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Early Italian Ceramic Printing



A Doccia teapot of c1750. The decoration on the body is transfer printed from copper plates and that on the lid is stencilled.
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The first decoration of ceramics with printed designs is of remarkably early date. There is a small number of Italian maiolica plates and dishes, probably made in Turin, that bear printed panels within decoration that is otherwise painted. All the decoration is in blue. Although these pieces are difficult to date precisely, they are considered to be from the late seventeenth or, possibly, the early eighteenth century – well before transfer printing on ceramics was carried out in England [1&2].

Italian potters also seem to have been the first to employ printing in the decoration of porcelain. Certain pieces made at the Doccia porcelain factory, where stenciled decoration was also employed, were decorated with underglaze blue transfer prints[1&3]. The printing is somewhat uncertain and discontinuities in the printed patterns needed to be retouched by a painter's brush. Printing at Doccia was only carried on for a short time, from about 1749 to 1752. It therefore only just pre-dates the earliest ceramic printing in England.

Neither the printing on tin glazed wares at Turin nor the printing of porcelain at Doccia seem to have been commercially successful and no tradition of transfer printing in the Italian ceramic industry resulted from these early ventures. Only four pieces of printed maiolica and about 50 pieces of printed Doccia porcelain are known.

No detailed description of the printing processes used at Turin and Doccia seems to have survived. However, a letter written in 1751 by Carlo Ginori, the founder of the Doccia factory, to his factory manager provides a number of interesting details: *Have a further printing trial made of your blue colour from delicate engravings from the enclosed copper-plate, in some lid of a snuff-box, which you will send back to me on Sunday with the afore-mentioned copper-plate so that I can have it engraved more deeply in those areas where that is necessary, but tell Micio to be very careful to wash off well all the colour from the skin and make sure first to clean off well from the copper the colour with which a pull has been taken here*[1&4]. From this it is clear that the engraved copper plates were coated with cobalt color and the engraving transferred using a flexible skin, rather than paper. There is no information as to whether the plates were heated or a press employed.

References

1. JVG Mallet, *English Ceramic Circle Transactions*, 22, 89-115 (2011)

2. Guido Farris and Paolo Roseo, *Faenza*, XCI, 121-30 (2005)

3. Roberto Bondi, *Faenza*, LVII, 38-41 (1971)

4 Alessandro Biancalana, *Faenza*, XCII, 75-76 (2006)