

Eating your words

Motto ware's snappy sayings call to collectors

By Elisabeth Dunham

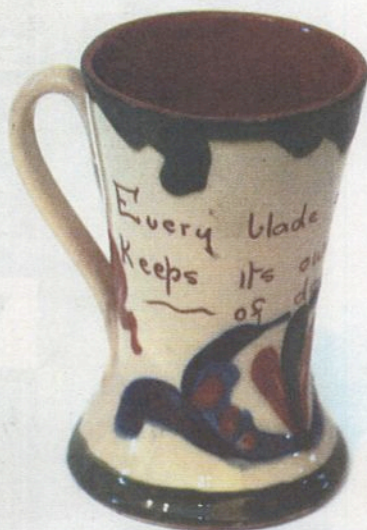
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

You never know when a little slogan might come in handy. Just ask Noelle Penn, a longtime collector of English "motto ware." She not only finds the inscribed pieces for her own collection, but she also seeks them out for her friends.

"I have a friend whose husband is a riot," Penn says. "We love him. He is deaf as a post, and he will not admit it. He also has macular degeneration, but his attitude is fabulous. For Christmas last year I found him a pitcher that reads 'Be a little deaf. Be a little blind. Happiness you will always find.' He just thought it was hysterical."

Motto ware, a subset of a British pottery known as Torquay, offers more than laughs, however. Collectors such as Penn are also fond of down-to-earth inscriptions such as "Do the best you can and leave the results to time" and "It's better to wear out than rust out."

Torquay is the generic term for a wide



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Noelle Penn started collecting motto ware, drawn to the pithy inscriptions such as, "It's better to wear out than rust out." The mug, above, is the scandi pattern. But she particularly likes cottage ware. "I got into the cottage ware because it's got the house and I'm an interior designer, Penn says.

variety of wares, including those with mottoes, made by more than a dozen small manufacturers around the town of Torquay in southwest England from the late 18th to middle 19th centuries.

In the 1860s, G.J. Allen, a retired barrister, came to live at Watcombe House at St. Marychurch, Devon. While his house was being built, he noticed that the excavated clay was redder and finer than usual. In 1869 he started the Watcombe Terra-Cotta Clay Co., the success of which inspired a number of rival potteries whose wares became known collectively as Torquay pottery.

When demand for terra cotta started to drop at the turn of the century, the potteries started making souvenir pieces. Household wares with mottoes on them were the most popular items, finding eager buyers among the holiday visitors to the seaside resort. Today, collecting Torquay pottery is popular in both Britain and the United States.

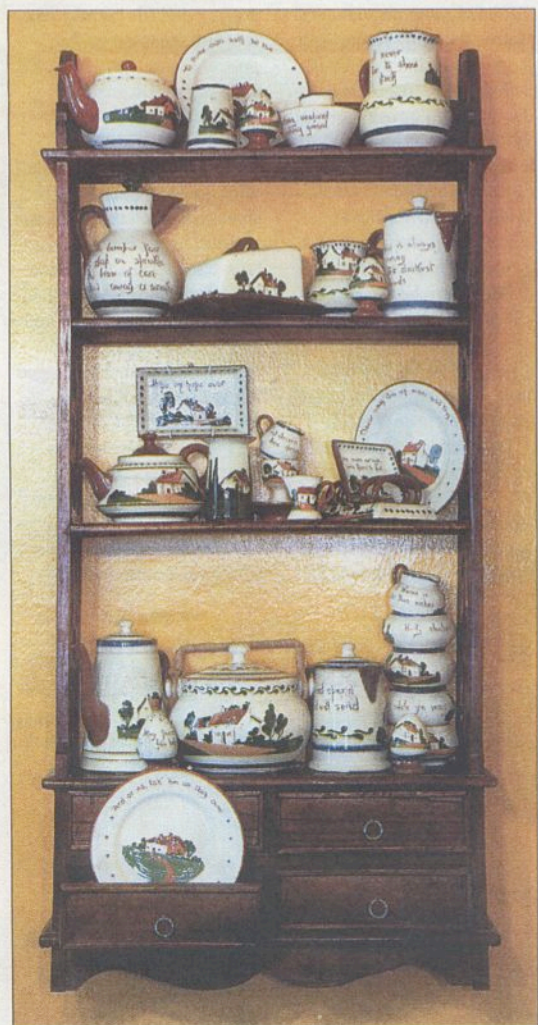
Penn, who collects only motto ware decorated with cottages — cottage ware — has amassed a collection of more than 200 pieces that lines wall units and other shelves

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Penn's collection isn't about perfection. "I'm a designer, and I use it more for displays," Penn says. "I don't really care if there's a little flake or crack." She picks up lots of less-than-perfect pieces for a great price. "Once they are up on the shelf, who can tell?" Plates, unique serving dishes and pots are among her favorites.



