

# Delftware: Popularising the Monarchy

Dr John West in conversation with Matthew Winterbottom

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**John West:** I've come to the Ashmolean Museum today, and I'm here with Matthew Winterbottom, the curator of decorative arts, and we're looking at some commemorative items from the seventeenth century. Now we're familiar today, I suppose Matthew, with commemorative items like mugs or plates being produced for significant royal occasions like royal marriages or births. But it is actually in the seventeenth century when this kind of industry takes off, isn't it.

**Matthew Winterbottom:** Absolutely, yes. You get plates, mugs, cups being made really from the reign of Charles I. But it's really after the Restoration in 1660 that you start to get this plethora of objects appear celebrating the kings and queens right up from Charles II through to George III particularly.

**JW:** Why 1660? Why does it happen at that particular point in time, do you think?

**MW:** I think that you have got to remember that this is a time of increasing prosperity, there's a growth of the middle classes, and these sort of objects (although not hugely expensive) were not cheap. So it was appealing to the middling sort of people, who can afford to buy this kind material, which are expanding massively really for the 1660s onwards. So it's this demographic that this kind of object appeals to.

**JW:** Right, and can just say a little bit about the different ways in which these items were produced?

**MW:** Well the objects were, most of them are produced in London, and this is what we seem to think about the commemorative ware. There were workshops across the country: particularly in London (in Lambeth) and across over in Bristol and Brislington: these are the great centres where Delftware, tin-glazed earthenware, was made. And there are various techniques: things would be thrown on a wheel, particularly. You've got to remember these workshops where everything is still an made by hand. There's still very little mechanisation, so things will be thrown on foot operated wheels, and then they'd be decorated by hand, painted, and what you often find with the images on them is they are often very dashed off, very formulaic. They sometimes hardly resemble what they're trying to depict. They had been repeated and repeated, and stylised and stylised. And this, I think, shows you how these things had been produced many many times.

**JW:** Okay. So these were quite mass-produced items.

**MW:** I think they were, yes.

**JW:** So you said a bit earlier that the growth in the production of these commemorative items was coincided with a growth of this middling sort, a burgeoning middle class if you like. They

were the main people who purchased these items. I mean, what were they using them for?

**MW:** We think they were actually often made to be used, although actually tin-glazed ware is actually quite fragile. Really, it's daily-useful-ware. So it would be used on the table. It would be used for decoration. These objects sometimes have little holes in the back so they could be hung up on the wall. So a decorative plate, for example, might be displayed on the wall and then brought out for best. I think if you are having a celebration, you might then get out this plate. But something that was very highly decorated I think was probably used only occasionally.

**JW:** So there are items made in high quantities, as you say, but they still retain a kind of special place in people's homes. You know: something to display.

**MW:** Yeah, (A) showing off that you are a monarchist, and (B) that you could afford these new consume goods that are brightly coloured and decorating your home.

**JW:** So it's kind of conspicuous consumption, really.

**MW:** Yes, absolutely.

**JW:** So can you tell me a little bit about how these Delftware plates are representing the monarchy in the later seventeenth century?

**MW:** Well they are very formulaic. So if you look at them, sometimes it's quite hard to tell who they are actually trying to represent, and it's often with the use of royal initials that indicate which king or queen it is meant to be in particular. But they are obviously based on prints, I think, popular prints that the potters and decorators would have had in the workshops: so mass-produced prints that would have been available in any town. They are actually quite limited in the colours they can use. So you'll often find, if you look at these plates, they are primarily decorated in blues and yellows, sometimes with a bit of red or orange. They are quite limited because there are different ways of decorating ceramics. And of course they are also having to produce quite a number of these things, and it's a slightly mass-produced market. So this is why sometimes we look at them and actually find it quite hard to understand which king or queen it is, if it wasn't for the 'CR' or the 'WR' or 'MR' that's accompanying them. So 'CR' for Carolus Rex, that's Latin for Charles, King Charles. Or 'MR' for Maria Regina: that's again Latin for Queen Mary. People will be familiar with this with 'ER' on our post boxes, of course, which stands for Elizabeth Regina for Queen Elizabeth II. This is the common way of showing the monarch's initials.

**JW:** It's really interesting that you say it's sometimes hard to tell which king or queen it might be. I was wondering if you could say something about what sort of messages these things might be conveying. Are they simply a way of saying I am, indeed I have an allegiance to the monarchy? Or are they conveying more complex political information do you think?

