

Adam Buck: a paper by Jon Whiteley, prefaced and summarised by Robin Hildyard.

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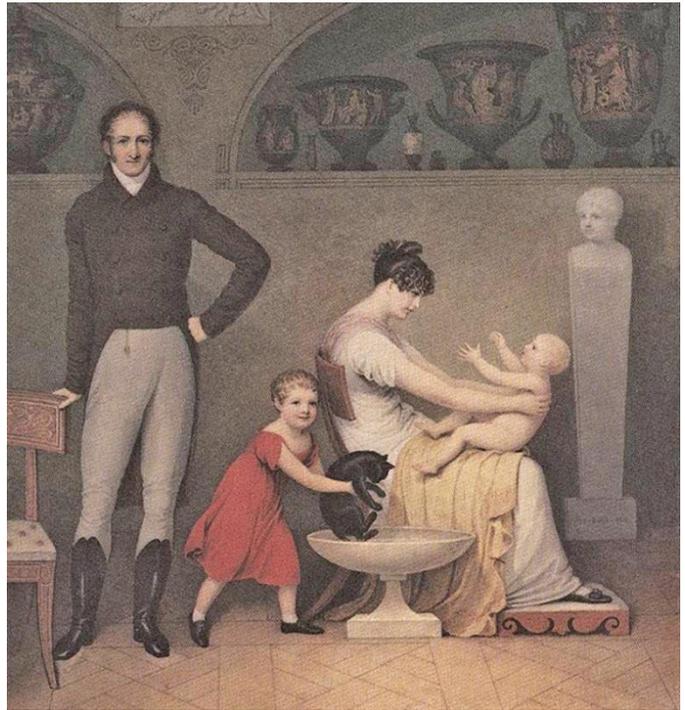
The name Adam Buck has long been known to students of ceramics as the source of prints depicting young mothers and children in Regency dress, usually seated on typical furniture of the period. Yet almost nothing has been published on the subject, partly perhaps because Buck, in his capacity as unwitting “designer”, neither engraved his own work nor worked directly for the ceramic industry: so that, for example, Williams-Woods’ book on transfer-printing neither mentions him nor even deals with the technique through which his soft and subtle drawings were so successfully interpreted, “Bat Printing”. It is therefore extremely fortunate that a scholar of the calibre of Dr Jon Whiteley is now able to set the record straight, having made a serious study over many years of the man, his artistic output and his influence.

Buck’s huge success was not altogether surprising, given that the mood in Britain around 1800 was still one of Neo-Classicism (though turning increasingly from Rome to the “Greek Revival”), and of Sentimentality. The blue and green shell-edged creamwares were still as popular as ever, shortly to be joined by the snow-white felspathic “Castleford” wares with bright blue enamel edges, the plethora of black-edged monochrome printed creamwares and early bone-chinas, and the various types of printed drabwares. As for shapes, the sarcophagus provided inspiration not only for wooden tea-caddies and needlework-boxes but also for teapot bodies, whilst the austere and severely practical shapes of Sheffield plate with their blank surfaces also continued to play their part in ceramic design. In terms of decoration, Wedgwood himself had added considerably to this mood by commissioning well-born ladies to design sprigged decoration for his Jasperware: notably Lady Diana Beauclerk, (born Lady Diana Spencer, a daughter of the 5th Earl of Sunderland later 3rd Duke of Marlborough), and the Irish aristocrat Lady Templetown, both of whose touching scenes of children and domestic life continued to appeal to public taste during the last quarter of the 18th century. It was also the heyday of cheap prints - often produced as pairs, or even sets - and the popularisation of work by artists such as Bartolozzi and Angelica Kauffman, whose mythological and allegorical oval vignettes were framed in tasteful black. In the 1790s, too, touching little roundel groups of children at play were engraved after the work of Francis Wheatley, later to be used as decoration on creamwares of the Don Pottery. Into this established scenario came a newcomer, the aspiring Irish artist Adam Buck.

John Whiteley’s paper

The numerous ceramic designs after Adam Buck produced during the period c.1810-1830 are found at a wide range of potteries, from smart beginnings with Spode, Chamberlain Worcester and Flight, Barr & Barr, through the mass-produced bone-chinas of New Hall and Machin to Staffordshire earthenware makers such as Enoch Wood and Davenport, ultimately filtering down to producers of pink lustre and yellow-ware in the North East and Scotland. These latter included Sewell or Sewell & Donkin at Newcastle, Dawson at Sunderland, and the Newbigging Pottery in East Lothian, plausibly connected to the Sunderland pottery of the same name. Prints engraved after Buck’s watercolours were also pasted above the gilt overmantel mirrors made at Boston Massachusetts, and used on contemporary fans and textiles.

