

Profile: Adrian Sassoon

25 April 2024

By Emma Chrichton-Miller

Emma Chrichton-Miller is Editor-in-Chief of The Design Edit, and an arts journalist, editor and writer. She contributes regularly to the Financial Times and is a columnist on Apollo Magazine.

For dealer Adrian Sassoon, the UK's leading dealer in Contemporary Works of Art and Antique French Porcelain, art fairs are critical. Without a gallery space, it is his reassuring presence over many years at art fairs from Maastricht to Paris to London, New York and, last year, Miami, that has confirmed his reputation for excellence and consistency. At leading fairs he displays on serried shelves and central plinths the latest creations of his virtuoso glass, ceramics and metalwork artists. Crucial to his display each time, Sassoon explains, is not just that all the works on display by both eighteenth century and contemporary makers conform to his exacting standards, but that there is new work: "Our artists don't make the same thing again and again. They move on. Even with contemporary objects you can weave patterns of development over a twenty, or even twenty five year period."

Sassoon's first expertise was in seventeenth and eighteenth century decorative arts, especially porcelain. An intern at the Getty Museum aged nineteen, he cut his teeth for the next five years under the redoubtable British ceramics curator Gillian Wilson. She was happy to let him take the lead on all things Sèvres. During his brief European holidays, he would buy the odd contemporary piece. Having learned to pot at Eton College from the distinguished studio ceramicist Gordon Baldwin, he recognised the value in the work he was seeing at galleries in London and elsewhere: "After I left school I realised that Gordon Baldwin was a man whose work was in the V&A collection. I was aware of galleries in London who had his work. Contemporary Applied Arts was in Covent Garden, in a vast space: there would be a nice piece of glass and a nice piece of this and a nice piece of that and so I had started collecting, when I was in my late teens."





A Pair of French 18th Century Early Hard-Paste Sèvres Porcelain Vases and Covers 1774 (vases à batons rompus)
[Courtesy of Adrian Sassoon](#)

By the time Sassoon returned to London, he had a small collection of contemporary art works. He was then working for the distinguished dealership Alexander & Berendt, with its focus on French, German and Italian furniture, all 17th and 18th century. But in 1994 he launched his own, making his first fair appearance at the British Ceramics Conference held in the Dorchester Hotel. "That first stand there was so small that it was actually underneath the stairs and if I stood up straight I'd hit my head on the bottom of the stairs. I was literally not even on a shelf but underneath the stairs." Nevertheless he managed to draw attention, with people "realising that they were looking at very fine things that they weren't used to seeing."

Sassoon credits his connoisseurship, rooted in eighteenth century porcelain, for his exacting taste: "The crucial thing if you are interested in contemporary objects, contemporary painting or contemporary architecture, is that you have to have some level of awareness of what has happened historically, otherwise you get confused. If something is newly made it does not prove that it is a new idea. You cannot understand or judge contemporary art if you disregard historic art." His schooling in Sèvres also opened his eyes to the possibilities of his artists creating pairs or even whole garnitures of objects - aiming high in terms of aesthetic impact. This would include ceramists like Kate Malone and Felicity Ayleff or metal workers like Junko Mori and Hiroshi Susuki.





Black Pumpkin, 2023 Kate Malone
[Courtesy of Adrian Sassoon](#)

Sassoon freely admits that he is drawn to highly finished, technically accomplished work: "My taste is for the shinier, smarter type of porcelain, glassy, silver object. I am personally not so interested in asymmetrical volcanic firings and seeing how a piece of ceramic can lean one way in the kiln. I like things that, when they exit the kiln, are pretty much as the artist intended." It also suits him to show work within a context where art and architecture also play a role: "One of the keys to collecting is that if you want to mix things, they must be of a similar quality. The architecture is just as much part of the collecting as anything else. I always thought that having paintings by Rubens and furniture by Chippendale on the other stands in the show was quite good company!" In this way, he wants visitors to his stand not to be impressed by his own curation but already dreaming of the spaces they have at home waiting to be enhanced by his art works.





Homeland Britain, 2020 Bouke de Vries
[Courtesy of Adrian Sassoon](#)

Sassoon insists that his choices are personal and aesthetic and not influenced by a desire to be fashionable or politically correct. Many of his artists are women, but many are not. Similarly, although through his career he has seen the prestige and popular appeal of ceramics rise tremendously, for Sassoon you feel this recognition of value comes as no surprise - indeed his mother collected contemporary ceramics when he was a child. Most recently Sassoon has taken on a young Korean artist, Woosun Cheon, who works with fine strips of metal to create intricate soldered vessels inspired by ceramic forms. Sassoon comments, "They are beautifully finished. They cast shadow in a way that is remarkable. And it is unlike anyone else's work. That is the relieving thing. We want things to be in the definite style of an artist."

What thrills him as a dealer is that clients in their nineties are still coming to his stand to check out the latest new piece. Each is a distinct contribution to the history of transformation in that primary material.