

# Wedgwood was his name, Jasperware was his game

by **Bruce Beck**

Buttons in this article are shown at actual size unless otherwise indicated.

**E**NGLAND AND THE WORLD OF CERAMICS were profoundly changed by Josiah Wedgwood. Born in 1730 in Burslem [now Stoke-on-Trent], Staffordshire, England, Josiah was the son, grandson and great-grandson of potters. He grew up knowing the ins and outs of the making of ceramics. He married his third cousin, Sarah Wedgwood, and with the help of his wife's dowry and space leased to him by his family, he started his own company in 1759. He named it after himself.

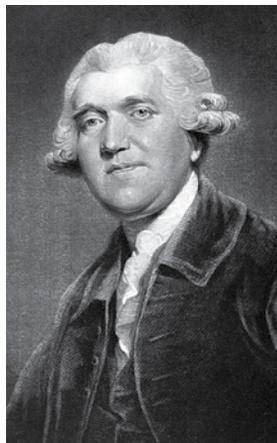
In the early 1760s Queen Charlotte was so impressed with his new earthenware, known as "cream-ware," that she gave him permission to call it the "Queen's Ware." In 1762 she appointed him Queen's potter.

In 1768 Josiah invented black basalt, a new solid matte black or gray-black stoneware. Black and white jasperware often is erroneously referred to as black basalt. Basalt comes from a reddish-brown clay that burns black when fired. Black basalt is a solid matte black or gray-black.

With his new success and experimentation, in the 1770s Josiah introduced jasperware to the ceramic world. The new stoneware and innovative designs influenced the look of ceramics in ways that have stood the test of time.

Josiah's process for creating his jasperware was kept a very close secret. The main ingredient was unknown until recent modern times when a chemical analysis revealed it to be barium sulphate, an ingredient that many believe Josiah stumbled upon when doing his many experiments. Some have described jasperware as a type of porcelain, while others called it a type of pottery. Josiah referred to it as earthenware. However, jasperware is a stoneware.

Wedgwood produced jasperware buttons in a variety of colors, but most jasperware buttons in collections today have white bas relief imagery on a field of sky blue color known as "jasperware blue." Wedgwood also created buttons in green, pink, dark blue, black, gray-black (black basalt), as well as three-color combinations.



Portrait of Josiah Wedgwood after Sir J. Reynolds (detail)\*



Peggy Osborne, in her book *About Buttons*, states this button may be the earliest known Wedgwood button, dating to 1774-75, which is the period in which Josiah invented jasperware. This button is mounted in iron, slip-painted blue, and separately molded applied figures.

The Portland Vase. Cameo-glass, probably made in Italy, ca. 5-25 AD. It has been on display in the British Museum since 1810. Wedgwood's jasperware copies of the vase contributed to the popularity of the original. 9.76" H (24.8 cm)



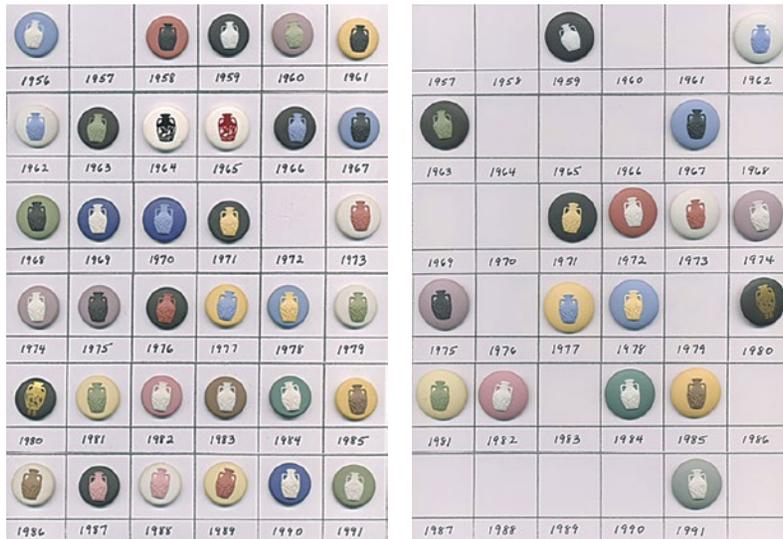
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**N**eo-classicism, inspired by ancient Greek and Roman culture, began in the mid-18th century in reaction to the dominant Baroque and Rococo styles. Josiah particularly admired the famous Portland Vase, a Roman cameo glass vessel made in the early part of the first century A.D., now housed in the British Museum. The Portland vase was Josiah's inspiration for the classical designs he used on his ceramics.

Just as there are button societies around the country and abroad, there are also hundreds of Wedgwood societies throughout the world. Each year their members meet and have a convention, or "seminar" as they call it. Like the National Button Society Convention, the members receive a favor button or stud. It always depicts the famous Portland Vase. The annual favor buttons and studs were made for the years from 1956 until 1991 when they were discontinued for financial reasons and replaced by less expensive stickpins with a glued on design of the Portland Vase. The Wedgwood Society still maintains its convention/seminars, the next to be held April 2017 in Miami, Florida.

