



THIS PAGE: Felicity Aylieff's *Chinese Ladders*, 2007, H300cm, makes a statement at the top of the stairs of the Painted Hall

OPPOSITE: The Duke of Devonshire photographed with Pippin Drysdale's *Bronzewing Mine*, 2017

An illustrious *collection*



For over a decade the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire have been acquiring and commissioning a stellar collection of ceramics for Chatsworth House in Derbyshire. *Sue Herdman* meets the Duke to find out more

Images: Cristian Barnett



ABOVE FROM LEFT: Two pieces by Emmanuel Cooper, potter and co-founding editor of *Ceramic Review*; a piece of biscuit porcelain, circa 1820s **OPPOSITE:** detail of Jacob van der Beugel's *The North Sketch Sequence*, 2014

There is, at Chatsworth, a family portrait unlike any other you'll find in the treasure houses of Great Britain. Called *The North Sketch Sequence*, it occupies an entire room and includes 659 panels. It took some four years to create, from concept to its completion in 2014. It is handmade and ceramic. The installation is the work of Jacob van der Beugel and it features, in small inserts in the stoneware and malachite sand blocks, the DNA sequences of the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire and their family. If you wait for the light to move through the space, it catches the gloss of transparent glaze on some inserts. The patterns these reveal have meaning for the Cavendish family; they include the trail of the Duke's favoured walk around the gardens, and the arrangement of notes from the Duchess's favourite piece of music.

The North Sketch Sequence pushes the boundaries of current ceramic making. Its genesis came over a decade ago, with a gift to the Duke that was to first ignite his interest in contemporary ceramics – a small bowl by John Spearman. That piece now sits, aptly, within the van der Beugel space, alongside works by Andrew Wicks, Hans Coper, Lucie Rie, Elizabeth Fritsch and Emmanuel Cooper. 'The Spearman bowl is pure and beautiful,' the Duke tells me when we meet. 'When it was given to me it still had a price tag – £65. This is something, I thought, worth investigating. Since then I haven't studied the medium in a didactic way. The collecting is a personal thing. The approach is more about the visual and the visceral – it's the way I have always operated.'

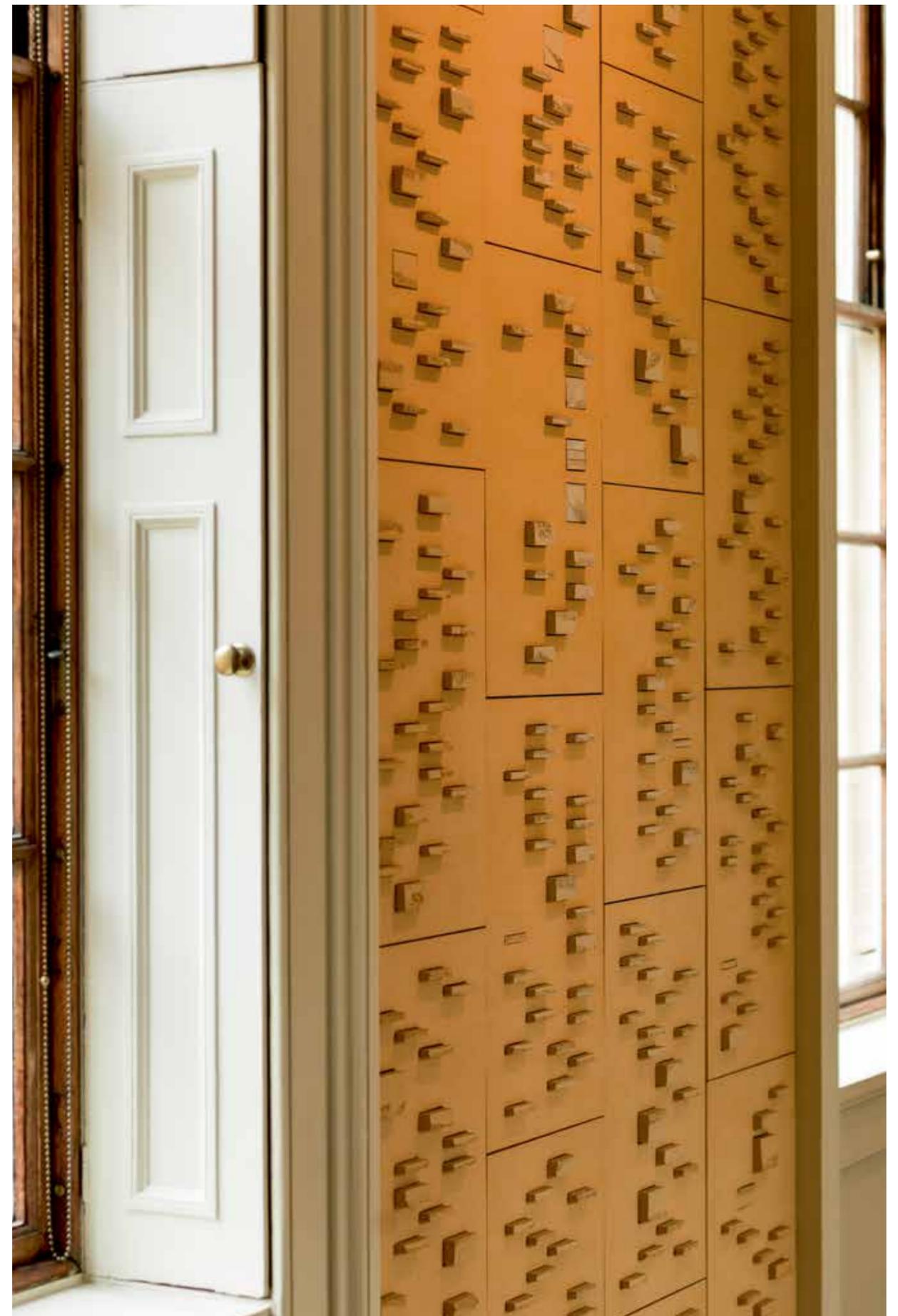
Over time there has been what the Duke describes as 'a steady stream of acquisitions, depending on where we are and what we see.' He enjoys *Collect* and has visited *Ceramic*

