

the eight directions of the wind

Edmund de Waal at The Huntington

on porcelain

I. Stories matter. The stories of those who made these objects matter.

This is a personal journey. Kneel down, look, make it your own. Find things in shadows, find things that are lit. Imagine holding these vessels in your hands.

This is the story of hands and of clay.

And of porcelain—and the obsession with porcelain. How do you make something out of this white clay? How do you make it before anyone else makes it? How can you have one single piece? How can you have it *all*, surround yourself with it? Can you ever get to the place it comes from, the source of this river of white?

Porcelain has been made for a thousand years. It's been traded for a thousand years. It's a material that crosses borders, that carries stories with it.

This story starts in China, a thousand years ago in the city of Jingdezhen.

II. It is a story of brokenness.

Here are broken pieces of porcelain made in the Song Dynasty, covered in the lightest of celadon green glazes. You can see flowers and dragons, the marks of hands moving quickly and fluently across surfaces.

You can see how thin this material is. If you hold these to the light the light comes through. This is the miracle of porcelain.

And it is why porcelain breaks. Look at all these accidents, porcelain that has collapsed in the kiln, that has been dropped, chipped. And mended, cared for, passed on from hand to hand.

Here are deep celadon bowls made in Longquan in 1220, a colour close to jade.

Celadons, the colour caught between green and blue, is close to poetry: *sky after rain*, and *kingfishers*, and *iced water*. A Tang Dynasty poem compares a service of teacups for the emperor to

...bright moons cunningly carved and dyed with spring water
Like curling disks of thinnest ice, filled with green clouds
Like ancient moss-eaten bronze mirrors lying upon the mat
Like tender lotus leaves full of dewdrops floating on the riverside!

You name these colours because they are beautiful and resonant.

III. And this is a story of decoration.

How many more stories can you tell when you pick up a brush and dip it in the deep blue of cobalt and let your imagination work through dragons and peonies, a boy fishing, a solitary bird on a wintry tree?

Everything is in motion, activity captured through cobalt across and around and beneath the porcelain, with ribbons and clouds and waves, falling water or a gust of wind propelling the stories.

The whiteness of the spaces on porcelain can become anything you want, water or sky, the heft of a mountain or the face of a child.

These shards come from the Ming dynasty. This is when this porcelain travels across the world, seeding stories as it goes.

Here is a bowl made in Vietnam recovered from a shipwreck in the South China Seas. Look at the freedom of these brushstrokes. Here is a tiny cup found amongst hundreds of thousands of other porcelain. It feels like a feather when you pick it up.

Here is my first cargo of porcelain made thirty years ago, thinking about the vast amounts of porcelain traveling out from China across the world, my first attempt to understand my own obsession. It is my very first installation, my first grouping of vessels.

IV. And here is a plate made in Japan in 1720 in Arita. You can see the potter trying out Kraak decoration so that it will appeal to Dutch taste.

This is a personal journey. I first made porcelain here when I was seventeen. I found it difficult. I still do. I write about porcelain and now—here—you can see my writing into porcelain.

This is about people and their hands. This is a personal journey, making it my own, finding the people along the way.

V. *Making it your own* takes us into Korea.

Porcelain and poetry are very close here. Think of the moon, their fullness. Think of awe, and light. These are moon jars made in Korea, the Joseon dynasty.

This moon jar has been mended. There is silver on the rim, and silver on the base.

“In what country will the rain call you home?” asks the poet Li-Young Lee.

When I look at this moon jar, I think of the rain: the moon and rain and poetry.

This is my poem for porcelain.

VI. Porcelain is about beginning again. Here are cups made in Meissen in Germany in 1710, the first time that porcelain had been made in Europe.

Porcelain is alchemy. It's secrecy. And this is where the secrets of porcelain are unlocked. And they begin by making cups that look Chinese.

I love porcelain for its exactitude, its unforgiving qualities. I also love its randomness, its possibility, its multiplicity and plurality.

These two things can work together. Here is a stack of dishes; like washing up by a sink. I called it a *wilde civility*. Here you see the accomplishment of a Meissen bowl. Imagine using this cup and saucer in 1760 in Vienna.

And this is the English trying to make porcelain. Very badly. We pick these up, and they do not balance. This is porcelain as aspiration. I love these. I feel the anxiety of the English potter.

VII. Porcelain is in endless conversation.

Sometimes the stories are difficult.

I am writing this into porcelain clay that comes from North Carolina. This clay was a sacred material for the Cherokee. The English potter Josiah Wedgwood in 1768 stole some of this clay, brought it back to England. He knew it was special.

It is still special.

And here is a Meissen plate that belonged to the von Klemperer family, Jewish collectors in Dresden. It was looted from them in 1938 and broken to shards in the bombing of the city in 1945.

The golden lines are *kintsugi*.

You cannot mend some stories but you can reveal where damage has happened.

You can mark loss.

VIII. Then here is porcelain as provocation, political, the whiteness as a revolution.

You want a manifesto? Here it is. You take an idea of an object for use and you end up with a teapot that cannot be used. A simple cup as combatant, revolutionary porcelain, says Kazimir Malevich in 1922.

And when we get to Germany the Bauhaus is revolution in itself, a white material that is clean, barely clay. *Porzellan* is the coming material. Marguerite Wildenhain starts here then designs this tea service in 1930 in Berlin. And then goes into exile, another story of crossing a border.

And here are Ai Weiwei's seeds, made in 2008 in Jingdezhen, the city where we started. These were scattered across the floor of the Tate Modern gallery in London, endless, uncountable, infinite possibility: porcelain as infinite possibility.

Each seed has four strokes of a paintbrush. Each one held and passed on.

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