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The Rococo Revival in Contemporary Porcelain

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Sotheby's Institute of Art

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The Rococo Revival in Contemporary Porcelain

by

Ariel Senackerib

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the Master’s Degree in Fine and Decorative Art and Design Sotheby’s Institute of Art 2018

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The Rococo Revival in Contemporary Porcelain

By: Ariel Senackerib

The contemporary design market has seen a resurgence of the rococo style. Porcelain has become a popular medium, and artists and designers have been revisiting the possibilities of it by returning to the motifs and symbols of the mid eighteenth-century. While there is a wealth of existing literature on porcelain manufactories, including Meissen, Sèvres and others, the rococo style is often overlooked in literature for its cultural and theoretical value. The rococo has been given little consideration by art historians, because of its excessive luxury and cultural appropriation. However, many contemporary artists and designers have found new inspiration in the incredible craftsmanship of this era, and in the conceptual ideas behind the rococo and chinoiserie styles. By relating these concepts to our modern-day global luxury design market, the designers chosen for this study have reinvigorated porcelain for the contemporary interior.

This thesis explores the eighteenth-century influences in the work of five artists spanning three generations. This study is comprised of an introduction, five chapters that each focus on a single artist, and a conclusion. The first chapter examines Arlene Shechet, who has shown her work from a residency at Meissen alongside traditional Meissen objects in different museum settings. The second chapter follows an interview with Robin Best, and her porcelain vessels that use historically and scientifically biased imagery. A studio visit with Beth Katleman comprises the third chapter and discusses how she developed her unique style that combines pop art and the rococo while simultaneously making a lighthearted social commentary. Chapter four moves on to Molly Hatch, and her expansive market and ideas which we discussed in an interview as a contemporary continuation of the chinoiserie dialogue. The fifth chapter ends with an interview with David Wiseman, the youngest of these artists, who makes very traditional decorative arts objects and wall sculptures, that utilize the lessons of modernity and tie together all these different influences.

By assessing existing scholarship, material evidence, and primary research conducted through interviews with four of these five artists, this thesis examines the resurgence of the rococo style of porcelain in the contemporary design market. It has become prominent due to the current artistic climate, which has encouraged ornamentation and excess on design objects. The eighteenth-century style also responds to luxury by crossing cultural boundaries and including “exotic” designs intended to fascinate and delight the senses. The contemporary works that look back at this rococo style take the materials and symbols used, but they also explore the deeper conceptual aspects of it. Ultimately, this thesis proves that this group of artists borrows from the eighteenth-century, in order to make luxury art items relevant to our material culture once again.
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Introduction

There is currently a revival of the rococo style in the work of living artists and designers. The motifs and materials of the mid eighteenth-century have recently become a major part of the contemporary design vocabulary. Gilding, added ornament, and ormolu mounts are seeping into even the most recent works presented as design. Even though interest in collecting eighteenth-century antiques has decreased, it has become a major source of inspiration for multiple generations of living designers. The scope of this paper involves five designers who work in the United States and abroad, and center their artistic practice on reviving eighteenth century styles.

Recently, museums, galleries, and auction houses have become more interested in mixing styles of different time periods. In combination with an increasing lack of interest in antiques, it has become a common practice to transition antiques galleries into design galleries and to include more contemporary and modern works of designers into trade fairs such as TEFAF, and the Winter Antiques Show, which traditionally have restricted dealers to bringing only fine art and museum quality antiques. The most interesting of these new works are the ones that establish a visual dialogue with the historical decorative art pieces. Because many antiques dealers have re-branded as “design” galleries, they have been adding more contemporary work that responds to the antiques, by using similar materials and styles, such as porcelain.

I am going to discuss porcelain pieces that are considered contemporary design pieces, but visibly and purposefully look back towards the eighteenth-century. This will show the relevance of antiques to contemporary design objects and establish a clear and logical dialogue between them. I will examine the way in which these artists are
responding to historical forms, but also how they are using modern techniques that make the works contemporary. The color white is a consistent theme, which all of these artists heavily utilize in order to reference the qualities of porcelain and how modernity has changed it since its height of production in 1750’s Europe and Asia. By referencing a historical context of porcelain and how it was discovered, appropriated from China, and adapted to a European market, I can better explain how exactly these current ceramic artists are looking to their predecessors, and what ideas are being revived and explored. Most of the artists I am examining have little existing literature on this topic, so primary research is used in the case of Beth Katleman, Robin Best, Molly Hatch and David Wiseman, by conducting interviews with each of them to discuss their work and their practice.