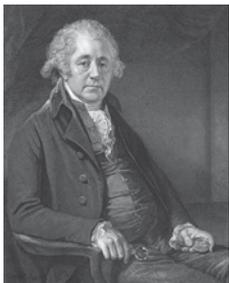
Each year in Milwaukee, Wisconsin a store known as the "Tiffany's of Milwaukee" presents a distinguished citizen, such as the governor, mayor, etc., with a specially produced piece of Wedgwood. The current Lord Wedgwood usually is present at this event, and friends and family of the recipient are invited. Several years ago the

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The famous Roman Portland Vase, so admired by Josiah Wedgwood, is pictured on a jasperware "favor" button or stud given to attendees of the Wedgwood Society's annual convention. Each year a different color combination is used, many beyond the familiar colors found on Wedgwood buttons.

author of this article and his wife Jane were invited to the event by the store's owner, a friend of theirs, who was going to be the recipient of the award. The author of this article prepared a card of 25 18th- and 19th-century jasperware buttons to show to Lord Wedgwood, who was delighted to see them and thankful for such a fine gift—but then he was told they were just for viewing. He was disappointed but understood and went on to say that there were more buttons on this card than any of his family had. He went on to explain much of the history of the Wedgwood Company, including its relationship with the famous Matthew Boulton.



Portrait of Matthew Boulton (detail) Wellcome Library, London. Wellcome Images images@wellcome.ac.uk <http://wellcomeimages.org> Matthew Boulton. Line engraving by W. Sharp, 1801, after Sir W. Beechey, 1799 via Wikimedia Commons

The collaboration of Josiah Wedgwood and British engineer and manufacturer Matthew Boulton gave us some of the most sought-after buttons ever made. Matthew Boulton, born in 1728 in Birmingham, was a manufacturer of a wide variety of items including steam engines, the invention of his partner James Watt. But it was Boulton's love for the decorative arts that made him famous throughout England and France. He became widely known for producing metal mounts, including ormolu (golden or gilded brass or bronze) and steel mountings. Wedgwood and Boulton combined their products, producing small decorative items such as buckles, brooches and, of course, buttons. It was an opportunity for both companies to ex-



This large size Wedgwood button mounted in Boulton steel is open in back showing the Wedgwood mark.



Division I jasperware buttons are typically classical subjects. This is a very unusual subject on an 18th C copper-rimmed button with cut steels and tin back.



18th C Wedgwood medium size set in Boulton steel with open back.



Large size 18th C pearl button with a jasperware center framed with a brass and cut steel inner border.



Large size 18th C copper button with a jasperware inset.

Companies in France and England, such as Adams and others, copied the famous Wedgwood process, however it is widely known that no one else could produce jasperware comparable to the fine quality of Wedgwood's. The British royalty over the centuries has believed Wedgwood jasperware to be one of England's greatest products and Josiah Wedgwood a genius of his era.

Many of our buttons assumed to be Wedgwood are attributed to him due to their fine quality. However, positive identification from a back mark is difficult when the disks are mounted in metal. Certainly several examples in collections today were made by Wedgwood's competitors. This is why we call Wedgwood ceramic types jasperware. There are a few examples from the 18th century that are mounted in open-backed steel, revealing the Wedgwood mark, and some later examples of unmounted Wedgwood buttons with the back mark.

True Wedgwood and other jasperware buttons were produced in many sizes from diminutive to large; the most plentiful being large and the rarest, the prized diminutive. Most jasperware buttons are mounted in metal, however, examples can be found mounted in pearl and with wood backs.

pand their wares. The two men enjoyed a long lasting business relationship. Although other companies used Wedgwood disks in their steel and other metal mountings, it is Boulton's revolutionary quality steel that make these buttons so desirable to collectors today. His patented formula, which is still unknown, made the steel remain so pristine some people have thought it was silver rather than steel, rarely pitting or rusting. Josiah Wedgwood once wrote of his friend Matthew Boulton, who he called the first manufacturer of England, "I like the man, I like his spirit."

# 18th-Century Copper or Copper Rimmed



Three mounted in or on copper



Copper rim with steel liner and tin back

Copper rim

Copper rim with steel liner and tin back



Copper rim with steel liner and tin back

Copper rim tin back with atypical radial floral design

The Tower of London. Copper rim with tin back

Beginning with the invention of jasperware by Josiah in the 1700s, Wedgwood buttons were produced until approximately the end of the 18th century. They would not be produced again for nearly 80 years until the late 19th century, and then only in limited quantities for a short time until the 1950s. The Wedgwood company was purchased in 1986 by the Waterford crystal company, and by 2009 they were in major debt. There are still jasperware ceramics being made today with the Wedgwood name. Although the English factory still exists, a good portion of its products are made in Indonesia. Many believe the US-based company, acquired last year by a Finnish company that now owns Waterford/Wedgwood, does not produce the quality that Josiah developed.

