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# Cotswold Antiques

A warm welcome to the first Cotswold Antiques newsletter!

In England we are still in 'pandemic lockdown.' I hope that you are healthy and well, and not averse to a diversion from the world's pressing problems.

The theme of this newsletter is solving a puzzle. I love a good mystery and find it one of the most interesting and engaging aspects of collecting antiques. It is particularly relevant to ceramics, where often there is little to indicate the maker or artist, and identification can require the patience and methods of a detective. (During lockdown, I have been plundering my bookshelves of Inspector Maigret novels!)

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*The allure of mystery*

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## **An ancient Egyptian enigma**

There is no doubt as to who made [this beautiful plate that we acquired last year](#). There is a splendid backstamp for 'Barr, Flight & Barr, Royal Porcelain Works, Worcester, Manufacturers to their Majesties, Prince of Wales, and Royal Families,' together with the monarch's crown, the ostrich feathers of the Prince of Wales, and a clearly impressed BFB mark. The partnership of Martin Barr Junior, father Martin Barr and Joseph Barr produced some of the finest English porcelain at Worcester's Warmstry factory, between 1804 and 1813. The earlier title of Flight & Barr was retained for the London shop in Coventry Street.



Barr. Flight & Barr plate, 1804-13

© Cotswold Antiques

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*Strange elements*

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No, the mystery concerns some very strange elements of decoration.

What is the purpose of the ring-handled urn in the centre, with smoke (or steam) rising from a narrow-necked lid? Why is the bottom tied, as if made of cloth? Directly below is a lyre, but what are the two peculiar musical instruments, between sprigs of ivy, at 10 o'clock and 2 o'clock positions?

The border also seems replete with coded images or symbols. Firstly, there are suspended bowls, some with lids, others without, all emitting smoke. Are they burning incense? The stylised acanthus, in red, purple, blue, black and gilt, is exotic even by Regency standards, but the livid green flower terminal looks like the alien heads of monsters.

In between, in gilt, is a serpent entwined around a vertical rod. At first glance, I took this to represent ‘The Rod of Ascepius,’ the Greek god of medicine and healing. (It was adopted as symbol of the World Health Organisation.)

Upon closer examination I soon discounted this neat theory, for the snake or serpent is not coiled around a staff, but around a standing bowl or lamp, on a foliate tripod base.

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*‘Antony & Cleopatra’*

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After protracted but ultimately fruitless historical research, I began to wonder if the iconography might be connected to esoteric ritual, or indeed to Shakespeare’s *Antony & Cleopatra*, in which the Queen of the Nile committed suicide by allowing ‘asps’ to bite her breast and arm.

It was time to seek help.

Serendipity led me to the Georgian Society, normally concerned with Georgian architecture. The Society’s secretary, David Adshead, who responded to my request, was previously head curator and architectural historian for the National Trust.

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*A priestly sistrum*

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David swiftly recognized the musical instrument at 2 o’clock as an Egyptian sistrum, a sacred rattle shaken by priestesses of the cults of Hathor and Isis. He kindly sent me an article he had written about the sistrum for the National Trust in 2008, inspired by a statue of an Isis priestess holding one, at the Trust’s Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire. Accompanying his article was a dramatic photograph.

He also shared his thoughts on other design elements. “The smoking (funerary) urn, with its strigulated top and what looks like a mantling of willow leaves, suggests to me memorial,” he wrote of the central image. “The hanging objects in the border are likely to be lamps or bowls, for light or the burning of sacrificial objects.”



The Kedleston statue.

© David Adshead

What can we say of the sprigs of ivy? As an evergreen, ivy has long symbolized eternity and fidelity, and in ancient Egypt was sacred to Osiris, god of the underworld, lord of the afterlife and judge of the dead.

And of the horned snake with a forked tongue?

The Shakespearean 'asp' that killed Cleopatra comes from the Latin *aspis*, itself derived from ancient Greek. My Oxford English dictionary defines asp as 'The Egyptian cobra, *Naja haje*, found throughout Africa. Also, a southern European viper, *Vipera aspis*.'

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*Cobras and vipers*

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A rearing cobra was a symbol of the pharaohs, often part of their ceremonial headgear. However, erotically charged European paintings of Cleopatra's death usually depict her applying *Vipera aspis*.

There is also a venomous, horned desert viper (*Cerastes cerates*), native to North Africa and parts of the Middle East, that may have inspired the horned serpent on our plate.

The presence of so many Egyptian-themed objects is no coincidence.

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*Napoleon and  
'Egyptomania'*

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A wave of 'Egyptomania' swept Europe in the wake of Napoleon Bonaparte's campaign in Egypt from 1798 to 1801. The campaign ended in ignominious military defeat at the hands of the British. Nevertheless, it profoundly impacted the cultural imagination of Europe, and found expression in the fine and decorative arts, architecture and literature.

This abiding legacy of the Egypt campaign was mainly due to a 167-strong contingent of scientists and scholars (*savants*) who accompanied Napoleon's *Armée d'Orient*. In addition to scientific and engineering work, they recorded remains of ancient monuments, and collected antiquities (many of which were seized by the British Navy and ended up in the British Museum).

In 1799, one of Napoleon's engineers found the Rosetta Stone, and in 1822, Jean-Francois Champollion deciphered the hieroglyphs. His breakthrough marked the beginning of scientific Egyptology.

A four-volume *Mémoires sur l'Égypte* was published between 1798 and 1801, and the much more comprehensive *Description de l'Égypte* between 1809 and 1821. They fueled a public fascination with ancient Egypt.

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*Chippendale chairs*

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Below are photographs of Egyptian female heads on Regency chairs that I photographed in the library of Stourhead in Wiltshire. Thomas Chippendale the Younger made the chairs in London in 1805. They were commissioned for Stourhead by banker Sir Richard Colt Hoare.





Stourhead library chairs

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One last discovery came from Patricia Ferguson, a curator of European 18<sup>th</sup> Century ceramics at the British Museum, and author of the excellent ‘Ceramics: 400 Years of British Collecting in 100 Masterpieces.’

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*V&A’s Derby version*

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She sent me an image of [an 1810-1830 Derby plate belonging to the Victoria & Albert Museum](#). It bears a striking resemblance to our Barr, Flight & Barr one but has fewer elements and a simpler palette.

The V&A description reads: ‘The rim is painted with a repeating device consisting of an incense-burner between two foliated scrolls; the devices are separated by a serpent entwined about a tripod bowl. In the middle are a vase and musical instruments.’



Derby plate, 1810-30

© Victoria & Albert Museum, London

I hope you have enjoyed this mystery tour. More mystery objects will follow in the next issue, both from Cotswold Antiques stock and my own collection.

Peter McGill

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