

# The British Tradition of Tea Drinking from Ceramic Cups

Written by **Olga Shkolna, Olha Dietochka, Natalya Revenok, Olena Kashshay and Marharyta Puhachenko**

**T**ea consumption in Britain, compared to a similar tradition in the Far East, began much later, just three hundred years ago. Nevertheless, it quickly won its connoisseurs among all sections of the population. From the end of the 17th to the middle of the 19th centuries, the tradition changed against a background of historical and cultural events and occasionally found itself in periods of stagnation or rapid development. The result was the compilation of British tea drinking etiquette and the corresponding production of special porcelain and earthenware tea-sets by leading British manufacturers. At the same time, British potters generated outstanding prototypes for various forms, unlike their Eastern predecessors (Sarybaeva et al., 2015; Bayzhanova et al., 2013).

It should be noted that many authors have addressed the question of the origin of tea drinking and its place in the cultural heritage of Great Britain. Nevertheless, this reflection on the specifics and its relationship with various types of ceramic art, plus the role of ceremony in society, both domestically and socially, remains relevant (Fromer, 2008). J.E Fromer authored *Essential Luxury: Tea in the Victorian Period*, which outlines the role of tea culture in Victorian England through consideration of literary works from the period. Another valuable resource is the dissertation research of M. Mahoney (2007), whose work explores the question of the tradition of drinking tea on the island of Barbados.

In addition, a number of articles by English art historians have become significant in the context of studying this topic. These include, *Chinese Porcelain, the East India Company and British Cultural Identity* (2019) by S. Pierson, and *Derby Porcelain: products of artists of floral and botanical motifs* (2003) by P. Brown. Also considered was *Tea Party in English Painting of the Victorian Era* (2016) by Russian writer, I. Rutsinskaya. These all address issues related to the spread and transformation of a tea drinking habit in the Victorian era, the medicinal properties of tea, the introduction of tea as the subject of works of fine art and fine ceramics.

Examination of samples of ceramic tea-ware are also significant and these are presented on a number of museum sites which lift the veil on many minor details of the tea drinking tradition and help to put together a complete picture (for example, the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; the National Gallery, London; and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA).

Regarding the typology of English tableware in a broader context, the articles of O. Shkolna *British porcelain and earthenware in the museum collections of London*, (2016), O. Isaeva *Early English porcelain: from Alchemy to the development of production*, (2014), and D. Tarylgyina *English Earthenware in Russia in the XVIII–XIX centuries* (2016) were informative.

The first mention of tea as a medicinal remedy in western Europe can be found in the treatise *Navigation and Travel* by the Venetian geographer and historian D. Ramusio back in 1559. As for the import of this Chinese drink to the territory of Great Britain, this can be traced to the first half of the 17th century, when trade in eastern goods was irregular. Initially, tea suppliers for the British were Dutch merchants, but due to uncertain relations between the countries and subsequent wars, this trade was suspended. After the 1760s, the East India Company sold regular deliveries of Chinese Camellia until the middle of the 19th century. However, it was thanks to the latter that tea finally entered the British market of London and quickly spread to all corners of Britain.

However, prior to this in 1657, tea (the Far Eastern drink) appeared on the counter of a London coffee shop. The owner was Englishman Thomas Garraway who developed an advertising slogan based on the universal healing properties of the Chinese elixir, which significantly raised interest in the English market. At the same time, the range of tea was limited; it consisted of only one type in dry or liquid form. Despite the high cost and puritanical sentiments of the period, the demand for a miracle drug among the population was gaining momentum. This led to

the expansion of tea products and institutions where it could be purchased. Interestingly, already at the beginning of the 18th century, there were about 500 coffee shops in London which began to sell tea. Over time tea would gain prominence and many establishments would be repurposed for its distribution (Mahoney, 2007).

