Moulding an Elagant impression from “primitive” earth

FL989724 [1]

- Share [2]

Original issue Sydney Cove medallion (cream), 1789

View collection item detail [4]FL989724
Wedgwood has showed the world that our Welsh clay is capable of receiving an Elignat [sic] impression...

Letter from Governor Phillip to Joseph Banks, 26 July 1790 [5]

Hopes for Sydney clay: the origin of the Sydney Cove Medallion

Writing in his journal on 28 April 1770, Joseph Banks, on board James Cook’s Endeavour, anchored in Botany Bay, observed that two Sydney Aboriginal men on the shore ‘were painted with white’;

Their faces seemingly only dusted over with it, their bodies painted with broad strokes drawn over their breasts and backs, resembling much a soldiers cross belts, and their legs and thighs also with such like broad strokes drawn round them which imitated broad garters or bracelets. Each of these held in his hand a wooden weapon… smeard [sic] over with the same white pigment with which they paint their bodies.

Joseph Banks, Endeavour Journal, 28 April 1770 [6]

On 6 May 1770, Captain James Cook recorded in his journal that ‘some’ of the Indigenous people ‘had their faces and bodies painted with a sort of white paint of [sic] Pigment’.

This pigment was clay, and the British visitors were keen to investigate further the commercial potential of Sydney’s natural resources. With the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788, Governor Arthur Phillip sent a ‘small box’ of this white clay to Joseph Banks in London for analysis, as well as additional samples of red and black clay.¹

I should not think it worth sending, but that you mention’d it in your Voyage, & L’Abbe Mongez [a French Priest and Naturalist], a very sensible Man, & I believe a good Naturalist; told me that it would make good [c]hina.

Governor Phillip to Joseph Banks, 16 November 1788 [7]

From these humble beginnings, Sydney clay became associated with, and representative of, a larger British imperialist vision for the new colony. The cultural value of the clay to the local Aboriginal people, however, was overlooked.

FL3330038 [8]
Moulding an Eligent impression from “primitive” earth
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Sir Joseph Banks
Call # Banks Papers/Series 03.02 (Safe 1/13)
Digital ID: FL7517259
View collection item detail

Joseph Banks portrait medallion
Digital ID: FL8800440
View collection item detail

Josiah Wedgwood and Bentley
Call # DL Pa 99
Digital ID: FL8800440
View collection item detail
Captain James Cook portrait medallion, after the portrait by William Hodges

ca. 1777
Josiah Wedgwood and Bentley

Digital ID: FL3192154
View collection item detail

Scientific interest in Sydney clay and the making of the Sydney Cove Medallion

After the clay’s arrival in England, Joseph Banks gave a portion of the samples to Josiah Wedgwood to assess their quality. Wedgwood was a notable ceramicist, scientist and businessman from Staffordshire with whom Banks was well acquainted. Banks supported Wedgwood’s ambition to overcome Britain’s reliance on imported porcelain by improving the quality of English pottery. Wedgwood’s breakthrough creation of a fine ‘porcelaneous’ stoneware he called Jasper in 1774, was the result of more than ten thousand recorded experiments.

On 15 April 1790, Wedgwood presented his findings on the Sydney clay to the Royal Society of London, and later published his results in the Society’s journal, Philosophical Transactions.
sparked significant attention from the scientific community. In his article, Wedgwood suggested that the ‘Sydney-Cove mineral’ represented a new genus previously unrecorded:

a pure species of plumbago, or black-lead, not taken notice of by any writer I have met with.

*Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London, Vol. 80 (1790)*

This supposedly new mineral was in reference to the substance in the black clay and its probable cause. Further studies were conducted by other close associates of Joseph Banks, including Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, Dr Joseph Priestly, and Charles Hatchett among others. Though it was eventually concluded that the black substance was in fact graphite, a common mineral, scientific interest in Sydney clay persisted until at least 1803.
In a letter written by Wedgwood to Sir Joseph Banks on 12 March, 1790, published in the same *Philosophical Transactions* of 1790, he wrote:

I have the pleasure of acquainting you, that the clay from Sydney Cove, which you did me the honour of submitting to [sic] my examination, is an excellent material for pottery, and may certainly be made the basis of a valuable manufacture for our infant colony there. Of the species of ware which may be produced from it, you will have some idea from the medallions I have sent for your inspection.

Britain’s colonial hopes for New South Wales were quickly tied to Sydney clay, with its potential for pottery manufacture which was seen to offer both industry and a ‘civilising’ influence. Sydney clay was later used not only in the production of ceramic ware, but also in the production of bricks and roofing tiles by early settlers.