Porcelain is a type of ceramic created by fusing china clay, or kaolin, and petuntse at temperatures of at least 1200 degrees Celsius. It has the hardness and durability of stoneware, but is light and translucent\(^1\). It was developed in China probably between the sixth and tenth centuries and developed into a national industry.\(^2\) When it was later introduced to Europeans, porcelain manufactories sprung up in Germany, France, and Holland in a feverish attempt to perfectly recreate the true “hard-paste” porcelain that was being imported from China.

Germany was one of the first European countries to develop this formula for porcelain, and the Meissen Manufactory produced a plethora of porcelain designs. Several of the most well known porcelain companies are still in operation today and

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 63
many hire contemporary designers to visit and create original new works, based on their unique collection. My first section will focus on Arlene Shechet, a contemporary designer who completed a residency at Meissen from 2012 to 2013. Meissen was originally created and funded by Augustus the Strong, and the inventive and once very modern rococo style pieces made for him have continually been produced. However, with the rise of neoclassicism that drastically changed the artistic landscape, the rococo style quickly fell out of favor, and even now is considered a frivolous artistic style and is greatly underappreciated by art historical scholarship. It was not until the Rococo Revival of the mid nineteenth-century, roughly 100 years later, that collectors once again began searching for and appreciating the traditional Meissen works. Collectors sought out the signature eighteenth century German styles, with little regard to authenticity.

Contemporary collecting is once again seeing a resurgence of demand for distinctly eighteenth-century designs as artists and designers are turning back to the rococo for inspiration. Arlene Shechet was invited to complete a residency in order to continue updating this dialogue. Her output explores the factory itself, and the labor practices that go into making these porcelain objects, that are now somewhat outdated. Shechet manipulates the Meissen works by adding new themes such as heaviness and weight to make the porcelain more contemporary. She also plays with positive and negative space, and uses color to highlight the flaws of casting porcelain in molds, instead of using it to mask them. Her work instills new life into traditional Meissen objects, and has re-opened a scholarly discussion about porcelain.

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My second chapter considers the implications of trade and global influence always present in the porcelain objects and the discussions around them. Robin Best is an Australian born artist working out of Jingdezhen, China, the birthplace of porcelain, and hand paints porcelain vessels using motifs and symbols taken from historical ceramics, textiles, and illustrations that depict the global trade of ideas. She uses overtly global imagery with complicated overtones inspired by chinoiserie and delftware. An easy definition of chinoiserie by scholar Mimi Hellman is “domestic or imported luxury goods that appropriated or claimed to reproduce the materials and forms of Chinese design.”

The trade between the Dutch East India Company and China led to an explosion of Chinese porcelain in the Netherlands, specifically in the blue and white style. Delftware, a Dutch creation, imitated the Chinese exports through the use of similar blue and white decorations. Even before Western artists could accurately mimic the formula for porcelain, they adopted the blue and white color palette and applied Chinese imagery to stoneware and other ceramics.

In my third chapter I look at the way in which the contemporary production of porcelain employing the rococo style is more of a social commentary on our present day than just a revival of the past. Artist Beth Katleman creates sculptures made of entirely white porcelain that are inspired by historical interiors. In order to understand her work, it is important to know the historical background of how porcelain was created and consumed in eighteenth century France. When the porcelain manufacturers in France were first discovering how to make hard-paste porcelain in the early 1700s, they were

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primarily funded by the royal family and the king’s mistresses. Louis the XIV, the king of France at the time, was building up Versailles to be intimidating display of wealth and power. Louis XIV and his family achieved this intimidating display of wealth by funding the production of decorative arts, especially porcelain. This excessive spending obviously backfired, and the severe economic stratification of France launched the French Revolution. Beth Katleman is a traditionally trained fine artist working in Brooklyn, New York. She finds inspiration in this time period, because she believes it echoes the current wealth gap in the United States. She sees struggling artists making works for wealthy collectors, and can not help but add a twinge of dark humor in all of her pieces. It allows her to use the context of rococo design, which was so luxurious and carefree, and apply a subtle criticism that points out cultural flaws.

