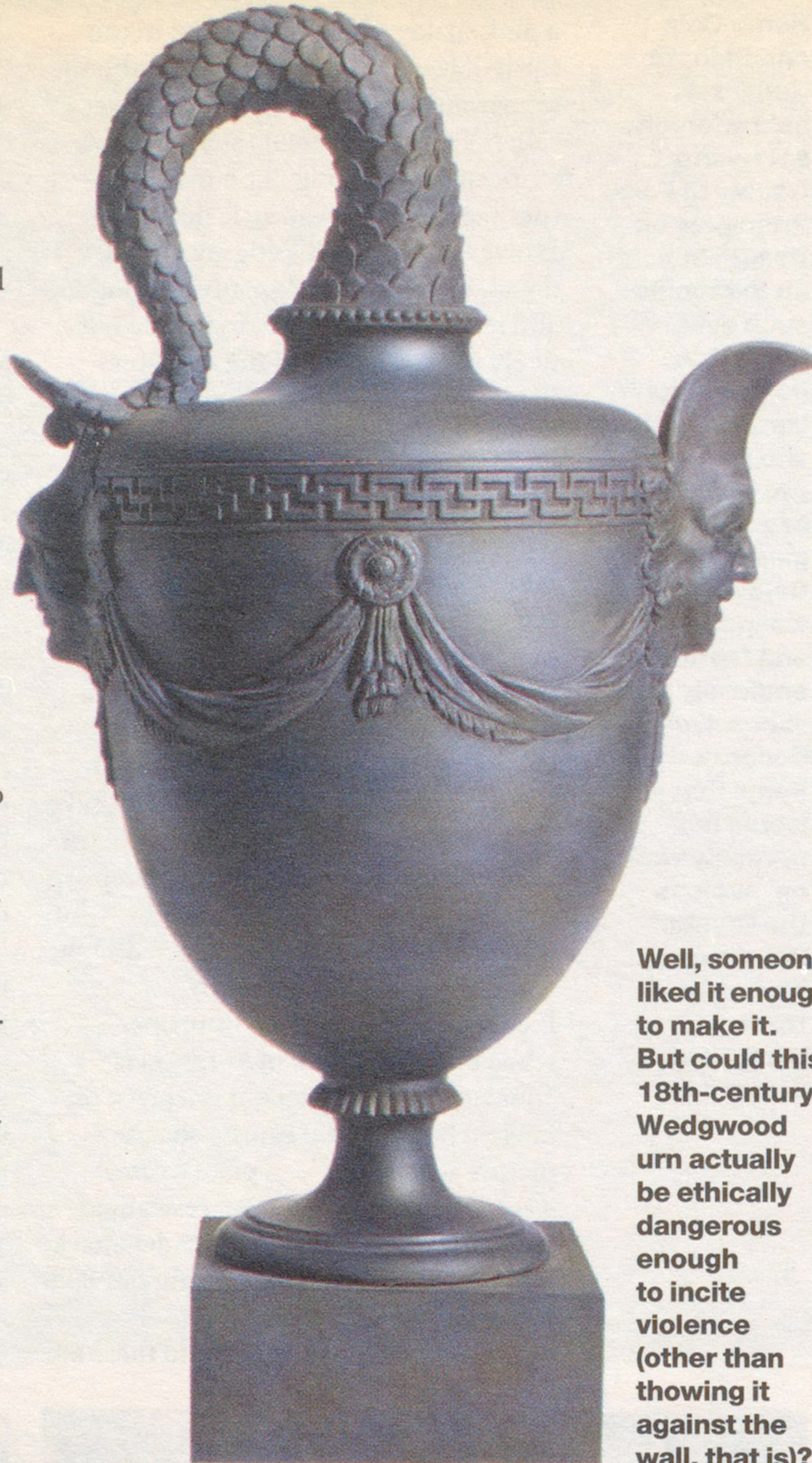


## Inner space

about this brand-new world of mass production and mass consumption which had nobody in charge to tell the populace what was good and what bad.

Technological innovation meant materials could be cheaply and easily faked, flooding the market with glass that looked like china, china that looked like marble, and so on. And if people started to make up their own mind about what material objects they liked, what else might they start making decisions about? But at least Cole and Redgrave didn't go so far as to claim a link between vulgar household wares and the uprising of the proletariat. From the mid-1840s there had been a body of opinion that warned of dire consequences if the lower orders could not be taught to buy quieter knick-knacks: "Taste has an Economic, a Moral, and a Social value, for it tends to increase production, it produces healthy feelings of content, and it renders men disinclined to disturb Law and Order," advised the Art Journal in 1849, the year after many European capitals had seen revolutionary uprisings. It's not an easy concept for us to grasp today — that good taste can prevent class war. We're not used to associating Wedgwood urns and lurid trays with riot and affray. To be fair, though, such thinking did cause hilarity at the time. The weekly magazine Household Words, edited by Charles Dickens, ran a mercilessly satirical short story about one Mr Crumpet whose life is ruined by a visit to the Chamber of Horrors and the revelation that he, his family



**Well, someone liked it enough to make it. But could this 18th-century Wedgwood urn actually be ethically dangerous enough to incite violence (other than throwing it against the wall, that is)?**

and friends are philistines: "When I come home, a dozen hideous forms glare at me in the hall — A person with my present correct principles of taste is naturally shocked every hour of his life in London."

"The show did rather backfire on Henry Cole," says Anthony Burton of the V&A's research department, and author of *Vision and Accident*, which charts the development of the V&A. "It only lasted a few weeks because the manufacturers got so steamed up about being publicly criticised, and they withdrew their products from the exhibition. The idea quickly started to look a little silly."

What the po-faced pair had missed was the fact that everyday objects were a cheap, effective way of getting colour, form and narrative into a household that had little chance of ever owning paintings or sculpture. These first mass consumers were not just buying carpets to walk on, trays to carry things and jugs to pour from. They wanted decoration for decoration's sake — exuberant, overwrought, whimsical objects to liven up a dull urban environment. Today, we are just as bullied, though the taste-and-style thugs tend to be less explicit than Cole and his circle (the V&A did hold a slightly tongue in cheek Bad Taste show in 1983, however). But there's something life-affirming in how cheap, tawdry gimcrackery continues to thumb its nose at polite good taste, and noble about people who cannot, will not, be told what to like. Let's hear it for the heroes of the sideboard.