

Getting the blues:

Transfer ware translated by three contemporary artists

By Shax Riegler



You can only imagine what the china connoisseur in Edward Lamson Henry's 1889 *A Lover of Old China* might think upon encountering a plate made by one of the three contemporary artists shown here.

We, on the other hand, might be equally disconcerted by the notion that there could be anything contemporary or even modern about a transfer-ware plate. In fact, when modern ceramics come to mind we are bound to envision a simple functional shape, obviously created by hand, coated in a glaze of a rich but subtle hue. That is the legacy of the studio pottery movement that began in Britain in the early twentieth century with ceramists such as Bernard Leach, Lucy Rie, and others.

And yet the three artists profiled here are making us take a second look at a medium that has grown stale with familiarity over the last hundred years.



Paul Scott: Artful anachronism

Paul Scott escaped into ceramics at England's Manchester Metropolitan University's School of Art. Originally studying painting and printmaking, he found the new medium liberating. "On the first day the tutor came in wearing a deerstalker, carrying a suitcase, with a pocket square and a clay pipe. It was all ceramic. If you could make things like that, I wanted to do that."

Nowadays, Scott has developed a following, but forty years ago he couldn't get his work shown because the ceramics world was still dominated by the legacy of the studio pottery movement. "It was all about function and form," he recalls. "And they looked down on anything printed or associated with industrial production. Art galleries wouldn't show my work because it was on a plate. Contemporary ceramics places looked at my work with disbelief and horror. There was a sort of incomprehension of what I was doing. I would be told 'Your work doesn't consider the form.' And I would have to say, 'But I'm not interested in the form.'"

With his background in painting and printmaking, Scott was drawn to investigate the archives of Europe's great ceramic makers, including Copeland/Spode, Egersund, Gustavsberg, and Rörstrand. At first, some of the manufacturers were reluctant to let him in, fearing that he was a spy who would make off with their trade secrets and intellectual property. But as many of these factories fell on hard times they began to allow him access. His subsequent

Facing page:

A Lover of Old China by Edward Lamson Henry (1841–1919), 1889. Oil on academy board, 14 by 12 inches. *Shelburne Museum, Vermont.*

This page:

"Sellafield the Decommissioning Series," 2014, from Scott's *Cumbrian Blue(s)*, English Scenery series by Paul Scott. In-glaze decal on a Poultney and Company, Bristol, earthenware platter of c. 1900; length 18 inches.

"Pastoral," 2014, from Scott's *Cumbrian Blue(s)*, English Scenery series. In-glaze decal collage and gold luster on plate by Alfred Meakin c. 1960; diameter 9 7/8 inches.

"Fukushima," 2014, from Scott's *Cumbrian Blue(s)* series. In-glaze decal collage on broken and re-assembled Willow pattern platter marked "Japan," c. 1965, with wave insert from "erased" Willow platter, c. 1840. Brass pins, gold leaf, tile cement, and epoxy resin; length 18 1/4 inches.



scene called "Palestine," he erased part of the pattern and added in an image of bombed out Gaza. On another similar pattern he simply added a jet fighter flying overhead.

He was struck by the fact that people who weren't really interested in contemporary art, would look at his work. And people versed in contemporary art were also interested. "Transfer ware and blue-and-white are safe and comfortable, so it feels approachable, but then there's a surprise. You can grab people's attention with it."

Scott recently received a grant from the Alturas Foundation to pursue a long-term project updating the theme of American Scenery, a once popular subcategory of designs for British manufacturers.



"Castle Buddleia," 2015, from Scott's Cumbrian Blue(s) series. Transfer-ware collage, *kintsugi*, and gold leaf; length 20 3/4 inches. In this platter Scott fused together pieces of two early nineteenth-century Spode patterns, "Castle" and "Buddleia."

"Palestine, Gaza," 2015, from Scott's Cumbrian Blue(s) series. In-glaze decal collage and gold luster on a Staffordshire "Palestine" platter by William Adams, c. 1840; length 15 inches.

"Temple" pattern platter, Spode, c. 1815. Transfer-printed earthenware, length 15 3/4 inches. Scott takes inspiration from this strikingly contemporary-looking piece made in the early nineteenth-century and now in his personal collection.

work has enabled others to see the value in this historic material and work to rescue it.

