

Not Just a Pretty Plate: The Okeover Family Armorial Plate

By Simone F Lee

When visiting the Trade Gallery at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), there is a good chance that you will gravitate towards the “Mistake Plate”. With such a great story to tell, it is the logical choice, but if you are ready for a change, I will tell you why you should take a look at the plate next to it, the Okeover Family Armorial Plate.

This plate is part of what is considered the most intricate 18th century armorial dining service produced in China for the British market. It was made for Leake Okeover (1701–1765) and Mary Nichol (died 1764), a wealthy couple who married in 1730. The service was shipped from Canton in two parts, one in 1740 and the other in 1743. The ACM Okeover Plate belongs to the first group.

The Okeover family kept the original drawing, a coloured watercolour painted by the English portraitist Arthur Devis (1708–1787) that was sent to Canton and copied onto the pieces with great care. It is believed to be the only complete original design for an armorial service from the 18th century. The family also kept two original invoices for the sets. One of the bills, dated 1743 reads, “From ye Jerusalem Coffee House, Change Alley, a consignment of fifty plates and four dishes with your arms.” The bill is addressed to Leake Okeover Esqre and is from Joseph Congreve, commander of the ship *Prislowe*. The original price of one plate was around one English pound, about 10 times the price for most armorial porcelain at the time. The invoices refer only to plates and dishes and this information, plus the richness of the decoration, suggests that they were intended more for showing than for use.

Now, let’s look at the design. Both Leake and Mary were entitled to the use of a coat of arms, so the shield at the centre is a side-by-side representation of both families – Leake’s on the left and Mary’s on the right. The shield is surrounded by a rococo floral scroll motif, topped with a helmet with large red and white plumes and an oak tree as the crest. At the bottom are two white horses accompanied by flags, rising from blue water, all enclosed in a shell-shaped decorative panel. There are four small panels on the rim, two with the monogram ‘LMO’ for Leake-Mary-Okeover, and two with what appear to be griffins (composite animals that are part eagle and part lion) above golden crowns. The four panels are framed by dolphins and alternate with European-style flowers. The design made use of the full range of colours available to Chinese artists at the time.

When doing research online in the UK National Archives, I found some information on the Okeover family and on Leake Okeover himself. There is a large amount of accounting records between the years of 1723 and 1762 that belonged to Leake. All his bills, receipts and vouchers had been saved because of his accumulated debts. The National Archive files also indicate that between 1751 and 1752, Leake had to run away to northern France and Belgium



The Okeover plate, rich in detail and history

in order to escape his creditors and that he lived under the pseudonym of Mr Scrimshaw. Mary stayed behind to sort out the problem. After two of the family’s estates were sold, Leake was able to return home to Okeover Hall, the family’s main estate. In the Archives you can also find personal correspondence between Leake and Mary during his period of exile, including an old notebook recounting his travels. Okeover Hall, in Staffordshire, is still the seat of the family, as it has been since the 12th century.

Mary passed away in 1764 and within months, Leake had also died. They didn’t leave a direct heir. However, the Okeover family kept most of the dining service pieces together for many years and finally in 1975 a large batch came up for sale in the collectors’ market, garnering a lot of interest. More recently, in January 2017, one of the plates sold at auction for around US\$22,000.

This beautiful plate is a memento of Leake and Mary’s (love) story as well as the times they lived in. On your next trip to the Trade Gallery at the ACM, I hope you will spend some time with the Okeover Armorial Plate and that you will be as charmed by it as I am.

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Image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum, National Heritage Board