It is worth noting that during this period, the largest share of buyers were well-to-do members of society, which was due to the excessive price of tea. In addition to the cost of camellia leaves, the import from China to Great Britain was subject to a duty of more than 100 percent. However, among the middle classes, there were also thirsty tea consumers, although in much smaller numbers (Mahoney, 2007). The end of the 17th, to the middle of the 18th centuries, was an era when, against the background of the country's economic growth, interest in tea extended to the royal monarchs. Therefore, an important figure in the history of tea is the wife of King Charles II, the Portuguese princess Catherine of Braganza. Princess Catherine brought tea from her homeland and introduced the formal tea ceremony. Over time, the local aristocracy began to emulate her habits and increasingly chose to drink the tea from the Orient (Wilson, 2004).

**Still Life**, Kiryanova V., 2011 oil painting  
Source: (ARC Museum, 2021).



## These events did not reduce the love of the British for tea, but only served as an impetus for the establishment of their own plantations

Tea exports became more complicated in the first-half of the 19th century due to strained political relations between Great Britain and China, followed by war (The First and Second Opium Wars). Subsequently, trade relations between the two countries were completely suspended. However, these events did not reduce the love the British had for tea, but only served as an impetus for the establishment of their own plantations in the territories of colonies in India, on the island of Ceylon (modern day Sri Lanka) and in Barbados in the Caribbean. In support for the development of tea of English origin was the abolition of duties on tea leaves from the mentioned territories.

Although the Chinese kept the recipe for the popular drink a complete secret (and revealing the secret was punishable by death) a small

amount of seeds still got to the borders of Great Britain. In 1824, thanks to the Austrian Maurice de Worms, the collection of Ceylon Gardens was replenished with Chinese camellia seeds, which was the beginning of tea on the island.

The favorable climate, decades of experience growing coffee, and the enthusiasm of local and British gardeners made it possible to expand the boundaries of plantations to the extent that the Sri Lankan tea variety became known throughout Europe. Over time, the Scotsman James Taylor, who is rightly considered the 'Father of Ceylon Tea', improved the cultivation technology. Another center for British tea was in colonized India, where the equally famous Assamese variety was developed and grown (Le Pichon, 2002).

*Below:*  
**Two Ladies and an Officer Drinking Tea**, unknown artist, 1715, oil painting. Source: (V&A Museum, 2021).

*Opposite:*  
Tea set, 1759-1769, Chelsea Derby, porcelain, enamel painting, gilding. Source: (V&A Museum, 2021).



The tradition of tea drinking in its modern sense, with a compilation of etiquette and special sets, belongs to the Victorian era. In general, already in the 19th century, the norm was considered the use of tea four-to-five times a day. It should be noted that a specific variety was selected for particular times of the day. For early breakfast, preference was given to black 'broken' (small-leaved tea) made from a mixture of Ceylon, Kenyan and Indian leaves. For the second breakfast (with food) strong tea was served, and therefore consumed with the addition of milk (Kazantseva, 2012).

At lunch-time and in the afternoons, a light and fragrant variety of tea was used, the most popular being 'Pekoe'. The well known 'five o'clock tea' is believed to have been established by the Duchess of Bedford, Anna Maria Stanhope, around 1840. Fragrant tea leaves, which included a significant number of tips (unopened camellia bush buds) were used by the Duchess to quench hunger and thirst between lunch and dinner. Later, 'five o'clock tea' developed into a time for (mostly) women to meet, converse and enjoy light snacks. These

gatherings also countered the ban on women visiting coffee shops in the afternoon (Marks, 2020).

Prohibition in Britain, approved in the 19th century, as well as the publication of a decree on a mandatory break at work for tea drinking, instead of alcohol drinking, also contributed to strengthening the British people's relationship with tea. Such a break-time could take up to an hour, and was considered necessary for recuperation.

Evenings were not complete without tea either, this time Earl Grey, one of the most fragrant leaves. Earl Grey has various histories of origin, including diplomatic relations between Chinese ambassadors and the English Earl Grey, from whose surname the name of the variety comes. According to another theory, this type of tea appeared by accident when an infusion of bergamot was spilled on one of the bags of Oriental leaves during transportation. However, the most likely reason for the appearance of a drink with this flavor was to imitate the eastern tradition of adding citrus zest to the leaf mixture.

