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Gallery 18 - People and Portraits

Flatback Pottery - Figure of Collier and Smith, c1866

Spoken by Jenna Rose, Curator

Several important donations enriched Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museum's ceramic collections in the 1990s, including the flat back figures from the Catherine Fleming Collection.

Flat back figures are pottery figurines made in England from the 18th century onwards.

They may evoke feelings of nostalgia, or maybe tame kitsch at worst - but in their day these figures were edgy!

Images in clay are as old as the history of pottery, but English figure manufacturing did not flourish until the 1730s.

The occasional individual figure may have been made by an adventurous potter before then, but figures had never been produced on a commercial scale before.

The making of animal and human figures for pleasure, devotional and ritualistic reasons was stimulated by Asian and European porcelain imports during the 18th century.

The factories produced porcelain figures for their wealthy customers. The 18th century was a period of great economic change and the subsequent growth of the merchant and trading classes saw an increase in people with disposable income.

They required a range of fine wares, including dinner, tea and dessert services. Ornamental pieces in the form of vases, candlesticks and figures were required for the table top. The Staffordshire potters sought to fulfil those demands.

Earthenware manufacturers, seizing the opportunity, produced a range of cheaper wares to fill a gap at the lower end of the market and as techniques and skills improved so the complexity of the figures increased.

Technology to mass-produce imagery was not like we have today, consumers were starved for affordable artwork and objects to decorate their homes. The cheap earthenware ornaments were only modelled and decorated on the front and were slim enough to fit on a shelf or mantelpiece - hence the name flat back figures. They let the British middle class express their personal tastes and interests.

The earliest figures feature classical artwork and religious themes. Artists at the Staffordshire potteries soon recognised a market for figurines based on celebrities, sporting heroes, newspaper stories, current events and even fairy tales.

The subjects depicted in the Staffordshire potteries during the Victorian era were not for the fainthearted: imagine giving the gift of a figurine that portrayed a murder or showed a gruesome circus attack.

The range of figures in Aberdeen's collection show complexity, a range of styles and a spectrum of colour. The figures demonstrate changes in style and fashions and illustrate technical developments in the pottery industry.

This double, flat back earthenware figure has overglaze painted decoration. There are no makers' marks; this is common in figures produced between 1740 and 1900.

The figure represents the murder of Thomas Smith by William Collier at Staffordshire, in 1866. The potters, inspired by the subsequent news coverage, may have produced this figure as early as within a week of the event.

Thomas Smith was shot, then beaten to death with a gunstock. The murder weapon was found hidden in a drainpipe near William Collier's home. He was a well-known poacher and was the obvious suspect. He was found guilty and was sentenced to death by hanging on the 7th of August 1866.

The ceramic figures are set against an arch of foliage with their arms extended to each other's necks as if they are in a struggle. William Collier's poached game can be seen at their feet and the murder weapon is poised in his hand, ready to make the fatal blow.