

Old vs. New

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Blending time and space with Adrian Sassoon

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“I like things to be very smart and shiny” says Adrian Sassoon, the 18th century porcelain and decorative art collector, and director of the gallery which bears his name. He likes things “to be not necessarily functional, but very apparent in a room because they look smart”; “things in pairs, in groups, in garnishes, in sets”, he tells me.

I’d asked him about a possible link between the two sides of his practice — the ornate, antique porcelain works produced in the Vincennes and Sèvres factories in 18th century France, and bold contemporary works by artists ranging from ceramicist Elizabeth Fritsch CBE to Japanese metalworker Hiroshi Suzuki. This mixture — 18th century plates, cups, and saucers, alongside “contemporary ceramics and glass and silver, lacquer, hard stones, some artist jewellery” — will be on show at the gallery’s stall at the Treasure House Fair.



Seni Vase, 2022

Hammer-raised and chased Fine silver 999

Made by the artist in Japan

Height 26cm (10 1/4"), Diameter 29cm (11 3/8")

Image courtesy of Adrian Sassoon

Sassoon does believe there’s a “slight” link between these two sides of his profession, and puts it down to a similar confidence in both types of work. His gallery is “looking for work by mature artists, but that doesn’t really mean age”. Instead, he’s drawn to artists “already on a well-worn path with a very good identity”, but who aren’t afraid to change in style from year to year. “Not so that you would have lost track of what they have made in the past . . . but just moving on, developing new ideas, new themes, new shapes.”

With this emphasis on boldness, strength, and size — Sassoon tells me “I do like things that are large” — it is no surprise that he represents Felicity Aylieff, the master ceramicist whose contemporary gargantuan porcelain structures are deeply influenced by the Chinese ceramics tradition. One of her works — the 2 metre tall vase ‘Chasing Black’ — sits in the permanent collection at the V&A, while another — the 4 and a half metre tall ‘Chinese Ladders’ — was bought by the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, and now lives in perhaps the only house that could rival the object for scale and grandiosity: Chatsworth.



Blue & White Monumental Lidded Vase, 2019
Made by the artist in Jingdezhen, China
Height 196cm (77 1/8"), Diameter 72cm (28 3/8")
Image courtesy of Adrian Sassoon

Ayeliffe's 'Chinese Ladders' is part of the Devonshires' own personal collection, but it is far from the only time that Sassoon's works have found themselves in the grand settings of country houses. Until October, works by the silver maker Ndidi Ekubia are also on show at Chatsworth. Ekubia's fusion of "hugely traditional techniques" with a "distinctive style [...] very much like stretched textile patterns" matches the fusion of old and new produced when contemporary art is hosted in such a historic space. Sassoon's gallery has also staged shows and exhibitions in the Elizabethan rooms of Parham House in West Sussex, and an Arts and Crafts house in the Lake District.



Cascade Tall Vase, 2018
Hammer-raised Fine silver 999
Height 26.5cm (10 3/8")
Diameter 16.5cm (6 1/2")
Image courtesy of Adrian Sassoon

I asked Sassoon about the effect of placing contemporary objects in such old spaces. He thinks his “objects will fit really beautifully into a historic interior, as long as it’s not overdone”, and enjoys the feel that “a collector lives in the house”. But, at the same time, he wishes “that we could get our hands on a really fine contemporary interior, and show the same objects in one”. As yet, with all the practicalities of filming and staging an exhibition, this has proved impossible.

Within the houses that the gallery has put on exhibitions, visitors would, perhaps, more often expect to see objects from the other side of his collecting interests: antique silverware, porcelain, and ceramics. Sassoon is an expert on porcelain produced in 18th century France, when soft-paste porcelain was a recent import from Germany. These objects — the type seen at the V&A, or behind the glass cases of the Wallace Collection, where Sassoon was trustee for a number of years — form a market that has only grown in recent years. In Sassoon’s words, “things don’t get cheaper”.

Sassoon first became interested in 18th century porcelain through sheer exposure: living in a family of collectors, it was his grandmother’s collection which inspired him to take History of Art A-Level, where he quickly learnt that there are far “fewer books about the decorative arts”. As his interest grew, he forwent university in favour of an internship at the V&A and, later, becoming a junior curator at the Getty Museum in California.



A Spectacular Sèvres Porcelain Vase Hollandois, 1757-63

Height 17.2 cm

Depth 29 cm

Image courtesy of Adrian Sassoon

Sassoon's interest in decorative arts and objects was as organic as it is now infectious. He tells me how he became interested in contemporary works because "materials like glass and ceramics and silver" are "addictive across boundaries". "If you're interested in a piece of ceramic made in 1800, your eye will probably be caught by a piece of ceramic made in 1880 and 1980. It's not about buying or anything [...] but the materials have not changed in technique profoundly".

"Chasing metal, soldering metal, blowing glass"; Sassoon's delight in the processes by which these objects are made is matched only by his interest in their democratic possibilities. Despite representing high-end artists and sought-after techniques, he repeatedly tells me how works can be surprisingly accessible to collectors of all budgets.



Eclosion, 2017

Cast glass with Kirikane, a traditional Japanese technique of gold leaf decoration

Made by the artist in Japan

Height 8.5cm (3 3/8"), Width 24cm (9 1/2"), Depth 6.2cm (2 1/2")

Image courtesy of Adrian Sassoon

For Ndidi Ekubia — the artist he represents who is currently exhibiting at Chatsworth — he tells me that some of her range in scale “means that a range of collectors can afford pieces”. And, when talking about 18th century porcelain, he notes that “prices have gone up”, but is keen to stress that some, still, are comparatively reasonable. Some pieces that are “in the same condition as when they were made in the 1750s”, still sell for hundreds, rather than thousands of pounds. As Sassoon says, porcelain “doesn’t fade”; “it’s quite a welcoming market”.

To end our interview, I ask Sassoon if he ever comes across people buying antique porcelain for everyday use: to eat their toast off, serve their dinner on, or drink their tea from. Sassoon’s reply is surprising: “serving some sorts of biscuits or something on a plate isn’t putting it in great danger”. He reminds me that a sculptural vase standing on a shelf is, still, in a way, being used, and makes a case for living with collected objects: “there’s no reason why not to use it. Just with care”.