Adam Buck was born around 1758 in Ireland, and became a highly successful miniaturist and portrait painter in Ireland before, armed with important introductions to prospective patrons, he moved in 1795 to the heart of fashionable society in the West End of London. Establishing himself at first in Piccadilly and later in the smart Soho area, he exhibited regularly at the Royal Academy, associating himself also with influential promoters of the Greek Revival such as Thomas Hope – for long thought to be the subject of this self portrait of 1813 (1) which depicts Buck, his wife and two of his four children (one having died). Apart from the cool palette and slightly two-dimensional figure profiles, which bring to mind not only Greek vase painting but also the heroic French Revolutionary work of David, of great interest are the identifiable Greek vases in the background: that on the far left from Hamilton’s Collection, that on the far right belonging to Buck himself. In the portrait, even the motif of a cat being dipped by one of his sons is adapted from a known Greek vase, probably also the source of a later print entitled “My Dear little Shock, you must have a Dip” in which a puppy is immersed. His enthusiasm for the genre led to publication of a single engraved Fascicule of Greek vases, intended as the first of a series but thwarted by lack of funds.



(1)

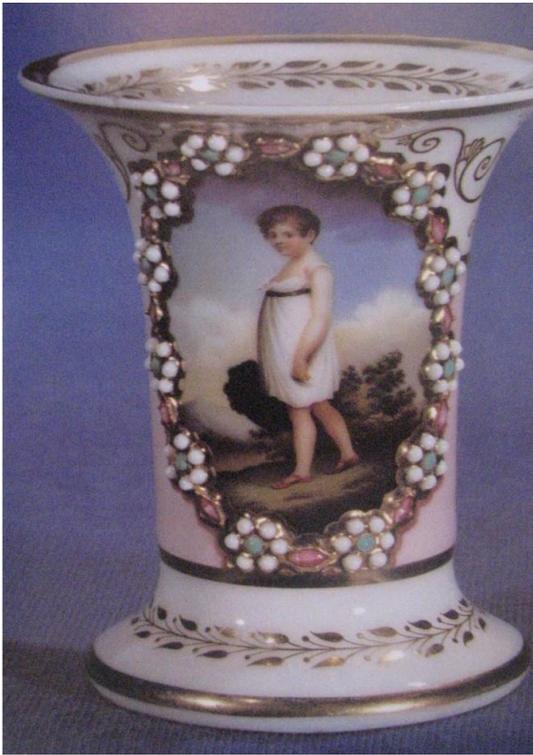
As regards ceramics, Adam Buck’s drawings and watercolours depicting scenes of maternal joy, which neatly formed vignettes entirely without background, were found to be ideal when carefully translated into stipple engravings and applied to the thin and plain surfaces of contemporary teawares – in particular the New Oval, Old Oval and London shapes, and Bute-shaped cups. A signed drawing of 1808 with a mother and daughter, known as “The Darling Awake” (2) may indicate the beginning of the craze for his work, which appeared first on the teawares of Ridgway and Machin (3, sold as Ridgway), and



(2)



(3)

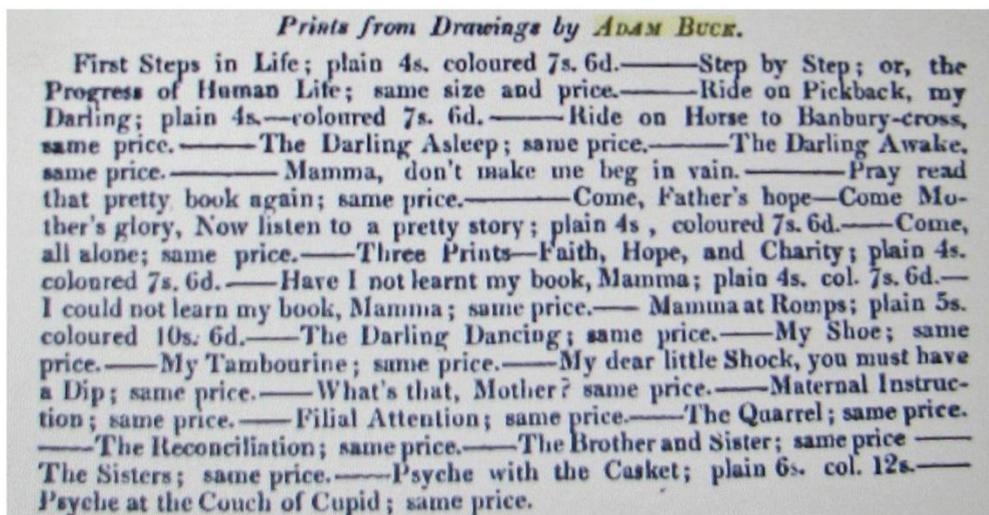


(4)

which was occasionally used as enamel decoration at Chamberlains Worcester such as the spill vase with “Mother’s Hope” (4) and also on other luxury pieces possibly painted by the Daniels at the Spode factory¹. Although some 70-80 scenes of “Adam Buck-type” are known on ceramics, comparatively few can be securely attributed to his hand. Of those that can, a most useful list was published in the print-seller Ackermann’s *Edinburgh Review* of 1822, (5) where plain prints were priced from four shillings (20P), and coloured from seven shillings and sixpence (35P), suggesting a prosperous middle-class market. Some titles can be attached to popular printed decoration, such as “Step by Step”, “Ride on Pickback, my Darling”, “Ride on Horse to Banbury-cross”, “The Darling Asleep” and “The Darling Awake”, “Mama don’t make me beg in vain, Pray read that book again”, “Come Father’s Hope, Come Mother’s glory, Now listen to a pretty story”, three prints “Faith, Hope & Charity”², “Mama at Romps”, “The Darling Dancing”, “My

Tambourine”, “My dear little Shock, you must have a Dip”, “Psyche with the Casket”, “Psyche at Couch of Cupid”.

The key to the success of Adam Buck’s printed work lay in the skill with which the engraver interpreted his drawings, using stippling to imitate soft pencil, and even sometimes aquatint to imitate watercolour. Ackermann clearly used some of the best engravers, perhaps Samuel Freeman c.1773- 1857, but in order to adapt these prints as decoration on



(5)

ceramics it was necessary to re-engage them in reduced form – sometimes in several sizes to suit different parts of a tea service – which inevitably watered down the spirit of the original. Nonetheless, at exactly the time when Buck’s work first became popular, a new type of over-glaze printing was developed which reproduced stipple engraving with great sensitivity, known as “Bat Printing”. Here, a prepared pad or “bat” of flexible animal glue was pressed onto an engraved plate charged with an oily mixture, the resulting sticky print

was carefully applied to the glazed pot which was then given a dusting of fine pigment (usually black, but sometimes iron-red or lilac), with any surplus blown off. During the subsequent low-temperature firing, the oily base medium burnt away leaving the pigment fused to the glaze. If we doubt that this technique did full justice to Adam Buck's drawings, we have only to look at the few humble earthenwares bearing his designs reproduced by naïve line-engraving.

With the advantages of accuracy, speed and economy, the technique was rapidly taken up by major potteries such as Spode, Minton and Mason though, as noted by Geoffrey Godden, it was at New Hall during the transitional period in 1810-12 when the body changed from hard-paste to bone-china, that Adam Buck's designs were adopted and mass-produced, using as many as 12 different scenes for a complete tea service. "The Darling Asleep" and "Mama don't make me beg in vain, Pray read that book again", the mother and child with candelabrum (this 'studio prop' also

borrowed from Greek vases) and the mother playing the harp, are typically found on New Hall porcelain, but other unidentified "Black Infant" factory designs may have been pastiches devised by the engravers working for the ceramic industry. Where New Hall led, others such as Machin and the Herculaneum factory followed, without however resorting to the gold chequered borders (6) and gaudy enamel over-painting, or mazarine blue ground, used latterly at New Hall but relying instead on the tried and tested formula of plainness. Herculaneum products (7) have two diagnostic features, a slightly greasy-looking surface and the placing of the bat-print on the front of the cup. The products of Machin display bat-prints of a young baby waking its mother with all the wild extravagance of a Thomas Hope design.



(6)

Private Collection



(7)

courtesy Peter Hyland

At least one marked piece from the prolific Enoch Wood factory has been noted, but a rare blue-ground pearlware jug of Chetham & Woolley shape, possibly also attributable to



(8) Private Collection



(9) Private Collection

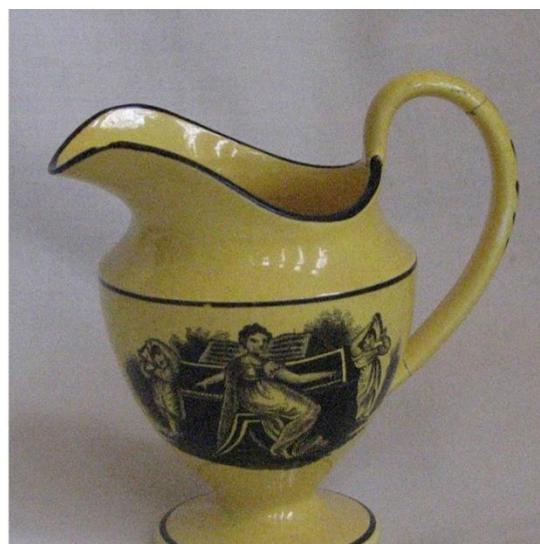
Wood or Wood & Caldwell, displays a curious aberration (8) wherein the design “Mama don’t make me beg in vain, Pray read that book again”, has been rendered rather harshly into bas-relief.

It was, however, drabware, an earthenware stained putty-colour, usually with enamelled edges and monochrome painting or printing, which became popular during the first decade of the 19th C. Later in date and further downmarket, those drabware dessert dishes with moulded vine-leaf borders and brown prints suggest one of potteries in the North East, like the crude bat-printed creamware dessert services with pierced edges (9) decorated with the pattern called “Badminton” which is also found on drabware. In addition, vast numbers of well-potted mustard-coloured children’s tea services have survived, much against the odds if they were really intended as toys. Other children’s wares of the yellow-ware type⁴ have green edges and lilac bat-prints, but apart from a few examples marked “Sewell” (before 1828) and “Sewell & Donkin” (after 1828), none bear factory marks and could be products of the North Hilton Pottery, or the Dawson Pottery at Sunderland.

The survival of a copper plate with Adam Buck-type designs in three sizes, including a mother seated at a square piano with two children, at the Laing Art Gallery & Museum at



(10) see Fig.51 of J.Jefferson Miller II ⁴



(11) Private Collection

Newcastle-upon-Tyne, though having provenance back to the Maling family of potters at North Hilton, only serves to complicate the issue further, since none of the prints are known to be Buck's own designs (10). They are, however, found on wares, and can provide a reasonably reliable attribution to North Hilton (11). But the story of yellow-ware is a tangled one which includes the unidentified products of the Newbigging Pottery at Musselborough in East Lothian.

By about 1830, four years before Adam Buck's death, his work had been completely overshadowed by the Revived Rococo, only to return to prominence in the c.1890-1920 period when, along with most of the decorative arts of the late 18th – early 19th centuries, his prints were seen to encapsulate the spirit of the age, and reached their highest value of up to £100. It is perhaps ironic that today he is known better for the designs “borrowed” without permission by the ceramic industry than for his delightful portraits and miniatures.

Footnotes

1. See the New Shape French Jar pattern no.3243, with figure of Hibernia in a Jig illustrated as Plate 184 by Leonard Whiter, “Spode” (1970), and also an écuelle with “The Darling Awake” illustrated in colour.
2. The inclusion of a set of three prints “Faith, Hope & Charity” at four shillings compares well with contemporary sets of Staffordshire pearlware figures which, at a mere half a crown (12 ½ P) per set, were clearly aimed at a cottage market.
3. Peter Hyland “The Herculaneum Pottery: Liverpool's Forgotten Glory” Figure 133.
4. For examples, see J.Jefferson Miller II, “English Yellow-Glazed Earthenware”, London, Barrie & Jenkins (1974).

POSTSCRIPT

The important exhibition **A REGENCY BUCK. Adam Buck (1759-1833)**, co-curated by Peter Darvall and Jon Whiteley, took place at the Ashmolean in 2015. The comprehensive and magnificently illustrated catalogue includes a chapter on Designs in the Applied Arts, together with an Appendix of twenty-five selected ceramics transfer-printed with images of Mothers and Children, which largely correct an earlier study by Cyril Williams-Wood, “Adam Buck on Ceramics”, *Apollo* vol.121, No.280, 1985. Notably, the catalogue has established that although the list of Buck designs now numbers around 797, only 10 of the 80 or so ‘Adam Buck-style’ designs known on ceramics can actually be related to the artist's hand.

An obituary of Jon Whiteley appeared in the Oxford Ceramics Group Newsletter 47, June 2020.