

MUSEUM OF ROYAL WORCESTER

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The Museum of Royal Worcester houses the world's largest collection of Worcester porcelain, over 10,000 ceramic objects, dating from the start of production in 1751 up to the closing of the Royal Worcester factory in 2009. This encompasses the work of competing firms in the City (often related through movement of people) that combined into one Worcester Royal Porcelain Company in the later 19th Century, becoming known as Royal Worcester Ltd in 1958. The Museum is situated adjacent to the location of the former factory on the banks of the River Severn and in addition to ceramics holds the extensive factory archive of pattern books, orderbooks, records and design source material. One of the best-known designs produced by Chamberlains Porcelain Works in Worcester – developed for the production, in 1811, of a service for the Prince Regent – betrays the inclination towards chinoiserie in the factory's production. However, Worcester's porcelain designers have also drawn inspiration from designs and shapes originating in the Islamic world. From the early-nineteenth century Worcester porcelain manufacturers both produced items and services for notable clients in the Middle East and its neighbouring countries, as well as garnering shapes and motifs from the ceramic productions of those countries. One of the earliest examples of this is a suite of objects bearing the portrait of the Shah of Iran at the time, Fath-‘Ali Shah (r.1797-1824), and his heir presumptive ‘Abbas Mirza (*fig.1*). Some such objects bear not only Islamicate designs but also inscriptions in Arabic. While the collection is generally well-researched, particularly thanks the indefatigable father and son team of Henry and John Sandon, the connections between Worcester porcelain and the Islamic world remain largely unstudied.

One of the earliest examples of this connection is a plate from a service produced for the Nawab (Nabob) of the Carnatic, Azam Jah (r.1819-1825), around 1820 (*fig.2*). During this period, Royal Worcester production was shared across a number of factories. The factory to produce this service, as well as that all-important service for the Prince Regent, was that of Robert Chamberlain. He was formerly head of decorating in the factory of Dr Wall, the initial founder of the porcelain works, but left to open his own factory in 1783. Many of Chamberlain's products would be shipped to India, for use by those serving with the East India Company. The services ordered in 1817 for the East India Co. headquarters at Fort St George, Madras were the largest ever made at Worcester - the order is reported to have included more than 7,000 items. The order for the service in question here was also placed in Madras, through the import-export firm Griffith's & Co, and comprised over 1,000 pieces, including dinner wares, desert wares, and a breakfast service. The order was so large that it was not completed and shipped until 1823, even though it had been ordered in 1820. The

piece with which we are concerned here is likely to have been part of the breakfast service, owing to its pink border – the dinner service was in a dark blue. The medallion in the centre of the plate gives the name and titles of Azam Jah (*Amīr al-hind nawab a ʿẓam jāh bahādur*) and the date in the Islamic calendar, 1236 (equivalent to 1820).

There is also a second example of a service made for an Indian client bearing a small inscription. A dinner service was produced for the Nawab of Bahawalpur, Sadiq Muhammad Khan, in 1931, bearing the insignia of the state (*fig.3*). The motto appears on a scroll at the bottom of the crest, with the words ‘*ṣādiq*’ and ‘*dūst*’. The crest on the plate, and the one found in the pattern books, give ‘*ṣādiq dūst*’ (*fig.4*). However, the motto of the Nawab was ‘*dūst-i ṣādiq*’ – the two words somehow became transposed in production at Worcester.

These two plates are representative of many of the other objects bearing Arabic inscriptions. From around the 1960s onwards Royal Worcester produced a number of services for the Gulf States. Just as production at Royal Worcester was facing a slump, with reduced demand at home and competition from elsewhere, the Gulf States were in the ascendant, profiting from the off-shore oil reserves discovered earlier in the century. In the collection are examples of dinner services for the states of Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Abu Dhabi. The plates tend to bear the state emblem embedded within a pseudo-arabesque or geometric border design.

