

THE STATE DINNER SERVICE OF CANADA, 1898

by Marie Elwood*

"Canada is not without its enthusiastic collectors of Women's art. Real interest in the art is growing" stated the Toronto Saturday Globe of 4 December 1897. The "Women's art" referred to was china painting, by that date established as a recognized art form, especially appropriate for women. There were many practitioners of the art, their ranks divided into professional and amateur; they were known as china painters, mineral painters or ceramic artists. In the 1870s china painting became widely fashionable; annual exhibitions of "Painting on Pottery and Porcelain" were established in 1875 by Howell and James of Lower Regent Street, London, England. The following year china painting was exhibited at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia.¹ The American "National League of Mineral Painters" held competitions for designs for a State Dinner Service and in 1879 Mrs. Hayes, wife of United States President Rutherford B. Hayes, commissioned one artist, Theodore R. Davis, to design a State Service with American pictorial themes.²

It was not until 1896 that a State Dinner Service for Canada was proposed by the Women's Art Association of Canada. Its aim was to encourage ceramic artists to a higher standard of excellence in their work. The service was to be painted by Canadian women, Canadian subjects were to be employed and each province was to be represented by an artist. The Women's Art Association chose the Canadian subject matter; it was decided to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the discovery of Canada by John Cabot and name the service "The Cabot Commemorative State Set."³ A Ceramic Committee was set up and its members searched for photographs, drawings and direct sketches of old forts, battlefields, old gates and other historical scenes, also

* Chief Curator of History, Nova Scotia Museum, Halifax, N.S.

reproductions of game, fish, shells, ferns and flowers of Canada. A competition was then arranged among ceramic artists throughout Canada "to whom the work was apportioned according to their individual proficiency in the painting of various subjects."⁴ In fact, the ceramic artists, when selected, represented Ontario, Quebec and Nova Scotia. Two artists were chosen from Nova Scotia: Alice Mary Egan of Halifax and Annie Lucy Kelley of Yarmouth.

Alice M. Egan was then 24 years old and had had only a few lessons in china painting from Bessie Brown of Brenton Street, Halifax. Miss Brown's terms for instruction were \$1.00 a lesson "if the pupil promised not to teach in the area, otherwise the fee was \$2.00 a lesson."* Alice Egan submitted designs for the game plates; she was to paint twelve plates and Miss Whitney of 2274 St. Catherine Street, Montreal, was to do the other twelve. The State Dinner Service was to comprise 208 pieces and, as no two pieces were to be painted alike, Alice Egan was requested "to agree with Miss Whitney as to the special kinds to be undertaken."⁵ "I chose the ducks," Alice wrote later, "or rather, my father did." (Her father, Lt. Col. T.J. Egan, was a noted taxidermist.) "My father was afraid that other artists would paint the birds with deformed legs and wings, as they paid no attention to bird's joints."⁶ There was also her father's set of Audubon, to which she could refer.

The china painter worked on blanks, commercially-produced porcelain forms that were plain white with a clear glaze, the paste and glaze formulated to take multiple firings. On this surface a design was drawn with a lithographic crayon (or china painter's pencil). The china painting colours consisted of mineral oxides and a low temperature flux, in powdered form. These colours were blended with grounding oils and applied to the glazed surface. Since china painting colours approximate to their fired colours, a quality unusual in ceramics, the artist could use a manner of application resembling water-colour technique.

* Rachel Dickinson, Bridgewater, N.S. 1976: personal communication.



