

Limoges AND ITS PORCELAIN

JUDITH DUNN TRACES 250 YEARS OF PRODUCTION IN THE PORCELAIN CAPITAL OF FRANCE

The Chinese have been producing porcelain at least since the seventh century. Its jewel-like beauty and translucence made it highly prized in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when merchants brought it back in quantities among the tea, cotton, silks and other commodities they were importing.

Europeans knew all about the production process, thanks to reports coming back from the Far East with traders and explorers. An early and highly detailed account is to be found in the correspondence of a French Jesuit missionary, Father François-Xavier d'Entrecolles. Born in 1664 (in Lyon according to some sources, in Limoges according to others), he went to China in 1698 and rapidly became versed in Chinese language and culture. From Yangzi he went to Jingdezhen, the centre of porcelain production. Nearby Gaoling (Chinese for 'high

hills') gave its name to kaolin (china clay), the essential ingredient that was quarried there. In two letters, dated 1712 and 1722, d'Entrecolles describes methods of extracting kaolin and the subsequent forming, decorating, glazing and firing processes.

Europeans at the time could only produce the unstable and artificial soft-paste without the key ingredient of kaolin. The

always up to the task. In 1784, the enterprise was linked with Sèvres as a branch of the 'manufacture royale' and benefited greatly from its expertise. The 1789 Revolution halted production of porcelain, perceived as an aristocratic commodity. Things looked up in the early nineteenth century and in 1807 Limoges had five manufactories and seven kilns, employing 200 workers.

A BOX IS A BOX IS A BOX... ACTUALLY, IT'S NOT. LIMOGES TRINKET BOXES WERE MADE SPECIFICALLY TO HOLD SMALL TOILET ARTICLES (ETUI), TO HOLD DANCE CARDS (CARNET DE BAL), TOBACCO (TABATIERE), GIFTS (BONBONNIERE), TO HOLD BEAUTY PATCHES (THE PATCH BOX), AS PORTRAIT MINIATURES AND BIBELOTS (TO HOLD A SMALL DECORATIVE OBJECT).



Always popular – and retailing at around \$90-150 – are Limoges novelty boxes, originally designed for snuff or pills. A lucky punter picked up these 11 pieces (signed Gérard Ribierre, late 20th century) for \$375 at Bonham's San Francisco in January 2014. Courtesy Bonhams

first deposits were discovered in Saxony in 1709, giving the manufacture at Meissen a head start. Sixty years later, high-quality deposits were found at St-Yrieix-la-Perche, near Limoges in west central France. The area also had plentiful supplies of wood for the kilns and water to drive paste-mills, as well as mineral deposits of gold, copper, iron and manganese, whose oxides provided colour and glaze. Limoges is still the capital of French porcelain production, but the appellation 'Limoges' includes the surrounding area.

In 1769, King Louis XV acquired the land and made porcelain production a royal privilege. Production was uneven in the early years; hard-paste porcelain needs to be fired at 1400° C rather than the 900° required for soft-paste – and the kilns were by no means

Twenty years later there were sixteen manufactories in the town, with more setting up in the surrounding area.

The mid-nineteenth century saw the inception and rise of international exhibitions. Limoges *porcelainiers* recognised their opportunity and realised that they needed to stand out. This they did by exploiting both the startling whiteness and purity of their production and their skill at decoration under glaze. They also realised the need to mark their production, something they had rarely done.

At the 1851 Great Exhibition in London a big name emerged, that of Jean Poyat. At a time when taste favoured complex and highly decorated items, his 'American' dinner service was remarkable for its simplicity, octagonal line and absence of colour. Poyat



In Limoges, the Musée national Adrien Dubouché is named for the businessman and philanthropist who founded an influential school of decorative arts in Limoges. The porcelain is displayed in cabinets resembling opened moulds. © RMN (Limoges, Cité de la céramique)/René-Gabriel Ojéda



This *Coupelle à la libellule* (Dragonfly Cup), made by Pouyat c.1903 is one of the museum's treasures. The 'grain de riz' technique was spectacular, but eventually proved too costly. © RMN (Limoges, Cité de la céramique)/Hervé Lewandowski

did it again in Paris in 1855 with his Cérés service, and in 1878 with the 'grain de riz' service. The former had a spectacularly intricate centrepiece and the latter was so-called as it had finely cut holes, shaped like rice grains and filled with transparent glaze.

