

Italian Renaissance ceramics . A catalogue of the British Museum collection

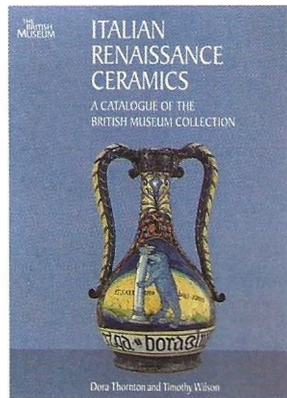
Dora Thornton and Timothy Wilson

2009 . The British Museum Press

Two volumes, 816 pages, countless figures, price £175

In these times of on-line information and non-sensopedias it is with great relief and no little pleasure that this reviewer can announce that scholarship is not dead. That at least is the principal message trumpeted loud and clear by this fabulous publication. Fabulous is not too strong a word, because the eye-watering price will render these twin volumes intangibly legendary to many of us but for the moment that issue must be put aside in a consideration of the work two of our foremost experts on this subject have laid before us.

Two volumes, over 800 pages and countless photographs and figures; the bare facts alone give some indication of what any proud owner can expect, but there is far more to it than that. Volume One contains a foreword and a preface that both comfort the reader with their justified trumpeting of the quality of the collection to be revealed in the following pages, a collection to which the catalogue does ample justice. The introductory chapter, 'A History of the British Museum Collection of Italian Renaissance Ceramics', gives a fascinating description of how the collection has been accumulated, and indeed how the British Museum continues to acquire pieces. This is crucial, of course, because if there were no new additions, then the collection would become fossilised into an assemblage, and thus lose some of its significance. One interesting aspect of the history of the collection is how subject it was to the vagaries of personal and institutional politics. Although there were a few pieces in Sir Hans Sloane's original collection, which formed the core of the original British Museum in 1753, it was 98 years before more Italian maiolica was acquired. The collecting of Italian Renaissance ceramics advanced rapidly thanks to the interest and energy of one man, Augustus Wollaston Franks, who came to the museum in 1851, and over the following 40 years built up what is probably the finest collection in northern Europe. Franks, inevitably, had to deal with less than interested museum directors, obstinate funding agencies and competition from collectors and other institutions – *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Thornton and Wilson seem to be acutely aware of their responsibilities in paying due service to those figures who were influential in creating the collection, and also in the responsibilities they have acceded to in



the production of this catalogue. The authors rise far above the challenge they have set themselves.

Once past the introductory chapter the catalogue begins with no further preliminaries. It is arranged chronologically and by areas of production, so that the first section covers the 14th and 15th centuries and includes Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Le Marche, Umbria, Campania, Naples and 'location uncertain'. In this fashion the reader is carried on into the 17th century, then to tiles and fakes. Subsequent sections deal also with slipware and other lead-glazed types, Medici porcelain and recent acquisitions. This is a sensible approach, for it facilitates an understanding of how the form developed through time and across the country. It is relatively easy to flip backwards and forwards to compare pieces from different production sites at the same period and indeed doing so is very much part of the pleasure of referring to this work. Reference is, of course, very much what these volumes are about. It is scarcely credible that anyone would sit down and read through from beginning to end, but the faultless cross-referencing means that once one starts at a particular entry one is drawn into a search for more parallels and additional information, and of that there is a seemingly unending amount. If there is any failing it is often in the lack of explanation as to why a certain piece has been given its attribution, and a discussion of how evidence has been evaluated and applied could have formed a useful introduction to the catalogue. As one follows threads from one entry to another, however, those issues become resolved, as the comparative nature of the art historical method is clarified. If reference is the principal function of this publication then it is underpinned by a formidable depth of research that makes every catalogue entry a virtual essay. Four hundred and seventy-five individual pieces are described over nearly seven hundred pages, each is accompanied by at least one colour photograph, often more, with line drawings of profiles and reproductions of contemporary prints relating to the subject painted on the pots. The prose is lucid and flowing, the photographs superb, the attention to detail mesmerising. The bibliography extends over 78 pages, which alone gives some indication of the high standards of scholarship that have gone into the compilation of this work. One of the two appendices even lists pieces that no longer exist, victims of the rump 'suicide exhibition' that was destroyed when the museum was bombed in 1941. The second appendix is a short discussion of the neutron activation analysis carried out by Michael Hughes. That too demonstrates the willingness of Thornton and Wilson to embrace new methodologies in the study of this collection. The fundamental approach is art historical, but archaeological and scientific evidence is also included and the authors freely acknowledge that further findings could lead to a re-consideration of certain attributions and dates. As they themselves state, 'a catalogue can only be snapshot of knowledge at a given moment', which leads us back to the issue of cost.