Art London. He reads *Ceramic Review* and observes works online. On occasion he will visit artists and makers in their studios. He talks to experts such as Joanna Bird (who advised on the shortlist of artists that culminated with van der Beugel's commission) and Adrian Sassoon. The acquisitions, some made in response to the house, now populate both public spaces and private apartments. An earthy Adam Buick moon jar and a sinuous Merete Rasmussen form sit within the suite we talk in. A view of other private areas reveal a crisp grouping of Sara Moorhouse works and a Gwyn Hanssen Pigott vignette – the latter placed exactly as the potter would have wished.

STATEMENT DISPLAY

For those who might question how well a mix of the Baroque and Beugel can work together, a visit to Chatsworth pays witness to the verve with which this can be accomplished. The Painted Hall is an example. It's a statement space, with busts and trompe l'oeil, yet its current focus is Felicity Aylieff's three-metre high *Chinese Ladders*, soaring under the painted ceiling at the top of the stairs. 'Big' works well at Chatsworth, where even the flower arrangements need to be created three times larger. 'There is another Aylieff piece,' the Duke tells me. 'One of our trustees found it in a car boot sale. It was a piece the artist made as a student. When she saw it she said it was like seeing an old friend.'

Also in the Painted Hall is Pippin Drysdale's *Sulphur Springs*. The grouping sits within a fireplace, where the firebricks lend a gritty backdrop to the smooth porcelain surfaces of the vessels. 'Chatsworth is a great environment in which to be brave,' comments Sash Giles, Curator of Decorative Arts. 'There is an expectation that we will do





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the unexpected here; one of the mediums that we do that with is definitely contemporary ceramics.' Such experiments, though, come with practical challenges. 'We had to weight Drysdale's work with sand,' she says: 'the house vibrates – pieces can travel.'

In the stone corridor close by is the Duke and Duchess's first major ceramics commission, which they purchased in 2007: Edmund de Waal's porcelain installation *A Sounding Line*. Some lidded pieces, some gilded; some lustrous celadon, some matte, gleam as they flow over and around two fireplaces and sit high on corbels. The Duke admits to being drawn to the 'plain' aesthetic that makers and artists such as de Waal favour. Within that range comes the work of Natasha Daintry and the 2018 site-specific commission, *Sowing Colour*, which draws on Chatsworth's gardens and landscape. Daintry chose the Dome Room for her 235 coloured pots, tiny at the top, looming large at the bottom, which reference Fibonacci's mathematical sequence. 'I love the brightness and surprise of this, and the use of natural light,' the Duke says. 'The more I've learned from Natasha, the more in awe I have become of the technicalities of making such a work. She had to find people with specialist skills to help achieve what she wanted. She drove herself on. The maths and nature-related

elements of the Fibonacci were a relatively new area for me; the result is so enjoyable.' It must be daunting, I venture, for an artist to receive a commission from Chatsworth. 'But we think of it the other way around!' the Duke counters.

