

Arcanum:  
mapping 18th-century  
European porcelain  
*Edmund de Waal*

NATIONAL MUSEUMS & GALLERIES OF WALES

# Arcanum: mapping eighteenth-century porcelain

Edmund de Waal

## i some marks

Turn over a porcelain teapot and look at its base. It is a small and beautiful lens. You see the colour of the fired porcelain body on the slither of unglazed clay of the foot ring. You feel it. It has been ground as smooth as a river pebble. There are marks, but no decoration here: you see the glaze at its most clear. Which white is it? It is milky, also bone-like, also infinitely opaque. It draws you in. Its whiteness is exemplary. You feel it. It feels as if the glaze is part of the porcelain.

This base has six marks on it. There is a pair of crossed rapiers, curving away from each other, in an inky cobalt blue. There are some initials in a grand and self-confident italic hand in the same blue, spotting at the start and end of the letters. You see the energy behind the marks, a hand comfortable with a brush. You see the confidence in the placing of the initials sweeping across the centre, staking their claim. A small rich gilt '58' sits between these marks. A round paper museum label, slightly yellowing, sits above the initials. NAT. MUS. WALES. 601 DE WINTON COLL. Blue (DW601) and red (NMW A 33,276) initials and numbers hug the foot ring. Every mark, underglaze, overglaze, paper label, ink pen, is distinct. Together there is a blur of information, of claim and counterclaim, of ownership and inheritance: emblems from a factory, pattern numbers, decorator's initials, collector's inventory numbers, dealer's labels, museum's accession numbers, museum's renumbering. All this interplay of knowledge framed within this discrete – and beautiful – footing.

This teapot, eighteenth-century, from Meissen, decorated perhaps by Johann Gregorius Höroldt, sold any number of times before being sold by a dealer and

bought by the Victorian collector Wilfred De Winton, given to the new National Museum of Wales in Cardiff, accessioned, stored and displayed, has had as rich and complex a life as any artefact. It hums with stories.

Where can we begin with this? To map these stories is to start to map eighteenth-century porcelain. Stories about why it was made and who it was made for. Stories about styles and about taste, about use and about display, and how they intersect. Stories about technologies and who knew what and when they knew it. Stories about collectors, marriages and alliances. Stories about trade, about patronage, about politics. This porcelain teapot is a palimpsest.

It is part of a narrative about collecting. De Winton, with his decided views on 'comparative collecting', his Casaubon-like attempt to reveal the matrix of connections between different European porcelain factories, was a Protean collector. You feel his energy and self-belief, his confidence in his project reflecting his age. His collection is a ceramic version of any number of contemporary Victorian projects mapping ethnographies, biological difference, biographical greatness.

It is part of a history of value, too. When De Winton gave his collection to the National Museum, it was a gift that was received with some initial anxiety. Why was there so much of it? The great authority Bernard Rackham of the Victoria and Albert Museum was consulted and stood god parent to the gift: 'The National Museum of Wales now possesses in the de Winton Collection the best public collection in this Kingdom of Continental porcelain, other than figures, which I understand Mr. de Winton has not set himself out to buy. ... I think it is no exaggeration to say that students of Continental porcelain, particularly German, Dutch and Italian, must now make a pilgrimage to Cardiff if they wish to complete their knowledge of the subject.'



Base of a Meissen teapot, about 1724



De Winton Room, National Museum of Wales, 1920s



De Winton Room, 2005



As such a new and handsome gallery was built to house it. Lit by a generous skylight it was three stories high, with oak and glass vitrines, brass handles and balconies of cast and wrought iron. The ground floor was the Print Room and on the next two floors the whole collection could be seen in its entirety with De Winton's careful taxonomies open for elucidation. This gallery, elegant and respectful, tells us about the Museum's confidence in the collection. It sat safe in the museological hierarchy above the Print Room. The drama of the collection was obvious.