Along with dinner wares, coffee sets were produced, following a typically Arabian style of coffee jug, accompanied by small coffeebowls (*fig.5*). One such example of this type of set was produced for the 1985 GCC conference held in Oman. In a more explicit link to oil wealth, one coffee set was produced for the 25th Anniversary of first shipment of onshore oil. Another set was produced for the Oman Police (*Shurta ʿUmān al-Sultāniyya*). Another set made for the Sultan of Oman is a coffee set bearing transfer depictions of some of the countries more well-known and spectacular castles. The names are given in inscriptions on the base of the sugar pot - al-Jalālī in Muscat and al-Rustāq being just two.

A slightly anomalous plate may have been produced for a royal residence in Egypt. The plate, otherwise simply decorated, bears the word ‘*Idfīnā*’ in the centre. This is most likely to be the Edfina Palace, built to the north of Cairo in the eighteenth century, but greatly extended and developed in the early-nineteenth. It is worth noting that, as is the case with a number of the objects referred to here, it is not known if this service was ever produced in full, or whether this example was produced only as a sample. The same goes for an example of a dinner plate simply with the word ‘Pakistan’ in the border.

A similar example is that of a plate bearing the crest of the last Shah of Iran, Reza Pahlavi (*fig.6*). The design books show that the pattern for the plate is one which the factory had already developed – the archives show the extravagant gold border coupled with a number of central motifs, including a bucolic scene of pheasants amidst foliage. Here, however, it is coupled with the Pahlavi crest, with the small inscription in Persian: *marā dād farmūd va khud dāvar ast* (He gave me the power to rule, but He himself is judge) (*fig.7*). As is the case with a number of the inscriptions addressed here, the Perso-Arabic script here has become slightly mis-formed in the rendering of the Royal Worcester designer, who, presumably, had

little knowledge of the script or language, and was merely copying the shapes of the words to the best of his, or her, ability.

Other pieces were produced for private, rather than royal or state patrons. These include those produced for '*Betromin Shell*' (Petromin, a Saudi Arabia based oil conglomerate which merged with Shell in the 80s), al-Sharif Mansur Abu Riyash, who is yet to be identified, and al-Safi Farms in Saudi Arabia (Mazra' a al-Safi).

Pieces were also produced for parts of the Islamic world less often addressed by Islamic Art. Royal Worcester sent commissions to the Sultan of Selangor, the rulers of Sudan, and the Sultan of Brunei. One such service bears the personal motto of the Sultan of Brunei: *tabaraka aladhi bi-yadihi al-mulk* (blessed is he in whose hands is power), the opening verse of chapter 67 of the Qur'an known as al-Mulk (Power, or Dominion).

While not coming directly under the remit of the Islamic SSN, it was interesting to see that Royal Worcester also produced services, bearing Amharic inscriptions, for members of the Ethiopian royal family.

As alluded to at the beginning, many of the pieces with a relation to Islamic Art which are of greatest interest do not bear inscriptions. As this is outside the remit of this project, just one example will be commented upon here. On display is a very fine example of the reticulated, or pierced, ware produced by George Owen (1845-1917) using an oiled knife while the clay was still 'leatherhard' or soft enough to cut through but dry enough to retain form and strength. While they are said to have been produced to imitate carved Chinese or Indian ivories, the shape of this example is distinctly Persian (*fig.8*). As noted earlier as well as holding the the ceramics collection, the Museum also houses in its archive the 'Design Library' contemporaneous sources for design and artistic reference and inspiration built up initially by Chamberlains but much added to in the 19th century by Richard Binns, Art Director in the Kerr and Binns period. In this archive are numerous works, largely from the mid-to-late-nineteenth century which present the most highly-appreciated works of Islamic Art at the time. One such publication, presenting fine objects in English collections, is a brass vase in the collection of John Henderson (*fig.9*) whose silhouette Owen's vase closely follows. While we cannot be certain that it was this exact image which inspired the designer of the pierced bottle, the publication of that object is indicative of the way in which this kind of object was made fashionable and disseminated to British (and European?) audiences in the late-nineteenth century, thereby becoming a sought-after taste recognisable to consumers of porcelain and other design and decorative arts.