

The Rice Collection: America's Finest

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"Rightly viewed no meanest object is insignificant; all objects are windows, through which the philosophic eye looks into Infinitude itself."

--Thomas Carlyle

Myth has it that the dog is man's best friend. As one who owns two Siamese cats, I would have to argue the point. But as the caretaker of the Rice Cow Creamer Collection at Taylor University, I would undoubtedly contend that the cow, not the dog nor the cat, has been more genuinely endeared in popular art-and for good reason.

The cow, that docile, leisurely beast, whose strength moved the world before the engine did, whose warmth made the stable (and often the house) bearable, whose milk has nourished countless generations, whose cheeses tantalize the gourmet, whose body-when sacrificed-produces the most succulent of feasts, and whose wastes give a measure of growth to crops unattainable without it-that bovine beauty, the cow, when seen through the philosophic eye of the craftsman of the cow creamer, is beyond any doubt, man's best friend.

Consider, for example, the tenderness with which the milkmaid approaches her duty in the delightful creamer dated about 1760, from the hand of artisan , Thomas Wieldon of England. The mottled orange, grey, and white cow appears to chew its cud contentedly as the maid leans both shoulder and head gently against its side and milks into a pitcher. A careful look at her face, ever so delicately created by the craftsman, reveals that she is as contented as the beast she milks.

The simplicity of the lines of the cow and the maid suggest the primitive technique of the craftsman and the early date of the piece. It is one of the finest creamers of the more than 250 cow creamers given to the Special Collections of Taylor University in 1978 by Garnet and Raymond Rice.

You may ask, as most persons who hear of our Cow Creamer Collection do, "What's a cow creamer?" When asked if the University ought to accept such a gift, I raised that very question myself. The only cow creamers I had ever seen were those small, plastic, cow-shaped pitchers on the tables of not-so-fancy restaurants at obscure intersections of Indiana state roads, and I had never referred to those as "cow creamers."

But Mr. Rice informed us that his collection contained more than 150 antique cow creamers and a number of exquisite sterling silver pieces, and that several creamers were thought to be from the eighteenth century and many were from the nineteenth century.

G. Bernard Hughes, in *Small Antique Silverware*, calls the cow creamer "A quaint conceit of the third quarter of the eighteenth century...the milk jug modeled in the form of a cow" (p.28) The cow is usually standing, sometimes on a low pedestal made to look like a pasture and sometimes simply on its own four feet. There is always an opening in the center of the cow's back through which milk is poured into the creamer; the tail usually loops over the back or occasionally downward, forming a small handle; the mouth is always open to serve as a spout for the pitcher. The facial expressions of creamers created by the various shapes of the mouths run, as one commentator noted, from surprise and innocence to "simple idiocy."

It is possible to trace increased sophistication in design of creamer and capability of craft from century to century. Interestingly, the care in creation in the nineteenth century seems to have been lost by modern potters, who often produce the most elementary, stylized creamers that in some instances must be described as silly. I wonder if the difference is in the diminished appreciation of the cow in modern culture rather than a diminished capability of the potter's craft.

The cow creamer is thought to have originated in the eastern Mediterranean area more than 3,000 years ago. Felice Davis, writing in the *New York World-Telegram and Sun* in 1955, suggests that traders carried the craft to Holland-that country of cows-where it gained impetus in the eighteenth century. She calls Dutch silversmith, John Schuppe, who moved to England in 1750, the man "largely responsible for starting later cow creamers on their way." Mr. Hughes claims both Schuppe and David Willaume the younger as the two earliest silversmiths applying their skill in the creation of creamers in England.

Of the seven silver creamers in the Rice Collection, one appears to be a creation of Schuppe, who died in London in 1773. This particular creamer is of sterling silver, approximately three and one-half inches tall, and weighs five and one-half ounces. Typical of other "silver cows," as the assay office termed them, an over-sized fly which serves as a miniature handle rests on the hinged lid. Flies were, of course, always directly associated with the milking operation and were not held in as low esteem as they are today. Thus the fly on the back was seen to the eighteenth and nineteenth century mind as a nice touch. The Rices acquired this fine piece in 1952 from Edward G. Wilson, Philadelphia antique dealer.

The Rice collection, which is seen by Ray Browne, head of the Popular Culture Association of America, as the finest in the United States, contains representative examples of creamers from nearly every region of Europe and America and from nearly every era. There are, for example, fine Staffordshire creamers of varying designs, there are Luster creamers from Sunderland, there are shiny, black-and-gold Jackfield creamers from Germany, Holland, and France, and there are Bennington creamers from Montgomery County, Pa., dated 1840.

"And what do you do with such a collection-besides handle it very carefully?" one may ask. Aesthetically, it makes an extremely pleasing display when appropriately arranged. The farm folks who come to campus from the Upland area-or elsewhere-always gather about display cases containing the cow creamers. They point out individual items and specific features about

certain creamers that they find interesting. A cluster of people around such a display is never silent.

"I remember one just like that," one woman was overheard saying recently.

"My grandmother has one like this," another countered.

"I think I've got one like that one over there-somewhere," another observed with a touch of excitement in her voice.

Both the Allen County Historical Museum of Fort Wayne and a Marion arts group have expressed interest in borrowing portions of the collection for display purposes. And we've talked of organizing a touring display of selected creamers for State Fairs, where there would be great interest in such items. Security, of course, is always a factor in any display use.

Another dimension of use will be for research purposes. Members of the Ceramic Division and the Metals Division of the Museum of History and Technology, Smithsonian Institution, have expressed an interest in the collection. No cow creamers are owned by the Smithsonian at all.

Dr. Browne has requested a paper on the portion of the collection at the annual national meeting of the Popular Culture Association in Detroit in May. We were honored to fulfill that request. University students will be utilized in research and photography as a part of their course work.

As Carlyle commented, nothing is insignificant. Each cow creamer is a miniature window itself through which the careful observer can see, if not infinitude, at least certitude of interest in and concern for a dimension of life significant in the cultural history of its time. And the collection itself represents a love for and appreciation of the dairy industry by Garnet and Raymond Rice, who, through their involvement in Dairy Queen over the years, depended greatly upon that industry. Their generosity in contributing the fine Cow Creamer Collection to the Special Collections of Taylor University permits us to share it and the love it signifies with many, many others. And we are grateful.