PAST TO PRESENT

Chatsworth has a history of four centuries of collecting, so adding contemporary pieces is nothing new. Ceramics have featured from the start. 'A "white bouille" appears in an inventory from 1599, which might be ceramic,' reveals Sash Giles. 'We don't know everything about the early collections as items moved between the family houses, and pieces got broken or were given away. In a way, the unknown is freeing.'

Today, there are tens of thousands of pieces in the collection: more than 2000 oil paintings, 650 sculptures and some 1000 ceramics. Among the latter are pieces by Rupert Spira, 16th-century Medici porcelain, blue and white Delft and Sèvres dinner services. They also include two Neolithic Chinese pots, which Ai Wei Wei has coloured. The latest ceramics acquisition, from the Gagosian Gallery in Rome, is 20 white vessels with black line decoration, displayed in a linear form, by the Japanese maker Shio Kusaka. The Duke has placed these in the Library where, among the 17,000 books, they are a quiet, elegant presence, along with pared-down pieces by Korean ceramist Sun Kim and English maker David Roberts. Other recent purchases include pottery for the estate's holiday cottages. 'We visited Nigel Matthews, who was on *The Great Pottery Throw Down*,' the Duke tells me, 'and asked him to make for us.'

LEFT: Australian ceramic artist Pippin Drysdale's *Evensong*, 2016, on display in the State Bedchamber
ABOVE: pieces by the Irish maker Sara Flynn, on the mantelpiece in the Great Dining Room



ABOVE FROM TOP: the piece that first spurred the Duke of Devonshire's interest in contemporary ceramics: a small bowl by John Spearman; the oldest pieces in the collection are two Neolithic Chinese pots, coloured by Ai Wei Wei, part of Lord Burlington's collection and on display since 2018
RIGHT: Natasha Daintry's *Sowing Colour*, 2018. Known for her experimentation with glazes, she uses a high-white porcelain as background for the colour



The Duke is pragmatic about his collecting. 'The advice given is to buy only the best, isn't it? But how do you know what is the best? The artist doesn't always know. The dealer knows, of course,' he adds, with a smile, 'because it will always be what the collector can afford at the top of their range.' What, then, are his thoughts on the longevity of his choices? 'They will date,' he explains. 'In 20 or so years some of the collection will be as unfashionable as Clarice Cliff. I'm not putting her work on the same level as de Waal by the way, although I am fond of her style, especially the crocus pattern; we have a Cliff piece on display. Both artists give pleasure and add to the ebb and flow of the house.'

I wonder if he considers any acquisitions as mistakes? 'The biggest mistake has been not buying enough, early enough,' he says. 'I wish I had bought more of Spearman's pieces when he was still making. I would also like to spend more time speaking to artists and visiting studios.' Ceramics – and furniture – are 'centre stage' for the Duke. 'I like the fact that the two are part of a smaller world,' he explains. 'The contemporary art world is glitzy, huge and expensive, which doesn't do the artist any harm, but I have now made a conscious decision to focus on these two mediums.'

THE QUESTION OF TASTE

In the final stages of a tour of Chatsworth, visitors reach the Great Dining Room. Here lie two arresting displays on different mantelpieces. The first is by Irish ceramic artist Sara Flynn: black, porcelain pieces so matte, so dark, that they appear made of metal. The second, white, is a serene grouping by the Australian artist, Kirsten Coelho. The Duke likes to play an active role in the display of pieces, but is he as interested in the alchemy of making? 'I'm impressed by it, but I don't understand it,' he admits. 'It's not what I am interested in. Nor, with ceramics, is function. What I love about contemporary ceramics, especially here – and with all the contemporary pieces we have – is that they bring a relaxed feel to Chatsworth. They change the pace of the house and bring a different texture to the rest of the collection. People can make up their own minds about them. There isn't the baggage of the question of taste – taste, I think, is the most appalling idea.'

The Duke talks of how Chatsworth today, although still a home, is less about the family and more about the house, grounds and gardens as a place for pleasure for visitors. The van der Beugel family portrait includes a section on fundamental human genetics, for 'Everyman'. The ceramics on display throughout the interior (and out: spot the huge Alexander Macdonald-Buchanan sculpture in the garden) bring a freshness – and surprises – to the spaces they inhabit. Chatsworth, as a key heritage destination, is leading the way on ceramics collecting and display that followers, everywhere, would urge others to view. 

Find out more by visiting Chatsworth House, Bakewell, Derbyshire, DE45 1PP; chatsworth.org