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## illuminating value

# ROYAL BONN

Charming and unusual fish plates evoke period lifestyle of late 19th century Germany

By Martine M. White ASA, AAA



Many wine lovers delight in the peppery white wine that is vinted in Germany's Rhine River valley. Tourists from around the world, in fact, gather to climb the "Rotweinwanderweg" - the wine hiking trail with its length of 21 miles leading through steep vineyard terraces to experience comfortable wine taverns and vintners' cottages. Perhaps though, unknown to the wine enthusiast, the region is also home to the earthenware factory that produced "Royal Bonn" which is renowned for making the porcelain Ansonia clock cases that are highly coveted by antique collectors. These popular mantel clocks with their imported Royal Bonn cases were relief molded in the Rococo Revival style and often embellished with hand-painted floral and foliate motifs with enhanced gilt detail.

Besides these popular clock cases however, this earthenware factory also produced other decorative wares. Actually the trade name "Royal Bonn" refers to earthenware made by the Franz Anton Mehlem Earthenware Factory in the Rhineland region of Bonn. Founded in 1836, Royal Bonn's greatest period of productivity was from 1880 to 1921 and, during its height, Royal Bonn produced vases and decorative plates, which like many

porcelain factories in the 19th Century, emulated the wares produced by the Royal Worcester Porcelain Factory of Worcester, England. Dating back to 1751, the Worcester Porcelain Company, through its founder, Dr. John Wall, was one of the premier companies to produce high quality porcelain and market early transfer printed wares on a large scale. The quality of their work at Worcester was held in such high esteem that in 1789 following a visit to the factory, King George III granted the company the prestigious 'Royal Warrant' as Manufacturers of their Majesties thus the word 'Royal' was added to the name.

In keeping with the production of affordable copies of Royal Worcester, Royal Bonn developed other product lines that attracted popular interest, including portrait vases and hand-painted china services that were often expanded to include fish services like the examples shown here. Prior to this time period, china was either produced for everyday utilitarian usage or elegantly designed for the upper class and nobility.

Production of these seemingly divergent product lines changed with the rise of the middle class in the 19th century, stimulating manufacturers to sat-

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isfy the needs of this growing population. This important segment of the consumer population now acquired extensive silver flatware services to coordinate with elaborate china place settings, with each plate displaying an entirely different hand-painted motif.

Atypical of the china services of today, where the pattern is identical, these "Royal Bonn" Franz Anton Mehlem Earthenware Fish Plates illustrate a different, probably indigenous, Rhine River fish on each plate. The back stamps on each plate are well marked with the incised circular cartouche and a green printed insignia of a castle tower enclosing the stylized monogram "AFM" (referring to the initials of Franz Anton Mehlem, the founder of the earthenware factory at Bonn). Also incised is the date "1755" which was intended to refer to a predecessor company, but in reality it is

purely fictitious.

Historically, these fishplates date back to the 1880s when plates with gilt-sponge painted borders were in vogue. Typical of the period, they are hand-painted over a transfer decoration giving the illusion of hand-painted detail. And, as these relief-molded plates with decorative shell border are earthenware as opposed to more expensive porcelain, they were available at a price affordable to middle class families.

Although French Limoges fish and oyster plates often exceed \$200.00 per piece, this collection, which includes eight hand-painted earthenware fishplates measuring 8" square from the Victorian period, should realize between \$200.00 and \$300.00 at auction - even more had the matching platter survived with the set.

Although many German porcelain factories continued to produce china

services to meet the growing consumer demands during the Victorian period, the Mehlem earthenware factory at Bonn eventually closed in 1931. Now, many pieces produced by this firm are not only highly collectible, but also imminently usable for entertaining today - perhaps serving an appetizer delightfully complementing a glass of fine Riesling!

*Martine White, of Bernards Appraisal Associates, in Basking Ridge, NJ, is a Senior Certified Appraiser of Antiques & Decorative Arts with the American Society of Appraisers and the Appraisers Association of America. Ms. White has been appraising property in the metropolitan area since 1988. Martine and her associates specialize in appraising antique furniture, silver, paintings, decorative art, and Oriental rugs.*



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