**MW:** Well I think on a basic level, the kinds of people that are buying these are not the aristocracy, they are not the people with great political power. They are the sort of in-between people. So I think they are trying to show their allegiance to the crown; they are trying to show that they are loyal citizens. I think that is very important. And so, as I said, these things are often displayed: so they may be displayed on a sideboard or on a dresser or on a wall. So once somebody comes to visit you, which I think after 1660 is particularly important: to prove that you are loyal. And this is particularly when these objects become popular: after the Restoration of 1660. Beyond that, I think some of them do have quite subtle messages, which you can look into them. For example, the plate we have here which is William and Mary. Obviously William

and Mary are a special case in terms of a joint monarchy; this is not the queen consort as Catherine of Braganza had been or Mary of Modena had been. Queen Mary is actually queen in her own right, not just because she's married to William III. And in this scene here, again you would be quite hard pressed to tell who they are, and have obviously been derived and are standing next to each other with very large crowns on their heads, and you would be quite hard pressed to recognise who there are if it wasn't for the WMR above them. But interestingly William is handing Mary the royal orb. He's showing that he's sharing power with the queen, that of course the queen is the daughter of the usurped James II, so she's really the reason that they've come back to the throne.

**JW:** So actually, if you read it like that, this is quite a complex moment of constitutional change and revolution being conveyed to quite a wide audience on a piece of tableware?

**MW:** Absolutely, yes exactly. Quite subtly done, but actually it's quite an important way I think of disseminating that story.

**JW:** So in a sense we can begin to gain an understanding of how ordinary people, if you like, understood political...

**MW:** Well I think it shows that ordinary people did understand that process, and that it was a joint monarchy for the first time. And I think that obviously that was clearly understood by ordinary people, not just educated people at the top of society.

Because you have got to remember: how did the ordinary person know what the king and queen looked like? They didn't have television. They didn't have photography. They wouldn't have, or probably rarely would have seen the king or queen unless they lived in London. But most people didn't live in London. And, even if they did, they may not have seen them very often. So how would they know what they looked like? So, of course it's coinage, it's cheap mass-produced prints, and it's this sort of delftware.

**JW:** Matthew, can you just tell me a little bit about what's being conveyed here.

**MW:** Well this is a wonderful large plate. It's quite early; it's dated 1665 and clearly shows King Charles II, who's identified by a C and an R. C for Charles (or Carolus), R for Rex. And these earlier plates from the early part of the 1660s are often much more detailed than the later ones. And I think you can see here, it is much less stylised than the later ones of Queen Mary and William III or Queen Anne. It's clearly taken from a print showing the king in his coronation regalia; so again he wears a wonderful ermine lined robes of state, and he's holding the orb and the sceptre in his hands. So this is clearly the king just after he's been crowned in 1661. This must be taken from an engraving, perhaps taken from an engraving after a painting of the King. Interestingly he's shown in this rather interesting arcaded interior, which seems to have been invented. I don't think this is based on an engraving of the king. There are similar ones **[12:30]** which show Charles I in this sort of architectural space, and that seems to have been something that's been derived from earlier decoration on Delftware. So clearly those were made to show people's allegiance the old king, and there were still monarchists within the interregnum. So that's quite an interesting example. Something like this, I think, was made clearly in the 1660s to demonstrate its owners allegiance to the throne and that they are good monarchists, and that they support the king even some years after his restoration.

**JW:** Yeah. Can I just ask about those 1650s Charles I examples. Where they produced in England or abroad? Whereabouts were they being made?

**MW:** Well I think they're English. So they would have been quite risky objects to make, of

course. But there are very very few of them. There are only, I think, two known of Charles I from that period. But that's a sort of interesting idea: that in addition you could also buy jewels and there are lots of rings that survive which show King Charles I's face, clearly showing your allegiance to the old king, who had been executed. I don't know too much about when they were [mumble] made or in which circumstances they were made in Lambeth, but presumably in great secrecy. Else you could have been tried and executed, I'm sure, if you were found to be decorating a plate with an image of the deposed king.

**JW:** But interesting that these items, these delftware items, commemorative items were (were for the Stuarts anyway) in this quite clandestine world of secret allegiance rather than something which is quite public.

**MW:** Yes, then it comes out into the open in 1660. This is, of course, a development at the same time as the delftware industry is developing in Britain in the mid seventeenth century. So, the two are sort of coming together, and you get this wonderful flowering of the craft really after the 1660s.

**JW:** I mean, these items often present monarchs; but they are also produced for other political occasions, aren't they? So we have examples, say, for the Act of Union.

