

A Century of Royal Doulton Figurines

by Val Baynton

One of the great collecting success stories of the twentieth century is that of Royal Doulton figurines, and whilst the overwhelming vogue for collecting 'pretty ladies' (as they are often known) and character figures may have passed, the rare shapes and or colourways from the first three decades of production still command premium prices. In the centenary year of the launch of the collection, Val Baynton investigates how it came about and takes a look at the early development of the collection.

Charles Noke, who joined Doulton in 1889 becoming art director in 1914, was passionate about sculpture, and it was his ambition to revive and refresh the historic Staffordshire figure, linking tradition, which he regarded as being rather tired and old fashioned with poor modelling and garish decoration. Having experimented with a variety of subjects and decorative techniques during the 1890s and early twentieth century with mixed success, Noke commissioned a series of models from the leading sculptors of the day, from artists of the calibre of Charles Vyse, Phoebe Stabler and William White. The resulting collection, inspired by literature, history, childhood, rural and contemporary life, was officially launched in April 1913 during the visit of King George V and Queen Mary to the Royal Doulton factory in Burslem, Stoke on Trent.

From the outset each new figure, subject and colourway was given an identification number, with Darling as 'No 1', however several other factory codes were also used, including model or shape numbers, and initially the figures were also numbered chronologically in the order they were completed. By 1915, it became clear that the figurine identification number needed to be easily distinguished from other factory codes so that the model with its particular decoration, (from an early date figures could be commissioned in different colour combinations) could be re-ordered. The initials of the manager of the painting department, Harry Nixon, were used as a prefix to this number and so the HN figurine collection was born.

From 1913 until July 1918, the Royal Doulton factory kept a book listing each figure as it was completed and this makes fascinating analysis. The figure painting department was very small with only a handful of painters including Harry Allen, Charles Nixon and Eric Webster, thought to have carried out the work, and over 800 figures were produced. The most popular figure from the first launch was *Darling* with 166 completed, and the least popular were Stabler's *Motherhood* and Noke's *Child on a Crab*, both with a total of three. It's worth remembering that the First World War would have restricted sales opportunities at home and abroad, and that fine hand-painted and gilded vases, plates and other ornamental wares were still a major part of the company's output.

Gradually Doulton's own artists began to create models. Ernest Light modelled historical costume figures, for example, *Lady of the Elizabethan Period*

and *An Afternoon Call*, Harry Tittensor's work ranged from fashionable ladies such as *The Gainsborough Hat* and humorous models such as *Spook* to child studies, but many figures were by Noke including Doris Keane as *Cavallini*, the *Carpet Vendor* and *Guy Fawkes*.

After the First World War Leslie Harradine, who had previously worked in the Doulton Lambeth studios, returned to England and sought work as a sculptor; his contribution to the development of the figure collection during the following decades was phenomenal, and his delicacy of touch and fine modelling has been admired by collectors. Harradine's first figures, introduced in 1920, were *Princess*, *Contentment*, *Puff and Powder*, *Marie* and *Betty*. Harradine also created contemporary decorative schemes combining bright colours and abstract motifs, and these were also applied to earlier figures, including some of Stabler's work from 1913. His work was extremely varied, the theatre and the Orient remained important themes but Harradine also developed the street vendor series, started by Stabler, with the *Flower Sellers Children* and *The Old Balloon Seller* becoming icons from this time. His interest in contemporary fashion and culture resulted in stylishly attired figures, a series of bathing belles and several nudes. There was a revival of popular interest in the eighteenth century and accordingly Harradine modelled figures inspired by this era, the first being *The Chelsea Pair*.

Until the 1930s figures were primarily a study of a moment in time or of a character. The titles selected for each figure emphasised the subject or story of the piece, for example Light's figure, *Out For a Walk* or Noke's *An Old King*. Christian names, unless the name of a real person such as Robbie Burns were not used, thus the choice of *Betty* and *Marie*, for two Harradine figures in 1920 was exceptional. Gradually this changed and more figures were given female names: *Fanny* (renamed Angela) in 1926; *Susanna* and *Kathleen* in 1927; *Sweet Anne* in 1928, *Rosamund*, *Priscilla*, *Iona*, *Moirra*, *Rosina* and *Doreen* in 1929. From 1930 the trend to choose female names as a title for each figure was well established.

Jocelyn Lukins, a historian and long time researcher into Royal Doulton figurines, has written and published a short book called *Reflections*, which traces the inspiration and stories behind many of the early figurines and the lives of the modellers. The anecdotes make great reading.

Market Analysis

At a recent Doulton, Beswick and Coalport Collectors fair held in Stafford, dealers agreed with my observation of auction prices, that values for figures produced before the Second World War have stabilised, some, such as for the art deco figures, might even be creeping up a little so it could be good time to start a collection!



Boy on a crocodile. Louis Taylor: March 2013. £7000. One of the rarest and most unusual of Noke's early figures.



Even with damage the art deco ladies of the 1920s continue to command fair prices, they are less than at their peak but prices seem to have stabilised. Potteries Specialist Auctions. June 2012. £600.



Gorringes, Lewes. February 2011. £460, some faults.



Was this a bargain even with a firing crack? It's a rare one. Winter HN315, Charterhouse, Sherborne. May 2012. £400.