

SALTY COMMENTS #26
(Facts and Opinion on Open Salt Collecting)

When we find porcelain open salts, we sometimes see initials, a person's name, or even a date on the bottom. These markings are obviously not made at the factory, although some companies did put initials or marks on their products. The dishes were decorated by amateurs, using blanks bought for the purpose. By digging deeper, we have found many interesting things about porcelain decoration that tell us something about salts like these.

In Europe, porcelain decoration was a fashionable hobby in the first half of the 19th century. Some of it was done in the U.S. before the Civil War, but the idea really took hold after 1876. In this year the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia featured exhibits that "stimulated every branch of art . . . especially the Ceramic arts". The common spelling of the word "ceramic" has evidently changed over the years, as has use of the word "bisque", called "biscuit" in the old ceramic catalogs. In 1887, "China Painting" magazine was started, "catering exclusively to the interests of the amateur decorator". They published monthly, and although they received letters complaining that their \$2/year subscription price was too high, they continued in business until 1901. In 1887, the Augusta, Ga. Evening News said that "over 100,000 ladies in this country are engaged in this art". An 1897 book states that ceramic painting "is the favorite employment of old, young, rich, poor, male, female, idle and busy. Skilled draughtmen supply designs. Societies of china painters have been formed to excite and keep alive the interest in the art. Competitive exhibitions are held to elevate the standard, with prizes for originality". Evidently flowery promotional writing was as common then as it is now. There is no question, however, that during the end of the 19th century ceramic painting was very popular, and was taught in private classes and young ladies seminaries as well as art schools.

The old books and catalogs give a hint of the wide popularity of the art. The Winterthur library has 13 books dated 1878-1904 on china painting, including several specifically directed to amateurs. There are also 2 books in French on the subject, dated 1847 and 1866, and 10 old catalogs of china blanks and decorating supplies dating from 1897 to 1915. We heard of one lady whose grandmother decorated a complete set of china for her hope chest before she married.

Many different shapes of china were painted at home. A catalog from King & Co. showed over 700 different shapes and sizes, including vases, planters, chocolate sets, and a vast selection of tableware. They did not say where their china came from, but a catalog from the Cobden Co. had marks from Limoges firms beside their pictures. Several articles say that most of the imported blanks came from Europe and very few from Japan. In the United States, the Ceramic Art Company (founded 1889, later renamed Lenox) and the Willets Company were two big suppliers. The latter was said to offer the most varied and extensive supply of blanks for amateurs. Whether this is in the U.S. or in the world, we cannot tell.

In decorating porcelain, metallic oxide pigments must be used. Organic colors, like those used to dye cloth, will decompose during the firing. This means that pencil, india ink, or water colors can be used to sketch the design before final painting, and the heat will remove all traces of it. Old-time kilns could also cause problems with the final colors, depending on things like over- or under-firing, the amount of air in the flame and contact with ash or sulfur gases from the fuel. Modern electric kilns avoid this problem, since they have good temperature controllers and no open flame to introduce impurities.

The quality of the work naturally varied with the artist. We have some open salts that were obviously decorated by amateurs, although they did not sign their names. These are mostly done in with one color with a gold rim. One article in an old book scoffed at people who "tint" china, using just one or two colors with no attempt to make a design. It then went on to give elaborate directions on how to

get the best results when you want to tint. Gilding was evidently quite tricky. A paste made from real gold was required, and two coats followed by hand polishing were needed for the best results. One catalog recommended that amateurs have their gilding and firing done by a professional. The firm offered to do the job and had an extensive price list, including 10 cents per cup or saucer and 3-4 cents per individual salt for either gilding or firing. They also sold kilns, fired with "kerosene, the best fuel".

We admire the artistic ability of people who decorated some of our porcelain open salts. The next time you are looking at your better hand-painted porcelain dishes, examine the decorations carefully. Imagine yourself copying them, and think about the skill it takes to make the tiny flowers and leaves so perfectly. Some of the geometric gilding with raised lines and dots must also require tremendous artistic ability. We think that the most delicate work was done under a large magnifying glass to get such precise results. The ultimate is probably the picture salts from Royal Bayreuth or the best Noritake ware. If you are lucky enough to have one of these, study it under a magnifying glass sometime.

