

THE OYSTER PLATE

by Dennis Hockman

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The pearl is not the only gem imparted by the simple bivalve *Crassostrea virginica*—the Atlantic oyster. While not considered a gem in the literal sense, the highly decorative and highly valued antique oyster plate has become highly collectible as well. Once as common as teacups, oyster plates have gone the way of oysters themselves. Prominent in the mid to late 1800s through the early 1900s, the demand for oyster plates dwindled as oysters became less abundant and more expensive. Today, these decorative, often ornate, plates are seldom used for oysters.

According to oyster plate collector John Collier, during the Victorian era when the Industrial Revolution transformed the production of tableware in Europe and the United States, oyster plates were simply included as part of full dinner service. Collier, who sells his collection through Camelot Antiques in Easton, Maryland, notes that the elaborate decorations common to oyster plates are a product of the time. Previously, only the wealthy could afford dinnerware featuring colorful designs, patterns and decoration. With recent advancements in the production process, manufacturers of the time were able to more commonly offer the beauty and color previously only available to the wealthy elite. But that is not to say that all oyster plates were overly decorative. Occasionally undecorated "blanks" would be produced overseas and decorated after import to the United States. Some oyster plates remained undecorated or bore little decoration at all.

In the heyday of oyster plates, oysters themselves were prevalent and eaten often enough that plates specifically designed for serving oysters made as much sense as salad plates do today. The typical oyster plate would serve five or six oysters by holding them in individual "wells." Smaller plates, those containing four wells, are often referred to as ladies' plates. As a way to estimate the number of oyster plates made during the time of production, Collier offered a simple ratio—for every 100 plates produced, one was an oyster plate. Despite the pervasiveness of oyster plates among manufacturers, they, like any product, were guided by the law of supply and demand. Therefore, oyster plates were less common in areas of the Midwest, for example, where oysters were a rarity.

Since transporting fresh seafood was uncommon until recently, oysters were only commonly available to people living along the Atlantic or Pacific coasts. Moreover, oyster plates were more widespread in harbor towns and population centers where both availability and consumption tended to be greater. This fact of history has left much of the United States with little exposure to oyster plates. In fact, even among antique collectors, Collier has noted a relative lack of awareness, "Many of the people I meet refer to oyster plates as egg plates."

So what makes oyster plates so collectible, and how does one determine value? In general, oyster plates follow the rules of any antique. First a certain amount of time must elapse before most items become "worth" collecting. Again supply and demand comes into play. The value of antiques and collectibles is often directly proportionate to the age of the collector. Often something becomes "antique" in the minds of the collecting public when it becomes significantly older than they are themselves. Fifty years ago, collectors may have remembered oyster plates as part of the dinnerware in the family cupboard, so they were of less interest. Today, few collectors probably actually used oyster plates on a regular basis, therefore, they are more unusual, a beautiful curiosity worth collecting. And according to Collier, the beauty of oyster plates is perhaps the biggest reason for collecting them—unlike dinner plates, most oyster plates were hand decorated. While, popular designs certainly emerged, each hand-decorated plate was essentially different, unique.

Generally manufactured of porcelain, majolica, earthenware, or semi vitreous porcelain, oyster plate production occurred primarily in Europe, but also in the United States and Japan. While only Quimper continues to reproduce oyster plates from original designs, Quimper, Haviland & Company, Minton Company, Limoges, Wedgwood, George Jones, and Samuel Lear were the major European players. According to Collier, of all the different types of plates manufactured, those of French majolica are today the most popularly collected plates. In the United States, Moser, Greenwood and Union

Porcelain Works among others, included oyster with dinner service. American made oyster plates,

though, were never produced in the same quantities as their European counterparts, so they are quite rare and very collectible today.

In addition to availability (or lack thereof), color and pattern tend to guide collectibility and pricing. Because almost all oyster plates have been hand-painted, there are an endless number of available patterns, and also many rare one-of-a-kind designs. Typically, original oyster plates will fetch between \$100 and \$4,000 for a single plate and multi-tiered oyster servers will go for as much as \$13,000. The record for a single plate is \$5,000. Also, popular are "oyster shooters" or single serving plates. Often shaped and decorated like enlarged and elaborate oyster shells, oyster shooters were generally made of porcelain and hand decorated. Oyster shooters often sell for \$100 and up. Less expensive plates are commonly referred to as "starter plates." Most of these have not been hand-painted and are commonly characterized by white backgrounds with transfer patterns. The prettier and elaborate hand-painted plates are more expensive. As a rule of thumb, the more decoration, the more it will cost. In addition, popular colors like cobalt are in higher demand and therefore more expensive.

