



AN ASSEMBLED GARNITURE OF ROCKINGHAM VASES

Description: three Rockingham vases of campana shape with gilt loop handles and moulded with partially gilt overlapping leaves, top and bottom, resting on moulded leaf and scroll feet, the central vase with coloured applied flowers to the main body and base, together with a domed and pierced cover with further moulded leaves and applied flowers, surmounted by a floral spike. The flanking vases are identical in shape but lack the applied flowers and cover. Date: c.1830-1835.

Decoration: the central vase painted on one side with a finely painted fruit and flower group, possibly by Thomas Steel; the other side painted with a typical Rockingham landscape featuring an arched bridge overlooked by a twin-towered building on a rock. Occasionally the decoration might include a painting of shells and coral to one side, a feature also found on Rockingham teawares of bucket shape. The other vases are painted with large floral groups to one side, perhaps painted by Thomas Brentnall, and birds among flowers to the other.

Mark: Rockingham printed griffin mark in puce to the base of the covered vase only.

Sizes: 26 cm (10.25 ins.) covered vase; 17.2 cm (6.75 ins) others.

The main subjects of this article are the coverless vases to the left and right of the central one, the latter being the standard form of a Rockingham pot pourri vase of this shape. These covered vases are not uncommon and were available in two sizes, c.26 cm as shown here and c.34 cm, but small variations can occur due to the varying height of the spikes on the covers. There is evidence that original garnitures of three vases were available as Alwyn and Angela Cox in Rockingham 1745-1842 illustrate a set, painted with named scenes, including Arundel Castle, to one side and with named botanical plants to the other (colour plates 93 and 94 on p.275). I share the view of the authors that these subsidiary vases were never intended to have covers as they lack the stepped interior rim of the central vase and additionally have painted flowers to the inner rims. These wares would have been expensive and the decoration is of very high quality, none more so than the covered example from the Dennis G. Rice collection, featuring a named view of Alnwick Castle on the front with roses, thistles and shamrock to the rear (D.G. Rice Rockingham Ornamental Porcelain (colour plate 6, opposite page 16). In this instance the applied flowers are left in the white and not applied to the base or the cover. The application of the flowers varies considerably from vase to vase and this suggests they are the work of more than one 'flowerer', perhaps not surprising in view of the popularity of this form of decoration in the 1820s and 1830s, as the many examples from Coalport, Minton, Rockingham, Spode and other factories demonstrate.

It was formerly thought that all these vases had applied flowers, either coloured or glazed but left in the white, but this pair and another single vase recently offered for sale prove otherwise. The great advantage from the painter's point of view is that there is a lot more room to display his or her craft, of which full advantage has been taken here. The pair turned up in a London saleroom's Design & Interiors sale in 2019, given second billing in the lot description to a very unremarkable pair of early 19th century candlesticks, probably manufactured at Coalport. All four pieces had some damage and the vases went unrecognised, simply described as 'a pair of twin handled urn shaped vases painted with birds and foliage'. The first illustration shows the exclusively floral side of one vase on the left, with the more unusual naturalistic bird among flowers and foliage of the other vase to the right. The cataloguer of the single vase, sold from the Rowley collection in 2020 and which has a very similar style of floral decoration, suggested a probable attribution to the painter, Thomas Brentnall (Paul Beighton Auctioneers Ltd. The Rowley Collection of Rockingham Porcelain, sale catalogue, 2019-2020, Part 2, 2 March 2020, lot 11). He was a Derby trained artist formerly at Coalport and was responsible for the flower painting on the famous Rockingham service manufactured for King William IV.

The decoration on the right hand vase is, however, highly unusual for Rockingham, featuring a chaffinch among two improbably large pink flowers, with their buds and foliage, and sprays of smaller blue forget-me-not type flowers, which also occur on the purely floral side.



Similarly the other side of the left hand vase has a red-crested bird among blue flowers with lesser sprays of fuchsia, which also occur on the reverse. There seems little doubt that both sides of both vases were painted by the same artist.



John Randall was the leading bird painter at Rockingham and there was another lesser artist, Russell, who also painted birds, but this decoration is completely unlike existing Rockingham examples of their work. Randall was by far the more capable of the two, not only decorating tea and coffee and dessert services with the popular ‘fancy birds’, but also painting native birds and more exotic species in a naturalistic style. He remained at Rockingham for only a short period and his best work was done later at the Coalport factory. Although patterns attributed to him occasionally feature birds on flowering branches, the latter are not out of scale to the extent shown here.

We shall probably never be able to give a positive attribution to the painter of this pair of vases but, along with the example from the Rowley collection, they make an interesting addition to the range of remarkable Rockingham ornamental porcelain.

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