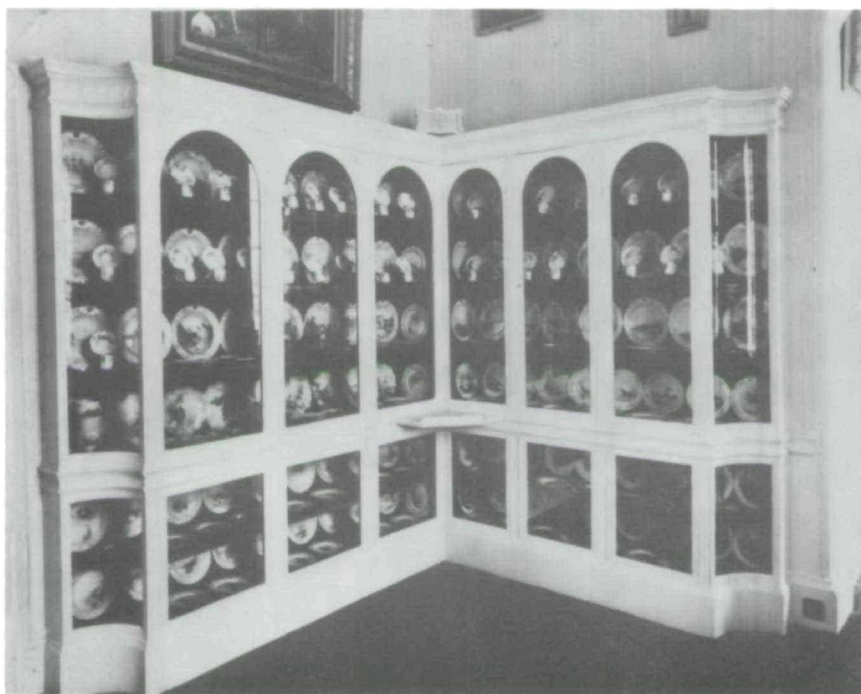
Game plate (diameter 22 cm) showing scaup duck, painted by Alice M. Egan, 1897, for the Historical State Dinner Service. (By permission of the Marchioness of Aberdeen and Tremair. Photograph by Studio Morgan, Aberdeen, courtesy of the Nova Scotia Museum.)

The Secretary of the Women's Art Association, E.J. Thompson, wrote to Alice Egan about materials: "our object was to get nothing but the best, for we want our State Set to be as near perfect as possible,...Sir Henry Doulton has taken quite an interest in our State Set and has given us the only plain china with the red factory mark that has ever left the factory to be decorated, and has sent us their best china and at the lowest price."⁷ Mary E. Dignam, President of the Women's Art Association, wrote that the cost of the blanks would be \$6.60 a dozen to the artist. "Your best work is expected - not less than \$60.00 will be asked per dozen in disposing of the set, proceeds to go to the artist, less 10%. Details of border of gold edge and W. A. A. stamp will be sent you, when you are ready for them. The pieces are to be finished by May 18th [1897]."⁸

Alice Egan had no experience in firing. Her teacher, Miss Brown, fired the first plate; to Alice's dismay there were three small stilt marks on the soft English glaze. (Many years later she presented this plate to the Nova Scotia Museum.) She asked her parents for a kiln and thus began her entry into ceramics. Alice Egan painted a different game bird on each of the twelve plates assigned to her. The habitat of each bird was indicated and appropriate plant forms were represented on the borders. Annie L. Kelley of Yarmouth had chosen the small wild flowers of Canada for her designs.

The Ceramic Committee of the Women's Art Association met to inspect and judge the submitted works in Toronto on 7 July 1897. Alice Egan was told "Your plates were much admired by all and you have really carried out the suggestions of the committee more perfectly than any of the artists."⁹

The Historical State Dinner Service then went on exhibition in Toronto in July 1897 and during the British Association meetings there in August 1897. It was appropriate that it should be exhibited in Toronto for eight of the artists were from that city. The State Service then became a "Travelling Exhibition"



The Historical State Dinner Service as it is today, housed in specially-made cabinets, in Haddo House, Aberdeenshire, Scotland. Haddo House was built in 1732 to designs by William Adam (father of Robert Adam). (By permission of the Marchioness of Aberdeen and Tremair. Photograph by Studio Morgan, Aberdeen, courtesy of the Nova Scotia Museum.)

and was shown in Montreal, Quebec and other Canadian cities. It was received as "a valuable and interesting work on a large scale, accomplished by the most representative talent in the Dominion...it is hoped that it will be accepted by the government and placed where it may be seen and studied and preserved to mark the first era in ceramics in Canada."¹⁰ But where would it be placed? Mary E. Dignam, President of the W. A. A., met with Lady Edgar, wife of the Speaker of the House of Commons, and some members of the Senate and the House of Commons to consider the disposal of the set. At this meeting it was arranged that the set should be purchased, at the artists' prices, by means of a private subscription on the part of the members of the Senate and House of Commons, who should present it to her Excellency the Countess of Aberdeen, upon her departure from Canada. Lady Aberdeen was noted for "her efforts in the direction of elevating the women of Canada."¹¹ Her husband, the Earl of Aberdeen, was about to retire as Governor-General of Canada.

