

# Whimsical Teapots

By Eve Hill

In most cases, design is dictated primarily by necessity and usage. With the exception of adding a few angles or curves, many household tools remain basically the same for years. The broom is one that comes to mind. A time traveler transported several hundred years backward or forward from the 14th or 15th century to our own would still recognize it. The same can be said for pans and kettles.

Teapots can be a different matter altogether. From early in the history of this vessel, which is used primarily for brewing a beverage from the leaves of *Thea sinensis*, artists and potters have let their imaginations run. The Chinese are the accepted inventors of the teapot, although historians don't credit its invention until several hundred years after the widespread use and cultivation of the tea plant.

It is known that for centuries tea was brewed in bowls of hot water, then in plain cups without handles. The next step was the covered cup known as the *guywan*, which is still used today by some connoisseurs. A red clay pot very similar in shape to an ordinary teapot was already in use as a wine warmer when the first teapots were known to have been made, and there has long been speculation about whether or not these were also used as the original teapots or whether they simply inspired the design.

A tour through the Asian art section of any major museum will show that Chinese artists were imaginative and often whimsical. They enjoyed telling a story or sharing a joke in their work, which soon showed itself in their transforming what was initially a plain unglazed round red clay teapot into teapots with dragon shapes on spout or

handles, lotus flower bodies and other imaginative designs inspired by Chinese folk lore and art.

When the Dutch brought the first tea to the Western world in the mid-1600s, shipments soon started to include wine pots nestled among the tea leaves inside the crates. Whether this was the brainchild of the sellers or the shippers has long been open to speculation, but it was a safe way to pack breakable ceramics and kept the product together with the processor. Although the first brewing vessels sent were wine pots, the Chinese had been making teapots for themselves for about 600 years by then, and soon real teapots with



strainer holes at the point where the spout and body meet were shipped. By the 1700s the first teapots that were formed into distinct shapes intended to represent images were on their way to England. One of the earliest forms was a man holding a snake, done in a white glazed porcelain.

Europeans liked the beautiful porcelain.



that everyone now called "china." It didn't take long after devel-

oping china for potters to let their imaginations fly. One of the best known teapot shapes in early-1700s Meissen was a monkey that was modeled after one in the Dresden zoo. In England, houses, camels and squirrels were among the teapots of salt-glazed stoneware John Astbury created.

Thomas Whieldon and Josiah Wedgwood made teapots shaped and colored like fruits and vegetables. Wedgwood was known for his scientific curiosity, and there is a wonderful tale of how he came to make the first of

his vegetable teapots. Some Eng-

lish experts swear it is true, others say it is apocryphal. You may decide for yourself.

One time when Josiah was experimenting, he developed a

Left: this majolica teapot, the low estimate of which was \$1,000, went for a whopping overbid of \$32,200 in Boston at a Skinner auction in May 1998. While this is not the only majolica fish teapot Minton made, apparently it was unique enough to command that price from Charlie Washbourne, one of the country's premier majolica dealers. The price includes the buyer's premium. Photo courtesy of Skinner, Inc.

Above, from left: Price Kensington cottage teapot, \$50-\$145. These have been made in similar molds and colors for most of this century in England and are often mistaken for older teapots by some dealers and by unwary buyers. A good guide to backstamps is essential before buying. This company also makes those cute red postbox teapots and the doubledecker London bus teapots at their factory in England. Tony Wood cat teapot. These were done in the style of some earlier English cat teapots and came in several breed colors, so prices vary wildly. Tony Wood's version of the Mad Hatter, 1970s, \$75-\$200. Wood's pottery is in the Stoke-on-Trent area of Staffordshire, where he is noted for turning out unusual character pots. A Wood family ancestor invented the Toby jug.