

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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The new entrance to the Victoria and Albert Museum is not into a magisterial hall, but into a courtyard. It is a pale blueish white, the colour of a summer sky at dusk. There are delicate lines inscribed into the lozenge-shaped tiles, some pooling with white glaze, others with yellows, blues or reds. This great expanse laps up against the walls of the museum, revealed for the first time. As you move through it you feel a kind of eddying, shifting sense of water or meadow under your feet.

And it is porcelain. This is a huge and appropriate delight. In creating this new threshold into the museum and the vast underground exhibition space — the largest building project here since 1906 — Amanda Leveté has brought alive a salient truth: this museum like no other museum is embedded in ceramics.

Exploring the V&A as a boy, I kept coming across ceramics. Not just the vast halls of vitrines on the fifth floor or the straying ceramic objects that had migrated to other display cases — but as part of the architecture itself. There are the terracotta decorations for

the Theatre façade, manufactured in 1865 by Blanchard & Co, great columns with intricate decoration representing the ages of man.

There are the majolica tiles in the arches in front of the Lecture Theatre made by Doulton. There is the Centre Refreshment Room — now the café — where there are columns designed by James Gamble and made by Minton. *Building News* magazine called these, rather wonderfully, “sham columns in a casing of crockery built up around a brick core”. There are exhortatory texts in majolica that run round the room as a frieze. And elsewhere in the museum are tiled ceilings and mosaic floors, some made by female inmates at Woking Prison.

Then there is the Ceramic Staircase. This climbs from the space at the end of what is now the Robert HN Ho Family Foundation Galleries of Buddhist Art, past what is now the Silver Galleries and up to the floors of offices beyond. Two flights of this staircase are encased in “Della Robbia” ware from Minton. They were conceived of as a sort of elevation to the heaven of the original Ceramic Gallery by way of music, art, literature on the first run of stairs and wisdom, truth and science on the second. I loved this idea of an ascent to ceramics through all these arts and virtues.

In this gallery there were ceramic columns, long gone. Now, when you are not looking at the silver, you look up and can see in small gilded cartouches the names of all the significant places that ceramics have

been made. It is an encyclopaedia that runs from Abruzzi through Korea and lots of English kilns to end in Xijing. It is a wonderful conceit. And there are the names of potters from Palissy to Wedgwood too, as a sort of tutelary presence hovering over us. Pousa was the Chinese potter who threw himself into a kiln to achieve a spectacular glaze. I’m always glad when Pousa turns up.

These are the designs that a previous director in the Edwardian period wanted painting over. The windows — showing moments in the lives of great potters and “incidents in the history of English pottery” — were to be replaced with “obscured glass of a modern kind” and the terracotta columns recovered “with fibrous plaster so as to form a simple classical shape”, while the floor of Minton tiles that “dazzle the eye and absorb light” were to go. They were taken out and crated up. So there are ghosts and memories of ceramics here too.

I was thrilled, then, when Leveté turned up in my south London studio talking porcelain, extemporising on the beauties of Chinese celadons, Iznik tiles where the colours of spring flowers



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are lyrically echoed and Ottoman tiled courtyards. I pulled books off my shelves and dug out broken Chinese shards and made her and her team plunge their hands into the buckets of porcelain slip. The idea of trying to make an open porcelain space in the heart of the museum was electrifying.

Over the subsequent seven years she has kept to this vision, talking to a huge array of small manufacturers before choosing the right factory, trialling again and again to achieve this facility and depth of tonality.

She has resisted the blandishments of those who wanted ersatz materials. And this matters because porcelain sits near to the glass of the oculus, to stunningly folded metal, to the tulipwood of the banisters, to the stone of the Aston Webb arches under which you enter. There is a passionate catholicity of materials here that sings to the V&A’s grounding as the world’s great museum of art, design and craft. The Sackler Courtyard is contemporary and yet part of this continuum of making and thinking, the history of what happens when we pick up a material and choose to make something.