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Edmund de Waal: potter, writer, alchemist

Alastair Sooke



EDMUND DE WAAL AT THE V&A CREDIT: JENNY LEWIS

“This is actually the worst pottery ever made,” says the British ceramicist and writer Edmund de Waal, his eyes glittering, as he points at an earthenware tea service designed by Roger Fry. “It’s brutish.”

We are in the ceramics galleries at the V&A, on our way to handle some of the objects that inspired his new book, *The White Road*: an impressionistic history of a material – porcelain – that has been made and traded for a thousand years, and has obsessed De Waal for decades. The trouble is, though, that De Waal, now 51, with the scholarly mien of a 19th-century curate and an infinite curiosity about the world, keeps getting waylaid as something else catches his attention.

He pauses beside some mid-century British stoneware: an autumnal display of earthy browns, lichen yellows and moss greens. “This, absolutely, is the tradition in which I was apprenticed,” he announces. “Basically, it is the English landscape: it’s a Wiltshire field in October. And it’s hugely beautiful. But it doesn’t do much more than that.”

He half stifles a laugh. “In fact, that pot was made by the man I was apprenticed to: Geoffrey Whiting.” DeWaal worked with Whiting, a disciple of Bernard Leach, while still a pupil at Canterbury school. “I must have turned out tens of thousands of honeypots. I could still make pots like these in my sleep.” He sighs. “But my passion is for porcelain.”

He gestures upwards to *Signs and Wonders*, his permanent installation commissioned by the V&A to mark the reopening of the ceramics galleries in 2009, which encircles the base of one of the building’s domes 150ft above our heads.

On a red metal shelf De Waal placed 425 glazed porcelain pots, each one a “memory” of a vessel representing the material’s history. It is a work of allusion, evoking porcelain from China and Korea, 18th-century Europe and Germany’s Bauhaus.

“That,” he says, with as much of a flourish as this self-deprecating man can muster, “was the history of my obsession with porcelain.”

Now he has created a written history to complement this earlier act of artistic homage. In *The White Road*, De Waal undertakes a series of journeys – “a pilgrimage of sorts”, as the subtitle puts it – to stimulate an idiosyncratic exploration of porcelain.

He visits Jingdezhen in China, the mother lode of this exotic material sometimes known as “white gold”, clutching photocopies of letters in which his hero, the French Jesuit missionary Père d’Entrecolles, described how porcelain was being made there during the 18th century.

Later, De Waal travels to Dresden to tell the story of Meissen porcelain, the first true porcelain to be produced in Europe. The alchemist Johann Friedrich Böttger developed it at the start of the 18th century, at the behest of the “totally bonkers” Augustus the Strong, who evocatively said that he suffered from die Porzellankrankheit, or porcelain sickness, and by his death had amassed 35,798 pieces of porcelain.

“I hate Böttger,” De Waal says. “He was an extraordinarily self-seeking and difficult man. But if you are allowed to,” he continues, looking at a Meissen teacup and saucer before us, “pick up that piece of Böttger ware, because you may never get the chance again.”

Delicate and refined, it provides a remarkable contrast to the hard-paste porcelain cow, resting awkwardly amid a bed of rudimentary flowers, that De Waal is also burning to show me.

Made in Plymouth around 1770, this provincial piece represents the enterprising endeavours of an English chemist called William Cookworthy, who, in a bid to manufacture porcelain, spent years experimenting with Cornish clay.

“Cookworthy is an extraordinary autodidact who becomes besotted by the landscape of the West Country,” De Waal says, using the present tense, just as he does in the book, as though his story is still unfurling. “And through his reading – he’s a voracious reader – he begins to piece together the puzzle of what the constituent parts of porcelain might be. He’s got this extraordinary inward obsession.”

De Waal leans forwards, animated with admiration. “So here is this combination of a highly cerebral person and someone who really picks up materials.”