# Mounted in Steel



18th C solid Boulton steel

Cut steel double border

Cut steel triple border

19th C thick flat jasperware

19th C with domed jasperware

# 18th-C Pearls with Jasperware



# 19th-C in Other Metals



Scarce oval



Copper and brass



Silvered brass

### 19th C Black Basalt



Mounted in metal

Mounted on metal plate

Scarce 8-sided and mounted in engraved metal frame

### 19th C Black & White



Self-shank, back mark: Wedgwood

Mounted in metal

Mounted in metal

### Colors



Scarce tricolor mounted in backmarked metal

Late 19th C jasperware pink with Plate and claws setting

Jasperware green, 19th C backmarked

### Paste OME



### Faux Wedgwood

Wedgwood pieces through the ages have been such popular decorative items that many companies made faux "wedgwood" items.



18th C painted glass, copper rimmed

Two 18th C one-piece painted coppers



Late-19th to early-20th C satin glass with applied glass head, in fine metal mounting

Late-19th to early early-20th C green-painted white glass mounted in metal



2-inch 19th C encrusted enamel with cut steel border



Ca. late-18th to early-19th C colored glass

### Modern Wedgwood

This article mainly focuses on the 18th- and 19th-century jasperware and basalt examples of Wedgwood and others. However, in the 1950s Wedgwood did produce some buttons for the Ertells, known US button dealers. It was the first and only time that the Wedgwood company produced buttons for someone else. They are marked on the reverse and dated 1951.

Enlarged 2X



In the 1950s studio artist Marie La Barre Bennett of Oregon made jasperware buttons. According to the Wedgwood Company they were of such high quality it was hard to believe they were not made by their company. Other artists have made jasperware button examples over the years, most widely known are Stella Rzanski and her sister Shirley Shaw of Ohio in the late 20th century. The granddaughter of Stella, Katie Cooper, attended this year's Ohio button show and made known her intention to continue the tradition by creating jasperware buttons in the Rzanski/Shaw style.

## Some Rarities—



Late 18th to early 19th C jasperware set in gold with gold-beaded border  
Enlarged 2X



Diminutive size. Left has gold pinshank. Right has ruby pinshank  
Enlarged 2X



18th C copper mounting  
rare medium



19th century 3-color enamel border with copper collet



Two 18th C woodbacks with metal rims



Am I not a man and a brother medallion [pubic domain] via Wikimedia Commons

Josiah Wedgwood was a prominent abolitionist and created the design of this anti-slavery medallion with the words "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" The design, modelled by William H. Hackwood for Wedgwood, was originally adopted as the seal of the Society for the Abolition of Slavery in England in the 1780s, and appeared on several medallions for the society made by Wedgwood as early as 1787. The medallion is exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum.

Josiah and Sarah had eight children. It is interesting to note that Charles Darwin was their grandson. The eldest Wedgwood child, Susannah married Robert Darwin, and they became the parents of Charles Darwin. Charles, like his grandfather, married one of his cousins, Emma Wedgwood. The intermarriages of the Darwins and Wedgwoods, coupled with the early deaths of three of Darwin's ten children, may have contributed to his theory of evolution.

Josiah Wedgwood passed on January 3, 1795 at the age of 64, but his name and memory continues throughout the world as an innovative inventor and designer, and as a major industrialist of his era. He had a lasting impact on the decorative arts world, and his jasperware is prized by button collectors. "Every generation since Josiah's death...has yielded family members who have, in one way or another, been involved in the factory and its business, or have made outstanding achievements in public life." [wedgwoodmuseum.org.uk]

Buttons in this article are from the collections of Barbara and Tom Barrans, Bruce Beck, Sheila Brudno, Maryalice Ditzler, Elizabeth Hughes, Sue Moncrieff and Ronnie Wexler.

Special thanks to Sue Moncrieff for her input regarding jasperware from a program she gave at the Florida State Button Society Show in 2015.



A scarce 8-sided black-and-white jasperware bas-relief figure set in silver. Actual size.

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**Bruce Beck**, like Josiah Wedgwood, was born into a family that eventually determined his future profession. He is the grandson of George Ertell and Viviane Beck Ertell, long-time antique dealers and button collectors/dealers who amassed one of the great collections in America. Bruce and his late wife Jane began collecting and dealing in buttons over 30 years ago. He has presented numerous programs at state and National shows and contributed many articles to the *National Button Bulletin*. He currently serves as chair of the Special Exhibits Committee for National, is a consultant to the Classification Committee, and frequently acts as the live auctioneer for National and state conventions. Bruce is very proud to know his granddaughter Celia Mercier of Florida is carrying on the family tradition of button collecting.