

# TUNBRIDGE WARE

Prized by collectors today, the decorative wooden objects known as Tunbridge ware were originally fashion able souvenirs from the English resort Tunbridge Wells, south-east of London. The proliferation of these veneered and mosaic boxes, game boards, inkstands and other accessories coincided with the development of the Wells as a spa after the discovery of local mineral springs in the early 17th century. Originally, the heavily wooded area probably provided the material for a cask-making industry, as "tun" means "cask" in middle English.

Tunbridge Wells' popularity as a resort grew as the century progressed. It reached a pinnacle of prestige in 1666 when Charles II held court there to escape plague ridden London. The tourists who followed the royal visitors were in turn followed by itinerant vendors who displayed their souvenir trinkets under the trees. Local shopkeepers developed their own specialty wares to compete. In 1697, the English traveller and diarist Celia Fiennes reported "shops full of ... all sorts of curious wooden ware, which this place is noted for." The unusual objects mentioned by Miss Fiennes were to evolve over the years into the pieces shown here, which are part of the collection of John P. Ryan, president of Smith & Watson, a New York based maker of fine reproduction furniture. Over the past 25 years, Mr. Ryan has amassed one of the largest Tunbridge collections in private hands.

The term "Tunbridge ware" encompasses a range of items that changed greatly in design over the years. In the 18th century it referred to wooden objects whose designs featured sharply contrasting wood veneers. Early patterns included the cube design and the triangular Vandyke pattern. Borders were simple, often plain stringing and banding of contrasting woods.

Perhaps the most interesting and technically dazzling work to come from the souvenir industry of Tunbridge Wells is the end grain mosaic ware, which appeared around 1830. Of the documented Tunbridge makers, no one has been credited the distinction of innovating this technique. Some descendants of these makers have claimed the honour for their ancestors, but the question has yet to be resolved by scholars.

Increased pleasure travel in the 19th century led to a corresponding increase in demand for souvenirs, and Tunbridge craftsmen sought a method to speed production of their wares to accommodate the growing market. End grain mosaic work was the answer, although in retrospect the new process hardly seems simple.

Following a coloured pattern on graph paper, a craftsman built up the design with hardwood sticks of various dimensions. The carefully cut sticks were glued to each other, tied together under pressure, and, when dry, sliced transversely into 1/16" thick veneers. The resulting patterned mosaic sheets were then glued to the objects. The final piece was sanded and polished.

There was little fanfare to herald the new technique. Makers preferred to wait until customers had accepted the mosaic work. Once they did, the craft achieved fame on its merits.

At first, the traditional cube and Vandyke inlay patterns appeared with mosaic borders, but gradually, as skills increased, many other design sources were tapped. Graph patterns for Berlin wool-work sources were tapped.

Graph patterns for Berlin wool-work panels, a popular form of needlework, were copied with hardwood sticks to create rich floral and figured borders. Fine butterfly and bird mosaics were done in the late 1820's; local castles and ruins became popular motifs after 1850. Later in the century, animal mosaics appeared. Designs became more elaborate in the late 19th century, but the craft died out in the early 1900's because of a lack of skilled artisans.

Today Tunbridge mosaic souvenirs serve as a reminder of those woodworkers who produced such fine work that even royalty, Queen Victoria, for one, accepted them as gifts with alacrity.

The John P. Ryan Tunbridge ware collection, one of the largest in private hands, spans 1780 to 1880 and includes several choice items.

1) A sarcophagus shaped tea caddy, c.1860, features a mosaic of Eridge Castle on its lid. The side and border are patterned after designs of Berlin wood work, popular floral on figural needlework panels of the period.

2) St. George slaying the dragon adorns the lid of a rare tea caddy, c.1810. Unusual geometric mosaic provides additional decoration.

3) Eridge Castle bordered by floral wool work motifs graces this c.1860 jewellery cabinet.

4) A rare perfume bottle case, c.1830 illustrates the cube and the triangular Vandyke veneer patterns, which predate end-grain mosaic designs.