

The First Ladies and Their China

Ellen Denker

The White House has always held a special fascination for people around the world – not so much for particular occupants, but because the President's house is the first house of Americans. Built and furnished largely with public funds, the White House is a symbol of the hospitality of the American people that is conveyed to the world through the heads of state from foreign lands who are entertained in its reception rooms. The tables of the State Dining Room, set with impeccable linen, gleaming crystal, fine china and glowing silver, provide an elegant

setting for world diplomacy. Our focus here is on the china.

The history of White House china is more than the pretty dishes that graced the President's table during official political and diplomatic entertaining. It is also the story of international fashion and trade during the nineteenth century and of the emergence of the American nation and its china industry during the twentieth century.

According to the United States Appropriation Act of 1826, all furnishings for the President's house that were purchased with public funds were to be made in America "as far as practicable." In fact, early White House china was made by leading factories in China, France and England, and carried the decorations that were internationally popular. Chinese blue-and-white china was used by our earliest presidents, while French china, with its bold colors and elegant designs, demonstrated presidential taste and America's close friendship with France during most of the 1800s. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Great Seal as a decorative and symbolic motif took second place to fashion. But after our Centennial celebration in 1876, the US gained an international reputation as a successful democracy and emerged as an industrial nation with a distinct identity.

First evidence of these changes may be seen in the Hayes Service of 1879. First Lady Lucy Hayes was in

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The Potteries of Trenton Society is a non-profit organization dedicated to the study and preservation of Trenton's ceramic past. Officers: President – Patricia Madrigal; Treasurer – Ellen Denker; Secretary – Sally Lane Board: Ellen Denker, John Hatch, Richard Hunter, Meta Janowitz, Sally Lane, William Liebeknecht. Newsletter Editor: Patricia Madrigal



Chinese export porcelain service plate made about 1785 from a set owned by George Washington. In the center is the Angel of Fame bearing the insignia of the Society of the Cincinnati designed by Pierre-Charles L'Enfant. The Society of the Cincinnati is a hereditary society founded in 1783 to preserve the ideals and fellowship of officers of the Continental Army who served in the Revolutionary War.

Left: The design of the plate from the Polk dessert service shows the French rococo revival taste of the mid 1800s that was popular in the US. The set was made in Paris, France in 1846.

Right: Harrison service breakfast plate designed by Caroline Harrison features corn border and American eagle in center. Made in France in 1892.



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the White House conservatory one day choosing fern fronds to send to Theodore Haviland, who was designing a new White House dessert service and bon bon dishes that would be made at his factory in France, when she was met by Theodore Davis, an artist-reporter for *Harper's Weekly* and the New York photographer G.W. Pach, who were at the White House to

take a photograph of the President's cabinet. When Mrs. Hayes described her purpose for the fronds, Davis strongly advised that it was an opportunity to design a service that featured the flora and fauna of the United States. Mrs. Hayes was so taken by Davis's enthusiasm for the idea that she changed her plans immediately and put Davis in charge of the design.

During the summer of 1879, Davis worked in a makeshift studio on the beach in Asbury Park, NJ devising the scheme and making the watercolors that were used by Haviland to produce the full dinner and dessert service in Limoges, France. The various dinnerware forms were emblazoned with turkeys, bobcats, catfish, and a wide variety of American flora and fauna. Mrs. James G. Blaine, then wife of the senator from Maine, wrote of the Hayes service that "It is worth a trip from New York to Washington to see the table at a State Dinner at the White House."

When Caroline Harrison became First Lady in 1889, she felt that the Hayes Service was out of fashion. Being a china painter herself, Mrs. Harrison designed a service that features a corn motif (the Harrisons were

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Turkey platter from the Hayes Service designed by Theodore Davis and made in 1879 by Haviland, Limoges, France.



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from Indiana) in gold print on a bright blue border and the American eagle with shield proudly displayed in the center surrounded by stars. Although this service was also made in Limoges, France, it had broken through foreign design influence by focusing on a significant American agricultural crop and showcasing the most potent symbol of American sovereignty.

First Lady Edith Roosevelt searched the American ceramics industry to find a manufacturer that could provide a high quality table service suitable for presidential entertaining. The American firm of Knowles, Taylor and Knowles of East Liverpool, Ohio, was approached, but declined to make the service because they felt the commission was so large that it would significantly disrupt their regular production schedule. The new service was produced by England's Wedgwood factory instead. It was classical in design and featured the Great Seal in the border.

