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Overglaze Printing on English Porcelain: the beginnings



Fig. 1 The only known Chelsea saucer with printed decoration c1750-52 (The British Museum)

The earliest known piece of English porcelain bearing transfer printed decoration is a Chelsea saucer [1]. It has a raised anchor mark indicating that it was made about 1750-52. The overglaze print is in black, with colours added by hand, and depicts a couple in a garden. Whether it was decorated in Birmingham or later at Battersea is difficult to say.

There is also the possibility that it was decorated elsewhere in London, since the Swiss enamel artist, André Rouquet, states that he saw transfer printing being carried out at a currently unidentified factory located near to the Chelsea porcelain factory. Although the book in which he recorded this information was not published in Paris until 1755, the observation must have been made before Rouquet left England in late 1752. However, no other reference to this factory seems to exist and this printed Chelsea saucer is an isolated enigma.

A very important figure in the development of English ceramic printing was the engraver Robert Hancock. Between 1746 and 1753 he served an apprenticeship to an engraver in Birmingham. There he must have encountered John Brooks and learned of his printing activities. After completing his apprenticeship, Hancock engraved a series of prints after Boitard some of which are dated 1754. These appear on enamels and also on Worcester porcelain. The enamels were probably printed in Birmingham but it is unclear whether the Worcester porcelain was printed there or at the factory.



Fig 2. A Worcester creamboat c1756, printed in "smoky primitive" style with a castle

These and other early prints are sometimes referred to as “smoky primitives” due to their slightly uncertain impressions [2]. Some of these designs were occasionally further decorated with painted enamel colors.



Fig. 3 The Red Bull pattern

A few patterns were specifically engraved in outline form, so that they could be colored in. The *Red Bull* was a particularly long running example of this type [3]. Introduced about 1754, it was still in use in the later 1760s.

About 1756 Hancock moved to Worcester, where he was to provide the factory with many engraved copper plates. This was not an exclusive arrangement, however, as he supplied similar plates to the Bow factory [4]. Indeed, it is possible that some popular patterns such as *L'Amour* and the *Tea Party* may have appeared on Bow porcelain before they were used at Worcester.



Fig. 4 A Bow plate c1754-56, transfer printed with L'Amour and with a hand painted floral border

Despite being early into the field of transfer printing, Bow never utilized the process on a large scale. Signed examples of Hancock's print of the *Tea Party* are also found on Chinese porcelain [5]. It is not known who printed these pieces or where. It could even have been Hancock himself.



Fig 5. A Chinese porcelain tea canister decorated with the Tea Party, the print signed R Hancock fecit



Fig 6 Signature RH Worcester for Robert Hancock and anchor rebus for Holdship



Fig 7 Bow plate c 1754-56 bearing a combined print of L'Amour and the Wheeling Chair that is signed R Hancock fecit below the dog (© Trustees of the British Museum)

The printing operation at Worcester seems to have been under the control of the brothers Richard and Josiah Holdship, who were partners in the firm. Richard had secured the factory premises and supplies of soaprock for the Worcester company. Hancock's relationship with the Holdships is not completely clear but he seems to have been the major supplier of engraved printing plates to the Worcester factory. He moved to Worcester, probably about 1756. He was briefly a partner in the porcelain works (1772-3).

Occasionally, Hancock's engravings on Worcester are signed RH and sometimes a signature is hidden within the pattern. More rarely a full clear signature is found. Some prints include an anchor [6]. This is a rebus for Holdship. Hancock's engravings for Bow are usually unsigned. A rare exception is a combined print of *L'Amour* and *The Wheeling Chair* [7].

Early printing, including a unique class of polychrome printing, is also found on the porcelain made at Vauxhall. **more**