The presentation was made in the House of Commons on Monday, 12 June 1898. "At 3 o'clock Earl Aberdeen drove up in a coach drawn by four black horses with outriders...Lady Aberdeen was presented with an address by Senator Allan and Mr. Frost conveying the presentation of a historical dinner service painted with Canadian scenes by the Women's Art Association of Canada, and valued at \$1,000. Lady Aberdeen made an appropriate and very eloquent reply which concluded as follows:-

'These painted scenes will remind us of many voices from prairie, lake and river which will haunt us in our home, but there will be an undertone of deeper voices which will speak of human love and friendships and these voices will form a choir invisible and will speak to us in the truest music of Canada.'¹²

The painted scenes were placed in their home -- Haddo House, Aberdeenshire, Scotland -- in cases specially made for them in the Great Hall. Two years had been spent at the work of painting



Game plate (diameter 22 cm) showing wood duck (taken from J.J. Audubon, The Birds of America, New York: MacMillan Co., 1962), painted by Alice M. Egan, 1897. (By permission of the Marchioness of Aberdeen and Tremair. Photograph by Studio Morgan, Aberdeen, courtesy of the Nova Scotia Museum.)

the State Dinner Service but when it was finished ceramic art had been raised to a standard unsurpassed in this continent.¹³

Alice Egan received a letter from the President and Treasurer of the Women's Art Association congratulating her upon "the very distinguished disposition of the Service and upon the interest thereby awakened in Canada in Ceramic Art."¹⁴

APPENDIX

Subject matter and artists represented in the State Dinner Service of Canada, 1898:

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| Historical views | Miss M. Logan, Miss Galbraith, Toronto |
| Harbours and Bays | Miss Irvine, Toronto |
| Snow scenes | Miss Watson, Galt |
| "Floriant" | Miss Roberts, Toronto |
| Ferns | Miss Harrison, Toronto |
| Flowers | Miss Adam, Toronto |
| Daisies | Miss J. Bertram, Toronto |
| Small flowers | Miss A. Kelly, Yarmouth |
| Game Birds | Miss A. Egan, Halifax |
| Water birds | Miss Whitney, Montreal |
| Fish, seaweed & shells | Miss Couen, Toronto |
| Small fruits | Miss McClung, St. Catherines |
| Fruit & blossoms | Miss Judd, Hamilton |

The historical scenes have a scroll decoration on the rim enclosing the coat of arms of the province in which they are located. The song birds are shown in their natural environment. With the game birds, "the food especially favoured by the species is shown on the rim."

This information is compiled from reports in the Toronto Globe, 23 July 1897 and the Toronto Saturday Globe, 4 December 1897. A subject listing of the Dinner Service appears in

Elizabeth Collard's Nineteenth-Century Pottery and Porcelain in Canada, (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1967), pp.320-21.

The author would be interested to know if there are any works by the above artists still extant. A.M. Egan and A.L. Kelley are both represented in museum collections in Nova Scotia.

NOTES

1. The Masterpieces of the Centennial International Exhibition, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Gebbie and Barrie, 1876), vol. 2, Walter Smith, Industrial Art.
2. K.M. McClinton, Collecting American Victorian Antiques (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), p.273.
3. M.E. Dignam to Alice Egan, 6 November 1896, Lady Aberdeen Collection, University of Waterloo Library, Waterloo, Ontario.
4. Women's Art Association of Canada, "Annual Report 1912", Aberdeen Collection.
5. Dignam to Egan, 6 November 1896, Aberdeen Collection.
6. A.M. Hagen to E.D. Long, 22 April 1963, Aberdeen Collection.
7. E.J. Thompson to Alice Egan, 5 December 1896, Aberdeen Collection.
8. Dignam to Egan, 6 November 1896, Aberdeen Collection.
9. Thompson to Egan, 8 July 1897, Aberdeen Collection.
10. Toronto Saturday Globe, 4 December 1897.
11. Halifax Morning Chronicle, 15 June 1898.
12. Halifax Morning Chronicle, 14 June 1898.
13. Women's Art Association of Canada, "Annual Report 1912", Aberdeen Collection.
14. Dignam and Thompson to Egan, 7 July 1898, Aberdeen Collection.