It was together there for only thirty years. In the 1950s the collection was divided between a store and glass cases on the balcony of the Museum. The taxonomies changed. The new cases mapped Meissen, Dutch porcelain, other German factories. The gallery was divided up. On one floor the vitrines now have bundles of archaeological photographs. On another is the Museum's IT department. There was a fall from grace, a cultural shift away from this porcelain and this kind of collection that has not yet been redressed. It was a mid-century embarrassment about this kind of object: what could be more difficult to explicate than this porcelain? It was obviously elitist and precious and suspiciously smacked of the connoisseurial, of Waddesdon or the Wallace Collection. Just as eighteenth-century porcelain in Europe began with an Arcanum – the secret of its manufacture – its reputation of being secretive clung to it. Best to leave it to the Faber monographs, to the salerooms, the scholars and the collectors. Best leave it alone.



Card index to the De Winton collection



Porcelain store, National Museum of Wales, 2005



De Winton collection on display, 2005

ii  
‘Trop de verre’  
Auguste Perret on visiting Philip Johnson’s  
1949 Glass House in Cleveland Ohio

Some years ago a friend of mine lent me – for a day or two – a small white porcelain cup. It came from the very start of the eighteenth century and was made by Böttger, the alchemist potter who formulated the first European porcelain body. It was a slight object, finely thrown, unmarked, with a tiny chip in its rim, but I loved it. It was completely singular, somewhere between a test object and a finished one, with a feeling of achievement in it. As I handled it I was struck by its size; it seemed to need a huge amount of space, seemed to displace an exorbitant amount of the world. How would I display it? And I thought of the mass of porcelain, the cargoes of Chinese and Japanese porcelain imported to Europe, the frenzy of excitement about this strange material, its reach from palaces to bourgeois drawing-rooms, all of which are connected to this small, chipped object.

I have been given the wonderful and daunting chance to tell some porcelain stories. To do so I have chosen things from De Winton’s collection, I have chosen how to display them and I have made some porcelain as part of this conversation. This is not an exhibition of highlights, not an exhibition that contextualises, not an exhibition that historicises. It is a collection of personal, episodic responses to this porcelain: a mapping alongside other maps. It is also an attempt to examine the question of display. This project comes out of the shared belief that ceramics have been poorly served in museums: why when we see ceramics in museums do we see so much glass? Why is there ‘trop de verre’: too much glass? What information are we given? Which of that great panoply of labels on the base of the teapot matters? Which should be effaced? Above all why are the objects so sad? And why do they look the same?

One of these stories I have chosen is about the singular and the many. Eighteenth-century porcelain is pulled between the Chardin tea table – the object framed in its particularity – and the *Porzellankammer*, porcelain framing a whole space in a palace. And so I have tried to isolate some objects and mass others, to change the rhythms of display. There is a case with nothing but white objects in it. Other objects are in cases where the taxonomies of date or factory are replaced by ‘things I like and dislike and am confused by’, an emphatic replacement of the connoisseurial. Other objects are in large vitrines that show how De Winton collected. ‘Flowers/sprays & sprigs with gold’ is near ‘Flowers/sprays & sprigs/plain’ and not far from ‘Flowers with festoons’. These have something of the aesthetics of the store, the beauty of objects in seemingly random juxtaposition that test your eye and challenge you to find the connections. This is massed porcelain, massed in a glass case, not in a palatial antechamber, but still functioning as an architectural use of the material. This massed porcelain resonates with the inventories of collectors from Graf von Brühl to Wilfred De Winton, the unspooling lists of things bought, noted and catalogued. It also has the memory of booty, tribute and treasure. To talk to these lists I have made a porcelain wall of 150 small pots. It has a perverse logic to it, a catalogue of marks and indentations, a spectrum of different whites.

Then there is a plinth with plates, salts, sauce-boats, tureens, serving dishes, centre-pieces on it, *en plein air* for the first time in a hundred years. This is not a *faux* dinner service, a mocked-up, polished dinner party, made up of complete sets and suites of work. It is porcelain to gawp at. We remember the onlookers at court dinners: we remember that porcelain was made for spectacle. I have made my own table-full of porcelain: dishes in an array of whites, a scattering of marks and gilding. These marks map my own life as maker and collector and curator of porcelain stories.

In *Arcanum* I want to tell stories. I want to give the feeling that stories are generative, each story leading to another, overlapping and contradicting each other, but allowing for moments of clarity. Provisional clarity, but clarity none the less. I want to show how beautiful this porcelain is. The porcelain deserves it.