In terms of style, the "Turkey Plate" is highly desirable. Collier explains that the plate itself is a Haviland design, and the decorative painting incorporates the oyster wells to resemble the body of a turkey. The original turkey plate was designed by Theodore Davis for President Rutherford B. Hayes during his term in office. In the late 1870s and early 1880s Haviland & Company produced these plates with a motif featuring five wells for oysters atop a scattered shellback design arranged in a turkey shape. The plates' backs feature Davis' signature and a Presidential seal. Plates also including a patent date of 1880 are not originals but from a subsequent production made for the general public. While the Hayes turkey plate is often a collection's crowning glory, Haviland also produced a number of different variations on the turkey plate, a motif typically seen in any sizable collection. Presidential turkey plates can cost upwards of \$2,000 while other turkey plate varieties often run between \$400 to \$1,000 depending on rarity and decoration.

According to Collier, Quimper and Minton majolica plates are also quite desirable. Minton's six-well "1323" mold is probably the most common oyster plate style. Rare oyster plates include the Lear Sunflower, the Joseph Holdcroft four-well plate, the Wedgwood Chrysanthemum, and the Japanese Satsuma plates. "Sought after oyster plates," says Collier, "include anything American, turkey plates, any of the majolica plates, the faience, and the Quimper." Of the majolica, American, English French Continental, and Austrian Continental are most popular. English majolica plates from the 1850s to 1880s are the most expensive and the Austrian majolica is unusual because of its square shape.

Because they are scarce, any American plate is a good find, but often dating and identifying American plates especially is difficult. Until the McKinley Act was passed, many American manufactures did not bother marking their plates with maker and dates. In the 19th century, according to Collier, European goods were much more prestigious than American made products. Therefore many U.S. companies avoided marking their wares, hoping that they would be confused with European goods. Passage of the McKinley Act changed everything, declaring that after 1891 all goods should be marked with the country of origin. This forced manufacturers to mark products and has helped some, but dating is sometimes still difficult, though.

"Reproductions are another problem," says Collier. As general guidelines he offers that reproduction plates are often much heavier than original plates and some even have holes in them designed for hanging. Another give away is the maker's mark. Limoges reproductions, for example, bear a crossed-swords emblem instead of the usual mark. The best bet for the inexperienced collector is to work with reputable dealers that guarantee authenticity. "Reproductions," says Collier, "are a problem best overcome with experience and the help of a good dealer."

Contacts:

*John Collier and Monique's Antiques have collected the oyster plates featured here. For further information, please contact Camelot Antiques: 410-820-4396 or www.camelotantiques.com. To learn more about oyster plates, *Collecting Oyster Plates* by Jeffrey B. Snyder is an excellent book on the subject.*



ABOVE:

English majolica produced between 1865 and 1890 is a much sought after style of Oyster Plate. The six-section plates with textured backgrounds are examples of Wedgwood Japanese Chrysanthemum plates. The four-well plate is referred to as a ladies plate. The dark cobalt blue plate and the multi-hued plate with a blue center were produced by the Thomas Minton Company.

RIGHT:

