

# Curator's Choice

## *Making Mocha – Not a Coffee You Would Want to Drink!*

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This rather unusual ceramic vessel (Figure 1), curated at the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Lab, never fails to fascinate people when I show it during tours. The straight sided canister was manufactured in England's Staffordshire pottery district sometime between around 1790 and 1820 (Rickard 2006). Since this humble utilitarian storage vessel did not have any maker's marks, the color and style of its decoration was used to assign its production date range.

What makes this canister, and other similarly decorated ceramics in the lab collections, so fascinating was how the fernlike decoration was accomplished. These motifs were created using a "tea" solution containing ingredients such as urine, tobacco juice, ground iron scale, and hops. The potter released drops of the "tea" onto the wet surface of a vessel coated with a solution of water and clay colored with metallic oxides (Figure 2). The design spread instantly when the acidic solution came into contact with the slip (Sussman 1997). The tree or fernlike designs, were supposed to resemble agate, also known as "mocha stone"—hence the popular name of this ceramic type as mochaware (Priddy 2004:171).

Archaeologists working on North Pearl Street in Baltimore discovered this 5.5-

inch-tall canister in a privy filled in the early 1800s by the household of Bernard Zell. Zell operated a soap and candle manufactory nearby and, in 1830, submitted a patent application to use steam in the candle and soap making process (Child 2007:71; Jones 1830).

The interior of the canister is heavily stained and its exterior glaze is flaking, suggesting that Zell may have stored soft soap made with wood ash lye in it. Before Zell made soap and candles, he was listed in the 1803 Baltimore business directory as a butcher. He may have become interested in this line of work as a way to use the quantities of animal fat left over after butchering. Tallow, or rendered bovine fat, was a key component in both soap and candle making.



Figure 1. This refined white earthenware canister from the North Pearl Street site (18BC162) was recovered from a privy filled during the first three decades of the nineteenth century.



Figure 2. Mocha tea spreading out in branching patterns after being applied to a vessel. Image taken from Carpentier and Rickard 2001, courtesy of The Chipstone Foundation.

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