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# Blue printed earthenware in the 19th century

It is widely accepted that Josiah Spode was the first Staffordshire potter to introduce underglaze blue printed earthenware on a commercial scale. By about 1784 he was in production and was soon joined by other potters in the district anxious to be in the forefront of this lucrative market. The first blue transfer-printed patterns produced in Staffordshire were Asian scenes and designs, many of which appear to be based on original Chinese patterns. The earliest English patterns are often coarsely engraved and printed in a dark, inky blue (1). The landscapes have the traditional Chinese perspective, with the bottom of the scene representing the foreground, the middle distance in the center, and the far distance at the top; often resulting in pagodas and trees seeming to float on clouds above the main design.

Many of the Chinese-inspired patterns include weeping trees. Perhaps it was for this reason that in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century blue transfer patterns were generally known as "willow" patterns. It was during the Victorian period that one "willow" was singled out, and in 1849 the romantic tale of tragic lovers was first written to rationalize certain features of the pattern. Since that time the story has become so well known that it is often mistaken for an authentic, traditional Chinese legend.

As the skills of the potter developed, bodies and glazes improved, and with the refinement of cobalt preparation for the blue, a clearer, brighter transfer print was produced. In the early nineteenth century it was usual for the pattern to cover the whole ceramic piece; the large central scene encircled by a wide border. The engravers also became more expert at their craft; line engravings were improved and stipple punching was introduced giving greater tonal range. The combination of cut lines and punched dots allowed a freer expression of light and shade, of depth and perspective. From the early years of the nineteenth century these more sophisticated techniques were employed to meet the change in taste and fashion. The prints now reflected the gentlemanly interest in botany and the natural sciences, and topographical views of Europe and Great Britain appeared, inspired by artists' impressions made while on the Grand Tour (2). The American customers had their own preferences, and as well as the royal blue designs in the English taste, there was a large market for topographical scenes of England and North America printed in a very dark blue. (3)

As transfer printing became established as a cornerstone of the English pottery industry, the manufacturers continued to respond to changing taste and fashion. By 1830, as an alternative to the all-over blue printed pattern, designs with a more open feel were introduced (4). The center print was now not inspired by actual scenes or botanical specimens but was based on imagination and fantasy. The views of Venice, the Alps, Egypt or China would never have been recognized by their inhabitants, nor was the flora and fauna necessarily realistic, however, overall compositions were pleasing and found a ready market. One of the most striking differences between the earlier patterns and the new styles is the paler blue color and overall lighter tone of the print. This was achieved by reducing the amount of stippled ground and having a smaller central design and border with much more of the white earthenware body showing.

A new product emerged when these more open patterns were printed in deep blue. The result was an effect known as "flow blue," where the blue flowed in the glaze and blurred the details of the pattern, resulting in an ethereal looking image.(5) American consumers showed a preference for this style, which was a lucrative product line for the Staffordshire potters from the 1840s into the 1860s. In the last quarter of the 19th century b lue continued to be used, becoming the vehicle for patterns based on various past traditional styles as well as for some contemporary aesthetic themed patterns.(6)  And the fascination with blue transfer-printed pottery continues. Many museums have collections of transfer-printed pottery, and

for beginners or experienced collectors the Transferware Collectors Club (transcollectorsclub.org) and the Northern Ceramic Society (northernceramicsociety.org) offer communities that encourage in

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