De Waal could almost be speaking about himself. After all, he is primarily an artist who has been making white pots for 40 years. “For me, white isn’t a singular thing,” he says. “I have a thousand whites in my studio. I joke that I am the ‘Fauve’ of whites.” (His obsession with white is explored in a new display opening at the Royal Academy of Arts later this month.)

He is also an aficionado of contemporary poetry with a first-class degree in English literature from Cambridge, and the author of the 2010 memoir *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, which was translated into 30 languages and sold 1.5 million copies.

In that memoir De Waal followed the peregrinations of his inherited collection of 264 miniature Japanese netsuke figurines, which had been passed down through five generations of his once-illustrious family, a Jewish banking dynasty to rival the Rothschilds.

Sometimes, though, like Augustus the Strong, he appears to be ailing from a touch of die Porzellankrankheit himself. What is it about white porcelain – which, on a material level, is nothing but the fusion at white heat of two minerals until they vitrify – that he finds so special?

“It’s an inscrutable material,” he replies, slowly at first, “in the sense that it comes from earth but seems to aspire to something else. It seems closer to glass – closer to air – than the earth. So to me it’s utterly about a moment of alchemical change.” He pauses. “Does that sound b-----?”

He gives another little laugh. “Also, porcelain has an otherness, an elsewhere-ness, about it – it has come a long way, it’s part of a trajectory of a thousand years, and has mystery and mystique and all that stuff within it. There is no moment when porcelain ever becomes ordinary. It is always ‘best’.”

Even this zealous devotee, though, must be concerned that not everyone will share his enthusiasm for porcelain. Following the success of *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, which took him seven years to write, is he worried about the reception for *The White Road*? “Yes,” he replies, simply and disarmingly. “I would be an idiot not to be worried. Will anyone want to read this book? Of course I’m worried.”

Still, he is confident that choosing to write about porcelain was the right decision. “What’s the other option? Write another book about a lost Jewish dynasty?”

Instead, De Waal says, he wants “to discover something else for myself, not channel other people’s expectations. I’m an artist, for Christ’s sake, and a writer: the only thing I can do next is the totally personal, idiosyncratic, obsessional thing that I have to do.”

How striking that he defines himself in that order: artist first, then writer. After *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, isn’t he tempted to switch those terms around? “I am someone who makes things out of clay, out of porcelain, that’s who I am. And I write books. That’s the way round it is.” His stock has certainly risen within the art world following his international success as an author.

“But I wasn’t doing badly as a potter before I wrote a book,” he says. “I am driven by making. Even the book is a kind of installation: it’s a series of fragments and shards, so for me it’s very much an artefact.”

Indeed, one of the arresting things about *The White Road* is its unconventional style. It reads like a series of semi-disjointed thoughts transcribed directly from the notebooks that De Waal kept while he was travelling.

“I have no interest in writing a sedated, connoisseurial history of porcelain: I have neither the capacity nor the interest for writing art history,” he says. “This is me trying to understand why I use porcelain. And because it’s for me, it is interrogative and conversational and journey-led.” All this is true – but it is also the case that De Waal is not shy of complexity. I wonder: does he consider himself a highbrow counterpart to that other leading British potter, Grayson Perry?

“Brows don’t come into it at all,” he says. “It’s just different territory. Grayson is rightly seen as a new voice within the culture. But you know what? It’s not a competition.”

He pauses, visibly perturbed. “I refuse to be called highbrow. It just happens to be that the places [and things] I care about are Vienna and Prague and Venice, German poetry and Jingdezhen and 17th-century Jesuits: but that’s not high-minded – that’s just my territory. I can make it high-minded: I can make it patrician and difficult and keep-away-ish. But actually I say come on in, come on this journey, and discover that this is about real human beings who have lived interesting and complicated lives, often with enormous difficulty, but creatively.”

The White Road by Edmund de Waal (Chatto & Windus, £20) is published on Sept 24. White: a project by Edmund de Waal is at the Royal Academy of Arts, London W1, from Sept 26