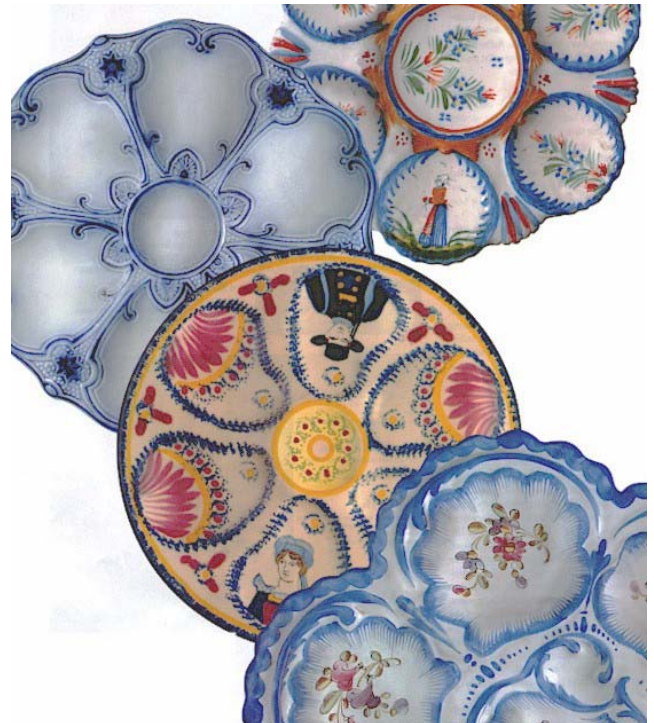
Quimper Oyster Plates are produced in a centuries old tradition of French pottery. The plates here were manufactured and decorated between 1890 and 1925 in Quimper, France, a pottery-producing town in located along the Brittany coast. Many Quimper plates depict scenes representing life in Brittany.

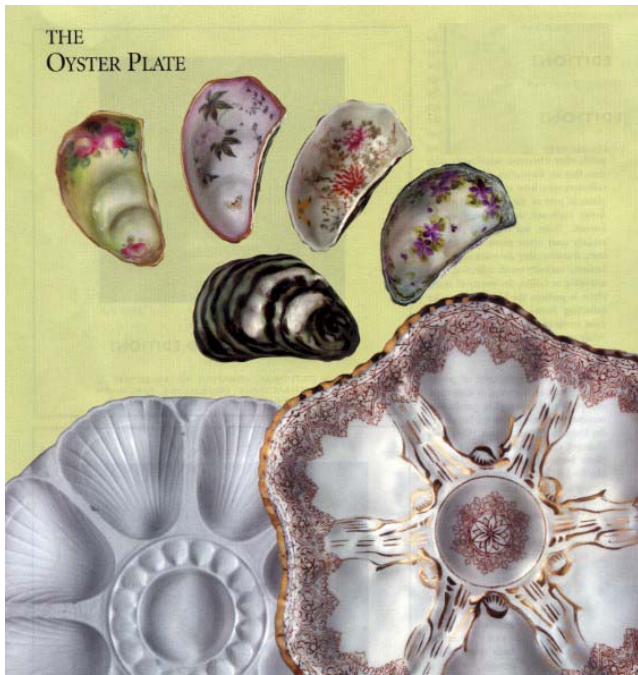


ABOVE:

The popular "Turkey Plate" style was produced by Haviland & Company, Limoges, France. The porcelain plates were either decorated by Haviland or by an American import firm. The original motif was designed by Theodore Davis for President Rutherford B. Hayes, but the design became quite popular and many varieties now exist.

Satsuma earthenware pottery oyster plates are a prized rarity. The plate here dates between 1870 and 1890, is hand enameled, signed by the artist, and features shell feet on the underside of the plate. Continental Austrian Oyster Plates were typically square with oyster wells arranged in a circular center. The Mark & Guthertz plate shown here was manufactured in Carlsbad, Austria between 1870 and 1900.





ABOVE: Individual Oyster Plates or Oyster Shooters were produced by nearly every manufacturer of oyster plates. Oyster shooters were often designed to be used on ships, so many individual shooters will bear a ship's name. The oyster shooters shown here are Limoges porcelain and Satsuma. All were produced between 1880 and 1900.

American Oyster Plates are extremely rare as fewer U.S. manufacturers produced them. The undecorated white plate was manufactured by Ott & Brewer In Trenton, New Jersey sometime during the 1880s. The white plate with gold and red decoration is an example of transferware. The Greenwood Pottery, Co., also of Trenton, produced this plate in the 1880s as well.



ABOVE: Haviland & Company was one of the most prominent manufacturers of oyster plates. The plates shown here have all been hand decorated and were produced by Haviland between 1860 and 1880.



ABOVE: Multi-tiered servers made an elaborate presentation for oysters served to large groups. The server shown here was produced by the Longchamp Manufacturing Company.