Scott has pioneered the idea of collage in ceramics. He has made platters that are fused mash-ups of two or three old patterns. "I'm intrigued by the juxtaposition of familiar patterns," he says. "It's interesting to slice a pattern in half and put it next to another and you can still recognize them. People are so familiar with transfer ware—overly familiar with it—that they often don't really see it anymore."

He also makes use of found objects. For his Cuttings series he harvests details from shards of old transfer ware and then embeds them in new pieces, or simply lets the cutouts stand on their own.

Some of his most powerful work is created in response to an individual piece he's picked up somewhere. For many of these, he infuses idyllic pastoral landscapes with modern structures like wind turbines. "When I first inserted a nuclear power plant into a transfer-ware plate, people were gobsmacked," he says.

On a plate printed with a classic nineteenth-century pattern showing a fantasy Middle Eastern

Andrew Stein Raftery: A year in the garden

Andrew Stein Raftery is an engraver. "An engraver," he emphasizes. "Why would anyone bother with this technique, obsolete since the mid-nineteenth century? I've had to answer this question my entire career."

A professor at the Rhode Island School of Design since 1991, Raftery was introduced to engraving in graduate school at Yale when a professor noticed his meticulous attention to detail and gave him a burin and a sheet of copper. "It immediately appealed to my need for very careful crafting of the art object," Raftery says. "I never wanted my work to be too naturalistic and there is something inherently constructed about engraved pictures."

He soon bought his first engraving, a picture of about 1630 by Claude Melann, and hung it in his bedroom so he could see it from bed. In time he began to absorb Melann's technique. Raftery now owns some eighty engravings as well as books with master engravings; he works surrounded by these examples. Additionally, over the last twenty-five years he and his partner have collected about fifteen hundred pieces of English transfer ware made between 1810 and 1850. "We live with it. We eat off it, hang it on the walls, touch it all the time. I love it because it's a print collection to me. The images on these plates are made from engravings and so I've always wanted to do a project that involved bringing my engraving to pottery."

So, starting in 2009, Raftery began devising a project that is just now coming to fruition. On a set of twelve plates, one for each month of the year, he is depicting himself working in his mother's garden in Providence. The *Autobiography of a Garden* series details the inception, growth, climax, decline, and dormancy of the garden. On "January" the gardener is shown reading seed catalogues in bed. "February"

Plates from *The Autobiography of a Garden* series by Andrew Stein Raftery. All are his engravings transfer printed on glazed white earthenware, diameter 13 inches.

Top to bottom: "May: Cultivating Lettuce," 2014. "June: Training a Passion Vine," 2015. "July: Fertilizing," 2015. "October: Bringing in Chrysanthemums," 2015. Photographs by Erik Gould.





depicts planting seeds, and the rest of the series captures activities such as watering, edging beds, cultivating lettuces, training a vine, fertilizing, deadheading, mowing, bringing in mums, digging up dahlia tubers, and, finally, in “December,” contemplating the garden in the snow.

There’s something fitting about depicting a garden on an object made of dirt. And just as he toils in the actual garden, Raftery toiled long and hard to create these scenes. In addition to creating them, he also designed the twelve shapes on which they are printed. Larry Bush, a professor of ceramics at RISD, developed a new recipe for the clay, formulated the glazes, and has directed the production. Raftery even developed his own ink. The entire process takes place between his studio in Providence and a kiln in Pawtucket.

When he fired the first design on the first plate, he was surprised by how dense and restrained it looked. “Presenting an image on an object like a plate has its own requirements. The lines on the pottery looked very different from how they looked on paper. I knew I had to re-think my process. I had to actually change my engraving style.”

Raftery admits that his prolonged engagement with engraving has led him to an extreme place—both in relation to contemporary culture and contemporary art. “I’m at the fringes, but I don’t feel embattled,” he says. “I’ve had incredible support from the print community.” And, most recently, from the ceramics community as well. In November forty-eight members of the American Ceramic Circle took time off from their annual conference to spend an afternoon with him in his studio.

“When people come to fine art prints, they’re often intimidated,” Raftery says. “My experiment is to see if people respond to these more quickly because it’s such a familiar object—a plate—that they can more easily relate to.”

