

Veilleuse-théières

Form and Function in Nightlight Teapots



AT THE BEGINNING of the movie *The Princess Bride* the grandfather, to entice his young grandson to listen to a story, promises “fencing, fighting, torture, revenge, giants, monsters, chases, escapes, true love and miracles.” To interest the average child in a collection of teapots it would likewise be smart to promise Turkish warriors, Spanish dancers, fortune-tellers, musketeers, Zouaves, pagodas, grotesques, cherubs riding dolphins, and elephants in striped pants. My grandfather’s old-maid sister should have done just that forty years ago, when she dragged me off to “see the teapots” one summer

Above, Left: Female dwarf on a rococo base, purchased in France. Above, Right: A grotesque, purchased in Nice.

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afternoon, my only consolation being the stick of Dentyne she always doled out to lure me into taking a road trip with her. I languished in misery in the backseat of her musty car, an eleven-year-old mourning the waste of a perfectly fine day spent looking at frilly things. But when we arrived at the city hall in Trenton, Tennessee, I discovered an intriguing new world. My agony turned to wonder and surprise.

A farming community about ninety miles north of Memphis, Trenton is home to the world's largest collection of antique *veilleuse-théières*, or “nightlight teapots.” Arranged floor to ceiling in the city council chambers, as if in a well-stocked pantry, these 526 teapots are more than decorative. They speak of times long ago and worlds far away. The mere fact that they still exist is remarkable, for these eighteenth- and nineteenth-century porcelain teapots were highly practical and well used. The hollow bases were constructed to hold a source of heat and light, initially a porous nut soaked in whale oil, which was eventually replaced by a candle or a godet, a small vessel, with a wick, to hold oil. Although all of the teapots display remarkable creativity, their original purpose was as a combination food and beverage warmer and nightlight.

Veilleuse-théières were used in nurseries and sickrooms to keep tea and porridge warm and provide soft light during the night. They were fanciful in appearance, with the most ornate designs being found in the homes of the wealthy and titled. Between nine and twelve inches in height, some of them look like exactly what they are—teapots seated on pedestals. But many take the form of mythological figures,

warriors, fine ladies poised with fans, and monks clutching wine bottles. Others have smooth façades on which are painted historical and literary scenes.

Although *veilleuse-théières* were produced for one hundred years, between 1750 and 1860, documentation is scant, as few records exist of their origins. Most references simply document where they were purchased by their most recent owners, not where they were manufactured, and most of the factories that produced them did not place identifying marks on the bottom. Indeed, these teapots seem almost as mythic as their subject matter.

Ceramic food warmers date back at least as far as the first century B.C.E., but they really came into their own in the mid-eighteenth century, when factories began turning out this style of decorative teapot in addition to their standard repertoire of dishes, vases, clocks, and figurines. Most *veilleuse-théières* were manufactured in Germany and France, but they were shipped all over the world, where they were painted to suit local tastes. While some were created by prominent artists like Jacob Petit, superstar of the porcelain-making world in nineteenth-century France, others are considered by historians to be fashioned “in the style of” artists like him.



According to Harold Newman, primary documenter and the owner of a formidable collection of these historic teapots, the occasional *veilleuse-théière* still pops up at an auction or estate sale. However, he cautions that those found at flea markets are usually fakes, especially if they appear to be in mint condition. Regardless of how well cared for a *veilleuse-théière* might have been, age and heavy use invariably will have caused cracks, chips, or other damage. Most strictly decorative items preserved from past centuries tend to be in much better condition than the workhorse *veilleuse-théières*.

Newman notes that while most of the great museums of Europe and the United States contain at least one or two *veilleuse-théières*, few possess more than three or four, which makes the Tennessee collection truly remarkable. (The only other significant collection in the United States is at the Beauregard-Keyes House in New Orleans, which owns eighty-seven.)

A Home in Rural Tennessee

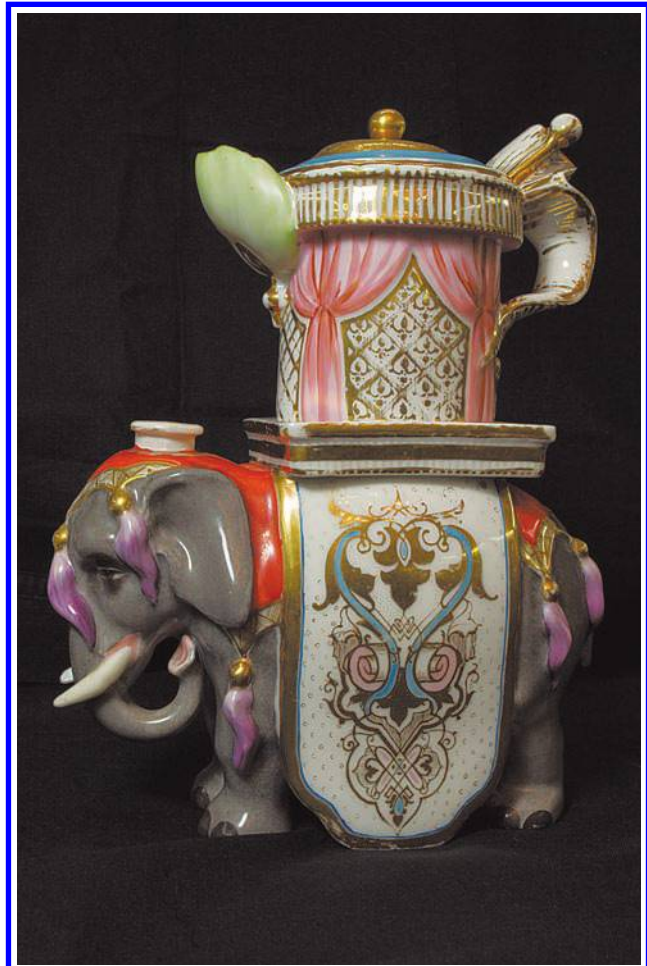
The world's largest collection of *veilleuse-théières* found a home in Trenton, Tennessee, courtesy of Frederick C. Freed, who

was born there in 1889. The son of a Prussian immigrant and Civil War veteran, Freed grew up in this rural west Tennessee town and then departed for college in Nashville and a medical degree in Philadelphia. He eventually settled in New York City, where he became a prominent doctor and professor of obstetrics and gynecology. He distinguished himself as a deliverer of celebrity babies, including the daughter of opera singer Enrico Caruso in 1919.

