Regent's Park, and when George IV died he left his menagerie, including the stuffed giraffe, to the Zoological Society.

Although England's first giraffe was dead, France's giraffe was alive and well and living in Paris. The arrival of the original giraffes in 1827 had set off a period of 'giraffomania' throughout Europe: giraffes were influencing art, fashion and interior design. That England did not have a giraffe of its own after 1829 was viewed as a national disgrace, and the new King, William IV, commissioned a French trader, Monsieur Thibaut, to search for giraffes for England.

Thibaut captured eight Nubian giraffes in The Sudan. Four survived the journey to London, and on May 25, 1836, three males and a female, accompanied by their native handlers and Thibaut arrived at the London Zoo and were set loose in the Elephant House until a new Giraffe House could be completed in 1837. M. Thibaut was paid the regal sum of 700 Pounds for the animals.

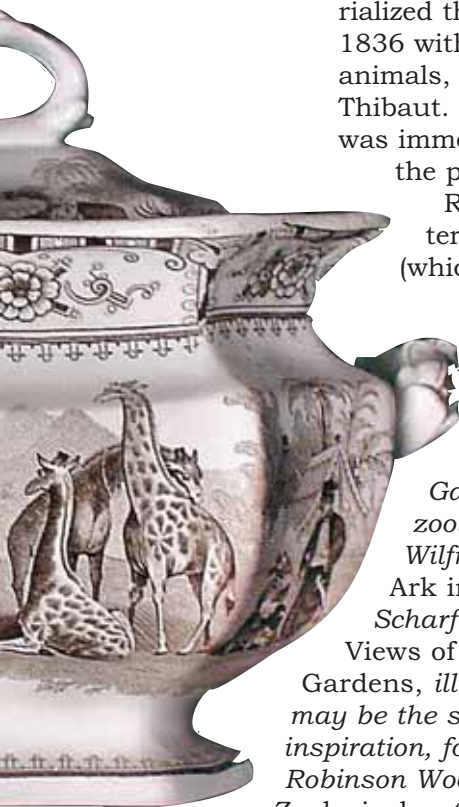
The lone female gave birth to her first offspring in 1839. In subsequent years, 17 offspring were born and these giraffes populated the London Zoo until 1881.

Except for a brief period (1882-1895), London has never been without giraffes since 1836.

The lithographer George Scharf (1788-1860), whose artwork documents events of everyday life in London, memorialized the giraffes' arrival in 1836 with an engraving of the animals, their handlers and M. Thibaut. Scharf's engraving was immediately followed by the production of

Ridgway's *Giraffe* patterned transferwares (which incidentally have completely overtaken my house).

For more information about London's Zoological Gardens and Scharf's zoological images, see Wilfrid Blunt's book, The Ark in the Park (1976). Scharf's 1835 works, Six Views of the Zoological Gardens, illustrated in the book, may be the source or at least the inspiration, for Clews' and Robinson Wood & Brownfield's Zoological patterns.



Most pieces of *Giraffe* show only the three male giraffes. The teapots, jugs, and other pieces of hollowware also depict Zaida, the female, off the left. Simplified versions appear on cups and cup plates.