There is no getting away from the price of this publication and one is forced to ask whether it is worth it, especially if it is, as the authors recognise, soon to become obsolete. Well yes, it is very much worth it. It is a lovely thing in its own right, beautifully bound, superbly printed on good paper, with fantastic colour reproduction in the photographs, and it comes in a robust slipcase. You will definitely be getting your money's worth. It is difficult furthermore, to put a price on excellent scholarship, nor should it be necessary, although it could be said that it is possible to convey it in a more accessible form. The cost, furthermore, stands up well in comparison with similar publications. The catalogue of sculpture in the Ashmolean, for instance, published in 1992, with no colour photographs at all, was priced at £325. Archaeologists are perhaps too used to their normal reading matter being made available at heavily subsidised prices. Considering just the number and quality of the photographs, I imagine the publisher's unit cost of the Renaissance ceramics catalogue is high, and on those grounds what may seem a high retail price is justified. One might justifiably wonder, though, how many of us are prepared, or able, to spend that much on a book. If you are, then this is definitely worth considering. It may even be an investment, if the second hand market in archaeology publications is anything to go by. In these straitened times it is actually rather encouraging to see a publication that is so stylish, luxuriating as it does in high standards of reproduction and research. It is weighty, confident and ultimately brilliant. Buying a copy would be a very satisfying way of investing in the future of such scholarship, so start saving now, because anybody who possesses this book is very fortunate indeed.

Duncan H Brown

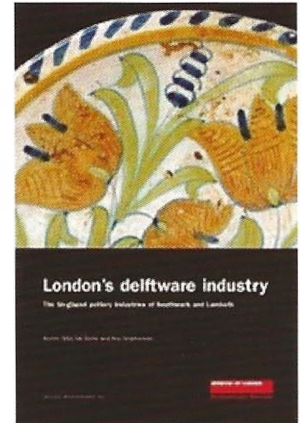
Kieron Tyler, Ian Betts and Roy Stephenson

London's delftware industry . The tin-glazed potteries of Southwark and Lambeth

2008 . Museum of London Archaeological Service Monograph 40
London

Hardback, xv+136 pages, 174 figures (86 in colour), 28 tables,
French and German summaries, bibliography, index, price £15.95

The Museum of London Archaeological Service has produced an informative and well illustrated account of the background to, and finds from, five south London delftware pothouses, excavated between 1979 and 1992. Three were in Southwark – Montague Close, Pickleherring and Rotherhithe, and two in Lambeth – Norfolk House and Glasshouse Street. They grew



up with others after London's first tin-glaze pottery at Aldgate ceased production early in the 17th century. The archaeological and historical background to each pothouse is discussed, drawing on previously published material, and then details are given of the recent findings and products.

The authors are cautious in their attributions and stress that forms and decorations alone can rarely prove the origin of wares. Seventeenth- and 18th-century pothouse staff moved freely from one pothouse to another. Consequently designs and patterns were copied, making stylistic attribution difficult. Even with chemical analysis of the clays to help them, the authors employ a grading system, from zero to three asterisks, to ascribe the likely provenance of the excavated shards. Kieron Taylor provided much archaeological information, Ian Betts the descriptions of tiles and Roy Stephenson the descriptions and discussions about vessels. The introductory chapter covers the above, including attributions and the conventions used in the text.

Chapter 2 describes the overseas origins of delftware; its arrival in England and subsequent spread elsewhere in Britain; its appeal in mimicking expensive, but highly desirable, imported Chinese porcelain; and its deficiencies in chipping easily and failing to withstand the thermal shock of boiling water. The manufacturing process of delftware is described from Piccolpasso in mid-16th century Italy, to Gerrit Paape and then to Diderot and d'Alembert in the later 18th century. Well illustrated with engravings, Chapter 2 would give a student insight into the working of tin-glaze potteries but it may seem superfluous to those with more extensive knowledge. There are descriptions of clay preparation, turning, moulding, and the methods of making tile blanks. Kiln furniture and the stacking