Freed's collection began with a gift from a grateful French woman whose baby he ushered through a difficult delivery. She brought him a *veilleuse-théière* from home, and a passion was born. Enchanted with the teapot, Freed traveled the world and built a collection that over the ensuing thirty-five years grew to 650 pieces. Obtaining *veilleuse-théières* from antique dealers, families, and individuals, he bought teapots in at least eighteen countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa.

Below, from Left: Rustic cottage with thatched roof, purchased in Strasbourg. Cupid on a dolphin base, purchased in Vienna. Capuchin monk, purchased in Monte Carlo. Howdah on an elephant base, purchased in India.

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Freed originally planned to donate the collection to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, which was interested in acquiring them. But then his brother Sylvane asked him if he had ever considered giving the teapots to his hometown of Trenton. Freed was delighted with the idea, and to the town's astonishment—and probably the Met's as well—he decided to send the collection home to Tennessee. Beginning in the mid-1950s and continuing into the 1960s, in shipments of fifty at a time, hundreds of antique teapots made their way to Trenton. Freed placed only two stipulations on the collection: that it be shown all together and that its exhibition remain free of charge.

The *veilleuse-théières* were first kept in an open case in the gymnasium lobby at Trenton's Peabody High School, where mercifully—and remarkably—they remained intact amidst the flow of students. When a new city hall was built in 1962, Freed commissioned the construction of special mirror-backed showcases to display and protect the collection in the city council chambers. Today the teapots are available for viewing to anyone who wants to see them—as long as the council is not in session. To visit the collection after business hours or on a weekend, one need only step into the adjoining fire and police department and ask for someone to unlock the door. In fact, it's not unusual to get some commentary on the teapots from the fellow with the key.

The collection, which is currently valued at eight million dollars, comprises all five basic styles of the *veilleuse-théière*: conventional, religious, personage, grotesque, and hybrid. Curator Dent Partee notes that of the one hundred molds used for creating *veilleuse-théières*, this collection includes sixty-nine of those designs. The oldest piece dates to around 1750 and is made of terracotta. Five teapots were created by the well-known Petit. The rarest in the collection is a neo-Rococo piece he fashioned featuring white lithophane panels trimmed in gold and depicting biblical scenes. Some of the more ornate pieces were commissioned by prominent members of French society in the early nineteenth century and feature family insignia and crests. Several bear Napoleonic insignia, including those famous bees. In fact, five of the *veilleuse-théières* were at one time owned by Napoleon himself. Another once belonged to Louis XVI.

The *veilleuse-théières* reveal ingenuity, attention to detail, and their creators' sense of humor. The noses of the grotesques serve as spouts, as do the upraised hands of some figurine-styled pieces. One teapot made to look like a cottage has a cat perched on the roof that serves as its handle. A house-shaped pot has a serpent running through the roof, with its tail serving as the handle and its mouth as the spout.

Another is in the shape of a thatched cottage with a yelling woman's head sticking out the window; her open mouth forms the spout.

Nothing seems to be off limits as far as subject matter is concerned: Both nobility and peasantry have their place on these teapots. One is in the shape of a peasant woman nursing a baby (no, the tea doesn't come out of *there!*). Another features a wife hauling her drunken husband into the house. Many are like Rorschach tests inviting individual interpretation. There's a figurine of a man in knee britches and a tricorne with mouth open and fists in the air—is he yelling or laughing? On another teapot are painted silhouettes of a woman chasing a man with a broom; its base shows a man reaching toward a woman—her skirts are held aloft, while his hat flies backward through the air.

The Trenton collection officially contains 525 *veilleuse-théières*, although a 526th was later added by Marilyn Dick, whose father had been close friends with Freed. She has fond memories of her family visiting “Dr. Freddie” in New York and taking limousine rides around Manhattan with Freed and his nurse. Eventually he gave her one of the teapots. But with two growing boys in her household, she felt the treasure would be safer housed with the rest of the collection, so she donated it to the city, whose identity has come to be bound tightly with that of its dazzling collection.

Trenton's city council meetings today are watched over by ranks of sultans, nuns, knights, musicians, and Chinese nobles—the same who once kept company throughout the night in many a nursery and sickroom. A softly glowing windmill, an elephant bearing a howdah, or a cherub riding a dolphin would be a fine thing to behold if you were a feverish child, to provide a cup of warmth and take your mind off your worries. I'm sure my grand-auntie would be pleased to know that those teapots did indeed make a lasting impression on the impatient little girl sprawled in the backseat of her car so many years ago. ☉

NOTE

The permanent collection of *veilleuse-théières* is housed in the Trenton City Hall, 309 College St., Trenton, TN 38382. (731) 855-2013. The building is open to the public Monday through Friday, 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. After hours and on the weekend go to the adjoining fire department to request entrance.

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