**MW:** Yes, we have got a lovely plate here which clearly refers to Queen Anne's Act of Union in 1707. And it is not decorated with an image of the queen. Quite interestingly there are very few images of Queen Anne on plates like this; and I think that's possibly because she's a bit less glamorous than some of the other monarchs, possibly. I don't know. But she's represented by her initials: 'A' and 'R' for regina And the crown, the royal crown. And then clearly there's the thistle combined with the rose: so it's a combination, combining the two kingdoms of Scotland and England together. So this clearly commemorates that Act.

**JW:** What did it mean in the seventeenth century to produce an item like this, and to own one. What were you trying to convey?

**MW:** Well I think the producers are probably just supplying the market. So it clearly shows that there was an appetite for this kind of object; they wouldn't make something that they couldn't sell. And I think it was probably about money for the manufacturers. But the consumers: they are making a political choice. They are actually showing these objects that would be displayed. So people visiting your house would see them on your dresser, in your kitchen, or, if you were having a grand meal, maybe you would serve food on them. So you're making a deliberate decision to show that you are supporting monarchy, that you are behind the restoration of the monarchy after 1660, which of course is very important for many people after the turmoil of the civil wars, and the execution of the king, and then the interregnum. So I think that it is important to show that you're supporting this newly restored monarchy back on the throne.

**JW:** So it's a way of helping people to convey their support for a new kind of stability, a political stability.

**MW:** And many of these people, of course, would have acquired this. The middling-sort were exactly the sort of people who probably would have supported Cromwell, before it was the middle classes, the middle-class Puritans who are often supporting Cromwell and parliament against the king. So this may be a way of actually trying to subtly show that you have left that behind, and that you are behind the new monarchy again.

**JW:** But they could also produce messages about how to preserve that stability in the future, I suppose, couldn't they? So we're looking at an example where we have not a monarch, but two

royal figures.

**MW:** So this is a very interesting plate, we've got here. It shows a fashionably dressed couple in late seventeenth-century costume, walking in a landscape with a very prominent church behind them, with a large crucifix on top, and then trees around them which are full of fruit; they're apple trees. Now above the head of the man there's a 'P' and above the head of the woman there's a 'PS'. And we think that almost certainly stands for prince and princess. Now, if it is an English plate, then it can really only show Princess Anne and her husband Prince George of Denmark. Now why would they be shown on a plate like this? They were fairly minor people in the royal family. Princess Anne was the sister of Queen Mary (as in William and Mary). So this plate was probably produced after the death of Queen Mary in 1694. Of course William and Mary came to the throne in 1688, and the great hope was that they would produce an heir and that that would continue the Stuart succession. What happens, of course, is Queen Mary died of smallpox in 1694. William never remarries. And so then his line is not going to be continued. And so then Princess Anne is next in line to the throne, and any of her children would then be in line to continue the Stuart succession, to continue the Protestant religion which they had been brought up in. I think this is what the plate is trying to say. The other alternative reading is that this could be 'P' and 'PS' for William and Mary, when the Prince and Princess of Orange, and that in fact this is a Dutch plate painted in Delft or somewhere in the Netherlands. Although the quality is quite crude, so it would suggest it probably is English. But if it is William and Mary, and it was painted in the Netherlands, the oranges in the trees represent the House of Orange, and that could be a reference to that. It is far more likely to be Princess Anne and her husband Prince George of Denmark depicted in the 1690s. She has a very high headdress, a very fashionably high headdress, which was fashionable really in the 1690s, so I think this must postdate the Glorious Revolution of 1688. And it probably postdates the death of Queen Mary in 1694, because why else would Princess Anne and her husband be represented on a plate? And then why would they be surrounded by fruits? And why would they be so prominently shown in front of a church? And I think what this is saying is that, after the death of Queen Mary in 1694, is that Princess Anne is the next in line to inherit when William finally dies. And she is the one that is still married and is still of childbearing age. So she can produce the heir. And all the fruit referred to her fruitfulness, to the hopeful fecundity of the marriage and the production of new heirs for the British throne, the continuation of the Stuart succession. Very sadly, most of her children died either as stillbirths or in early infancy. And she actually died in 1714 with no heirs at all, after having fifteen pregnancies, which is terribly sad.

**JW:** So this is actually really interesting because what seem to be quite... You know, mementos of quite specific historical occasions, ways of expressing allegiance are actually helping us to understand how ordinary people in the later seventeenth century thought about complex political change, thought about revolution, and thought about their own nation and their own religious future.

**MW:** Yes, their hopes and fears really for the country. If you just looked at this plate in a cabinet in a museum you might simply see a nice fashionably dressed couple walking in a landscape, you know. But actually when you look at it, it's actually quite a very interesting take on the situation in the 1690s, and the dread I think that most people had of the Catholic King James II coming back and taking the country back to Catholicism. So I think that this is a very important document that shows that fear.