**The design**

The discovery that Sydney clay could be used for high-quality ceramic manufacture was considered a notable achievement for Britain at the time. Both the material creation and the allegorical design of the Sydney Cove Medallion were seen to represent this achievement. A letter from Governor Phillip to Joseph Banks on 26 July, 1790, highlights this connection further:

Wedgwood has showed the world that our Welsh clay is capable of receiving an Eligant [sic] impression, & I return thanks for the Cup & medallions.

*Letter from Governor Phillip to Joseph Banks 26 July, 1790* [5]

**About this item:**

1 clay medallion, cream in colour. 5.6 cm. medallion (max. diam.).

Obverse: Bas-relief design featuring three women and a man in classical dress, personifying Hope, addressing Peace, Art, and Labour, between images of a sailing ship (on the left), houses and a windmill on a hill (on the right), and a basket of fruit (centre foreground) that denotes plenty.
Original issue Sydney Cove medallion (cream) "Made by Josiah Wedgwood of Clay from Sydney Cove'.

About this item:
1 clay medallion, cream in colour. Reverse: Impressed 'Made by Josiah Wedgwood of Clay from Sydney Cove'.

Original issue Sydney Cove medallion (cream, reverse) "Made by Josiah Wedgwood of Clay from Sydney Cove'.

About this item:
1 clay medallion, cream in colour. Reverse: Impressed 'Made by Josiah Wedgwood of Clay from Sydney Cove'.

Josiah Wedgwood
Call # SAFE/PM 133 [20]
Digital ID: FL989724
View collection item detail [4]
Josiah Wedgwood
Call # SAFE/PM 133 [20]
Digital ID: FL989725
View collection item detail [22]

FL1080328 [18]

Original issue Sydney Cove medallion (black)

Josiah Wedgwood
Call # SAFE/PM 132 [23]
Digital ID: FL1080328
View collection item detail [19]

About this item:
1 clay medallion, brown in colour. 6.7 cm. medallion (max. diam.) ; 8.6 cm. box (max. diam.) Stored in red-brown square shaped box.

FL3313447 [24]
Josiah Wedgwood

Call # SAFE/P*68

Digital ID: FL3313447

View collection item detail

About this item:
1 clay medallion, cream in colour, stored in circular wooden frame with glass panel on front and back; approx. 5.6 cm. medallion (max. diam.); 8.8 cm. frame (max. diam.)

FL1034927

Original issue Sydney Cove medallion (framed cream)
The formal title for the medallion is *Hope encouraging Art and Labour, under the influence of Peace, to pursue the employment necessary to give security and happiness to an infant settlement*.

The design features the Grecian figure of Hope joined by the three Virtues: Art, Labour and Peace. Peace may be clearly identified by the olive branch in her hand. Art is depicted as holding an artist’s paint palette, while Labour holds a hammer over his shoulder in preparation for the task ahead. The bulging cornucopia at their feet symbolises the abundance of possibilities that Peace, Art and Labour may offer. From her elevated position, it is Hope who stands steadfast. Her outstretched arm and anchor at her feet symbolise noble and prophetic wisdom, which was seen to be irrefutably bound with British colonial arrival. To the left of Hope, a ship heralds the new
land’s discovery and the possibility of trade, and to the right of Labour, settler houses and possibly a church beckon future social and industrial development.

The Sydney Cove Medallion today

**FL453240** [33]
The exact number of Sydney Cove Medallions produced by Josiah Wedgwood from Sydney clay remains unknown. Varying accounts suggest as many as 200 medallions may have been created, while others insist that a limited manufacture of a few dozen was more likely. Today, the whereabouts of only 13 original issue medallions have been identified, five of which are in the State Library’s collection. Two were purchased in London for £35 by the Agent-General of NSW, Sir Saul Samuel [35], in 1891. These items were initially deposited in the Australian Museum collection and were transferred to the Library in 1955.

Another brown-coloured medallion was presented by Sir Richard Tangye in 1886, and additional medallions have been bequeathed to the Library from Australian Wedgwood collectors. Unfortunately, the cup, noted as accompanying the medallions, has been lost.

In 1790 a little-known second batch of the Sydney Cove Medallion was also produced from Sydney clay. This clay was sent by Governor Phillip to Josiah Wedgwood as a gift:

> You will receive some Clay by the Gorgon, for Wedgwood, I think that is the least we can do for him.

