

ARTS + CULTURE

Paul Scott's Provocative Ceramics Reinvent Transferware Traditions

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 by **Pamela Polston**
June 19, 2024



"After Wood & Warhol, No. 2" COURTESY

You don't expect your dishware to remind you of the climate crisis, disappearing species, race riots or, really, anything disturbing. **Paul Scott** aims to do just that. Except his ceramic works aren't for serving up dinner. A recently opened exhibition at **Shelburne Museum**, titled "Confected, Borrowed & Blue," presents a selection of the internationally known British artist's transferware updated for modern times.

Transferware, which originated in the mid-18th century in England, refers to pottery upon which a pattern has been applied by transferring a print from a copper plate. American collectors — and anyone who frequents antique stores — are likely most familiar with the cobalt-hued decorations on white earthenware or bone china. At first glance, Scott's pieces seem much the same. But a closer look rewards viewers with rather subversive sociopolitical commentary rendered primarily in a gorgeous deep blue.

“Flint, Near Detroit, No. 7,” for example, is a transfer print collage on a 1751 Royal Worcester china plate. Its border has a floral and eagle motif. The center image would be a generic landscape except for the looming water tower and, alarmingly, an explosive blob at seven o'clock. The reference is the long-running crisis in Flint, Mich., of aging lead pipes, befouled water and the consequent health problems of city residents. That blob is courtesy of melted lead.

For “Residual Waste (Texas), No. 6,” Scott transferred the image of a long semitrailer across the center of a platter edged simply in blue. The titular waste is ... nuclear?



"Sampler Jug, No. 10, Shelburne & Sugar" COURTESY

Some of Scott's pieces recall the popular commemorative or souvenir plates of centuries past but include a fact that locals would probably rather forget. A stamp on the back of "Souvenir of Providence, Cape Coast Castle, No. 1" notes that, in the 18th century, "Rhode Island merchants controlled between 60 and 90 percent of the American trade in African slaves."

Scott's series, dubbed "New American Scenery," reflects his Brit's-eye view of contemporary phenomena across the pond. It also pays respect to the classic Staffordshire tableware manufactured in the early 19th century specifically for export to America.

"I liked the way I could put the contemporary into the historic," Scott said in a talk at the museum earlier this month. "The nice thing about transferware is, you can put it on anything [ceramic]. I found I could deal with things that are horrible."

A selection of Scott's works is exhibited in the Variety Unit gallery alongside some of Shelburne Museum's historic transferware. Senior curator Kory Rogers estimated that the permanent collection holds more than 300 items. And it has a new addition: Scott's large-scale "sampler jug" collaged with images of objects in the museum — even a photograph of founder Electra Havemeyer Webb.

Rogers said in a phone interview that he had been "fanboying" Scott for years on Instagram. After Alice Cooney Frelinghuysen — a Webb family member by marriage — happened to meet the artist, the museum invited him to spend a week on the campus last fall. Scott fell in love with Webb's collection of rare mammoth jugs, Rogers said, and "quickly understood what Mrs. Webb's collecting aesthetic was." Frelinghuysen underwrote Scott's subsequent commission.

Scott's exhibition debuts a planned series of artist "interventions" at Shelburne Museum. Though many of its past craft-adjacent shows have aligned with the traditional works, Rogers said that curatorial approach is evolving.

"We have this campus with historic collections," he explained. "We want to invite contemporary artists to play off objects we have."

"Confected, Borrowed & Blue: Transferware by Paul Scott" is on view through October 20 at Shelburne Museum. shelburnemuseum.org

The original print version of this article was headlined "Paul Scott's Provocative Ceramics Reinvent Transferware Traditions"

This article appears in [Jun 19-25, 2024](#).