Raftery is planning to exhibit the work in an edition of one hundred sets next fall at the Ryan Lee Gallery in New York. The plates will be displayed on letterpress-printed wallpaper that he is designing to complement them.

Raftery has a massive collection of traditional transfer-printed ware, a small portion of which is seen here.

Photograph by Andrew Stein Raftery.

“Things Could Be Worse” mugs by Don Moyer, 2015, from his Calamityware line, manufactured by Kristoff Porcelain, Poland. Transfer-printed in-glaze on porcelain; height (of each) 4 inches. Photographs by Don Moyer.

Don Moyer: Updating a classic



In 2011 Don Moyer, a graphic designer, inherited a traditional, run-of-the-mill transfer-ware plate in Allerton’s “Chinese” pattern. “There’s nothing magical about this ugly, old plate,” he says. “But it was the door that let me into the blue garden. It got me looking at similar patterns, like Willow, and noticing what they have in common and the variations. I was impressed with the detail and decided to draw the plate in my notebook,” he recalls. “When I was almost finished, I added a pterodactyl for excitement. Then I drew several more plates from memory and added additional calamities.”

Soon, he began thinking that it might be fun to reproduce one of those drawings onto a real porcelain plate—and so a successful Kickstarter campaign, and his playful line called Calamityware were born. He has now used Kickstarter to fund some thirteen projects, eight involving ceramics. “It allows me to describe a project in advance and if there are enough supporters, then

I have the money for a production run. If no one wants to support it, there’s no obligation to do anything and no money is collected.”

Moyer compares today’s crowdfunding platforms, like Kickstarter, to the subscription model that funded publishing ventures such as Audubon’s in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. “To be worth the effort, a production run should be a thousand or more units,” he explains. “If I can justify a production run of two thousand, I’m satisfied. I set my Kickstarter goals low so I don’t need to be anxious about whether I will make it. For a Calamityware plate the target is usually \$20,000.”

He has learned a lot in the process. The first four Calamityware plates were produced in the United States at Bryan China in New Castle, Pennsylvania. He has since moved production to Poland’s Kristoff factory, where the plates can be produced using an in-glaze technique, which allows the inks to blend more smoothly into the surface. “Many people wouldn’t notice any difference, but the in-glaze plates are a little bit more like Grandma’s,” he says.

Moyer’s first plate showed an attack by flying monkeys. Subsequent calamities have included a giant robot, a voracious sea monster, UFOs, pirates, an erupting volcano, and more. He draws each new calamity from scratch. He starts by looking closely at as many old plates as he can. Then he draws details in a sketchbook. The goal is to design something that feels traditional yet incorporates

fresh visual forms. “Making counterfeits of old plates wouldn’t be much fun,” he says. “All my plates have different borders and different details. For me, the fun of these projects is creating new designs, new patterns, and new ornaments that feel right. I also try to sneak in a few wonky details to reward people who take the time to study their plate. Look closely and you might find faces, monsters, and bugs where they don’t belong.”

Like so many ceramics patterns, “Chinese” reassures with its familiarity. There’s no challenge, no threat, so Moyer put his own twist on it to lift it out of the banal. “If a traditional Ming vase is covered with dragons, think how funny it could be covered with dragons and poodles.”

Moyer’s Kickstarter projects have all been in support of individual dinner plates. But people have persistently requested other pieces in order to assemble complete place settings. He recently introduced a mug design and this year he plans to start offering small plates and shallow soup bowls designed to complement the plates.

As for that lover of old china: we can only hope that a smile of delight would spread across his face as he grasps the game these artists have been playing with the forms he holds so dear.

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“Chinese” pattern dinner plate by Charles Allerton and Sons, Staffordshire, early twentieth century. Transfer-printed earthenware, diameter 9 ½ inches. This inherited plate inspired Moyer to pay attention to transfer-printed wares.

“Giant Robot,” 2014, plate 2 in Moyer’s Calamityware line, series 1, manufactured by Bryan China, New Castle, Pennsylvania. Transfer-printed on-glaze on porcelain; diameter 10 ½ inches.

“Rambunctious Volcano,” 2015, plate 6 in Moyer’s Calamityware line, series 2, manufactured by Kristoff Porcelain. Transfer-printed in-glaze on porcelain; diameter 10 ½ inches.