**Letter from Governor Phillip to Joseph Banks, 26 July 1790** [5]

Currently, only three medallions from this second batch have been found, all a warm cream colour. Original issue medallions are easily distinguished from later issues and reproductions, as they are clearly impressed on the reverse: ‘Made by Josiah Wedgwood of clay from Sydney Cove’, being one of the few instances where Josiah Wedgwood not only signed his own name, but also identified the origin of the clay used. In actuality, the medallion was designed by Henry Webber, and modelled by William Hackwood, both celebrated artists.

### Beyond the object: interpreting the Sydney Cove Medallion

A poem by Dr Erasmus Darwin was written specifically to accompany the medallion. An important poet, physician, naturalist, Enlightenment thinker, and close friend of Josiah Wedgwood, Darwin was an avid supporter of the scientific and industrial revolution of the late eighteenth century. Entitled ‘Visit of Hope to Sydney Cove’, the poem emphasizes Britain’s aspirations for the new colony through the personification of Hope:

WHERE Sydney Cove her lucid bosom swells,

Courts her young navies, and the storm repel

High on a rock amid the troubled air

HOPE stood sublime, and wav’d her golden hair;

Calm’d with her rosy smile the tossing deep,

And with sweet accents charm’d the winds to sleep;

To each wild plain she stretch’d her snowy hand,

High-waving wood, and sea-encircled strand.
Hear me,” she cried, ’ye rising realms! record

Time’s opening scenes, and Truth’s unerring word. —

There shall broad streets their stately walls extend
The circus widen, and the crescent bend;
There, ray’d from cities o’er the cultur’d land,
Shall bright canals, and solid roads expand. —
There the proud arch, Colossus-like, bestride
Yon glittering streams, and bound the chasing tide;
Embellish’d villas crown the landscape-scene,
Farms wave with gold, and orchards blush between.

There shall tall spires, and dome-capt towers ascend,
And piers and quays their massy structures blend;
While with each breeze approaching vessels glide,
And northern treasures dance on every tide!” —
Then ceas’d the nymph — tumultuous echoes roar,
And JOY’s loud voice was heard from shore to shore —
Her graceful steps descending press’d the plain,
And PEACE, and ART, and LABOUR, join’d her train.

Erasmus Darwin is prophesying the British colony would grow prosperous, where order and reason would transform this place from the chaos of nature, to an outpost of European ‘civilisation’. The Medallion’s notable absence of Aboriginal representation acts as a sobering reminder that the future for Australia was not believed to be found in the land’s unique features or the ownership and understanding of the land by Aboriginal people, but rather its usefulness in the creation of an empire.

The ‘companion’ to the Sydney Cove Medallion

**FL10948313** [36]
Josiah Wedgwood produced a companion medallion, commonly referred to as the ‘Slave Medallion’ [38].

Also designed by Henry Webber, the Slave Medallion was created in 1787 as means of identifying those associated with the abolitionist cause. As a member of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade himself, Wedgwood manufactured and shipped a number of these ceramic medallions to Benjamin Franklin, then President of the Philadelphia Society for the Abolition of Slavery, most likely bearing the cost himself. Later, the Slave Medallion’s design also became the emblem of the British anti-slave movement and was extensively reproduced and disseminated in promotional or decorative items such as jewelry, snuff boxes and hair pins.

In a letter from Josiah Wedgwood to Erasmus Darwin in July 1789, Wedgwood acknowledged the companion pieces:

The slave cameo comes in so well, & so extremely apropos where you have placed it…especially considering it as [sic] a companion to the Hope of Sydney cove [sic].
Correspondence of Josiah Wedgwood, 1781–1794

A further poem written by Erasmus Darwin entitled ‘The Economy of Vegetation’, from Part Two of The Botanic Garden, similarly sought to celebrate the scientific achievements of his contemporaries through the use of Ancient Greek mythology and Romantic traits.

And pleased on WEDGWOOD ray your partial smile,

A new Etruria decks Britannia’s isle.

Charm’d by your touch, the flint liquescent pours

Through finer sieves, and falls in whiter showers;

Charm’d by your touch, the knead clay refines,

The biscuit hardens, the enamel shines;

Each nicer mould a softer feature drinks,

The bold cameo speaks, the soft intaglio thinks.