The signed open salts in our collection give a sampling of the work done by amateurs. The attached illustrations show some of the shapes used, along with marks that were on the blanks. We have included only those with artist initials or names, and have omitted others that look home-decorated but are not signed. Two of our dishes have added information. One is marked Xmas 1893; the other is marked "Stewart Kern from J. Root Christmas 1920". This latter is one of a set of 6, each with a different year from 1919-1924. Most of our other dishes are undated, although some marks, like "Czechoslovakia", show that the dish was made after World War I. The blanks are all from Europe, Ceramic Arts or Lenox. The only Japanese item is a pepper shaker that is decorated to match an unmarked salt. Three of the salts are modern, made as anniversary salts by Fran Vernatti for the OSSTW club on the west coast in 1985-6-7. There are 2 more we do not have - the 1988 and 1989 versions. These commemoratives show that some open salt blanks are still available, so age cannot be told from shape alone.

Besides the salts in our collection, we saw several other blanks in old catalogs that we examined. Some are shown in the illustrations. We have most of these shapes but they are apparently factory decorated. You may want to examine your porcelain dishes to see if any have markings suggesting that they were decorated at home.

Our exploration of amateur china painting has given us a better idea of where and how some of our open salts were made. We hope this article will stimulate you to look at your porcelain salts closely, and have a greater appreciation of those that were decorated for fun or self-expression rather than for profit.









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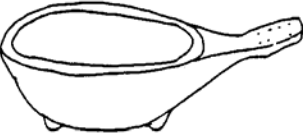
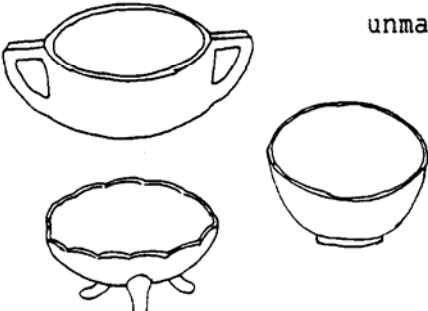
References:

- "China Decorator" (magazine), July 1887
- "Tried by Fire" by Frachelton, 1886
- "China Painting" by Monachesi, 1897
- Trade Catalog, Wright, Tyndale & van Roden, 1895
- Trade Catalog, King & Co., Detroit, MI, 1905
- "Practical Hints on China Decorating", the Cobden Co., ca. 1900

SOME PORCELAIN SHAPES USED FOR HOME DECORATING

<u>Shape</u>	<u>Factory Mark</u>	<u>Notes</u>
	Ceramic Art Co. Willets RS Germany D & Co. France GDA France O&EG Austria	The most common shape for both factory and home-decorated ware. There are slight differences between dishes from different sources. Shape shown in 1905 china painting catalog.
	Czecho-Slovakia	Similar to first one. Mark indicates it was made soon after World War I, when the new country hyphenated its name.
	T&V Limoges	Willets also made a heart shape with more delicate china and a more finely ruffled rim. We have one with the Willets factory decoration, and assume they sold some undecorated as well. Shape shown in 1905 china painting catalog.
	JP/L France	Ours is marked "Xmas 1920" (see writeup). Shape shown in 1905 china painting catalog.
	unmarked	Pedestal salt with 6-sided bowl.
	Hutschenreuther Selb, Bavaria	Round bowl, simple shape, but evidently popular since we have seen a number of them. Our books indicate the mark is pre-1920.
	Germany	Six-sided deep bowl on 3 stubby feet.
	Rosenthal Monbijou	Master size, 4-lobed bowl with scalloped rim. Old catalogs show quite a few larger blanks, but they are called table salts, not master salts.

SOME PORCELAIN SHAPES USED FOR HOME DECORATING

<u>Shape</u>	<u>Factory Mark</u>	<u>Notes</u>
	B & Co. Limoges, France	Low six-sided bowl on 3 stubby feet.
	O&EG, Austria	Round bowl on 3 ball feet.
	Vienna, Austria	Round bowl, 3 curved legs with embossing at top of each.
	CFH/GDM France	Six concave sides with embossing on all the edges. Shape shown in 1905 china painting catalog.
	Royal Bavaria	Round bowl on 3 ball feet. Shape shown in 1905 china painting catalog.
	Haviland & Co. and Haviland France	Round with 6 splayed feet, ruffled rim, embossing on sides. Dual marks suggest a date about 1891-2. Shown in 1905 china painting catalog.
	unmarked	Mandolin, thicker china than the more common Japanese one. Artist dated 1961 - a modern one.
	unmarked	Three commemorative salts made for the Open Salt Seekers of the West by Fran Vernatti Petersen in 1985-87. We have seen older dishes with the side-handled tub shape, but not older dishes of the other 2 types.