

Artwork of the Month March 2021

A Stafford Pottery Plaque

Included in the rainbow Wall of Pots display at York Art Gallery is a tile made by the Stafford Pottery. Here Sammi Scott, a PhD student at the University of York, explores the way this unassuming tile relates to a complex history of copies, forgeries, translation, and deception.



Stafford Pottery, *Seated Hercules*, c. 1825-1855, earthenware plaque, 18 x 15 x 1 cm, York Art Gallery (YORYM:2001.5777).

With only three colours and an apparently simple design, there at first sight appears to be little of note in this earthenware plaque depicting Hercules. Dating between 1825 and 1855, the plaque was made by William Smith and Company, under the name of the Stafford Pottery. The pottery was based in Thornaby, Stockton, and traded successfully in transferware in Northern Europe. The name 'Stafford Pottery' was probably chosen very purposefully for its similarity to the more famous Staffordshire Potteries (in what is Stoke-on-Trent today), which had been established since the 17th century. This is reinforced by the fact that Smith's first hire was the Staffordshire potter John Whalley.¹

While the morals and legal status of capitalising on this link to the Staffordshire Potteries are clearly debatable, William Smith and Company's reputation has been most compromised by the fact that they went a step further than this. In 1848, Wedgwood took out an injunction against Smith and his partners to stop their imitations of Wedgwood works. This injunction prevented the company from using the name 'Wedgwood' or 'Wedgewood' on any of its wares, which it had been doing on most pieces as well as marketing a version of Wedgwood's Queen's Ware.²

The fact that this Hercules plaque has been made with the mark of the Stafford Pottery rather than one of these counterfeit marks means that the plaque can be tentatively dated to after this injunction in 1848.³ Nevertheless, a visual link to Wedgwood's productions can still be seen. While the use of a blue and white motif was long established in ceramics by this time, the combination of a blue background with a classical figure in white, sculpted in relief, is comparable to the traditional blue and white

¹ L. Jewitt, *From Pre-Historic Times Down to the Present Day: Being a History of the Ancient and Modern Pottery and Porcelain Works of the Kingdom: and of Their Productions of Every Class*, volume 2, 1878, 12-15.

² 'VICE CHANCELLOR OF ENGLAND'S COURT', *Standard* (London), 20 November 1848, 1.

³ The date range I give here is different to that on YMT's online catalogue, as my research has shown that William Smith was not part of the company after 1855, and his name appears to have been no longer used on marks; this implies that the plaque could not have been made after this date.

of Wedgwood's jasperware. For instance, similarities can be seen with Wedgwood's [*Hercules in the Garden of the Hesperides*](#), c. 1785-1800, with the comparable colouring, subject matter, and classical poses.

Interestingly, there appear to be few other existing relief plaques in this style made by William Smith and Company. Most research into the company has focused on their production of transferware, of which there are also several examples in the York Art Gallery collection. While the 1848 injunction prevented the Stafford Pottery from using the name 'Wedgwood' or 'Wedgewood', it did not prohibit any aesthetic associations with the Wedgwood brand, and so it is possible that William Smith and Company continued to imitate the style of some Wedgwood wares.

However, the design of the plaque is not a direct imitation of another Wedgwood piece. Instead it is taken from a sculpture by the French artist Guillaume Boichot (1735-1814). Depicting the seated Hercules, this large-scale sculpture was made for the Paris Panthéon in 1793, but later removed due to its Revolutionary context.⁴ As a result of its post-Revolutionary destruction just decades later in the early nineteenth century, the sculpture is only known through reproductions, such as the bronze cast by Charles Crozatier now in the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#). This version of the sculpture is a translation at a reduced scale, and made in bronze rather than the marble of the original. There is another version of this bronze held in the [Royal Collection](#) (RCIN 31361). Made by Charles Crozatier between 1820 and 1830, this might have reignited interest in and awareness of Boichot's original sculpture in England. While the Stafford Pottery would have been unlikely to have access to this copy in the Royal Collection, its existence would have increased the possibility of accessible prints or drawings on which to base the design. Indeed prints of Boichot's sculpture can be seen in both

⁴ For discussion of revolutionary associations with Boichot's *Hercules*, see R. Reichardt and H. Kohle, *Visualizing the Revolution: Politics and Pictorial Arts in Late Eighteenth-Century France*, 2008, 27-28, and E. Naginski, *Sculpture and Enlightenment*, 2009, 217-288.

French and English publications.⁵ The viewpoint chosen in these prints is the same as that used in the plaque made by the Stafford Pottery, which supports the theory that these might have been the source used in creating the design.

Although there have been no drastic changes in composition, this reproduction necessarily shows some alterations when compared to the original. The main change in translating the sculpture into this relief version is that, in place of a sculpture that can be walked around and experienced from many angles, the viewer can now only see one view of the figure as it is flattened into a relief reliant on a background. While the retained white colour imitates the original marble, the figure is framed very differently as set against a bold blue background rather than other artistic and architectural elements of the Paris Panthéon. The addition of a harsh black border affirms the new pictorial status of the design, with its bold and unmoveable framing that positions it in a mode of viewing more associated with two-dimensional works, despite its retaining some of the three-dimensional qualities of relief sculpture.⁶

Another key difference in experiencing the design is that this plaque is also greatly reduced in size at just 18 x 15 cm, with just one centimetre of depth. The original sculpture seems to have been on a monumental scale, as can be seen in this eighteenth-century etching [Façade de Ste Genevieve](#), where Boichot's *Hercules* appears to be the third statue from the left. The inclusion of two people in the doorway highlights the work's immense size, which was necessarily dramatically reduced in its various reproductions as a print, bronze smaller-scale sculpture, and earthenware plaque.

Reproductive art has a split identity: on the one hand there is always the object itself, but on the other there is a complex web of reproduction, of twists and alterations that define a whole other virtual identity for the design. Like so many other 'decorative' pieces in the nineteenth century,

⁵ Examples can be seen in R. Sievier, *Sculpture Illustrations*, 184, plate following page 76, and Musée et l'Ecole Moderne des Beaux-Arts, *Annales du Musée et de l'Ecole Moderne des Beaux-Arts*, 1807, plate 60.

⁶ For discussion of the nature of relief sculpture as combining elements of both two and three dimensions, see L. Rogers, *Relief Sculpture*, 1974.

this pottery plaque has a complex history of reproduction and inspiration that dramatically alters our view of the design in each reincarnation.

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