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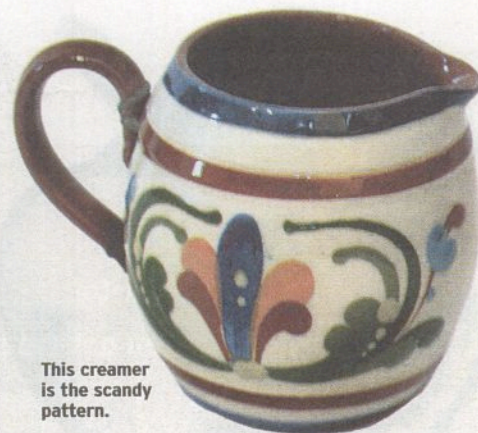
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This creamer
is the scandi
pattern.

FROM PAGE 12

inside her Foursquare home in Southeast Portland.

She admits that one piece of cottage ware doesn't have much impact. Grouped together, however, the stuff packs a visual punch. But for her, motto ware is more about the message than the medium. "The first piece I bought, the motto just grabbed me. I had never seen it before. I read it and thought, 'That kind of fits.' It said, 'Don't trouble trouble till trouble troubles you.'"

She paid \$7 for that first plate, which she found in an antiques shop in Kalama, Wash. Today, she sees similar plates in antiques stores for \$120, a price she considers ridiculous. Cream and sugar sets, among the most common pieces, are about \$85. Penn says she recently saw a 12-inch plate sell on eBay for \$390.

Despite some exorbitant auctions, the Internet is still the best place to find bargain prices on starter pieces. A Watcombe motto ware bowl and jam pot recently sold for

\$5 each. Deals like that make collecting motto ware irresistible even to longtime collectors who've sworn themselves off the stuff.

"I'd pretty much stopped buying it," says Penn, who counts motto ware as one among many collections that fill her home. "And then one of my friends said, 'I think I saw some on the Internet.' And now, of course, I have to go on, and I'm like, 'Oh great — another addiction!'"

She's scoured antiques stores, junk shops and garage sales, finding salt and pepper shakers, a cruet set (for vinegar and oil), a mustard pot, toast rack, biscuit bales, trays, vases and, of course, plates galore in the most prevalent 7-inch and 10-inch sizes. She's even traveled to England and lugged home 30 pieces. "I just wrapped it into underwear."

The mottoes themselves must catch her eye.

"I won't collect pieces that say 'Take a little milk' (on a milk pitcher) or 'Have a little jam.' I don't collect normal

Motto ware pieces
include fun
pieces such
as this
split
serving
dish.



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"These, to me, are the grass roots of the old adages and sayings and blunt back-to-basics. This is how you get from one day to the next." NOELLE PENN

pieces. I look for weird shapes and weird mottoes, although I do like the little egg cups that say 'Laid today.' Some of her other favorites: "Write injuries in dust, kindness in marble," "Sweep your own door first" and "Don't worry — it may never happen."

Childhood memories sparked Ashland collector Carol Oxley's interest in motto ware.

"My parents had a milk pitcher with a cockerel on it that had the motto 'A pound of pluck is worth a ton of luck,' recalls Oxley, who now has dozens of pieces. "As I grew up, this pitcher was used everyday for milk for my cereal in the morning. . . I still have this pitcher in perfect shape with no chips on it even after all the use."

A member of the North American Torquay Association, Oxley says that most of the motto ware collectors she's met have similar stories from growing up. The pottery "seems to be homey and comfortable. The pithy sayings are appealing in their advice and humor," she says.

Aller Vale Pottery in the Torquay region is credited with making the first piece of motto ware in the late 1800s. More than 20 manufacturers soon followed suit. Pieces are almost always stamped with the names of the pottery that produced them, including Watcombe (the largest), Devon, Longpark and Hele Cross. Artists at the companies created hundreds of designs, and no two are truly identical since they were made by hand. The pieces were thrown on a

potter's wheel or formed in a mold. When the clay hardened, workers dipped each piece in a creamy mixture of white clay and water, called "slip."

Once the slip was set, artists hand-painted decorations on the surface and used a nail to scratch proverbs and other sayings through the slip and into the clay — a technique called sgraffito. The pieces of pottery were then fired in kilns and later glazed and fired again.

Motto ware sales picked up after the turn of the century, when railroads made day trips possible for tourists. The last of these potters closed its doors in 1970.

Most Torquay collectors start out collecting cottage ware pieces, which were produced by virtually all the potteries in a variety of shapes and sizes. Other popular pieces are scandy, based loosely on Scandinavian designs, cockerel (with a rooster motif) and the ship pattern, a favorite of seaside tourists in the 1950s.

But it's the sayings, rather than the quaint designs, that have hooked Penn for so many years.

"These, to me, are the grass roots of the old adages and sayings and blunt back-to-basics. This is how you get from one day to the next. 'May the hinges of friendship never grow rusty.' It's a bring-you-back-down-to-earth kind of saying. They are really fun and wholesome," she says. "I love this one: 'Good folks be scarce. Take care of me.'" ♦

Freelance writer Elisabeth Dunham: 1320 S.W. Broadway/Portland 97201

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