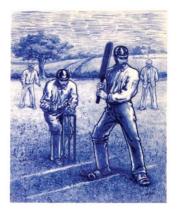
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A SPORTING HERITAGE

Jessica Doyle examines some recently discovered sporting plaques and, overleaf, gives a round-up of news and events



One of the highlights of the Masterpiece London arts and antiques fair this year was a set of 12 handpainted pottery plaques displayed by Robert Young Antiques. With each plaque depicting a different sporting activity - including cricket, football, polo and shot-put - their recent discovery seems particularly serendipitous in this Olympic year, but what is really interesting about them is their intriguing back story.



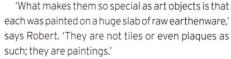
When the plagues came up for auction in Scotland just before Christmas, little was known about them, except that they had been created by Copeland Spode in 1877-1878 to a special commission by a Thomas Russell for the billiards room at his home, Cleveden House in Glasgow. It was only when Robert Young received them, in their original crates and in an untouched condition, that he realised their significance. Their scale, for a start, was a surprise - each plaque measures 85 x 65cm, an extraordinary size for a single piece of this period. Also, they are hand-painted, a departure from the transfer printing developed by Spode in the late eighteenth century, which enabled the mass production of decorative ceramics and remained in vogue until the Arts and Crafts Movement reignited the taste for handcrafted objects.



Their style, as Robert describes it, is 'not high art, but more folksy', and reminiscent of contemporary newspaper illustrations, which perhaps inspired the

artists who painted them, Robert John Abraham and Lucien Besche. In a social-history context, they reveal the general enthusiasm at the time for the sports they depict. The first cricket test match had just taken place in 1877, the first polo match in England had been played in 1869, and the first ever football match between England and Scotland, thought to be depicted in the football plaque, took place in 1872. As Robert says, 'The sports were incredibly cool at the time.'

But it is their artistic context that provides much of their interest. Although they are in the blue-andwhite palette fashionable at the time, as used in much transfer printing, they are not only handpainted, but were painted on to raw, unglazed pottery, a difficult task that would have required the artists to execute them very quickly, with no room for error, in a style similar to fresco painting.





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