The Wedgwood china served during the Roosevelt and Taft administrations, but part way through Woodrow Wilson's first term, the President and First Lady decided to replace it. Edith Bolling Galt was Wilson's second wife and was widowed when he met her in 1914. Her first husband had been in the jewelry and silver business in Washington, DC. So it was mostly out of courtesy that the china dealers, Dulin and Martin, old professional friends of Mrs. Wilson, invited her to visit their special exhibit of Lenox china in 1917. After showing Mrs. Wilson through the display, Lenox's representative Charles Service mentioned discreetly that if the Wilsons were interested in new china for the White House, Lenox would like to be considered for the commission.



A comparison of the Great Seals as rendered on china made for Wilson (1917, top) and Truman (1951, bottom) administrations shows the evidence of Truman's order after World War II that the American eagle in the Great Seal should face the olive branch of peace, whereas earlier services featured the eagle facing the tokens of war.

Service would have told Mrs. Wilson the story of Walter Scott Lenox's boyhood in Trenton and his desire to be an artist, a desire that he eventually turned toward industry. She would have heard about the rise of Trenton as the "Staffordshire of America" and the gradual perfection of American porcelain by the Trenton firms with which Lenox had worked as design director before establishing his own firm in 1889. And she would have heard of Lenox's final triumph in wedding art to industry through the development of exquisite dinnerware.

Shortly thereafter the White House asked Dulin and Martin to have Lenox prepare some designs for the



In 2000, Hillary Clinton commissioned from Lenox China a service of 300 place settings to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the White House. It features a variety of borders taken from architectural details of the White House.

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President and First Lady to consider. The Wilsons were particularly keen to have something that was patriotic, because of the war in Europe, and agreed that the Great Seal should be the principal motif. In the final design by Frank Holmes, the Great Seal is centered on the service plate and meticulously rendered in raised gold paste set off by brilliant sapphire blue and etched gold borders. In March

1918, negotiations were complete and the order placed for a service of 1,700 pieces, the first White House china made in America.

Throughout the twentieth century, First Ladies continued to turn to Lenox for White House china. New Lenox services were designed for Eleanor Roosevelt, Bess Truman, Nancy Reagan and Hillary Clinton. Lady Bird Johnson commissioned a service featuring American wild flowers from Castleton China in New Castle, Pennsylvania, and recent special services ordered by Laura Bush and Michelle Obama were supplied by Pickard China in Antioch, Illinois, near Chicago.

I hope that I have been able to demonstrate that a study of White House china is more than a succession of plates of many colors. It is also a study of developments in the ceramics industry, of the changes in international fashion, of the development of American identity, and of the tastes and desires of our Presidents and First Ladies. Perhaps you will have an opportunity to visit the White House

Nancy Regan commissioned a state china service of 220 place settings. Mrs. Regan worked with Lenox designers to create a bold pattern that featured bands of scarlet red, her favorite color.



POTS Annual Meeting

The Potteries of Trenton Society held its 2019 annual meeting on April 6th at the Trenton War Memorial, Trenton. Museum consultant and independent scholar Ellen Denker, a founding POTS board member, spoke about the *First Ladies and Their China* (summarized on page 1).

The 2020 membership meeting will be held on April 4 in the New Jersey State Museum Auditorium. Dr. Laura Microulis, Research Associate for Bard Graduate Center, New York City, has agreed to be our speaker. The lecture is free and open to the public. Laura has been busy with an

upcoming exhibition and catalog that explores the phenomenon of majolica in Victorian England and America, "Majolica Mania Transatlantic Pottery in England and the United States, 1850-1915." In her talk, she will focus on the Trenton makers and show their work in national and international contexts. The exhibition is being organized by Bard Graduate Center and the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, where it opens in late April.

Be sure to visit our website and sign up for our email list in order to receive details about the meeting and updates about other POTS goings on.



Ellen Denker speaking at the 2019 membership meeting.



Majolica pitcher from Joseph S. Mayer's Arsenal Pottery, Trenton, 1880s.

Ceramics in America 2018

Reviewed by Ellen Denker

Ceramics in America 2018, featuring articles concerned largely with contemporary American potters inspired by historical ceramics, was published by the Chipstone Foundation in early August. This issue of the hardcover annual publication is distributed by Oxbow Academic and available from your bookseller of choice. For those unfamiliar with this publication, it is an interdisciplinary journal for collectors, historical archaeologists, curators, decorative arts students, social historians, and studio potters, publishing articles on the broad role of historical ceramics in the American context.

