

BEYOND

With its pale good looks, a fine grain that creates perfectly smooth objects and a trademark 'ding' that mimics the most discreet of reception bells, porcelain can seem fragile and otherworldly. The reality, as Ally Ireson finds, is a complex tale of kings, explorers and artists



THE

PICTURE: MARTIN SLIVKA

MAIN: THE POLAR BEAR,
ME WANT NOW,
BARNABY BARFORD

BOTTOM RIGHT: CELADON
ROCKING BOWLS WITH REED
DECORATION, CHRIS KEENAN

FIRST IMPRESSIONS ARE often deceptive. Porcelain is actually extremely hard, durable and, crucially for something often used to make vessels, the most non-absorbent of the three main materials that form ceramic objects. But the signature quality of porcelain is that light can pass through it. This seductive translucence is achieved by ‘vitrification’, a process brought about by a high firing temperature that effectively turns compounds in the clay mix into glass.

Although porcelain might look like a poster girl for purity, the etymological roots of its name reach into decidedly swampy territory. ‘Porcelain’ comes from the material’s name in Italian, *porcellana* – literally ‘little pigs’ – a nickname for the lustrous cowrie shell whose smooth white surface it resembles. But the charm falls straight out of this analogy when you’re told that *porcellana* is closely related to the slang word *porcellina*, a subtlety-free blend of references to women, pigs and cowrie shells (with their distinctive, slit-like opening) that is one of Italian’s most offensive ways to solicit female attention. That rather muddled name is a surprise, but in a sense it seems fitting for a material whose history is streaked by unattractive examples of desire: for power, status and things.

SUPPLY AND DEMAND

Porcelain was first produced approximately 2,000 years ago, probably in Jingdezhen in south-eastern China, and close to

a mountain site rich in kaolin – the silicate that is porcelain’s key ingredient. Prized for its strength, lustre and milky whiteness, porcelain became part of the social currency of the imperial court and China’s ruling dynasties (most famously the Ming, known for its vases) supervised its production. It was Marco Polo who ignited Europe’s love affair with porcelain, having brought back a small vessel from China in the 14th century. Unsurprisingly, Chinese craftsmen held onto their trade secrets, meaning that porcelain remained an extortionately priced and import-only commodity in Europe for hundreds of years.

By the 17th century, porcelain and its expensive exoticism had become a convenient index of wealth and power, as well as an easy means for someone to demonstrate they had refined taste. In an early example of rampant materialism, the European aristocracy simply couldn’t get enough of the stuff.

Asia’s stranglehold on porcelain production was broken

in Meissen, Germany in the early years of the 18th century, by researchers commissioned by the then King of Poland, Augustus II the Strong. A German-born aristocrat who was a self-confessed sufferer of what he called *die Porzellankrankheit* (‘porcelain sickness’), Augustus left a collection of more than 35,000 pieces after his death. In 1710, it was officially announced that the secret of ‘white gold’ had been unlocked, with Augustus’ resident alchemist Johann Friedrich Böttger claiming the vital formula was his discovery, although history suggests it was actually the work of the recently deceased scientist-philosopher Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus. Production of →



ART

porcelain pieces started in what is now the iconic Meissen factory and, in 1759, England's Wedgwood company followed suit. As a result, lustrous porcelain tableware and figurines became accessible to the bourgeois classes and their seemingly endless (and rather unsettling?) desire for perfectly white objects was now exploited on an industrial scale.

ART FOR ART'S SAKE

The aristocrats of the 17th century would no doubt be appalled at how mass production has made porcelain objects an everyday feature in today's 'ordinary' homes. However, the refined approach of historical Chinese production is still very much in evidence in the work of modern ceramists, who produce both functional and sculptural pieces in porcelain and make no apology for clay's conventional association with the everyday.

Edmund de Waal is the most high-profile modern devotee of porcelain, having expanded his reputation for evocative, pared-down vessels with shows at major art galleries and through writing an exploratory book about porcelain, *The White Road*, which became a bestseller in 2015. Although porcelain is unforgiving to work with – it needs careful handling and easily cracks when fired – many other ceramists have, like De Waal, made it the focus of a restrained practice, including Chris Keenan, Karen Downing, Daniel Smith and Keith Varney.

Other makers, however, seem intent on veering quite a way off the 'white road' of the purists, using porcelain for often-flamboyant explorations of colour (Tanya Gomez, Sophie Cook), decoration (Kyra Cane, Mandy Cheng, Lara Scobie) and form (Ranti Bamgbala, Daniel Fisher, Sara Flynn). In addition, many conceptual artists now work with porcelain, including Clare Twomey, Rachel Kneebone, Vipoo Srivilasa, Claire Curneen and

PLACES TO SEE CERAMIC ART

- Barnaby Barford's exhibition, 'ME WANT NOW' is at David Gill Gallery, London SW1 up to December 21 2016
- The Crafts Council's 'Collect: The International Art Fair for Contemporary Objects' is at the Saatchi Gallery, London SW3 from February 2-6 2017
- Erskine Hall & Coe, London W1

- The 'Ceramic Art, London' art fair is at Central Saint Martins, London N1 from March 31-April 2 2017

- The Contemporary Ceramics Centre, London WC1

Karen Thompson. The 'Grayson Perry effect' has no doubt helped make this an acceptable choice, when previously ceramics were often judged 'too crafty' for the art world.

Artist Barnaby Barford in particular does arrestingly unexpected things with porcelain, barbing his gorgeous-looking pieces with pointed questions about the way we live. His latest exhibition, 'ME WANT NOW', features a life-size polar bear made up of more than 7,500 porcelain flowers and leaves. Impressive but powerless, this figure and the other animals in a 'queue' representing species under acute pressure from human activity all silently intimate the collateral damage created by our 'me first' culture.

Whether focused on form, colour or concept, Barford and other contemporary makers prove that, although porcelain is a material known for its lack of elasticity, it can still be used to push and pull at the status quo. ■



RIGHT: MEDIRE, 2015, PORCELAIN, 24X17CM BY RANTI BAMGBALA



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