Decoration under glaze required mastery of the 'grand feu' technique – a single firing at high temperature. Jean-Baptiste Ruaud was the first to use coal-fired kilns and he and his fellow porcelainiers perfected the palette of colours we know today. Notable at the time were the Chinese-inspired blue-and-white. They also perfected *pâte-sur-pâte*, a single firing with a decor of slip. Another development was in the architectural sector; pieces fired at high temperature were impervious to the weather, so a whole new market opened up – notably in stoneware.

Another big name from the second half of the nineteenth

century was the American David Haviland, who moved to Limoges from New York in 1842 in search of porcelain to import to the United States. He moved away from circular decorative motifs to embrace the asymmetrical Japanese-inspired decor popular at the time, preferring elegant simplicity and refinement. Remarkably, by the late 1850s sales of Limoges porcelain in the United States accounted for half of the manufacture.

Haviland's sons explored creative relationships with artists such as Jean Dufy, brother of painter Raoul and his grandson, Paul, married Suzanne Laliq (daughter of Nancy school glassmaker René). All of these connections put Limoges manufactories in the forefront of twentieth century artistic achievement as they evolved with the Art Nouveau and Art Deco movements. At one point in the 1920s, as many as 48 companies were producing wares marked Limoges – also often with a factory mark and/or signature of the decorator.

The Paris decorating studio Le Tallec, which opened in 1930, is known for its very high quality decoration on Limoges porcelain and pieces from this studio tend to command high prices. Although still in operation today, it's now owned by Tiffany & Co and modern items decorated at the studio bear the Tiffany name.

In the later twentieth century Limoges explored contacts with haute couture, creating such iconic pieces as the *Toucan* dinner service for Hermès in the 1980s.

When collecting Limoges, there are a number of factors to consider. If you're buying dinnerware, for example, and the set is transfer decorated, make sure the transfers are placed so they complement the style of the porcelain – sometimes there is little harmony between the blank and its decoration.

If the item is decorated with human figures, make sure they're well proportioned both as figures and within the blank, and dressed in clothes suitable for the period. Ideally the facial expression should convey a feeling or mood, and the background should form part of the overall tableau and be suitably detailed. When there are several people in the decoration there should be some interaction between them.

As a general rule, the value of Limoges porcelain intended as a decorative object is determined by the size of the item and the quality of the decoration. The value of functional sets such as dinnerware is determined by completeness and the size of the set – a dinnerware set for six is less valuable than a dinnerware set for eight. Pieces that are entirely hand painted and well executed are generally more valuable than those incorporating transfers or those with a combination of transfers and



Many items on the market today are imitations. This novelty box is genuine; the mark *peint main* (hand-painted) is a reliable guide, as are the marks for P.V. and Rochard, both well-documented producers. Courtesy Ivor Hughes.

hand painted highlights and a recognised artist's signature will add value. Having said that... there are also undecorated pieces that are more highly prized than decorated, due to the translucence of the porcelain, the artistic style of the sculpting or the rarity of certain blanks. These rarer blanks include jardinières, unusually shaped vases, large chargers, glove boxes (part of the dressing set), letter boxes and chamber pots.

Although production of hard-paste porcelain began in Limoges in 1771, most of the items produced in the first 75 years are in museums and private collections and are unlikely to be discovered by collectors. Most pieces of Limoges on the market today will date from around 1855 to the present.

Useful websites:

royal-limoges.com for a virtual tour of production processes
musee-adriendubouche.fr for details of collections



Check out the Royal-Limoges site, where you can have a virtual tour of the whole process of porcelain production – still faithful to the origins. Courtesy Royal Limoges