

ANTIQUES & COLLECTIBLES

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A Natural Head-Turner

In the 18th century, mochaware was the pottery of the common people. Today it's a rare and valued collectible. | BY CATHERINE RIEDEL

When I was young, my father had an ant farm. I was a little creeped out, and a whole lot fascinated—somewhat by the ants and their empire of tunnels, but mostly by the intricate design their industry left behind in the sand. It appeared to be both the deliberate result of hard work and a beautiful natural occurrence. Although the ants got all the credit, I believe that the sand played a part as well. After all, it's the interplay of artist and medium, each one in resistance and submission to the other, that makes a manmade wok or the beauty of nature spring to life.

The look and feel of those ant tunnels came back to me years later when I first saw a piece of mochaware pottery. Even before I knew what it was, I knew it was something good. Clean, simple forms, with a wet-looking surface, were decorated with wild, free-flowing designs: crawling worms, spiny sea life, gently rolling waves, simple bands, trees, twigs, cross-hatches, swirling cats' eyes, and purely random squiggles. These pieces had been made a couple of centuries ago, yet they looked as modern and fresh as today's contemporary art pottery.

Funny thing is, mochaware was never intended as art. First made in England in the late 1700s, it was utilitarian pottery, used in taverns and modest homes. Simply put, it was the cheapest decorated pottery one could find. By the early 19th century, it was imported into America and was later produced here.

Most people assume that mochaware is so named for its palette of browns, creams, grays, blacks, and muted tones of blue, green, pumpkin, and yellow. But the name derives from *mukha*

Mochaware is marked by its exuberant decorative style, complete with colorful patterns and bold designs. TOP, small covered teapot, very rare, c. 1800. ABOVE, banded pearlware barrel-form jug, c. 1820. TOP RIGHT, creamware baluster-form pepper pot, c. 1810.

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("mocha") stone, a type of moss agate from the Yemeni city of the same name. The stone features natural striations similar to the wares' seaweed and tree-like decorations.

But if mochaware was cheap, we have to assume that little time was spent applying its decoration. And therein lies the secret of mochaware's beauty: Many of the designs *look* natural, because they *are* natural. Pieces were first coated in a runny mixture of clay and water known as "slip"; then a tea made of tobacco juice, turpentine, hops, and purportedly urine was applied. The resulting chemical reaction formed delicate dendritic patterns in the glaze. Other designs were painted, scratched, or stamped on with fingers, brushes, or objects, resulting in a multitude of layers and colors. Such techniques lent a haphazard ease and fluidity to these straightforward objects.

Owing to daily use, few examples of mochaware have survived over the years, making it a rare American collectible. The simplest, smallest forms fetch hundreds of dollars; large multi-colored wares go for as much as five figures. Mugs are most common, followed by bowls, jugs, pots, and vases. Flat items such as plates and saucers are extremely rare. Look for pieces in good or fair shape, as mint-condition items are rarer still. To really get a feel for the stuff, visit the Shelburne Museum in Shelburne, Vermont (802-985-3346; shelburnemuseum.org)—it boasts the largest public collection of mochaware in the world.

I've worked in the auction industry for nearly 10 years now. Over that time, I've seen a lot of wonderful things. After a while, one can grow a little immune to it all. But a collection of mochaware still turns my head. Call it a natural reaction to something beautiful. ♪

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