
AUCTION NEWS

George Owen the “Bradman” of the pottery world



George Owen's 1893 Chicago Exhibition vase

To many in the porcelain world, English potter George Owen (1845-1912) must seem like the equivalent of Australian batting legend Sir Donald Bradman who died in 2001 aged 92.

Bradman retired from Test cricket in 1948 with an almost perfect batting average (99.94) and Owen, who worked for Royal Worcester, was the only potter in history to perfect the art of intricate, net-like honeycomb pierced effects on the external body of his ceramic creations – and to this day most experts are mystified by his work.

Collectors will have the opportunity to see the best of his work first hand when auctioneer Phil Caldwell auctions online the Tena and Terry Wheeler multi-million dollar Royal Worcester collection near Perth Western Australia from 11am Sunday November 13 (see www.fineauctions.biz for more details).

Reticulated pottery is not new. It is believed the earliest examples were produced in the official kilns of China's Southern Song dynasty (c1127-1279 AD) at Laohudong in Hangzhou. Using different terms when referring to pieces decorated with a textured surface (such as linglong and lòu diào), Chinese craftsmen separately formed the internal and external walls.

The process was complicated – with the internal surface painted before the outer one was applied and fired – and good examples were rare, often fetching higher prices to compensate for elevated risks in production. Europeans did not learn about these reticulated pieces until 1643 when the Dutch East India Company (which had started trading with China) introduced them to fascinated and intrigued collectors – and Chinese potters then began producing them solely for export.



With pierced Chinese porcelain as a guide, European manufacturers rose to the challenge and, by the early 1800s, France's Sevres factory – under the directorship of Alexandre Brongniart – was producing reticulated ceramic pieces inspired by Chinese examples.

George Owen Royal Worcester miniature



Like Bradman, who as a boy practised for hours hitting a golf ball with a cricket stump against a water tank on his family property to perfect his batting art, Owen's powers of concentration and innate ability took the porcelain piercing art to another level. Starting in June 1859 at only age 13 with Royal Worcester, he was employed as a "china presser" in the ornamental department where he was responsible for cutting holes in porcelain using a moulded outline to imitate Sevres pieces. However, for an ambidextrous **George Owen fragility was a byword and he set about perfecting the technique so that**



the finished product was full of much tinier piercings than those found in either the Chinese or Sevres creations.

Constantly experimenting, he worked alone and succeeded in creating a perforated teapot with an inner lining without using an earlier version's pattern – leading to public exhibition and a further 300 commissions.

The delicacy of Owen's technique and his multiple kiln visits risked months of work with the ever present possibility of having to start over a constant shadow.

The 1896 edition of the Pottery Gazette best summed up the process when it reported "the artist (Owen) tooled every one of these miniature apertures without having any tracery, or any other assistance whatever to guide him to regularity, except his eye and hand... if on the last day of his work his knife had slipped, and so made two 'holes' into one, the whole piece would have been ruined".

The best vase he ever produced is the one he made for the 1893 Chicago Exposition and is lot 33 in the forthcoming auction.

Another George Owen creation is a c1908 exquisite and very rare shaped Royal

Worcester miniature (lot 37), demonstrating the artist's trademark piercing, modelled as a deep bowl on a pedestal foot with high domed cover, set on an integral square base.

Other Worcester artists could never match Owen. So secretive was he about his technique, that he worked behind closed doors and hid his tools if anyone entered his workspace.

Even his own son, who provided thin-walled vessels for Owen to perforate, was never allowed to watch – thus protecting his lucrative trademark.

Despite his meticulous skill, Owen's high failure rate resulted in many unfinished pieces – such as an unfired example gifted to the Royal Worcester museum – that have greatly assisted subsequent research into the techniques he used.

Close examination of these unfinished works confirms Owen used the same method as earlier Chinese potters in cutting the wet clay before firing, employing tools often filed down from the metal stays of women's corsets.

Before he started work, he would use a pair of compasses and callipers to carefully measure the distance around a vessel, marking where each incision should be made – and then create the hexagonal holes with a sharp, oiled knife, deftly swapping from hand to hand as he worked his way around the piece.

It is worth noting that, despite having Owen's unfinished pieces as a guide, in more recent times artisans have been unable to replicate his work with such finesse. Even a small test piece punctuated with tiny holes instantly fell apart once fired in the kiln.