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It is worth remembering the rules of etiquette that were formed with tea drinking. First, it was important to choose the type of tea that the guest liked, or which suited the mood at a particular moment. Today, this rule is still observed in many British restaurants where waiters produce a box with a variety of tea flavors for customers' to select. Historically, etiquette also dictated that tea was served on a white tablecloth, and only the hostess held the key to the tea box, where the leaves were securely stored. The English writer Jane Austen (Wilson, 2004) mentioned this tradition in her books.

In the Victorian period the rules of etiquette provided instructions regarding how to hold a cup, when to sip, and even where to direct your gaze while drinking (Rutsinskaya, 2016). Characteristic of this period was the ‘tea party in the garden’, derived from the similar Far Eastern ceremony, which later became widespread in other countries. In addition, at the beginning of the 19th century, so-called ‘tea dances’ appeared, the derivative of which can be enjoyed today (known as ‘high tea’) in leading hotels in London, including the Savoy, the Waldorf and the Hilton. There often remain requirements of these events such as appropriate dress code, and a traditional English table setting with thin-walled porcelain to drink from (Kazantseva, 2012).

It is impossible not to examine the role of ceramics alongside the development of the traditions associated with British tea drinking. At first, the British imported Chinese porcelain along with the tea, which was valued. Oriental thin-walled products were desirable among the nobility of Great Britain and highly sought after due to their scarcity.



It is worth noting that with the invention in the second-half of the 17th century of the recipe for bone china by the British (and later hard paste china or ‘White Gold’), tea sets became an integral companion to tea drinking for the middle and upper classes. The refined and difficult-to-attain combination of porcelain and tea significantly elevated the status of its owners. As for the composition of the English tea set, it evolved and adapted in accordance with the rules of English etiquette. Gradually a teapot for boiling water, a teapot (tea box), saucers, a milk jug, a Maslenitsa, a sugar bowl, cups, dessert plates, a rinse aid, sugar tongs, and teaspoons were added to the original teapot and cups. In addition, during the lunch period, a toast stand, a coddler, jam containers, and butter spatulas were included in the tea service (Pierson, 2019).

Tea advertisement, England, 1840  
Source: (V&A Museum, 2021).

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## Prohibition in the UK, approved in the 19th century, as well as the publication of a decree on a mandatory working break for tea, instead of drinking alcohol.

An illustration of a British set of tea utensils is the Chelsea porcelain set from 1759-1769 with floral decoration characteristic of the period. This includes all the forms for tea drinking that were established at that time (the set also includes cups for coffee). It is known that English manufacturers made cups with handles by the 1740s (Brown, 2003).

The mood for support of English products grew and prevailed, and buyers of exported goods (or their imitation) were condemned (Fromer, 2008). This resulted in English ceramics and tea mixes becoming increasingly popular. A striking illustration of the latter is two advertising leaflets created at intervals of ten years. The first shows a shopkeeper in a Chinese outfit against the background of an exotic seascape, which indicates the source of the product, while the second postcard is the opposite: an Englishman in a domestic costume drinks tea from a British porcelain cup with a handle.

At the beginning of the 19th century, thin-walled ceramic sets began to differ in their own English style, characterized by the rejection of spherical oriental forms and the appeal of silver products of domestic use. This was typical for a number of porcelain manufacturers in Britain,

in particular Wedgwood and Worcester, which specialized in tea-ware (Isaeva, 2016).

The decoration of fine ceramics at this time focused on subjects from antiquity, and romantic landscapes. The source of these compositions were engravings by English masters and European landscapes. Such images were applied using the technique of underglaze printing, a distinctive feature of English earthenware products and imitated by many potters of European art and industrial centers (Tarlygina, 2016). Thus, the tea-set of the late 19th century was already distinguishable by illustrated compositions and shapes, atypical for Chinese ta-sets which were often decorated in exquisite cobalt painting.

Today, the British tradition of tea drinking is supported by the occasional release of porcelain and earthenware ‘replicas’ of famous tea-sets from British history. In particular, teapots are made using their characteristic decoration, but married with a cobalt pattern – a transformed local tribute to chinoiserie. Such ‘repetitions’ are often found in branded tea stores in the UK, such as the Twinings Tea Company as part of the on-going celebration of and affirmation of the importance of tea, historically and now, in British culture. ■

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