Chapter four looks deeply into the practice of Molly Hatch, an American artist who designs ceramics that range from fine art to more accessible household tableware. All of her work uses ornament and design taken from antiques and historical pattern books, textiles, and prints. Many of her sources fall into the category of chinoiserie as well. She uses earthenware blanks as canvas, and revisits the style of “painting on porcelain.” Hatch is a uniquely interesting case, because her output is so expansive, and truly demonstrates the economic nature of porcelain designs. Ultimately her work opens up the economic discussion about the rococo porcelain style. It will also open up a discussion about how the past and contemporary luxury design markets interact with more accessible design and household goods.

My final chapter will look closely at David Wiseman, the youngest of this set of designers and a RISD (Rhode Island School of Design) graduate currently working in
California. He designs interior installations that are inspired by historical interiors, and very traditional decorative arts items such as candlesticks, vessels, and chandeliers. His heavy use of porcelain and bronze is also inspired by the past, but his designs update these styles to fit contemporary interiors. Wiseman relies on a strictly white color palette in his porcelain, and has embraced the streamlined style of modernity. While he has added nature inspired porcelain ornament back into the design dialogue, he has added in a modern version of it. As the youngest of these designers he is arguably the most influenced by the current market, and therefore provides an important dialogue about what is currently happening in the design world.

The artists and designers of this paper span three generations, and are all working with the same materials and out of a similar inspiration. They are only a select few, but they are indicative of the expanse of this rococo trend. While ceramics usually carry the implication of domestic use, the artists and designers in this study are creating very respected fine art. This recent application of porcelain as an artistic medium has revived the rococo style, albeit in a twenty first century manner. Galleries, museums, and decorative arts companies are all combining contemporary art with antiques, and using this historically inspired art to ease the contrast. As I will more thoroughly examine throughout the course of this paper, all of these artists and designers have deconstructed the rococo style and revisited in a way that celebrates it and points out its flaws, but ultimately brings it to the forefront of design once again.
Chapter I: Arlene Shechet (American, b. 1951)

While artists have been creating ceramics consistently for the last three hundred years, they have also been actively working at the major European manufactories. Many of them have stayed open since the eighteenth century and have been adapting and changing over time to follow major artistic movements. Recently however, these manufactories have been specifically responding to the eighteenth century styles again, and are hiring artists to recreate these pieces in a contemporary way. The work of American artist Arlene Shechet clearly demonstrates how this trend has moved into porcelain production and display. From the works she has created at Meissen, Shechet has had two museum exhibitions, one at RISD and one at the Frick Collection, both of which contrasted her work against historical Meissen objects. Her most recent exhibition, currently on view in Madison Square Park, shows an entirely different type of porcelain sculpture, although still inspired by and responding to historical forms. By assessing the work of scholars who have deeply studied Shechet’s shows at RISD and the Frick Collection as well as her residency, I will show the relevance of her practice as a ceramicist as she continues to develop and puts contemporary porcelain into the greater scholarly conversation that it demands.

The Meissen Manufactory was founded in the early eighteenth-century, when European royals were racing to discover the formula for true hard-paste porcelain. Like most porcelain manufactories, they have always been very guarded, keeping their methods and formulas largely private. While they have continually hired artists to come in and shake things up, Shechet’s residency sheds light on how secretive and traditional the manufactory still is. Meissen is interested in changing, as evidenced by their
commitment to artist’s residencies. However, as one scholar who has studied Shechet’s work has pointed out, Meissen is in the former East Germany, and they do not know how to adapt to a new global economy and more commercial mindset. If Meissen wants to stay open through the centuries, they are dependent on artistic change. While the manufactory has maintained ownership of only a few of Arlene Shechet’s pieces, some her forms have appeared in Meissen’s dinnerware, showing that they are open to change and are using the new perspectives from these intervening artists in order to do so.

Shechet’s work often challenges traditional notions of porcelain. She creates large blocky forms, that could not be further from the delicate figures Meissen is known for. Shechet was more inspired by the factory itself, and the process of making porcelain. While her resultant work used many of the molds and colors that were present, she was more interested in the hidden aspects of Meissen forms, such as the underappreciated workers and the level of craftsmanship and skill that goes in to everything they produce. Her work was ultimately successful and well shown, because it opened up an interesting dialogue about the process of porcelain, and gives greater artistic credibility to the craftspeople.

Similar to many of the artists in this study, Arlene Shechet faced the challenge of how to re-think a medium that is so pervasive in our material culture and so explored by the eighteenth-century artists she is inspired by. In 2012 when Shechet went to Germany, most of the forms were still revered as delicate antiques. Shechet is deconstructing the overarching ideas we have about porcelain and looking back to the eighteenth-century

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5 Judith Tannebaum Arlene Shechet: Meissen Recast. P. 18
7 Judith Tannebaum Arlene Shechet: Meissen Recast. P. 18
global explosion of porcelain manufacture to do it. Her work adds substance to these products, and gives them a massive quality, to change our notion of ceramic as a delicate and fragile substance.