Articles in the 2018 issue approach ceramics history through the eyes and hands of contemporary American potters:

Robert Hunter relates the history and outcome of a project that brought together potters associated with the North Carolina Pottery Center of Seagrove and the Chipstone Foundation's collection of 17th and 18th

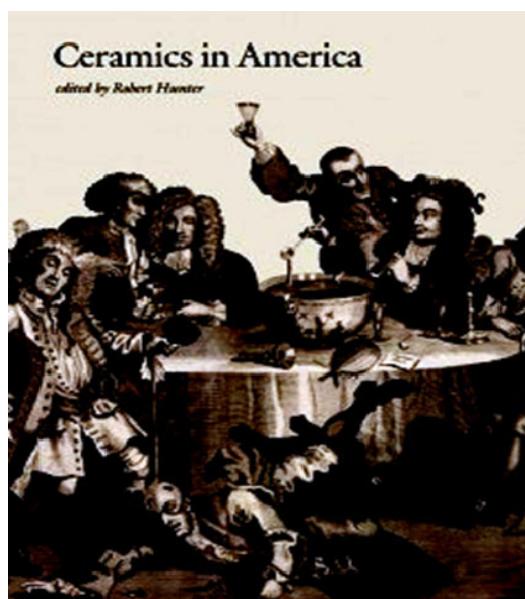
century American, British and German ceramics, particularly those objects used for consuming alcoholic beverages, especially punch drinking, a social practice known for leading to excessive consumption. Basically, contemporary potters riffed off of a variety of early ceramic drinking vessels while commenting on public drunkenness as a topic in American social and political history. The resulting exhibition, "The Last Drop: Intoxicating Pottery Past and Present," included Chipstone's historical objects paired with the contemporary potters' efforts. It was on view at the North Carolina Pottery Center in late December 2017 and early January 2018. Photographs of the paired results are also included in Hunter's article along with comments by the participating potters.

Robert Hunter also contributed an article that examines the work of Michelle Erickson, a contemporary ceramic artist who has mastered colonial-era ceramic techniques which she uses in her creation of 21st century social, political, and environmental narratives.

Stephen C. Compton traces the history of ceramics in North Carolina in his article "In the Pale Moonlight: Jugs and Alcohol in North Carolina" by focusing on objects associated with storing and drinking alcohol. Redware and stoneware objects are included.

Potter Stephen Earp examines his personal journey of discovering historical ceramics in his article "A Potter Considers the Traditional Decorative Arts." Throughout his essay he visits with contemporary American potters who are working in historical

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pottery styles to discuss their aesthetic approaches and techniques, including Ken Henderson, Joe Jostes, Ned Foltz, Wesley Muckey, Greg Shooner, Tammy Zettlemoyer, Mary Farrell and others.

“As Real as It Gets: Lead Glazing and Traditional Wood-Firing” by Greg Shooner and Brenda Hornsby Heindl probes potter Shooner's quest to duplicate the forms and glaze effects observed on historic American lead-glazed earthenware. Through his pursuit he discovers the chemistry underlying the often misunderstood surface appearance of venerated antique

lead-glazed earthenwares in museum collections.

Finally, Scott Hamilton Suter's article relates the history of a Shenandoah Valley industrial pottery making fancy ware. Local investors in Harrisonburg, Virginia, partnered with William W. Sherratt, late of Trenton, New Jersey, to build a state-of-the-art pottery to make press-molded rocking-ham and yellow ware such as Rebecca-at-the-Well teapots and fancy cuspidors. Suter describes the ups and (mostly) downs of Sherratt's enterprises as he struggled with obtaining reliable and economical resources, including clay, coal and water.

Web Site Update

In 2018 the Potteries of Trenton Society received a grant from the Mercer County Division of Culture and Heritage, in partnership with the New Jersey Historical Commission, Division of Cultural Affairs/Department of State, to update our website.

POTS hired Surface Impression to create a new, modern and user-friendly website. Surface Impression is a web design firm that specializes in helping non-profit organizations such as museums, historical societies, cultural organizations and educational institutions make the most of digital media. The updated website launched at the end of 2018.

POTS received a second grant in 2019 to integrate the Trenton Potteries Database into the website. The con-

tent management system for the website was designed to support the addition of the database, and will allow us to link the two together and create a better user experience.

The database contains an immense amount of historical information and stories about the pottery industry and associated history. Our goal is to make this information easily available to researchers, pottery enthusiasts, and POTS members and create a resource that will also be useful for students, educators (of all levels), genealogists, and the local community.

The Trenton Potteries Database is scheduled to go live at the end of 2019. Please be sure to visit at www.potteriesoftrentonsociety.org.

We're on the web! Check us out at
www.potteriesoftrentonsociety.org

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Newsletter of the
Potteries of Trenton Society

POTS Membership

Membership in the Potteries of Trenton Society is open to all interested in Trenton's pottery industry and the ceramic products manufactured here. We welcome pottery workers, historians, archaeologists and collectors. Your contribution is used to support newsletter, lecture, meeting, and conference costs.

Annual Membership \$25

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