Whether, O Friend of Art! the gem you mould

Rich with new taste, with ancient virtue bold;

Form the poor fetter’d SALVE on bended knee*

From Britain’s sons imploring to be free;

Or with fair HOPE the brightening scenes improve,

And cheer the dreary wastes at Sydney Cove…

Accompanying the latter stanza, Darwin included the footnote:

Alluding to two cameos of Mr. Wedgwood’s manufacture; one of a slave in chains, of which he distributed many hundreds, to excite the humane to attend to and to assist in the abolition of the detestable traffic in human creatures; and the other a cameo of Hope attended by Peace, and Art, and Labour; which was made of clay from Botany Bay; to which place he sent many of them to show the inhabitants what their materials would do, and to encourage their industry.

As Darwin suggests in his poem, the Sydney Cove Medallion illustrated the European ideals of enlightenment and imperialist vision for the new colony.

**Empire narratives**

Another important publication of the period that is associated with the Sydney Cove Medallion is The Voyage of
Governor Arthur Phillip to Botany Bay [39]. First published in 1789 and hugely popular across Europe, the first two editions of Voyage featured on its frontispiece a copper-plate engraving of the Sydney Cove Medallion by Thomas Medland, and re-engraved by W Sherwin for the third edition published in 1790.

FL3733560 [40]

- Share [2]

Title page of 'The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay', 1789
Etruria

The sprigged word ‘Etruria’ at the base of the Sydney Cove Medallion is also significant. Originally stemming from the region in Italy and its ancient people; the pre-Roman Etruscans were romanticised and idealised in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Britain as the ultimate unspoilt ‘noble savage’. The term ‘Etruria’ recalls this history on the medallion. In doing so, Josiah Wedgwood was associating the development and commemoration of great empires with Australia’s similarly wild and ‘untamed’ origins. The Sydney Cove Medallion envisaged Australia as a second Etruria, following the ‘civilising’ process of colonial social and economic development.
The word ‘Etruria’ has an additional association to Josiah Wedgwood, as he named his pottery factory in Staffordshire, 1769 Etruria. Wedgwood’s inclusion of this word on the medallion’s design is a thinly veiled expression of his own professional and commercial hopes for the legacy of his pottery manufacture. Indeed, Josiah Wedgwood’s first pottery production in his new Etruria Works bore the legend ‘Artes Etruriae Renascuntur’ meaning ‘the Arts of Etruria reborn’.

The legacy of the Sydney Cove Medallion

From Josiah Wedgwood’s perspective, the manufactured arts presented an opportunity for the dissemination and appreciation of European culture, with objects once reserved for the few now able to be copied to:

suit the tastes, the wants, & the purses of different purchasers


Since the early 1800s, over 20 editions of the Sydney Cove Medallion have been reproduced in Basalt (black), Jasper (various colours), and Queen’s ware (cream hard-paste porcelain), as well as serving as ornamental bas-relief motifs on larger Wedgwood pieces such as the Australia Vase [44]. In particular, commemorative issues of the medallion were created to mark the sesquicentenary and bicentenary of the First Fleet Landing, in 1938 and 1988 respectively.

FL1097595 [45]
Moulding an Elegant impression from “primitive” earth

Published on State Library of NSW (https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au)

Thomas Lovett for Wedgwood

Call # PM 134 [46]

Digital ID: FL1097595

Visit of Hope to Sydney Cove basalt plaque with central Sydney Cove medallion reproduction

1890s

Digital ID: FL1143347 [48]

Visit of Hope to Sydney Cove basalt plaque with central Sydney Cove medallion reproduction

Wedgwood

Call # R 984 [49]

Digital ID: FL1143347

View collection item detail [47]

View collection item detail [48]
Josiah Wedgwood was confident in the quality and innovation of his wares, though he may not have foreseen their lasting impact. Ornamental wares by Wedgwood, particularly those from the era of ‘Old Josiah’, are highly prized in Australia and around the world. With so few examples of the original issue surviving, the Sydney Cove Medallion remains among the most coveted and historically significant of Wedgwood’s creations.

A selection of Wedgwood medallions and portrait medallions are on permanent display in the Library’s Collector’s Gallery [54].

Further reading


Wedgwood, J. & Bentley, T., Correspondence of Josiah Wedgwood, 1781–1794: with an appendix containing some letters on canals and Bentley's pamphlet on inland navigation (ed.) Euphemia Farrer, K. (1906).


Links
[12] https://primo-slnsw.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=ADLIB110326369&amp;vid=SLN\nSW&amp;search_scope=MOH&amp;tab=default_tab&amp;lang=en_US&amp;context=L
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