

Edmund de Waal explores the story of porcelain at the Fitzwilliam Museum

On White: Porcelain Stories from the Fitzwilliam
Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge | 29 November 2013 – 23 February 2014
Galleries 26, 27, 28 & 33

The story of how porcelain - and its almost impossible translucent whiteness - has fascinated artists and collectors from both East and West for over a thousand years is being explored in a major intervention at the Fitzwilliam Museum this winter by Edmund de Waal.

The renowned potter, author and Cambridge graduate will be taking over four galleries of the Museum, re-curating the permanent collection of European and Chinese ceramics. This is the second display of de Waal's work to be hosted in Cambridge in the last 6 years, following an exhibition at Kettle's Yard in 2007. Both the Fitzwilliam and Kettle's Yard have been a source of inspiration for de Waal since his undergraduate study at the University in the 1980s.



Portrait of Edmund de Waal,
photograph Rob McKeever,
courtesy Gagosian Gallery, 2013

De Waal commented: "A lot of my three years reading English were spent at Kettle's Yard and at the Fitzwilliam. I had come up straight from an eighteen-month pottery apprenticeship with a Leach school potter, Geoffrey Whiting. I had followed this with a few months in Japan, visiting famous kilns and elderly potters: my canon of favourite pots felt pretty secure and the Fitzwilliam had everything I needed. English slipware, small Chinese tenmoku teabowls, Medieval pitchers. It took me a long time to see beyond these pots into the other collections. When I started to look it changed the ground under my feet. I can still remember looking at eighteenth-century porcelain for the first time, rather than striding past the vitrines."

The intervention at the Fitzwilliam has taken the story of porcelain back to its source, and included a residency by de Waal in Jingdezhen, China in 2012. Jingdezhen has been a world centre for porcelain production since the 11th century, where works of great beauty were made to order for Emperors and their households until the end of Imperial rule in 1912. Jingdezhen's exquisite wares, exported worldwide from the 14th century onwards were coveted for their beauty and refinement, known to be 'white as jade, mirror bright, paper thin and clear as a bell.'

De Waal commented: "Jingdezhen has always been a slightly mythical place for me, as the starting place for porcelain. I wanted to discover what it was about its porcelain that made Emperors. I tried to encounter everything from the washing of clay to the creation, decoration and firing of porcelain. I commissioned one hundred thin 5mm porcelain tiles with a pale celadon glaze from a small workshop where porcelain plaques are made. My request was greeted with amusement as all their output is normally used by painters. My explanation that their work would be used to display ancient Jingdezhen porcelain pleased them greatly. I also bought stacks of new Song dynasty pots. There is a

very long-standing tradition of the recreation of earlier styles of ceramics in Jingdezhen, and I will display some contemporary porcelain alongside the Museum's collection."

Alongside material from de Waal's residency in China the re-curated galleries in On White will include letters from Pere D'Entrecolles (the French Jesuit priest who spied on the secrets of porcelain production in China in the early 1700s), photographs taken by Edmund in Jingdezhen whilst on his residency and poetry by Chinese and European writers about the colour white and clay.

Over 40 pieces from the Museum's permanent collection will tell interesting stories about the history of porcelain, and the highlights of the intervention are two major installations of ceramics by de Waal. The first installation a thousand hours, is one of de Waal's most ambitious works to date and was the centrepiece of a major exhibition at the Alan Cristea Gallery in London. The work comprises 1,000 pots encased in two large walk-through vitrines. The second featured work yourself, you, has been specially commissioned for On White, holding 36 thrown porcelain vessels in white and cream glazes and some unglazed in a pair of free-standing vitrines.

De Waal continued: "This intervention is about obsession, with porcelain and with the colour white. How do you make it? Can you ever get to the place it comes from, the source of this river of white? The Fitzwilliam has an extraordinary collection of Chinese porcelain. I fell in love with it as a student. I hope that by telling some of its stories visitors will begin to look again at the objects on display here."

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Notes to editors:

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB

FREE ADMISSION

OPEN: Tuesday - Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00
Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 - 17.00
CLOSED: 24-26 & 31 December and 1 January

Galleries involved in the intervention:

26 - European and Japanese porcelain
27 - European ceramics
28 - Arts of the Far East
33 - Arts of the near East

Works by Edmund de Waal in the intervention:

'yourself, you' (2013)

On display in gallery 28

A pair of free standing vitrines with white aluminium frames on clear, polished acrylic plinths, holding 36 thrown porcelain vessels in white and cream glazes and some unglazed. Dimensions: 50 (h) x 80 (l) x 15 (d) cm each, displayed on a white plinth 120 (h) x 60 (w) x 160 (l) cm.

'a thousand hours' (2012)

On display in gallery 33

1,000 thrown porcelain vessels split between a pair of vitrines in white aluminium, clear and 'Silk' perspex. Dimensions of each vitrine: 240 (h) x 210 (w) x 75 (d) cm, separated by a 65 cm gap

The Fitzwilliam Museum

Founded in 1816 the Fitzwilliam is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and leads the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Major Partner Museum consortium. The Fitzwilliam's collections explore world history and art from antiquity to the present day. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, masterpiece paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century and outstanding collections of applied arts, ceramics, coins, and Asian arts.

Welcoming over 470,000 visitors a year, the Fitzwilliam presents a wide ranging public programme of major exhibitions, events and education activities, and is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation.

www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk