



Spongeware, from left: fruit bowl, late 19th century, £125, Tobias and the Angel. David Methven & Sons bowl, c1880, £165; David Methven & Sons shallow bowl, 1890, £230, both Becca Gauldie. Horn dish, £12.95, Summerill & Bishop. Medium natural horn spoon, £18 for four, Summerill & Bishop. Wooden bowl, £18; Greek pomegranate in pumpkin hand-printed ticking, £189 per m; red hand-printed napkin, £12.50, all Tobias and the Angel. Natural linen tablecloth with white panel, £95, Volga Linen

Everyday BEAUTY

Traditionally dismissed as 'cheap and cheerful', antique spongeware is now much sought-after and commands high prices. Ellie Tennant soaks up the history and finds herself absorbed by its charms

PHOTOGRAPHS **RACHEL WHITING** STYLING **KIERA BUCKLEY-JONES**

There's a lovely naive quality to antique spongeware,' says entrepreneur Emma Bridgewater, whose own spongeware patterns now adorn many a dresser. 'It's mostly decorated with primitive shapes such as flowers or leaves, repeated all the way round: blob, blob, blob. I find those simple repeats incredibly pleasing. These days, we use upholstery foam to print our pottery but the basic method remains the same.'

MASS MARKET APPEAL

The art of decorating pottery by hand using sponge printing is nothing new. Some of the Minoan ceramics from 4,000 years ago on display in the Archaeological Museum in Heraklion, Crete, are decorated with basic sponge stippling. But the technique evolved here during the 19th century, when potteries in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland began to use fine-pored sponges cut into shapes to print simple, coloured patterns on to inexpensive earthenware.

Key potteries included Llanelly in south Wales and David Methven & Sons in Kirkcaldy, east Scotland, which both produced a vast amount. Notable English potteries such as George Jones and WM Adams & Co were also big producers. Confusingly for dealers and collectors alike, copying was rife and many potteries didn't mark their pieces.

'It was the cheapest of wares,' writes historian Henry Kelly in his book *Spongeware: 1835-1935*. 'Indeed, some

potteries did not want it known that they were reduced to making anything so tawdry; particularly as some of them only made it when times were bad.' Antiques dealer Robert Young, who has a personal spongeware collection of 150 pieces, says a lot of it was unmarked because it was decorated by individuals at home. 'It was a cottage industry. Women would pick up cheap blanks from the pottery, sponge them on the kitchen table, then return them for the second firing.'

Children decorated it too – young girls mostly, who worked in the potteries, printing by hand. A fascinating interview transcript published in a 1978 edition of *Scottish Pottery* revealed something of life in the 'spongion hoose', thanks to 83-year-old Mrs B McGovern – a former child worker in the spongeware department at Verreville Pottery in Glasgow, 1913. 'Ah goat five shillings a week. An then ah wis pit on piecwork... the spongion shoap wasnae as high paid as the painting or the printin,' she recalled. 'Hit wis jist wae a sponge.'

RARE COLLECTIONS

Because it was so cheap, it was well used and so only a relatively small amount has survived intact. 'It was the kind of tableware you'd find in a farmhouse kitchen, used to serve porridge and soup to farm workers who lived in little bothies,' says Becca Gauldie, an antiques dealer who started collecting spongeware at the age of 12, after gathering broken shards on beaches near Kirkcaldy. ▶



Bowl with blue rim and red floral motif, c1880, £160, Robert Young Antiques. **Jug** with central green pattern, c1910, £115, Becca Gauldie. Hand block-printed **notebooks**, £9.50 each, Tobias and the Angel

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LEFT *Bowls, from top:* Flower motif **bowl**, late 19th century, £95, Tim Bowen Antiques. Scottish zigzag pattern **bowl**, 19th century, £110, Becca Gauldie. Shallow **bowl**, 19th century, £85; 'Ethels' in 'Sludge Green 2' hand block-printed **cloth**, £189 per m; red hand block-printed **napkin**, £12.50, all Tobias and the Angel. **Wooden spoon**, find similar at Lakeland **BOTTOM LEFT** Norman W Franks was a London retailer specialising in 'cottage' pottery **BOTTOM RIGHT** Many marks are a mystery

'Lots of it got scorched because it was kept resting on the range and people often poured hot dripping into spongeware bowls, which got right into the pottery and discoloured it.'

As such, collections are rare – even the Victoria and Albert Museum only has a small selection of relatively refined mid 18th-century sponged creamware from Staffordshire potteries on show. So where are the rural 19th-century pieces from Welsh, Scottish and Irish potteries? The answer seems to be that savvy collectors are snapping it up. Tim Bowen, an expert in Welsh spongeware, has noticed the trend. 'There's been a recent resurgence in interest. When I started dealing 25 years ago, all the weekend auctions in Wales would have spongeware but now it's harder to find and consequently prices have steadily gone up.' Dealers agree that as key collectors amass more and more items, there's less stock moving around. 'It used to sit on the window sills of cottages in fishing villages,' remembers Becca Gauldie. 'Now it can be found in loft apartments in New York.'

ROUGH AND READY

Prices vary according to condition, age and design, but rare pieces can fetch thousands of pounds. 'I sold a collection of 25 pieces of blue and white spongeware pottery from the 1800s for £6,500 recently,' says Robert Young. Small single items such as mugs can ►



FACING PAGE *Top shelf:* Scottish **shallow bowl** with red flowers, c1880, £230; small Scottish **bowl with lid**, c1870, £145; Scottish **bowl** (at back), c1875, £135; Scottish salt dish, 1860-80, £135, all Becca Gauldie. English solid turned fruitwood **loving cup**, c1650, £3,200 Robert Young Antiques. *Middle shelf:* **Books**, find similar at vintage markets. **Notebooks**, as before. Floral **shallow bowl**, mid 19th century, £75, The Dining Room Shop. Scottish **butter dish** with butterflies, c1860, £220; Scottish **porridge bowl**, c1870, £135; shallow **bowl**, c1870, £135; Scottish cottage **money bank**, c1840, £98, all Becca Gauldie. *Bottom shelf:* **Soup bowl**, 19th century, £125, Tobias and the Angel. Blue **tea bowl and saucer**, c1860-80, £145, Becca Gauldie. **Bowl** with red floral motif and blue sprigs (at bottom), c1880, £160; floral motif **bowl** with red line, c1870, £200; **bowl** with red geometrical border, c1860, £180, all Robert Young Antiques. Stationery **boxes** covered in hand block-printed paper: small, £28; large, £35, both Tobias and the Angel. **Notebooks**, as before. Elizabeth Hamilton 'Marge' **wallpaper** in 'Cinnabar', £206 per roll, Tissus d'Hélène



On sideboard, from left: Scottish **bowl** in a chinoiserie pattern, c1880, £395, Becca Gaudie. **Pestle and mortar**, find similar at Divertimenti. 'Louella' glass **butter dish**, £19.95, Summerill & Bishop. **Ham stand**, find similar at Chinasearch. Scottish 'Persian Rose' pattern **servicing bowl** with lid, 1860-80, £185 Becca Gaudie. **Wooden board**, find similar at Below Stairs of Hungerford. Vintage silver and bone-handle **knives**, £60 for six, The Dining Room Shop. English blue and white **servicing platter**, c1830, £280 Robert Young Antiques. On kitchen table, from left: **Wooden bowl**, as before. Ram motif **plate**, probably Irish, c1880, £170, Becca Gaudie. Horn **spoon**, as before. 'Everyday' **carafe**, £20; 'Everyday' **short goblet**, £44 for six, both Cox & Cox. Scottish star motif **bowl**, 1860-80, £125, Becca Gaudie. British lidded **mustard pot**, c1880, £220, Robert Young Antiques. Stainless steel **oil can**, £12.95, Summerill & Bishop. British **bowl** with black rim, late 19th century, £80, Tim Bowen Antiques. Scottish **bowl** with lid, 1860-80, £185, Becca Gaudie. Vintage silver **fork**, £45 for six, The Dining Room Shop. **Knife**, as before. Flower pattern **plate**, 1930s, £45 for two, Tobias and the Angel. **Tablecloth**, as before





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be quite affordable though, starting at around £40 each in antiques shops.

It's the simplicity of spongeware that draws many collectors to it today. Rudimentary spongeware was often, as Emma Bridgewater affectionately describes it, 'a bit slapdash'. There are smudges, wonky patterns and mysterious gaps in otherwise unbroken friezes. Sometimes, the border on a bowl or plate was sponged by an unskilled child, then a more senior decorator would hand-paint the centre with a detailed motif such as an animal, a flower or a maxim. Dealer Tim Bowen has one piece in his own collection that he can't bear to part with. 'It's a humble little mug, with the name "Dolly" on it. It's not the most valuable piece – I have sold pristine, early blue and white spongeware mugs for £500 ►

How spongeware spread around the globe...

Around 1900, many of the larger potteries produced spongeware to export to ex-pat communities in places as far-flung as India and the US. Look out for pottery stamped with 'S Oppenheimer & Co Ltd Rangoon', a retailer in Burma. Despite the mark, most of it was actually made in Kirkcaldy potteries. You can still find it if you know where to look.

'I know people who have been to Sri Lanka recently and have found stacks of it for sale in the second-hand markets there for next to nothing because it was sent out to the colonies in such quantities,' says dealer Becca Gauldie. In the 1860s and 1870s, spongeware tea bowls and saucers were shipped to the US.

'People drank from cups with handles by then but they tended to break off during shipping and you could pack more in if they were handleless, so they exported bowls instead,' says Becca. The tea bowl tradition continues in the US and Canada today.



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each – but it's so sweet and personal.'

Robert Young prefers unusual pieces such as the mustard pot he currently has in stock, priced at £220. 'It wasn't just crockery that was decorated using sponges,' says Tim Bowen. 'We have a late 19th-century spongeware toothbrush holder for £110.'

'Japanese collectors love blue and white patterns because that's what they're familiar with, while ex-pats in Canada and America want nostalgic animal motifs but children's porridge bowls with mottoes always sell well to everyone,' says Becca Gaudie, who has a patriotic World War I design in stock, with the music hall lyric 'It's a long long way to Tipperary' emblazoned inside, for £225. 'Nurseryware collectors love them, as do customers who want quirky gifts. A motto on a similar bowl reads, "Ne'er scald yer mou' wi'ither folks kail" – never scald your mouth with other people's kale.'

The fact that spongeware is so robust and useable today is also a big plus for buyers. 'It doesn't need to be put in a glass cabinet,' says Tim Bowen. 'The odd chip or hairline crack doesn't matter when you're serving up salads and stews on a daily basis. We have pieces at home that we use all the time. We mix them up with modern spongeware and it all looks great together on the dresser.' ■



FIND OUT MORE

BUY

- **Becca Gaudie** 07770 741636; beccagaudie.com
- **James Glyn Antiques and Collectibles** jamesglyn.co.uk
- **Robert Young Antiques**, 68 Battersea Bridge Road, London, SW11 3AG. 020 7228 7847; robertyoungantiques.com
- **Sam Lindsay** 07966 225695; sam@samlindsayuk.com
- **Tim Bowen Antiques**, Gallery, Ivy House, Ferryside, Carmarthenshire, SA17 5SS. 01267 267122; timbowenantiques.co.uk
- **Tobias and the Angel**, 68 White Hart Lane, London, SW13 0PZ. 020 8878 8902; tobiasandtheangel.com
- **Welsh Antiques**, Castle Mill, Kidwelly, Carmarthenshire, SA17 5AJ. 01554 890534; welshantiques.com

SEE

- **Highland Folk Museum**, Kingussie Road, Newtonmore, PH20 1AY. 01540 673551; highlandfolk.com. Has around 20 pieces of spongeware on permanent display
- **Kirkcaldy Museum & Art Gallery**, Abbotshall Road, Kirkcaldy, KY1 1YG. 01592 583213; fifedirect.org.uk/museums. Good display of spongeware from Kirkcaldy potteries. Make an appointment with the curator to view more in the archives

READ

- **Scottish Pottery** by Graeme Cruickshank (Osprey Publishing, 2008)
- **Spongeware: 1835-1935, Makers, Marks and Patterns** by Henry Kelly and Arnold & Dorothy Kowalsky (Schiffer Publishing Ltd, 2001)

TOP 'Contented' bowl, mid 19th century, £160, Tim Bowen Antiques. 'Tipperary' motto bowl, c1915, £225, Becca Gaudie. Blue and white tea cup, early 19th century, £80, Tim Bowen Antiques. Running figure mug, c1920, £78, Becca Gaudie. **POSTCARDS**, find similar at vintage markets. **FACING PAGE** Top shelf, from left: Glass jars, find similar at Labour and Wait. Scottish serving bowl, c1880, £95, Tim Bowen Antiques. Elephant motif bowl, c1870, £600, Robert Young Antiques. **NOTEBOOKS**, as before. Sugar shaker, find similar at John Lewis. Blue and red bowl, c1880, £95, Tim Bowen Antiques. Hanging from shelf, from left: Red flower mug, c1880, £95, Tim Bowen Antiques. Tapered loop-handled mug, c1840, £280; blue and white mug, c1870, £140, both Robert Young Antiques. Mid 19th-century South Wales Pottery mug, £160, Tim Bowen Antiques. Metal basket, £24 for three, Cox & Cox. Late 19th-century South Wales Pottery mug, £120, Tim Bowen Antiques. On sideboard, from left: Small early 19th-century teacup, £80, Tim Bowen Antiques. Bowl with red floral motif, c1890, £160; stag motif dish, c1850, £380, both Robert Young Antiques. Enamel cream jug, £16.95, Dotcomgiftshop. American blue and white jug, 19th century, £85, Tobias and the Angel. English spouted blue and green jug, c1830, £350, Robert Young Antiques. English mid 19th-century plate, £140; late 19th-century red patterned rim mug, £125; late 19th-century mug, £65, all Tim Bowen Antiques. Vintage glass comport, £10, RE. Geometric pattern porridge bowl, c1910, £98, Becca Gaudie. **BOOKS**, as before. Confit pot, from £190, I & JL Brown. Red Irish armchair, £625, I & JL Brown. On chair: 'Sarah's Tile' hand block-printed vintage linen, £189 per m, Tobias and the Angel. Cloth on sideboard, as before