

## LaVonne Smith Antiques



Flow Blue is a real “Blue Chip” in antique china collecting. During the turn of the 20th century one’s Flow Blue china collection would have been used as one’s kitchen china or perhaps “second best” china. Not at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century! During the past twenty years retail prices have soared and complete dinner, luncheon or tea services command very high prices. Fortunately, however, vast quantities of Flow Blue were made in hundreds of patterns between about 1825 or 1915; and, there are still wonderful finds to be made. Whenever I think that there is a real scarcity of complete services or the unusual older pieces, I will come across something just wonderful in the most unlikely place. Popular with the American market from the beginning, the great majority of Flow Blue found its way to the United States during the past 175 years. There are still collections to be assembled albeit for a lot more money!

During the late 1700’s and early 1800’s English Staffordshire potters spent years trying to imitate the soft blurring of the immensely popular Chinese underglaze blue and white porcelains that were appearing in Europe. Prior to the introduction to these porcelains, earthenwares, heavy and prone to chipping, were basically the only ceramics available. For the masses, it was common to use wooden plates and trenchers for the table.

The potters’ experimentation eventually resulted in discovering the “secret” of making porcelain and also resulted in many different and unique wares such as “flowing blue” and a new type of hard-bodied earthenware called ironstone (later variations included china stone, oriental stone, pearlware, stoneware, granite ware and semi porcelain). The term “Flow Blue as a ceramic type” describes transfer-printed, hard-bodied earthenware (as opposed to soft bodied earthenware, i.e. Delft or hard bodied, vitrified, thin, porcelain) on which the cobalt oxide has been made to run beyond the transfer’s boundaries. During the firing process, lime or ammonium chloride was introduced into the sagger to cause the chemical reaction and thus, the “flow.” There have been opinions expressed that Flow Blue wares were really mistakes and were perhaps even seconds – I would suggest that during the years of experimentation to imitate the hand painted blue Chinese wares, an attempt was made to provide the rising merchant and middle class with a substitute for the expensive Chinese wares: a substitute which became exceedingly popular and it’s own specialty in itself. It is true, however, that the “flowing blue” did cover imperfections of the transfer printing process and other firing mishaps.

I would estimate that eighty to ninety percent of all Flow Blue was produced in the Staffordshire region of England during the period between 1830 and 1910. Well known names include: William Adams, Henry Alcock, Willam Davenport, Thomas Dimmock, W.H. Grindley, Johnson Brothers, Ford & Sons, Charles Mason, Alfred Meakin, Charles Meigh, Minton, William Ridgways, Spode, Wedgwood, Wood and Sons. As its popularity increased pottery companies in other countries began making their own

## LaVonne Smith Antiques



versions. The most noteworthy of these are American – French China Company, Wheeling Pottery and Warwick China; Dutch – Petrus Regout Co.; German – Villeroy & Boch.

There are three main time periods to consider when collecting and/or evaluating Flow Blue china. The early period dates from about 1825 to 1855. Generally made of ironstone or stoneware; these examples tend to be heavier and thicker than later pieces. Potteries used names for their ceramic body such as: Ironstone China, Chinese Porcelain, Improved Stone China, Real Ironstone China, and Oriental Stone. More often than not the shapes are angular, plates are twelve-sided or fourteen-sided rather than perfectly round; also, hollow pieces (pitchers, tea pots, vegetable bowls, cups) tend to be six to eight-sided rather than round. Three “pinhead” shaped marks (stilts) are often found impressed on the face and back of plates made during this era – sometimes on large pieces, such as meat platters, there will be three sets of three pinheads spaced in a triangle on the outer rim. These marks were the result of stacking devices used to separate the pieces during the firing process.

The patterns most popular during this early period are the Oriental motifs featuring over-scaled peonies, willow trees, pagodas, Oriental figures and scenes featuring exotic locales. The names of these patterns call to mind places in the Far and Near East (some places that were in the news in Victorian times – for example, "Amoy," "Hindustan," "Shanghai," "Pelew," "Chapoo," "Cashmere" and "Whampoa"). This era was the time of much discovery and trading between heretofore remote and inaccessible places in the world.

