

REVIEWS

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A show that makes all the white noises

Edmund de Waal: On White

Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge CB2
29 November 2013 – 23 February 2014

Reviewed by Shane Enright

Edmund de Waal's star is certainly on the rise, and this captivating show deploys his talents as artist-maker, curator, and (as author of the best-selling *The Hare With Amber Eyes*) story-teller, to magnificent effect. It is a pitch-perfect presentation of ceramics, in which three of his own works guide us through the impressive porcelain collections of the museum, which he has raided and rearranged.

De Waal has been meddling in public spaces for a while now. I reviewed his show at Waddesdon Manor – which I did not much like – in these pages (*Crafts* No.237, July/August 2012), and readers may be familiar with his extraordinary *Signs and Wonders* installation in the V&A, which was commissioned to mark the triumphal reopening of its ceramics galleries. He has shown in Cambridge, his alma mater, before (at Kettle's Yard), while projects are planned for Oxford's Ashmolean and Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum.

To describe this show as an 'intervention' is to be precise rather than pretentious, and de Waal's achievement is not to disrupt but rather to enhance his surroundings. This is a show with no beginning or end, but instead a strong sense of place. The display can be approached, or accidentally encountered, from a number of different directions. I entered through the room devoted to the Arts of Korea, among them a superb Choson period white moonjar. Next door, a single de Waal piece – *yourself, you*, two wayward lines of thin cream and white vessels in white framed vitrines – floats on a plinth, amid the splendours of the Chinese imperial porcelain, Song celadon wares and Tang figurines. It's an unostentatious work in which subtle variations of tone and shade alludes to the



a thousand hours,
Edmund de Waal,
1,000 porcelain vessels,
aluminium, acrylic, 2012

plasticity and translucence of his material: porcelain. Designed for this space, it subtly signposts the way. It is also quite the most magnificent work of his I have ever enjoyed; the language of music and minimalism is often deployed, and here we have syncopation that is elegant and seductive.

The whites of his pieces soon find their counterpoint in the first of the five permanent low cases that proceed along the centre of the long European ceramics gallery. Early Chinese dishes, stemmed bowls, lobed vases, and a wine ewer – all show that white is in fact a multiplicity of colours serving a variety of purposes. The drawers underneath the case present artefacts and images weaving stories round

the works we are looking at: anecdotes and insights rather than captions.

The *Ming* wares in the second case include exquisite and improbably perfect monochrome white, red and blue stem cups, juxtaposed with shards and a bowl that has fused with its inadequate protective saggar. Porcelain is magnificent but clearly not easy. Next up is a case of dishes and bowls, largely decorated in underglaze blue on white, which seem at first sight familiar and predictable; imperial and auspicious dragons and the like. But no, here is a Chinese dish painted in the manner of Delft, and is that a phoenix flying over the plate with a view of Burghley House? And whose coat



Above left: six-lobed bowl, Song Dynasty (960-1279)



Left: blue and white jar and cover, Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)

of arms is it on the large armorial dish?

There is a dialogue here between European taste and Chinese technology: de Waal's display takes us through the complexity of this exchange, and the consequences of Europe's eventual discovery, with a light but engaging touch; here we have the words of Jesuit spies, here Chinese copies of Wedgwood Jasperware, and here snapshots of his own visit to kiln sites. The translucent gatefold hand-out accompanying the exhibition shows all the playful erudition that hallmarks his wonderful *The Pot Book* (which I also reviewed, in *Crafts* No.235, March/April 2012).

The next gallery, a huge double-height room dedicated to Islamic Art and leading to the impressive white marble Courtauld staircase, brings us *a thousand hours*, de Waal's monumental paired vitrines in which three layers of clustered vessels soar triumphantly skywards, framing – according to the orientation – the marble steps and columns, and the central case of exquisite Iznik tiles. Unlike at its first outing, in the white cube of London's Alan Cristea Gallery – where the piece struck me as improbably overworked – here it sings in its surroundings, fun to walk through and crouch within. His final work here, *in plain sight*, a small triple vitrine, generously gifted to the museum, lurks elsewhere, awaiting discovery, reminding us that, as we appreciate his work it is the wonders all around that merit our attention. This is a deft and delightful display. *Shane Enright is a freelance writer on crafts and contemporary culture*