

Forever Flowering: William "Quaker" Pegg & Derby Botanical Porcelain

By Katherine E. Manley /
Earle D. Vandekar of Knightsbridge, Inc.

William Pegg, known as "Pegg the Quaker" is considered one of the finest flower painters to ever decorate porcelain. Born at Whitmore, near Newcastle-under-Lyme, on May 10, 1775, Pegg practically grew up in the porcelain industry. From the young age of 10, he worked in an earthenware factory, and by 13 years old, Pegg already was a student of earthenware painting. A short time later in 1790, he became an apprentice china painter. This period was an intense time for Pegg. He wrote that he worked up to 15 hours a day at the china factory in addition to his studies.

Pegg's work paid off. Six years later, in the autumn of 1796, William Duesbury II hired him at the Nottingham Road Works to succeed William Billingsley as chief flower painter. Pegg's five-year contract at Derby (1796-1801) marks his First Period. His naturalistic style from this time is fairly restrained when compared with that from his Second Period (1813-1820). Normally pieces with a description carry a blue mark. Like most china painters, he was allocated certain plates from the Old Derby Pattern Books – plate patterns 239 and 240 and cup pattern 475. Pieces made from these patterns normally carry a puce mark with no description.

Earle D. Vandekar of Knightsbridge, Inc. carries a set of Derby botanical dessert dishes containing several pieces attributed to Pegg. The plate finely painted with a Tangier Pea branch within a gilt rim, shows Pegg's exquisite execution of the flower and leaves. Yet, it has the restraint that is common of his First Period. Inscribed on the back in blue enamel is "Lathyrus Tingitanus, Tangier Pea" with the crown, crossed batons, dots, 'D' and numeral '115.' John Twitchett shows on page 206 of his book, *Derby Porcelain*, an illustration reproduced from the *Curtis Botanical Journal*. This illustration is so similar to Pegg's design that he most likely used it as a reference.

By 1800, Pegg's religious convictions led him to join the Society of Friends. This society believed in simplicity and lack of adornment, which contrasted with Pegg's decorative porcelain painting. After completing his contract at Derby in 1801, Pegg left the factory to become a knitter for a stocking manufacturer. He also burnt most of his sketches because he considered them "engines of will-worship."

Life as a knitter was difficult and his artistic passions could not be squelched. In 1813, Pegg returned to Derby, which marks the beginning of his Second Period. During this time he created his famous sketchbook. It is signed, dated 1813 and watermarked "Trevarno Mill, 1811." When he completed the sketchbook he gave it together with nine loose sketches to a friend and fellow Quaker, Thomas Martin Randall. The book passed through the female line of Randall's wife until it was discovered by historians. It contains more than 112 different sketches that illustrate the difference between Pegg's First and Second periods at Derby.

Not only do these sketches show a great technical understanding of flowers and plants, according to Twitchett "many of these fine sketches show a wild, exotic abandon, as if he were releasing his pent-up emotions." They also show the extensive variety of his style and underline the dangers of being too dog-



A Derby porcelain botanical dessert plate painted by William "Quaker" Pegg with a naturalistic "Tangier Pea." A stylized, gilt border of lily-of-the-valley encircles the rim; Circa 1796-1801.

matic about Pegg's work. Furthermore, the drawings confirm the theory that most of Pegg's art is life-sized, both in the sketchbook and on porcelain. In reality, most botanical services were copied or, in the case of Pegg, freely adapted from the Curtis or other botanical journals that were available to the Derby painters from about 1792.

Pieces from Pegg's Second Period are marked in red and show a particularly skilled use of color. As his style matures over time, it moves farther away from the restrained manner he learned as an apprentice. It becomes freer, leaving the confines dictated by the shape of the porcelain. Yet, he retains his detailed naturalism, even down to the foliage. His vibrant and bold flowers seem to take on lives of their own. These flamboyant, almost explosive, pieces that Pegg is famous for should be placed in the latter half of his Second Period.

One must also take note of the gilder. Pegg's artwork frequently has only a simple gilded ring around the edge of the object. The gilder James Clark consistently worked in conjunction with Pegg. He was allocated the gilder's number '2' during the red-mark period. Like other gilders, he also later did much arabesque work.

In 1820, Pegg again left the Derby China Works because of his religious convictions and together with his wife he ran a small huckster's shop until his death on December 27, 1851. He was 76 year old.

References:

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