

Basic Detail Report



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Title

Tea tray with a scene of the death of Captain Cook

Date

1781-1819

Primary Maker

Edward Bird

Medium

wood lacquer

Dimensions

Overall: 50 × 790 × 615 mm, 2.143 kg

Name

Tea tray

History

Japanning was a decorative process that became popular in the 17th and 18th-century in Europe for decorating and finishing wood, leather, tin, and papier-mâché. It was intended to imitate the popular lacquer work exported from China, Japan and India without using the traditional lacquer made from the sap of the Chinese Lacquer Tree. In Britain the japanning industry was based primarily around Birmingham, in towns such as Wolverhampton and Bilston. The method, now replicated with local materials, was used in the production of furniture and other decorative and functional household items such as tea trays. Manufacturers embraced the popularity of drinking tea which had increased significantly in the first half of the eighteenth century and was another import from Asia that had changed local production in Britain. The domestic British 'tea ceremony' saw the increase in the desire for cups, pots, bowls and trays. The flat surface area of these tea trays in particular were prime areas for decoration, the quality of which reflected the owners social standing. In Wolverhampton japanned tea trays were a specialty reaching a level of exceptional quality, such as this tray painted by Edward Bird. Bird was a local painter who became renowned for his japanned ware and his historic scenes. As late as the late nineteenth century his work was still highly regarded with an 1880 edition of the journal 'Notes and Queries' noting; 'I have seen at Wolverhampton some of Bird's tea trays which, it is needless to say, were distinguished by the excellence of the central painting, and which were highly prized by their possessors, who, in some cases had cut out the painting and had framed it.' This tray by Bird was not unusual in reflecting the outpouring of grief and commemoration of James Cook that appeared following his death. Highly regarded and well known in his own life time, Cook's death elevated him to almost mythical status and British depictions of his death reinforced this heroic perception. This Edward Bird tray came into the collection of Henry Bolckow who

owned the site where Cook was born and subsequently amassed an important collection of Cook material, including the ENDEAVOUR journal and Cook's secret instructions for the voyage. On the site of the cottage where Cook was born, Bolckow erected a classical granite urn bearing the inscription, 'This granite vase was erected by H.W.F. Bolckow of Marton Hall A.D. 1858 to mark the site of the cottage in which Captain James Cook the world circumnavigator was born Oct 27th 1728.'