Do not expect, however, the design on the piece to necessarily depicting the actual place named in the pattern; the names were meant to suggest the “idea” of the exotic, not the reality. It was a way, perhaps, of bringing a little of the exotic home to England and the growing middle-class. They might not be able to afford the finest Chinese porcelains or to travel to the Far East, but they could afford something that looked like Chinese porcelain with exotic names – and these wares were much more available – made right in Staffordshire England.

In addition to Oriental motifs, there was also a fondness for classical motifs featuring the famous classical Greek and Roman antiquities, for example, patterns with scenes depicting the ancient ruins of Athens and Troy, and funeral urns and heroic statues. There again the romance of the long ago and faraway had great appeal to the Victorians.

The early Flow Blue patterns are prized by collectors for their scarcity, age and deep cobalt color. Some patterns were made for very short periods of time – reflecting the changing tastes and commercial trends – others were made for much longer times and in

## LaVonne Smith Antiques



fact were sometimes re-issued again maybe forty year later. One example is, of course, the Willow pattern. It has been said that every country that makes ceramics has made their own rendition of the Willow pattern; and, I would have to agree. I have seen the Willow pattern and the many variations of it on every known kind of ceramic ware. Doulton and Wedgwood continue to make Blue Willow – both made it in Flow Blue before the turn of the century.

One of the most prized patterns of Flow Blue is “Amoy,” which also happens to be the one I personally collect. I have a dinner service with over 50 pieces and a complete coffee service.

### **“Amoy” by Davenport, circa 1840’s, Coffee service**



The handle-less cups and saucers are from the same period, however, only two are of the “Amoy” pattern. You will note the angularity of the pieces. The handle-less cups are derived from the Chinese custom of handle-less tea bowls. Also the Arabic custom of handle-less coffee cups. Prior to the 1840’s cups and saucers were smaller and finer,

## LaVonne Smith Antiques



reflecting the expensive nature of both beverages and also the use of expensive porcelain for the ware. As coffee and tea became more affordable and ironstone became the ceramic of choice with the rising merchant classes, the cups became larger and heavier. As English ladies did not want to burn their fingers, nor drink from the deep saucer, handles were introduced and by 1850 had pretty much replaced the handle-less variety.

The large sugar bowl is a reflection of that era's method of processing and serving sugar. Rather than being granulated as sugar is today, it was then sold in large cone shaped blocks and pieces were chipped off; tongs were used to put the bits of sugar into the cup. One needed a large container with a large mouth in order to accommodate the sugar chunks. The large open bowl is the waste bowl for one to pour cold dregs before pouring another cup.



**"Whampoa" by Mellor and Venables, circa 1840's, soup tureen – small chip at foot rim and some wear - \$1, 250**

## LaVonne Smith Antiques



This tureen would have had a large under platter in the same pattern and a matching Flow Blue ladle. The three-piece set could command a price of over \$3,000 today.

The Victorians enjoyed an abundance of food and also the new ability to store food for longer periods of time. They enjoyed setting an elaborate table and the Staffordshire potters were eager to supply them with all sorts of specialty ceramic wares whether for breakfast, morning tea, lunch, afternoon tea, dinner or a late night snack. The vast array of serving pieces and individual pieces required help in the kitchen to attend to the storing, cleaning and displaying of the chinaware. Examples of unusual pieces are: individual vegetable plates, individual bone dishes, individual turkey bone dishes, individual butter pats, serving bowls just for potatoes, specialty fish plates and platters, oyster plates, meat platters and well tree platters in graduated sizes from 11 inches long to 21! Additionally, there were game plates and game platters, and a special set just for turkey with a 23-inch platter along with dinner size plates with a turkey motif on each.



**Turkey Platter, 23 inches, Cauldon, circa 1905 – excellent condition \$1,200**

## LaVonne Smith Antiques



Just the number of different cups alone is enough to fill a cupboard. There is the farmer's very large cup, morning teacup, the chocolate cup, and the afternoon teacup, the posset cup, the coffee cups for each time of day.

