

Thrown for a Loop

A RESILIENT POTTERY COMPANY FACES TRYING TIMES

by Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell

This past winter, Waterford Wedgwood found itself teetering on the edge of bankruptcy like a ceramic vase poised to topple from its shelf. A mainstay of bridal registries, the distinctive earthenware is equally at home in museums around the world, including The Huntington. Now owned by an Irish firm, the once-venerable pottery manufactory was founded by Englishman Josiah Wedgwood in 1759. As the company struggles for survival, visitors to The Huntington can appreciate what a great loss its demise would be. A look at the firm's history reveals that the current crisis is just the most recent of several that Wedgwood has overcome in its 250 years.

The story of Wedgwood is one of the great personal and professional triumphs of the 18th century. Born in 1730 into a family of potters, Josiah Wedgwood started working at the age of nine as a thrower, a craftsman who shaped pottery on a potter's wheel. Smallpox weakened his right leg, ending his career as a thrower, for he could no longer operate the pedal of the wheel. Instead, Wedgwood took up modeling, devising new forms so innovative and appealing that many of them still are produced today. In 1759, he opened his own

factory near his Staffordshire hometown, Stoke-on-Trent.

Wedgwood married traditional craftsmanship with progressive business practices and contemporary design. He employed leading artists, including the sculptor John Flaxman, whose *Shield of Achilles* is in the Huntington collection, along with his Wedgwood vase depicting Ulysses at the table of Circe. As sturdy as they were beautiful, Wedgwood products made high-quality earthenware available to the middle classes.

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Today, Wedgwood is virtually synonymous with Jasperware, an unglazed vitreous stoneware produced from barium sulphate. It is usually pale blue, with separately molded white reliefs in the neoclassical style. Jasperware's distinctiveness and popularity meant that it was frequently copied. The Huntington collection includes a French chest of drawers decorated with blue and white imitation Wedgwood plaques made by the Sèvres porcelain manufactory in the early 1790s.

The London showroom of Wedgwood and Byerley, as the firm was known from 1790 to 1810. From *Repository of Arts, Literature, Fashions, Manufactures, etc.* London: R. Ackermann, 1809–28. Vol. 1.



While Jasperware continues to be quite popular and still is produced by Wedgwood, the pieces in The Huntington's collection are rare 18th-century examples. "The quality of the early pieces is certainly superior in terms of the rendering of fine details," says Curator of European Art Catherine Hess. "They were innovative in terms of design as well as technique."

Wedgwood's black basalt wares, introduced in 1768, were made from a reddish-brown clay that developed a fine-grained, matte black surface when fired. The material tapped into the popular passion for all things classical by imitating ancient Greek pottery, and was sometimes even painted with classical friezes in red. Along with the Jasperware, The Huntington's black basalt pieces capture the "nostalgia for antiquity that you see throughout the galleries, often developed on the Grand Tour," the extended continental vacation young Englishmen took to complete their educations, Hess says. "The blue and white is evocative of ancient cameos, and the black basalt pieces are decorated with ancient motifs like ram's heads and acanthus leaves." The Wedgwood pieces also provide a fascinating British counterpoint to The Huntington's extensive holdings of French Sèvres porcelain vases and useful wares, Hess adds.

After Josiah's death in 1795, the family firm struggled. At London's Great Exhibition of 1851, it became obvious that Wedgwood had fallen behind its competitors in both taste and quality. Minton, a rival company, dominated the exhibition with its majolica, a new type of earthenware in brilliant colors and whimsical shapes inspired by the maiolica

ceramics of 15th- and 16th-century Italy and France. In a bid to boost sales, Wedgwood quickly added majolica to its product line.

When the Huntington Art Gallery reopened last year, visitors got their first glimpse of several newly acquired pieces of Wedgwood majolica from the Kadison family's gift of some 50 choice pieces from the Wedgwood collection that Carita and Stuart Kadison assembled

Gifts from the Kadison Family Trust include two majolica items: a jardinière with its pedestal (left) and a quatrefoil cachepot. Both are tin-glazed earthenware manufactured in the late 19th century by Josiah Wedgwood and Sons, Ltd., in Stoke-on-Trent, England.



over many years. A colossal red and gold jardinière (a kind of ornamental flower pot) on a matching pedestal dominates the galleries of 19th-century British art. A plate in the shape of a flounder, a strawberry dish ornamented with strawberry leaves, and a vase resembling an ear of corn are just a few examples of the imaginative majolica designs Wedgwood produced.

In 1860, the firm hired the French painter Émile Aubert Lessore, a student of Ingres, who had worked for France's Sèvres porcelain manufactory before moving to England, where he was briefly employed by Minton. At Wedgwood, Lessore was free to experiment with new glazes, forms, and techniques; he was even allowed to sign his pieces, a first for a Wedgwood artist. Lessore's painting—characterized by loose, visible brushwork—raised ceramics to the status of fine art, reviving Wedgwood's fortunes and reputation. The Huntington has two creamware plates designed by Lessore, one shaped like a shell and one decorated with scenes from Aesop's *Fables*.

Wedgwood continued to expand its range of majolica to capitalize on the emerging market for art pottery, which reflected contemporary art movements like Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau. Around 1879, the firm introduced a new line of majolica wares marketed under the name Argenta. These pieces had a light ground color with modeled, naturalistic motifs inspired by Japanese art, highlighted with vivid glazes. The Kadison gifts include an Argenta ware trefoil tray from the late 19th century.

Thanks to its readiness to adapt to changing tastes and clients, Wedgwood continued to thrive throughout the 20th century, remaining in the hands of the founder's descendants until 1986. In recent years, the company has followed its founder's example by enlisting the talents of a new generation of leading artists and designers, including Martha Stewart, Jasper Conrad, and Vera Wang. Time will tell if the company's tradition of resilience and reinvention will sustain it through the current economic downturn. ∞



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