Martin Brothers: English Art Potters

by Roland Head

Martin Brothers is one of the best known and most highly regarded of English art potteries. Its origins lie in the Lambeth art movement of the late nineteenth century and one man's drive to create his own business from making art pottery. In this article, I will examine the brothers' wares in a little more detail and look at current market conditions.

Robert Wallace Martin & Brothers

Robert Wallace Martin (known as Wallace) was the oldest Martin brother and the founder of the pottery, into whose service he enticed three of his younger brothers; Walter, Charles and Edwin. Wallace Martin's education had been in the world of sculpture but he had, by stages, made his way to producing stoneware by the time he established his pottery in 1873. Wallace Martin had already established a reputation for his architectural wares and much of the pottery's early output was commissioned architectural work. The brothers did, however, gradually increase and market their own wares and by 1880 were experiencing considerable success. Each of the brothers had a distinct role; Wallace was in overall charge and performed all the modelling and some decoration, Walter threw, Edwin mostly decorated and Charles ran the Martins' London shop and provided creative direction based on customer feedback.

The Lambeth Style

The Martin brothers' early output was heavily influenced by the art school training of Wallace Martin and the prevailing design style of the time; two-dimensional and heavily geometric. Owen Jones's 1856 book, *Grammar of Ornament*, defined this style and leading designers such as Christopher Dresser espoused it, supporting Jones's theory that all successful styles of decoration tended to be geometric. Other influences that made themselves apparent included Japanese wood block art - popular in London at the time - and Persian, Celtic and Classical references. A similar style of decoration can be seen on Doulton's Lambeth art pottery from the same period - albeit Martin Brothers' decoration was held to be more imaginative and less repetitive. As time passed, both the style and subjects of the ornamentation applied to the brothers' wares became more naturalistic and by the mid-1880s, the geometric style had all but been dropped - in keeping with the fashions of the time, which were ultimately leading towards the Art Nouveau style.

Salt Glaze & Stoneware

Although Martin Brothers did experiment with earthenware in the early twentieth century, it was not a great success and the vast majority of their work was made with stoneware bodies and salt glazed. Walter Martin became extremely proficient at developing salt glazes and was able to create a wider range of colours than had ever been seen before with this type of glaze. Salt glazing had an important advantage too - it left incised decoration far more sharply defined after firing than did liquid glazes. For this reason, most of the Lambeth potters of the period (including Doulton) favoured salt glazing.

Birds & Monsters - the Martins' Legacy

Despite the many fine vases and other conventional shapes that were produced by Martin Brothers, it is the grotesques and bird jars produced by Wallace Martin that are most memorable and highly prized today. Wallace started to produce these sculptural pieces when the employment of an artist at the pottery enabled him to reduce his involvement in the decoration of thrown pieces. These sculptural pieces were an immediate success and remained so until the eventual closure of the pottery. Demonstrating Wallace's remarkably fertile imagination, they ranged from abstract monsters through to remarkably anthropomorphic birds, many of which were given human-sounding names such as 'The General' and some of which were deliberate caricatures of contemporary characters, such as Gladstone and Disraeli. Today, the market for the best of these wares remains strong and good bird jars (known as tobacco jars, although such use is unlikely) are retailed for five-figure sums. At a recent selling exhibition held by British art pottery specialists *AD Antiques*, a rare example sold for in excess of £40,000.

Alison Davey of *AD Antiques* says that the economic downturn has strengthened demand for bird jars: "These have always been aspirational pieces and the market has seen a strong rise in prices as collectors compete over the best examples."

Collecting Martin Brothers

Even at the peak of the Martins' popularity, in the 1880s and 90s, they only fired their kiln a few times a year and demand regularly outstripped supply. The result today is that demand for Martin Brothers is strong, as are prices.

However, as with any high value antiques, anyone who is less than expert would do well to buy only from reputable dealers who can guarantee condition and authenticity - a real issue. Alison Davey says, "Over the last twelve months, we have seen numerous fake bird jars and face jugs that have either been offered to us directly or come onto the market through auctions and eBay."

The economic downturn appears to have helped the market for Martin Brothers, which Davey describes as "particularly buoyant at the moment." At the lower end of the market, small gourd vases can be had for a few hundred pounds, bringing Martin Brothers in reach of most serious art pottery collectors and offering considerable variety.

At the upper end of the market, Davey says, "wealthy individuals are investing in the birds", attracted by both their unique appeal and investment potential. This is resulting in prices being pushed up as the flight from traditional investments continues.

Further Reading

Anyone interested in Martin Brothers would do well to get hold of a copy of the definitive book on the Martins - *The Martin Brothers Potters*, by Malcolm Haslam (ISBN 090368506X).



Double sided face jug modelled as a barrister, 6.5in high, c1910.



Backstamps normally indicate who made the piece and the date and location of manufacture.



Grotesque spoon warmer, 5in long, 2.75in high, dated 1908.



Gourd vase in buff colourway, 2.5in high, dated 1898.



Tobacco jar modelled as a grotesque monk bird, 10.25in high including base, dated 1911.



Pair of vases decorated with insects among foliage, 9.5in high, dated 1897.



Martinware miniature vase, 1.25in high, c1910.

Images are courtesy of www.adantiques.com



Gourd vase, 5.75in high, dated 1909.



Tobacco jar modelled as grotesque bird in vibrant blue glaze, 7in high, dated 1913.



Two-sided face jug, 6.5in high, dated 1900.



Two-handled vase decorated with roses and a butterfly, 9.5in high, c1885.



Tobacco jar (bird jar) modelled as an owl, 11.5in high, dated 1885.



Tobacco jar, modelled as a grotesque bird, 14in high, dated 1898.



Vase with 'Snake Skin' glaze, 3.25in high, c1905.



Closeup of bird's head, showing detail of modelling and glaze colours.



Tobacco jar modelled as a grotesque bird, 9.75in high, dated 1895.



Jug decorated with flowers and a moth, 10.5in high, c1890.