Stoneware At Portsmouth’s Warner House

Warner House.

PORTSMOUTH, N.H. — This summer, the Warner House presents a European stoneware exhibition, “From the Mundane to the Sublime: Stoneware 1600–1775.” Displayed throughout the house and curated by Robert Barth, the exhibition includes more than 250 pieces of stoneware from regional museums as well as private collections. These objects were produced primarily in German and English in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. The importation of European stoneware to the colonies for practical use and private enjoyment was an ongoing necessity, as there was little or no stoneware production in the colonies prior to 1775. Attribution to specific makers is difficult as these wares were rarely signed or dated and sometimes even the location of production cannot be determined.

This exhibition contains most of the different types of stoneware imported to the colonies. The Seventeenth Century was dominated by German salt-glazed wares; designated as Frechen brown and Westerwald blue-gray. The German wares consisted largely of rugged bot- tles, jugs and mugs for the shipment, storage, service and consumption of liquids. The Dutch dominated shipping of these German wares for the first three quarters of the Seventeenth Century.

Around 1675 England began to assume control of the North Atlantic trade routes and, at the same time, began to produce their own brown stonewares in imitation of the Frechen type. It is important to note that during the Eighteenth Century, the English glass bottle industry made significant inroads into the use of ceramic containers. Around 1720, potters in Staffordshire began to produce a much finer, lighter white salt-glazed stoneware that was initially used to produce tea wares and, by 1740, dinner wares. White salt-glazed stoneware appealed to the rising Georgian middle class on both sides of the Atlantic, who benefited from an increase in earning power and the desire for better commodities. As these new, fashionable wares reached the colonies, they began to replace the more common dining materials of wood, earthenware and pewter.

Not all English wares made their way to the colonies. Carved Nottingham mugs attributed to James Morris, the slip-cast unglazed red stonewares of Elers and the London or Bristol bunt tankards have not been found in the archaeological record but are included in the exhibition to show the variety of wares produced.

The Warner House

Sota-Irish merchant captain, Archibald Macphedris, arrived in Portsmouth in 1714, and in 1715, hired John Drew, a recent- ly arrived London mason/joiner to construct a house for him and his new bride, Sarah Wentworth. Drew created an English baroque brick mansion on the hill overlooking the harbor. The windows were based on known examples of Palladian design. As such, the house is an asset, and it became known in such copious quantities. The texture is somewhat like sandpaper.

In addition to the importance of its decoration, the room is equally important, as it was constructed as a performance chamber. It retains its original 1717–18 floating floorboards, which are not nailed to the joists but instead connect to each other by dowels. Float over the joists and are held in place by the walls. This construction provides shock absorp- tion for dancers and acts as a soundboard for musicians. The construction of the rest of the house would have worked well for musical performances in this room filling the house with music. The room as completed would have worked well for musical performances in this room filling the house with music. The room as completed would have worked well for musical performances in this room filling the house with music. The room as completed would have worked well for musical performances in this room filling the house with music.