The middle period of Flow Blue dates from the mid 1860's to about 1880. The focus in design was on realistic botanicals and items of natural history. New flora and fauna and places in the news often became names of new patterns of dinnerware.

With the opening of Japan to the world in the 1870's, Japanese motifs became very popular. The shapes tended to be gently scalloped or fluted reflecting the softness of nature. The ceramic body tends to be thinner and lighter. Names of the ceramic bodies changed from ironstone and stoneware to Opaque Porcelain, Warranted Ironstone, Imperial Stoneware and Royal Semi Porcelain perhaps reflecting the reach of the empire. The depictions are often realistic and occasionally have very details depictions of insects and butterflies included in the motif. Pattern names reflect these changes: "Anemone," "Aurorea," "Dresden Sprigs" and "Jardinere."

**"Japanese" pattern, scalloped edged bowl, circa 1880 – some wear - \$595**



## LaVonne Smith Antiques



There are also a number of “re-issues” of early period patterns done in the lighter and thinner semi-porcelain. Much more of the Flow Blue of this period was highlighted or heavily sprayed with gold from melted coins. Sometimes the highlighting is very carefully done, and the artist’s cipher is often included on the back with the potter’s mark. Some collectors prefer this gilding; others do not like it at all. Purely personal preference.

Detail is shown below of an 1870’s coffee pot, highly gilded with hand applied gold. The shape reflects the softening of the ware’s lines and also the fluting and scalloped edges of the middle period of Flow Blue. The depiction of birds is realistic and yet fanciful.



The late period dates from about 1890 to 1910 (some was produced later, but very little of it is of good quality). A tremendous quantity was produced during this time period. Reflecting the Victorian and Edwardians’ love of “bric-a-brac” and the rising middle

## LaVonne Smith Antiques



class in both Europe and the United States, items were made in a wide variety of shapes and uses. For example, some Flow Blue wares made during this period are: umbrella stands, garden seats, clocks, egg cups and drainers, candlesticks, hatpin holders, elaborate bath sets with ewer, large basin, toothbrush and sponge holders, dresser sets, spittoons, inkwells, biscuit barrels lined with Flow Blue inserts (the Jenny Lind patterns is often featured in oak barrels), cheese keepers, sardine “boxes,” and pots and pitchers of all sizes and shapes.

All kinds of patterns were produced, but I would say that the primary focus of design of this period is floral and Art Nouveau. There are patterns for every flower and vine from tiny petite roses of "Marechal Niel" to the large blooms of "Lily." Some of the most favorite and sought after are: "Touraine," "Argyle," "Cambridge," "Conway," "Albany," "Lonsdale," "Normandy" and "Waldorf." The edges are often fluted and scalloped with embossing and beading. The semi-porcelain ceramic body is quite thin and light and has the appearance of porcelain. There are a profusion of patterns and shapes during this period. Large quantities were made and there are complete sets available if one is willing to pay the price.

Flow Blue, while never “cheap,” was generally the kitchen or family china rather than the “best” service. Mrs. Woodrow Wilson the 28th President’s wife, brought her Flow Blue service to the White House. Her pattern was “Amoy.”

A few collecting suggestions for the beginning and advanced collectors alike:

1. Buy at least one or two reference books. There are several excellent ones available in many antique stalls as well as Amazon.com.
2. Buy what “you” like. Just because it is old and rare doesn’t mean you have to collect it.
3. Regarding “as is” pieces, don’t reject a piece that has a little damage before considering that you may not see another like it **in any condition**; the more rare the piece the more true that is. It goes without saying that the price must also reflect the damage. There are some wonderful china restoration artists available if at some point you want a piece repaired.
4. There are many reproductions in Flow Blue that are sold as “old.” The most frequently seen have an English coat of arms back stamp (see my logo below) with the words “Victoria” printed in flowing blue. The method of production is similar to the vintage Flow Blue and it can deceive a novice collector. Another re-issue is marked “Romantic Flow Blue.”
5. Contact antique dealers who specialize in Flow Blue and related ceramics. They are usually very helpful and knowledgeable and can be invaluable in helping you to assemble your collection.

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