

# Japan Dreams of Egypt: Cairo by William T Copeland and Sons

By Kelly Keating

**C**airo is a multi-motif light chocolate brown (it also appears in blue and I recently saw an example in red on eBay) transferware pattern by the Staffordshire manufacturer William T Copeland and Sons. The design was introduced in 1881 and continued in production for about 10 years. There were 15 different designs: 13 of those designs are discussed in this essay.

As a pattern, *Cairo* is a strange mixture of Japanese elements and Egyptian motifs. The Far East component of the pattern links *Cairo* to the wider Aesthetic Movement in which Japanese art became a major influence on the decorative arts of the West in the 1870's and 1880's. In 1854 diplomatic relations were established between Japan and the United States, and in 1858 trade began between the 2 countries, allowing a large number of Japanese goods to enter the United States. The craze for "things Japanese" by the American public, however, did not really begin until the opening of the spectacular Japanese exhibition at Centennial Exhibition of 1876 in Philadelphia.

The opening of Japan by the United States allowed other nations such as England to enter Japan and be influenced by Japanese cultural objects as well. In 1872, the term *Japonisme*- art influenced by Japan- was first used by Jules Claretie in his book *L'Art Francais*, and also by Philippe Burty in his *Japonisme III La Renaissance Literaire et Artistique*. However, the term *Anglo-Japanese* was being used in England as early as 1851. It seems that the Japanese influence on the arts began in England significantly earlier than in other countries.

Further support for this conclusion is the 1862 International Exhibition in London, where there was an official Japanese section. The Japanese Court was organized by Sir Rutherford Alcock who had been the British Minister in Edo from 1858-1864. The Japanese area of the exhibition also included, for public viewing, Alcock's



FIGURE 1: 13" *Cairo* platter.



FIGURE 2: 10" *Cairo* platter.



**FIGURE 3: 8" Cairo tray.**



**FIGURE 4: 6 1/2" Cairo plate.**

own extensive collection of Japanese objects; from these objects, designers could gain inspiration.

Another factor in the prevailing influence of Japanese art in England earlier than elsewhere was the collection owned by James McNeil Whistler, who moved to Great Britain in 1859. A final factor is the tradition of "oriental" influence on English design, particularly in ceramics, which allowed for an easy acceptance of Japanese objects and style. Therefore, the *Cairo* pattern by Copeland introduced in 1881 was developed within a rich visual tradition of eastern motifs.

The adding of Egyptian elements to the pattern strengthened this visual dynamic.

#### Arabesques, Fans & Scrolls

Although a multi-motif pattern, *Cairo* does possess some common elements among its various incarnations. The border of the pattern is an arabesque which is a form of decoration made up of rhythmic linear patterns of scrolling and interlacing leaves and tendrils. The arabesque is a common feature of Islamic art, and its presence in the Copeland pattern nicely connects with the Egyptian motifs of

obelisks, pyramids, domed mosques and minarets. Furthermore, the 15 different motifs can be categorized into motifs with fans and motifs with scrolls.

On a 13" platter (fig. 1), an Egyptian obelisk is seen from across a river (the Nile, it is assumed). It is pictured in a fan cartouche layered on top of a ground of bamboo. A smaller round cartouche overlaps the fan and depicts 3 small birds in flight. This layering of elements with insets with their own images, along with the fan, the bamboo and the 3 flying birds, is very reminiscent of Japanese art. This lay-



**FIGURE 5: 7 1/2" Cairo plate.**



**FIGURE 6: 8 3/4" Cairo dessert plate.**

ering design creates a sense of space and dynamism on the flat surface of the pottery

On a 10" platter (fig. 2), the design on the bottom of the dish exhibits the same layered elements as the platter in figure 1. Instead of a fan cartouche, there is an unfurled scroll that pictures a domed mosque and minaret seen from across a river. Beyond the horizontal scroll is another unfurled vertical scroll with some type of flower. The ground of the dish is decorated with a fruit tree (prunus) with a flowering branch. The scroll and the flowering branch suggests Japanese motifs, as does the layering design.

