

The Prunus Root pattern.....some thoughts by John Robson on the origins of this pattern.

The 'Prunus Root' pattern is probably the most common design found on pre-1765 Worcester wares, according to Simon Spero in his Guide to 18th Century porcelain. Throughout the early period at Worcester, blue and white porcelain formed a large and very important proportion of the factories output.

Easily the most common design of the pre-1765 period is the 'prunus root' pattern which appears frequently on teawares, bowls, coffee cans, mugs and the rare early mustard pots. Factory marks were not regularly used until the late 1760's, but most of the pieces from 1753 to 1760 bear a workmen's or painters mark of some kind.





The blue colour derives from cobalt oxide and was first used in China in the fourteenth century. It would withstand a high firing temperature. The Chinese ware was imported into England in vast quantities from about the 1690's up to the early 1790's. In Great Britain the trade was confined to the English East India Company, which enjoyed a state monopoly in the importation of a wide variety of goods from the East. The trade was vast and profitable and 50% of porcelain was in blue and white. Much of the imported Chinese porcelain was of a very ordinary quality. It was mass produced for the despised Europeans and was in most cases painted by young children. Later, towards the end of the 18th century, some English blue and white was sent out to China to be copied and shipped back to Europe, intended presumably to undercut the prices of English made porcelain.

The so called 'Prunus Root' pattern was very popular and was produced for a long period, over ten years if not longer. It is not regarded as rare but to some, it is pleasing perhaps, but no more than other 'rock' patterns which had a

similarity visually. Indeed, it might be said that the Prunus Root was naïve and possibly painted by children as the pattern was so simple and produced in large quantities. The blue is usually a pleasant tone and one could build up an interesting collection of Worcester porcelains comprising this one popular pattern.





But what of its origins?

From the fourteenth century onward, the history of Chinese ceramics becomes one of art rather than technology, and it is the decorative style and fashion which take first place. It was the introduction of cobalt blue which was the final step which brought Chinese ceramics into the modern age, and led to developments in Europe, both in the techniques involved in the use of clay materials and in the design and decoration, in an even wider area than that of ceramics. It was not until the sixteenth century that blue and white pieces with no other colour are found and then mainly in religious wares. Blue and white

with polychrome was apparently common. (see 'The Chinese Potter: a practical history of Chinese ceramics' by Margaret Medley, 1976). So the blue colour was a relatively 'new' one used by the Chinese.

Cobalt oxide was found in Scotland and developed by Nicholas Crisp and found in Cornwall, developed by William Cookworthy and used in English porcelain decoration.

In Chinese Influence on Shape and Decoration in English Porcelain by *W Winkworth, M.C.*: An address given by Mr W. W. Winkworth, M.C., at 13 Craven Hill Gardens, on January 14th, 1930. (ECC Trans. 1931) an attempt was made to find the sources for the decorations found on English porcelain and I recommend reading this fascinating article. But it does not assist us in our task relating to the Prunus Root pattern. While he speculated on the Chinese source of patterns, nothing was certain because there were similarities but few actual copies.

As John Sandon stated in his Dictionary on Worcester Porcelain volume 1- 'although I have been searching for many years, I have not come across a Chinese prototype for this pattern [Prunus Root] which is almost certainly copied exactly from Oriental porcelain. One of the first blue and white patterns introduced at Worcester, probably by 1753, Prunus Root was to enjoy enormous popularity for about thirty years, during which time it remained remarkably consistent in its composition. Having copied it onto porcelain myself, I know how simple the design is to execute and it could be adapted easily to different teaware shapes. It occurs on plain as well as fluted shapes and on bowls and mustard pots as well as a range of mugs.....' (see page 270).

I have come to the conclusion that the Prunus Root pattern was an English 'invention' in about 1752 and due to its ease of application and the licence it

gave in its wandering branches, was adopted quickly and with ease. It is 'Chinese-like' rather than 'Chinese based' in my opinion but others might know differently!

Whatever the conclusion, the pattern is still pleasing to the eye and begs the question 'Please talk to me!'

JMR/March 2021

