ANTIQUE

Ceramic Toothpaste Pots

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Interest in keeping teeth clean was only aroused in the 17th century and escalated during the 18th. At this time, dentifrice was sold as a powder. In Georgian times, the poor rubbed salt on their teeth. Many people made up their own recipes and rubbed the powder on their teeth with a toothstick and a rag over the end—a forerunner of the toothbrush—which became popular when the more solid toothpaste or tooth soap came into general use in the early nineteenth century.

Local druggists, chemists or dentist-surgeons often sold their own dental products such as tooth powder, toothache medicines and tinctures for gum disease. This was common practice amongst the most respected practitioners of the 18th and early 19th century. The earliest proprietary tooth powders were packaged in labeled paper bags, wooden containers with revenue stamps, and small ceramic pots covered with parchment or paper and tied with a string to protect the contents.

Extremely rare large Jewsbury and Brown advertising plate c.1900-02

Pot lids are the covers or tops of small pottery containers that first appeared in England around 1840 when town and cities were expanding rapidly. Retailers produced a larger number of household commodities for domestic use or consumption such as bear's grease, toothpaste, cold cream, salves and ointments or cure-alls, edible pastes and shaving cream were packed in earthenware pots with advertising printed on the lids. The pot and lid were eventually consigned to the dustbin and then off to the local dump.

The lids were frequently decorated by transfer-printing to describe the contents. Prior to the invention of the transfer-printing process, the brand names of manufactured goods were hand-lettered onto the side of the pot or described by means of a paper label pasted on the lid. Transfer-printing process introduced a much quicker and economical method of describing the contents. Although still laborious by today's standards, this labeling method also allowed for a greater degree of artistic expression and enticed buyers by the aesthetic appeal of the package.

This process was distinctively English. It originated in Liverpool in the second half of the eighteenth century. Although not in general use for packaging until the 1840s, transfer printing was used for domestic porcelain and pottery in the intervening period.

Orders for transfer-decorated pots made by Staffordshire

Photo by: Rita Bauer and Bruno Rakiewicz

Lyman's pot lids with advertisement from their 1890 Trade Catalogue.

potters were received from many countries such as Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, France, Italy and India.

The method of printing on a pot lid was a staged time-consuming process. The transfer was lifted on tissue-thin paper from an engraved copper plate that previously had been inked or colored. It was then transferred to the lid after the first baking (i.e. the bisque stage) and rubbed until the print firmly adhered to the pottery. The paper was then carefully removed, usually by washing or floating it off in water and the lid glazed and fired to fix the design as an integral part of the pottery. They were used until World War I when more economical packaging techniques evolved such as collapsible toothpaste tubes, tins and cardboard boxes or glass containers (also very collectable!).

Because of the high production cost of multicolored advertising pot lids, single colored or monochrome lids dominated the market. Gold bands were sometimes added around the border of the container to give the product a high-class appearance.

The shape of the pot and lid also evolved. For the first thirty years of the use of printed pot-lids, most were round in shape. From the late 1870s and 1880s, rectangular and square lids became popular. Oval-shaped pots and lids were also manufactured, but because these were difficult to pack and store did not become popular. They came in various sizes from small sample size of less than an inch in diameter to 10 inches for economy size.

While some manufacturers secured the contents by means of a paper label around the base and lid, others employed the Toogood patent whereby grooves were provided on opposite sides of the lid and base through which string was passed to secure the two parts and contents within.

The majority of lids advertised the practitioner's location, degrees, contents as well as proclaiming its superiority in maintaining the health of the gums and teeth as well as freshening the breath. Victorian advertising yields fascinating insights into the early days of mass marketing. Many of the lids were printed in bright colors, which made them stand out amongst the majority of the monchrome varieties. Therefore, the lids often had elaborate designs and messages to attract the consumer. Six themes dominated the pictorials on these lids. The first theme revolved around Royalty—everyone was seemingly the dentist or perfumer to the royal family—sending a message that it is good for the rich and famous and it is certainly good for the commoner. Secondly, attractive girls and aristocratic gentlemen were pictured on the lids to appeal to ones' vanity—conveying the message that you too could look this good. Thirdly, farmyard scenes, beehives, horse & carts were reassuring and familiar—presenting a message of natural wholesome products. Fourthly, famous architectural structures—sent a message of solid, dependability and longevity. Fifth, unusual locations and exotic animals such as palm trees and temples, camels and even chameleons—try to allure the consumer with rare, expensive and mysterious ingredients. Lastly, there were images that clearly identify the purpose of the product such as toothbrushes and animated teeth.

Although flavors of toothpaste came in many varieties such as honey suckle, orange, tomato, carbolic acid and even odd concoctions like myrrh and borax, the two most popular types of toothpaste were areca nut and cherry. Oddly both were made of the same formula, i.e. with areca nut flavoring, but the cherry toothpaste was cherry colored by the addition of carmine. Nothing was added to give a cherry flavor, the description "cherry" being applied merely due to the color the paste.

The addition of Indian areca or betel nut and of the cherry coloring suggested attractive pictorial adornment for the lids. Areca nuts were normally used as a worming agent and no doubt few realized they were being mildly wormed when they cleaned their teeth.

While English pot lids number in the thousands, the American pot lids number only in the hundreds. Pot lids can be found throughout the United States but are concentrated around the coastal areas such as New York and San Francisco. Jules Hauel, Xavier Bazin and H.P & W.C. Taylor, all of Philadelphia, exhibited their products at the Great World Fair of 1851. There are fewer than 20 varieties of Canadian pot lids. In the 1890s, Lyman's Pharmaceuticals of Montreal produced the most common toothpaste sold in ceramic pots in Canada.

There are several books on the subject. In 1977, Ron Dale produced the Price Guide to Black and White Pot lids, which documented more than 2300 different pot lids. Alan Blakeman, publisher of the British Bottle Review, stated there could be as many as 7,000 different varieties of pot lids worldwide. Robert Keil and American Pot Lids have also published other books on the subject, Collecting Pot Lids by Sonny and Barbara Jackson in 1981 and 1987, respectively. **DPM**

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