

CONDITION OF CERAMICS – WHAT AM I BUYING?

Aka. “My pot is not as shiny as I thought it would be!”

Let’s face it, most ceramics / pottery after use are destined for the waste tip. Some ceramics, however, have gained “celebrity status” and became prized possessions. They were cared for, even repaired, as they had value, to the owner, over and above the utility they were made for. Everyone has heard of a “Ming Vase”, but many vintage and antique ceramic potteries produced decorative and collectable items that have somehow been passed down and kept in families. We specialise in the Scottish Pottery genre; there is a large history of fine quality ceramics from about 1750.

Any pottery (ceramic) with significant age will likely exhibit some wear and tear, call it collateral damage if you like. Pieces that are pristine are highly prized and may command really very good prices. At the bottom end, even somewhat damaged pieces can have decorative and interest value. Collectors have to start somewhere and a not so happy but nevertheless interesting (and of course, affordable) piece of pottery may still be worth having, or starting with, until another better piece comes along.

Here I set out my “condition” description. This is so that a buyer’s expectations are realistic and the moment of “disappointment” when unwrapped is minimised, hopefully avoided!

An important note is that crazing is a sign of (genuine) age and can be considered as if patina, akin to the surfaces seen in aged furniture. Crazing may be accompanied by a certain extent of staining under the glaze or have dirt within it. Not to draw conclusions, but older studio pottery may have these characteristics as they may not have been as highly fired or had been made as bespoke pieces that were not under any sort of batch product quality control. Of course, larger industrial potteries produced their own flawed batches, so don’t read much into it. Glaze defects, crazing and bites, scratches and dents are part of the history of the item and give each ceramic its individuality. *No one will have your exact piece. If they do, it was probably made in the Far East last week.*

OUR DESCRIPTIONS OF CERAMICS OF DECORATIVE QUALITY

5* / EXCELLENT – a museum quality example that could not be better than the day it was made. Rare – if you can find and afford these then, well done! Likely to command a price significantly higher than you might think.

4* / VERY GOOD – decoratively intact, exhibiting only minor chips (bites) or scratches or maybe loss of high glaze. This is the realistic top end of pottery that is often for sale, below Bonhams or high-end specialist sales.

3* / GOOD – it’s what most of us can get our hands on and afford without getting silly. Pleasing, and for proud display, even with its bumps and bashes.

2* / POOR – This covers a multitude of pottery “sins”, but cracks, chips, scratches, and stained glaze are probably all present. Remember, the price you pay will be less than you pay for a pristine piece, so don’t knock it! Maybe collect these and ‘trade up’ when something better comes along.

1* / VERY POOR/DAMAGED/SHARD – if that’s all there is then you cannot complain. Maybe the piece could be restored or just put in the “I have a piece (literally) of that” pile.

I could go on, but the pottery available on this website is sold as seen, at realistic prices considering age, rarity, and condition. You may think that a 1780 plate, attributed to Delftfield Pottery in Glasgow (Scotland’s first quality enterprise, 1750-1830), priced at £2500 is ridiculous. My response is: find another if you can. Oh, and you can see it in my shop, but it is not for sale. Happy pottery hunting...

Pricing is based on age, rarity, and aesthetic value, not just condition. Very old rare items that may be a 2* or a 3* will command a premium.

Mike Allan, November 2020