

# Collector's interest triggers rise of Phoenix bird

By: CORINNE ABATT

Was there ever any doubt that Joan Oates of West Bloomfield would collect Phoenix Bird china? She doesn't think so.

She has framed a page from the January 1928 issue of Needlecraft magazine. It pictures the premium gifts for selling subscriptions to the magazine. Among the gifts is the Japanese export china she collects. The date of the magazine is the month and year she was born.

Mrs. Oates, who has been collecting the blue and white dinner and decorative ware for about nine years, said, "I've really made it popular."

That's because when she did collect, she went at it with a vengeance. Counting the Phoenix Bird pattern along with several others in the same color and style, she has well over 1,000 pieces.

SHE HAS CATALOGED THE PIECES

ES, photographed many of them, written articles about the ware and does a quarterly newsletter which she distributes by subscription to collectors across the country.

"Until six or seven years ago, it was just a flea market dish," she said. And while prices are still modest in comparison to the more elegant exports from the Orient, the ware is now attracting more collectors.

While a large part of its appeal is aesthetic, the unknown aspects of it challenge people like Mrs. Oates.

"At one time it was sold in Woolworths and given as a prize for selling Needlecraft magazine subscriptions," she said.

She knows that many different Japanese potteries made the blue and white ware, but records of which ones and what pieces they made are non-existent, or at least undiscovered until now.

"Most of the factories were destroyed during World War II," she said. Mrs. Oates has cataloged 40 different

identifying marks on the china. Some of the new pieces and some of the early ones have no marks at all. "If they are marked Nippon, they were made before 1921," she said.

SHE IS ALSO INTRIGUED by the wide variations in quality. In her kitchen she has one cabinet that has hand-painted pieces which, without close scrutiny, look a lot like the many others she has on display.

In the early 20th century when the ware was being exported, the Japanese makers might not have realized what excitement the wide variety of pieces would create among later future collectors.

Among the six blue and white patterns there are 125 kinds of pieces and some 300 variations in shapes, styles and patterns.

Among the collectors, the plates and most cups and saucers are the usual. They go after the unusual to fill in the spaces. There are five different large lemonade pitchers, five to six varieties

of small coffee pots, over 10 different salt and pepper shakers, 25 different creamers, as well as varied egg cups, gravy boats, platters, goblets, biscuit jars, condensed milk can holders, custard cups, remekins, fruit bowls, desert dishes and tureens.

BESIDES THE TABLEWARE, Mrs. Oates has discovered that there are decorative pieces such as chamber candlesticks and bath items made in the blue and white patterns.

It is the scarce pieces that pique her interest now.

"I'd love to have a pitcher and bowl set," she said, "I know of only one in existence. I'd like to know if there was a pedestal cake plate made — and tall thin iced tea glasses. There is a lovely soap dish, hair receiver and powder jar, so probably at one time there was a complete bath set."

In the Oates' family room there's a small hut containing a complete child's set of the china. Just recently Mrs. Oates' son David was in San Fran-

cisco and he found what Mrs. Oates believes was a salesman's sample box. So the hunt for the missing and unknown pieces continues.

"That's been the fantastic part of all this — cataloging, and photographing the different pieces and making safaris to other collectors' homes to see their things," Mrs. Oates said.

Kenneth Oates does the photography for his wife, their three married children all contribute to the hobby by watching for things their mother might be interested in. Tom, 14, named one of the patterns "Flying Turkey." David has done drawings of maker's marks for his mother's file and some of the Phoenix Bird designs which she has used for needlepoint, toaster covers and other items.

THE COLLECTION HAS DEVELOPED into a family hobby that has brought all of them many new friends from coast to coast. Part of the collection is attractively displayed in every room of the home. The varied blues of

the patterns are repeated in the decor of the home.

Mrs. Oates remembers when she first saw the china in her aunt's home in Ohio.

"I told her when she got through with them, I'd love to have them." Her aunt gave Mrs. Oates her place settings for six, but didn't live to see what came of the gift.

FLORENCE SURRIDGE OF BIRMINGHAM still hunts for Phoenix Bird pieces for Mrs. Oates and it was her mother who contributed many pieces to that original collection belonging to Mrs. Oates' aunt in Ohio.

Mrs. Oates stood in her kitchen before a large antique cupboard housing some of her prize pieces. "There's a story to go with every piece," she said.

The thought of doing a book on this export china is always in the back of her mind. In meantime she does articles on her hobby for several different publications, sends out the newsletter and answers a steady stream of inquiries.

## Art fair scheduled

The Royal Oak Recreation and Public Service Department will hold the ninth annual outdoor art fair Saturday and Sunday, July 21 and 22. The location is Memorial Park, Woodward and Thirteen Mile. Hours are 11 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. Saturday and 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday.

This is a juried show in which 95 artists will be selling items of pottery, metal work, various media, wood, photography, jewelry, weaving, and leather.

The Austin-Moro Jazz Band will present a concert 4-5:30 p.m. Saturday. Food concessions include natural foods, pizza, fruit salads, milkshakes, hot dogs and cake from the Blue Mushroom, Farmington Fruit and Riverfront Enterprises. The fair is scheduled rain or shine.

## Michigan artist shown at U-M

An exhibition of some 50 paintings and drawings by Brighton artist Paul Zenian continues at the Rackham Galleries on the University of Michigan campus through July 25.

A University of Michigan art graduate, Zenian has been an art faculty member at Washtenaw Community College since 1968.

The Rackham show, which will feature abstract works with natural and environmental theme, is being presented by the U-M School of Art. Rackham Galleries are open to the public 9 a.m. to 11 p.m. Monday through Saturday.

The exhibition will coincide with some shows in the University Musical Society's "Summer Fare" program in the U-M Rackham Building.

Born in 1935 in New York City, Zenian received a B.A. degree in physics from U-M in 1957 and worked in the research and development field for eight years before directing his attention to art.

He studied art at the Center for Creative Studies and Wayne State University, and received his masters in fine arts from Michigan in 1968.

He has participated in juried and invitational shows in New York, New Jersey, Indiana, South Dakota and Michigan. In 1973 he received a major award from the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Zenian's works are in local, regional and national collections. He has also had many gallery showings and his work is currently available from the Lee Hoffman Gallery in Birmingham.

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