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# Reinventing the Staffordshire flatback figure for the British Ceramics Biennial 1

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Christie Brown, Elementary, 2019, Photo Jenny Harper

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# The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery is reinventing the tradition of Staffordshire flatback ware with the help of contemporary ceramicists

Once a staple of nearly every fireplace in the land, the tradition of the Staffordshire flatback is one that stretches back into the Georgian period, and although they were designed to be cheap, mainly earthenware ornaments affordable by the masses, today they are quite collectible.

Typically press moulded, they were modelled only on the front so they were slim enough to fit the narrowest shelf or fireplace ledge. The Staffordshire potters that made them – many of them just mere children – used the word ‘images’ for the figures because they often commemorated folk heroes like Dick Turpin or national heroes like Nelson and Wellington.

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Dogs and Royals were also popular, but in the Victorian period – when the form was at its highpoint – people were also fascinated by murderers and there was a boom in the

Production of Staffordshire figures depicting famous ones especially females. And while this of we will assume that you are happy with it.

these portrait chimney ornaments aimed for a likeness they were based on second hand sources such as engravings from the Illustrated London News and popular prints.

To remain topical and relevant designs were often adjusted to represent another notable person – at least one example of a Staffordshire portrait figure representing Queen Victoria was adapted from the Opera singer Malibran with the addition of a crown. Malibran had died tragically less than a year before the accession of Queen Victoria, which meant a reduced demand for her likeness and an increased demand for figures of the young queen.



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From the collection: The Grapplers flatback. © The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery

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Christie Brown, When Were you Under Me, 2019, photo Jenny Harper

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Claire Curneen, The Annunciation, 2019, photo Jenny Harper

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At the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, which is home to a spectacular and wide ranging collection of Staffordshire pottery and ceramics, the collection of Staffordshire flatback ware is suitably large and encompasses a subject matter ranging from royalty and heroes to politicians, explorers, celebrated actors, singers and musicians – all of whom made an impression on the nineteenth century public.

Cultural Icons at the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, takes inspiration from this long social history and cultural tradition – once fuelled by the workshops of most of the potteries in the region but now re-imagined by a group of contemporary artists who are taking this fireplace convention in new directions.

“During the nineteenth century countless British mantelpieces were enlivened by items of mass-produced, hand-painted, flat-backed Staffordshire pottery,” says John Hewitt, a Senior Lecturer in Illustration with a minor in Manchester School of Art, whose



drawings of historic flatbacks are featured in the exhibition.

“Their date of manufacture coincides with the infancy of portrait photography and the backwards reach of generational family memory. They were situated in close proximity to the hearth, the traditional setting for fireside storytelling, which, according to the antiquarian John Aubrey, was led by the women of the household.”

And with popular figures like highwayman Dick Turpin and murderer [Maria Manning](http://www.stokemuseums.org.uk/pmag/collections/getrecord/CFPOT_1982_P_452) ([http://www.stokemuseums.org.uk/pmag/collections/getrecord/CFPOT\\_1982\\_P\\_452](http://www.stokemuseums.org.uk/pmag/collections/getrecord/CFPOT_1982_P_452)), who went to the gallows for murdering her husband, staring down from the mantelpiece – there was plenty of inspiration.



(<http://1rs84j3vm0ob2asu30vmou8p-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Ingrid-Murphy-She-danced-him-into-a-flat-spin-2019-photo-Jenny-Harper2.jpg>).

Ingrid Murphy, She danced him into a flat spin, 2019. Photo Jenny Harper

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Dick Turpin flatback, produced in Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, late 19th century © The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, photo Jenny Harper

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Ingrid Murphy, She danced him into a flat spin, 2019. Photo Jenny Harper

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“Flatbacks were acquired as conversation pieces on celebrity, news, notoriety, romance or occupations,” adds Hewitt. “Those pieces that have survived into the twenty-first century are often chipped, crazed, cracked and partially repaired.

“Traces of past ownership and long forgotten domestic mishaps bestow individuality and fresh meaning on these modest but quietly enigmatic ornaments. Their scuffs and scars now trace a route down years of domestic change and incident to the imagination, affiliations and desires of our Victorian forebears.”

Hewitt’s own interest in the history of the flatback includes his textual commentaries, which sit among the updated versions of the Victorian art form by ceramic artists Joanne Ayre, Christie Brown, Claire Cuneen, Stephen Dixon, Ingrid Murphy and Matt Smith whose flatbacks engage with today’s cultural icons and national conversations.

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Staffordshire potter Joanne Ayre began work on her flatbacks when she was pregnant with her first child and her designs take inspiration from the Victorian fascination with Queen Victoria as a royal mother. Depictions of modern royal mothers Meghan and Kate are complemented by Shamima Begun – the “jihadi bride” who recently unsuccessfully sought repatriation to the UK.

Stephen Dixon offers a satirical take on political events such as Brexit and the presidency of Trump, while Matt Smith’s series, Oceans Rise, Empires Fall, features sinister hooded figures in an allegorical vision of societal structures in a state of collapse.



(<http://1rs84j3vm0ob2asu30vmou8p-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Joanne-Ayre-Kate-2019-Photo-Jenny-Harper.jpg>).

Joanne Ayre, Kate, 2019, Photo Jenny Harper

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Queen Victoria, 1840s, 20.5 cm H. Photo courtesy of The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent.

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Joanne Ayre, Meghan, 2019, Photo Jenny Harper

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Joanne Ayre, Shamima, 2019, Photo Jenny Harper

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Christie Brown plunders the world of popular TV – with Love Island, Strictly, Sherlock and Friends all providing inspiration for a series of bizarre anthropomorphic portrait figures while Claire Cuneen draws on Leonardo, Bosch and Donatello to try and bring some new narrative potential to the contemporary domestic mantelpiece.

One of the most popular Victorian flatback subjects, a pair of Highland Dancers, provides the starting point for Ingrid Murphy who scanned the original design then transformed it using a 3D scanner and a virtual reality computer programme to cast a series of increasingly distorted and abstract forms.

The artists were also commissioned to provide a related design for production as a limited edition by communities of makers in Stoke-on-Trent who took part in workshops to develop new skills and gain an understanding of how the original flat-backs were made.

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The editions and one-off works are displayed alongside a selection of Victorian flatbacks from the museum's collections together with John Hewitt's drawings, which encourage close study of the original figures.

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Matt Smith, Oceans Rise. Empires Fall, 2019. 3 of 5 black porcelain flat-backs, photo Jenny Harper

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Stephen Dixon, The Trumposaurus, 2019, photo Jenny Harper

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Stephen Dixon, Cultural Assimilation, 2019, Photo Jenny Harper

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Matt Smith, Oceans Rise. Empires Fall, 2019. Set of flat-backs. Black porcelain.

***Cultural Icons is at The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery as the part of the British Ceramics Biennial 2019 from September 14 to November 17 2019.***

***Find out more about the British Ceramics Biennial at***

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