

Mask Mugs

Portrait mugs, or mask mugs, have been popular for many hundreds of years. I suspect they have been around, in one form or another, wherever clay was moulded into vessels.

This pair of wonderful red earthenware ones are about fifteen hundred years old, and were made by the Moche people who lived on the Northern coast of Peru. They were an agricultural people who must have been both prosperous and gifted to make such confident and sophisticated mugs and jugs, some of them evidently portraits of real people.



Moche



Moche

Much nearer to us are Doulton's Characters from literature, history, and current affairs. Their continued production, since the 19th century, indicates what an enduring genre this is.



Doulton

Between, these examples, in time and artistry, are those made in England between approximately 1760 at Derby in porcelain, and 1820 in both porcelain and earthenware. They are almost all either heads of a crowned man, perhaps Neptune, or Satyrs or Bacchantes, which can be male or female. Bacchantes have pointed ears, a grape-vine circlet, and a grin. Neptune usually appears deeply serious, even worried.

I think there must have been models for the Neptune and Bacchantes that Derby made, but I have been unable to find them. Similarly, I assumed that there were Continental precursors, as for so many forms of English ceramics; but in

spite of the shape being sometimes known as Dutch mugs, I have been unable to discover any. It would make sense to have a drinking cup shaped like Bacchus – if generous for wine in the disapproving Units of today – but why Neptune?

This conceit became fashionable after the midpoint of the 18th century in porcelain at Derby where it was continued for about twenty years. Possibly the Bacchantes were first to be made. An example of a Staffordshire King exists, and there is a Chinese Export copy of a Bacchante, both contemporary. If anyone can shed any light on the shapes, or the fashion for them, or is aware of any early Continental ones, I would love to hear from them.

They are only distantly related to Toby jugs which, according to legend were modelled on a renowned Yorkshire toper; and in any case were made for different surroundings, clientele and beverage. Nor are they descended from the ancient Greek rhytons which are another concept altogether. Perhaps there is a kinship with the mask jugs made in quantity at Worcester and Caughley, though I feel that the mask is a different element of the design in that case.



Derby Neptune

The mask mugs reached their flowering, probably in the late 1780's in the earthenwares of Staffordshire. There exists an Enoch Wood vigorous creamware coloured glazed one, and Turner made excellent white stoneware ones, both plain and with overglaze enamels.

Neale & Co. in Hanley made spirited black basalt Bacchantes, and this Neale & Co pearlware Neptune, beside a Derby Satyr, shows how very fine they could be. This one is undoubtedly Neptune because his handle is elegantly scaly which is not always the case with Derby ones.



Derby

Neale & Co.

Subsequently, the Bacchantes seem to have outlasted the Kings, and cheerful earthenware ones were made in Staffordshire in some quantity into the early 19th century.

The two shown here are examples of a number of different models which may, by then, have migrated to a somewhat earthier, jollier stratum of society.



Staffordshire examples

Reference:

Neale Pottery and Porcelain - Diana Edwards Barrie & Jenkins, 1987

English Dry-Bodied Stoneware - Diana Edwards and Rodney Hampson
Antique Collectors' Club, 1988

Derby Porcelain F. Brayshaw Gillespy - Spring Books London, 1965

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