On a small 8" tray or stand (fig. 3), the same flowering branch found on the vegetable dish and small plate appears again. The piece features 2 cartouches: the larger one depicting what looks like a Chinese junk. Not surprisingly, Europeans often confused and conflated Japanese and Chinese elements. The boat cartouche overlaps a patterned cartouche which is reminiscent of a Japanese *mon* or heraldic device and may also be influenced by Japanese textiles.

On a small 6.5" plate (fig. 4), the same flowering branch ground as found on the 10" platter is featured. It is overlaid with 2 fan cartouches. One depicts a heron or stork and the other

pictures 2 minarets on a river with boats

On a 7 1/2" plate (fig. 5), a ground of irises is featured with a large bird in flight. Two interlocked and overlapping fans act as cartouches. One shows 3 birds in flight above a landscape and the other depicts a large building seen across a river (The Nile, again?) with 2 palm trees in the foreground.

On an 8 3/4" dessert plate (fig. 6) there is an unfurling scroll that reveals a landscape with a prominent minaret and a river in the background. Overlapped by the scroll are 2 round *mons* with intricate patterns which could relate to Japanese textiles. A large iris is portrayed on the ground of the plate.

On a 10" cake or biscuit plate (fig. 7), the ground consists of a flowering branch and 3 birds in flight. The next layer features 2 *mons* with elaborate patterns, the upper one with a Greek key pattern. The top layer is another unfurling scroll cartouche portraying 2 men walking and a third man riding a camel. This design is also found on 10" dinner plates.

On a 9 3/4" soup bowl (fig. 8), there is a background of a flowering prunus branch on which are perched 2 charming birds on the bottom left. Also, on the ground of the bowl are 2 insects- a

butterfly and a fly. The scroll cartouche features a river scene with bamboo in the foreground and a boat which perhaps reminds one of the type of vessels that sail on The Nile.

On a smaller 8 1/2" soup bowl (fig. 9), there is a ground of flowers and foliage. One *mon* is placed on the lower right partially behind the scroll. The forward element is another unfurling Japanese scroll which depicts a view of 2 of the great pyramids of Giza seen in the distance across a river with a large tree and plants in the foreground. The pyramid, of course, symbolizes Egypt.

The pickle dish (fig. 10) has only 3 elements to its design. There is a flowering prunus branch on the left, as seen in almost all the other *Cairo* examples depicted here, and there are 2 cartouches: one is a *mon*, and the other depicts an Egyptian obelisk with figures amongst trees. This motif is the same one found in the large 13" platter, just reversed.

All of the above motifs are taken from items in my own collection. The following three motifs are found in *Spode/Copeland Transfer-Printed Patterns* by Lynne Sussman. The first motif (fig. 11) from the Sussman book is unusual in that it features a gourd as the prominent motif. Inside the top of the gourd are 3 flying birds as seen in other *Cairo* motifs, and in the bottom



FIGURE 7: 10" *Cairo* cake or biscuit plate.



FIGURE 8: 9 3/4" *Cairo* soup bowl.

half of the gourd is a pair of ducks nesting next to an iris. Behind the gourd is a pair of rolled up scrolls, and the whole is set on a floral and foliage ground.

The next design, (fig. 12), is set against a bamboo ground overlaid with a skinny vertical scroll and a wider horizontal scroll. The skinny scroll features some foliage. The front scroll displays a pair of nesting ducks on the water's edge surrounded by foliage.

Another scroll based motif displays a European style building (fig. 13)

within the field. At the top and partially behind the scroll is an intricate *mon* with a Greek key design. The ground of this design is a prunus branch. A bird in flight is on the lower left at the corner of the scroll and on the corner of the scroll.

### Imperialism and Cairo

In the 19th century, the United Kingdom was the greatest European imperial power: *The sun never sets on the British Empire*. Cairo was first introduced in 1881, and the British occupation of Egypt began in 1882.

