

Ambrose Heal table



Drawer for children

comes in re-arranging them, discovering how the gaps and spacing work, and where the small single grey vessel will fit. And in this play there might be a hidden memory of all the endless setting and clearing of crockery from the table over its long life in the heart of the household.

There is a final hidden piece, too. A small collection of porcelain inside a drawer in the gallery, waiting for children - or adults - to find them and animate them how they will.

For, of course, one of the hidden histories of domestic objects, is that they are rarely still, often on the move. Though we are not able - and we are not invited - to move these iconic pieces of Arts and Crafts furniture around, we are able and we are invited to move some 'very moveable things' around. In doing so we can rediscover just how special this collection is.

Edmund de Waal, February 2009

Exhibition dates 7 February - 3 May 2009

This project is part of *New Expressions*, a major new programme from MLA South West – the regional agency for museums, libraries and archives. More than €150,000 is being handed to ten museums through the initiative, which is also supported by the National Lottery through Arts Council England. *New Expressions* will open up dialogues between audiences, contemporary artists and the wealth of historical material held in the region's museums.



Design: www.touchmedia.uk.net Photography: Bruce Barron and Alexander Caminada.

Very moveable things

New work by Edmund de Waal

Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum



Morris table



We are delighted to have been able to commission Edmund de Waal to create new work inspired by the Arts and Crafts Collection as part of *New Expressions*, a major new programme from MLA South West. The pieces created will become part of the Art Gallery & Museum's permanent collection. This pamphlet includes photographs of the seven pieces created and a short essay written specially for the commission by Edmund de Waal.

"So I say our furniture should be good citizen's furniture, solid and well made in workmanship, and in design should have nothing about it that is not easily defensible, no monstrosities or extravagances, not even of beauty, lest we weary of it... also I think that, except for very moveable things like chairs, it should not be so very light as to be nearly imponderable: it should be made of timber rather than walking-sticks" W. Morris, 'The Lesser Arts of Life', in M.Morris (ed), the Collected Works of William Morris Vol XXII, London 1914, pp261-2.

I have borrowed Morris' words very freely, just as I have borrowed some of the most wonderful examples of Arts and Crafts furniture in the Cheltenham collection as places in or on which to put work. Morris had a

sure sense of the heft of words as well as the gravity of things. His translations and epic poems are in kindred spirits with his furniture and tapestries: they are gravid with intent. And so the chance to work with these galleries of furniture was a chance not just to think about these great pioneers, but also to think about the weight of things.

Kelmscott Chaucer



Ashbee cabinet



Porcelain is light. Porcelain vessels are easily moved, easily displaced. That is part of their nature: they are 'very moveable things'. So I wanted to make temporary resting places for my groups of porcelain in relation to this furniture. They would be discrete 'homes' out of wood and lead, small demarcations that make a space for porcelain vessels to rest in.

But each of these homes had to be sensitive to the different nature of the cabinet, table or sideboard. Over the last two years I have expanded my

palette of materials to include steel, wood and lead, so this seemed the best opportunity to explore how minute adjustments in texture, tonality or colour could affect the conversation between porcelain installation and the host piece of furniture. For Morris' great round deal table of 1856, worthy of a collection of Arthurian knights, I made a group of shallow dishes held in a bevelled tray, the bevel an echo of the table's edge. In the Kelmscott Chaucer cabinet, designed by Voysey in 1899, I have left a cabinet door ajar to reveal the unexpectedly rich crimson interior, and then placed within a series of pencil thin celadon blue vessels inside a small crimson lacquered box: each of the vessels has a small dab of ox-blood red on it. And when you open the Ashbee writing cabinet from 1901 with its dramatic and severe bands of wrought iron articulating the ebony and holly exterior to find its glorious golden

Gimson roomset (mantelpiece)



Gimson sideboard

interior of hidden interstices and cupboards, it seemed necessary to make tiny gilded vessels in yellow glazes and hide them there. This exhibition is thus partly a dialogue between Arts and Crafts materials - in particular woods of all kinds, lead, gilding, pewter and steel - and my contemporary palette of materials. The modernity of these designers lies partly in their passion for exploring materiality. The dogma of a singular, normative 'truth to materials' is not theirs.

I love the idea of 'redomesticating' museums: bringing museum objects back to life. One of the ways this can happen is to reflect on the history of display in itself, by using 'very moveable things'. By displaying objects "for best" on the dresser or sideboard, lesser ones on a refectory table, you can sense a sort of cultural history through the placing of objects. This can be seen in the very formality of the pairing of two small groups of grey and white vessels on Gimson's sideboard of 1915, each group a discrete echo of the chequerboard stringing on the piece. But it is more than just placing these installations. It is exciting to explore hiddenness as well as obvious display - hence the pieces inside cupboards. This is taken further with two parts of this exhibition, where pieces demand to be moved around.

One of these pieces is a series of shallow vessels held in a channel of powder-coated black steel. This is in the centre of the Ambrose Heal dining table made in 1916 of chestnut and oak. There is no 'right' order to these pieces. The pleasure



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