



Tea Service - The Cockle Pickers Willow Pattern

The quintessentially English 'cup of tea' and the tea service are inextricably linked with Britain's development of the slave trade. In the early nineteenth century, bowls made in Staffordshire held slave produced sugar from the Caribbean, making palatable the exotic bitter infusion of tea from China and India. It was appropriate therefore that in 1787 Josiah Wedgwood one of the leading ceramic industrialists of the time began production of what was to become a series of anti-slavery ceramics. Jasperware cameos featured the image of a kneeling black male slave in chains surrounded by the legend *Am I not a slave and a brother?*¹ Over the next eighty years variations of this iconic design graced the surface of a huge variety of ceramic forms as the disseminating, campaigning power of print moved from paper into other media.

The legacies of the slave trade include the destruction of cultures, economies and the ongoing impoverishment of West Africa, but also the immense wealth generated for the British economy. Contemporary manifestations include the architecture of our towns, stately homes and gardens as well as in arts and culture throughout Britain. They are also evident in our humble cup of tea (or coffee).

¹ See Margolin, Sam; *And Freedom to the Slave: Antislavery Ceramics 1787-1865* in *Ceramics in America 2002* Ed. Robert Hunter.

In spite of its formal legal abolition, slavery is still with us in the twenty-first century manifesting itself in a number of ways, but almost always involving illegal immigrants forced to work or live in appalling conditions, often by brutal gang masters. On February 5, 2004 twenty-one of these contemporary slaves, were drowned in Morecambe Bay, so close to Cumbria. They were Chinese cockle pickers, very far from their homes. Many of those killed in the tragedy originated from the Fujian province of China which known for its production of Oolong tea. A tea service therefore seemed a very appropriate form to create a contemporary comment on the legacy of Britain's abolition of the Slave trade in 1807.

Basing the design on the ubiquitous *Willow Pattern* I created a *Cockle Pickers* tea service. The *Willow Pattern* was designed in Stoke on Trent in the early 1800's, but alludes to the oriental and exotic. It is the most commonly produced printed ceramic pattern ever produced and familiar to millions the world over...

In the *Cockle Pickers Willow*, the pattern is mostly erased as the tide flows into Morecambe Bay² (lake district hills in the distance) drowning those harvesting the shelled delicacies.... The symbolism in the tea service is multi faceted: Semiotic, form, image, material and colour based

- Cockle shells are integrated in the border pattern, and inside some forms.
- Replacing geometric patterned sections, the patterns of bodies of African slaves taken from the iconic engraving in Thomas Clarkson's book *History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*.³
- Inside the sugar bowl and pearlware cup, a small icon of the kneeling slave has been adapted from a print on an 1830 Drabware cup and saucer.
- The icon also appears as part of the stamp on the base of objects in the set.
- Swallows are often depicted in the Willow pattern. Meaning a *safe return home* they are a popular tattoo for sailors. Ironically our victims of the slave trade, historical and contemporary never saw *their* homes again.
- The tea set includes Royal Worcester bone china⁴, Royal Copenhagen porcelain⁵, tea caddy by Jane Smith⁶, and a pearlware cup from the early nineteenth century, probably produced when African slavery was still big business
- Blue prints are held within gold rims ... in the early nineteenth century Romantic commentators associated colour with the three social divisions of nobles (gold), freemen (red), and slaves (blue).⁷

² I first created a version of the submerging Willow pattern for a series of works *Three Gorges , After the Dam* exhibited at *Cumbrian Blue(s)* solo exhibition in Tullie House 2003.

³ Clarkson, Thomas *History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade* London 1807 featured in *Ceramics in America 2002* Ed. Robert Hunter.

⁴ Bone China, an English invention, often used in tea services

⁵ Denmark, like most European countries, was also involved in the slave trade.

⁶ Based on Chinese porcelain in the Tullie House Museum collection

⁷ Gage, John *Colour and Meaning, Art Science and Symbolism* Thames and Hudson 1999, ISBN 978-0-500-28215-1

Three *Cockle Pickers Tea Services* were made. One was acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2008, another is held in a private collection in the USA and the final set is currently on show in the *Confected Borrowed and Blue* touring exhibition.⁸

A small number of 'extra' items were created in the process of creating the works; these include hand made teapots, sugar bowls, as well as three old porcelain (restaurant-ware) plates. Manchester City Art Gallery and Gallery Oldham have each acquired items from this body of work.

Ceramics have a long history of commemoration and comment: This contemporary Willow reminds us that interwoven in the richness of our everyday lives are the legacies of our ancestor's enthusiastic embrace of the slave trade and that slavery is still with us but in a less obvious guise.... For more information, see:

www.antislavery.org



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www.cumbrianblues.com

⁸ http://www.scottish-gallery.co.uk/artist/paul_scott