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BEAUTIFUL IRISH BELLEEK  
THE ENCHANTED PORCELAIN

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Perhaps the leprechauns had something to do with it - the  
creation of this captivating Irish china that has charmed  
collectors for the last one hundred and thirty years.

Or those wild and wily Irishmen.

In the 1850's, John Bloomfield, owner of Castle Caldwell in northwestern Ireland, discovered a native clay deposit on his estate that had qualities unlike any other clay in the world. For years, the local farmers had used the clay to paint the exterior of their cottages, imparting a vivid white finish that was impervious to moisture.

Bloomfield wanted to exploit these clay deposits commercially and provide employment for his tenant farmers still suffering from the potato famine of 1846-1851. With a friend, Robert Armstrong, a London architect, he founded a pottery factory in 1857 in Belleek, a small town on his estate in County Fermanagh. They brought in David McBirney as financial backer.

Over the next few years, they distilled the strength of the old Irish chieftains, the purity of the Irish saints, the romance of the Irish harpers, the beauty of the Irish countryside, and the sturdiness of the Irish peasants into the romantic porcelain china now known as Belleek.

First displayed at the Dublin Exposition of 1872, Belleek has attracted enthusiastic collectors, including Queen Victoria of England, ever since. Outstanding museums around the world display representative examples of this pottery's art.

Fine china possesses two qualities - translucency (the

ability to transmit light) and vitreosity (the quality of brittle glass). Unlike most clays, Belleek clay becomes both translucent and vitreous in the first firing. The glazes applied with subsequent firings do not permeate the body of the china but give an overlay effect. The irridescent and lustrous glow of its pearlized glazes remains a distinguishing feature of Belleek. Like a beautiful woman, it glows from within.

Today the Belleek Pottery uses the same techniques of total handcraftsmanship that it did in the beginning. Workmen measure the raw materials - feldspar, flint, alkalies and clay - into huge vats which toss and churn for six days. They filter the resultant "slip" to remove impurities. They pour the slip into Plaster of Paris molds and then immediately pour it out. The thin layer that adheres to the inside of the mold is the raw china. They allow that to harden to a cheese-like consistency when it is ready for its first firing of 56 hours. The only concessions to progress are the huge electric kilns which have replaced the original peat furnaces.

Craftsmen add the glazes and decorations in several subsequent firings. They transmit their skills proudly from one generation to the next. Because of the time and labor involved, even the simplest items are made in small

quantities, thus assuring their collectibility and increasing value.

To produce the famed Belleek baskets, craftsmen lace spaghetti-like rods of the "cheese" substance over molds, using only their hands and eyes to achieve perfection. They hand-sculpt the pastel flowers added later as decoration.

The Irish Ambassador presented a Belleek basket filled with Irish shamrock to the newly-installed President Reagan on his first St. Patrick's Day in office in 1981.

Except for five years during World War II, Belleek has been produced continuously since 1857. It was first exhibited in the United States at the Philadelphia Exposition of 1876. More than twenty American potteries attempted to produce a similar fine china which they referred to generically as American Belleek. In 1929, the Belleek Pottery Ltd. of Ireland sued successfully in the American courts to prevent the use of the term "Belleek" by any other company.

The Ceramic Art Company, the only American pottery to survive from that period, became the now well-known Lenox, Inc., which still produces beautiful china.

Many examples of the American Belleek china produced

between 1880 and 1930 remain eminently collectible by enthusiastic antiquers. Understandably, Belleek Pottery Ltd. of Ireland still calls such china "counterfeit."

You don't need to be Irish to collect Belleek. The Belleek Collectors' Society has members throughout the world, including Australia. A Wisconsin antique dealer says that her best customers are visiting Japanese businessmen.

Fortuitously, almost from the beginning, the company used a succession of trademarks that now determine the approximate year of manufacture and the value and rarity of each piece of Belleek.

Collectors speak of the "first black mark" used from 1863 - 1891, the "second black mark" from 1891-1926, and the "third black mark" from 1927-1941. The simpler the mark, the older the piece of Belleek - and the more valuable and collectible. The color of the mark was changed to green after World War II. Now it is gold in color. Whatever the color, all marks show an Irish wolfhound, a harp, a round castle tower, and a banner marked Belleek.

According to Susan Osmani, owner of ConsignTiqueS, St. Charles, Illinois, "What is nice is that sometimes an advanced collector does put his collection up for sale. That is probably the only way you can buy "black-mark" Belleek today."

An advanced Belleek collector in the western suburbs who is a retired airline captain and world traveler has chosen Consigntiques to sell his 2,000 piece collection. Many of his pieces have the first and second black marks, attesting to their age and rarity.

Would-be Belleek collectors who have no luck prospecting in antique stores and flea markets can start their own collections by buying the current pieces available in local gift shops.

According to Dolly Vari, owner of Grace's Little Bit of Ireland in Elmhurst, the harpist butter dish selling for under \$50.00 is a popular gift item.

Alex McGrath of Donegal Imports, Chicago, says that his customers favor tea sets, dinner sets, and lamps as wedding and anniversary gifts.

You can join the Belleek Collectors' Society by writing to POB 675, Pine Brook, New Jersey 07058. You will receive the quarterly bulletin and be eligible to buy the limited edition pieces offered only to members.

Someday, like all true believers, you may even want to make a pilgrimage to Ireland on one of the yearly Belleek Collectors' tours. Who knows, you may even spy the leprechauns that started

it all.

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