The proximity of these events does not strike me as a coincidence. *Cairo* becomes a tool of imperialism and an expression and product of the British Empire. It is not simply a cultural artifact, a piece of pottery, an example of Aesthetic design: it is embedded in a historical and political moment, and for that reason, it is all the more appealing to me as a collector.

*Editor's Note: There are currently 11 patterns from this series recorded in the TCC Pattern and Source Print Database.*



FIGURE 9: Small 8 1/2" *Cairo* soup bowl.



FIGURE 10: *Cairo* pickle dish.

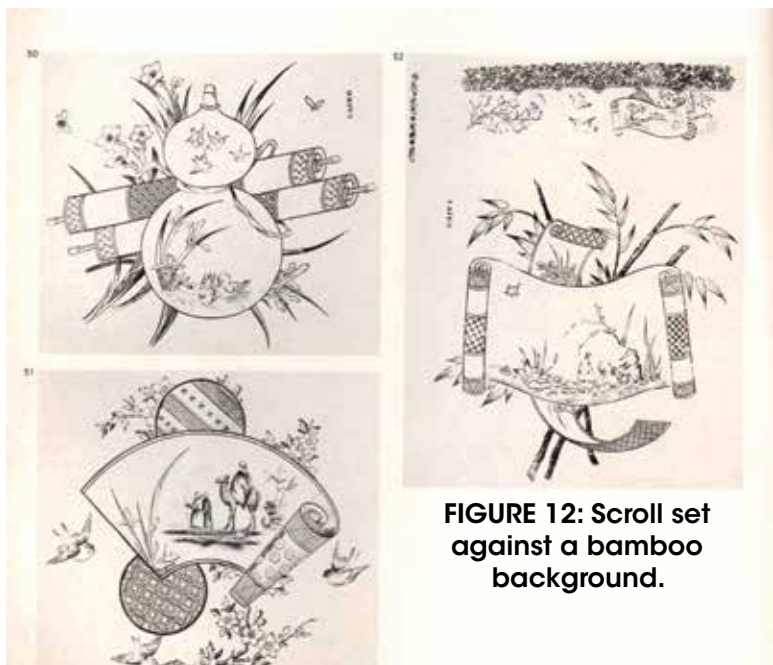


FIGURE 12: Scroll set against a bamboo background.

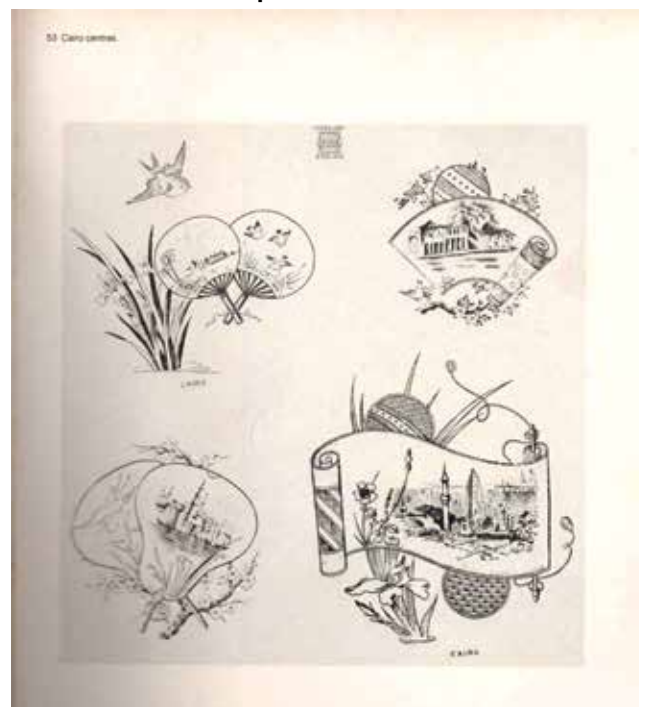


FIGURE 13: European-style building.

FIGURE 11: Typical *Cairo* pattern motif featuring a gourd.