During her residency at Meissen, Shechet had to adjust from her studio practice into a factory setting. Six hundred and fifty people still work at Meissen, and every job is fragmented to a specific part of the process. According to Shechet, there are people who have worked there for forty years and have only ever done their one job, which they have perfected. For example, she cites a cherry painter who does not even dare to venture into the occasional strawberry. This intensely divided labor keeps production consistent, but also keeps it standardized and resistant to change. Arlene was always intrigued by factories as a child, so this division of labor that mechanizes the process of porcelain obviously intrigues her as well.

Porcelain scholar Maureen Cassidy-Geiger also visited the Meissen Manufactory in 2012, to interview Shechet about the work she was doing there. Since Shechet was allowed in as strictly a sculptor, she found initial conflict within the rigid factory system of divided labor, especially the separation between painting and sculpture. Shechet was only allowed to apply oxides and glazes, and paint her initials, nothing else. For full painted decoration, she was given one artist for one afternoon a week. In terms of molds, her access was also extremely limited. She became very resourceful in her use of materials, which is probably what led her to use odd pieces of molds and create different

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8 Judith Tannebaum *Arlene Shechet: Meissen Recast*. p. 18
9 Ibid., p. 12
Shechet painted and gilded new areas such as mold numbers, signatures, and seam lines in order to highlight her process, which is typically very hidden in European porcelain.\(^{12}\)

The limitation of access to molds, forms, and painted decoration encouraged Shechet’s exploration of the psychology of the factory. She studied the factory system at Meissen, as much as the historical objects, which allowed her to ultimately create works inspired by the eighteenth-century manufacture. Some of her work creates human animal hybrid figures, some deconstructs the functional object, and in her most recent work she completely rethinks the medium of porcelain.

Shechet began by rethinking the process of the mold. Mold making is a crucial aspect of Meissen forms, considering they have continued to make the same originally eighteenth-century objects. Therefore, they hold on to molds to accurately recreate these figurines and table ware with the same level of detail and quality. The overall use of molds and designs keep the works consistent despite the handmade process.

Molds are meant to ensure consistent replication and keep even complicated forms standardized. Since they are modified in Shechet’s body of work to create unique single works that can not necessarily be replicated, they give new meaning to the mold. In one piece titled *Asian Vase Pair*, Shechet has filled the mold and recast it, and presented the two halves of it with the object silvered on one side and painted with orange floral decoration on the other. (fig. 1) The registration marks are painted with gilding, silvering, and enamel in blue, pink, yellow, orange, black, and green. Registration marks are holes that are typically used so a mold can be pulled apart after it has set and align the two

sides of the mold correctly when it is time to pour the clay. While it is a small part of the mold making process, it is an important and necessary one. Forgetting this step could ruin the entire idea of consistent replication, because the two sides will fail to realign. Shechet chose this step, which is not even part of creating the final product, to highlight the difficulty of this medium and the importance of process. Molds are so present in the factory yet so hidden, because seam lines in finished products are expertly hidden. Shechet’s underlying theme is a celebration of the workers, so highlighting the imbedded use of molds in her porcelain sculptures allows her to do this by showing the many intricacies of the process.

Her work, unlike traditional Meissen, utilizes a more modernist and formalist language that applies ideas about the factory to intricate objects. She takes the lessons learned from twentieth century design and applies them back to these delicate, ornamented shapes. In *Asian Vase Pair*, Shechet has taken the delicate vase form and made it dense and massive by keeping it within the structure of the mold. She also left a clear glaze off a lot of her works, leaving them with a matte finish, which is normally not done in the factory. Shechet highlights the human nature of making porcelain by keeping drips and faults on the forms instead of hiding them.

The imperfection of art is exemplified by the *Swan Vase*, a classic vase shape but built up with collaged pieces of molds, flowers, figurines and other vase forms. (fig 2) The collaged elements strongly recall the “schneeball” vases beloved by Frederick the Great. However, in the contemporary pieces the presence of odd forms and figures

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makes the ornament slightly more complicated in its interpretation. Swan Vase, for example, uses this all white, rococo design, but the awkwardness of this dense vase with various flowers and clay chunks sticking out asymmetrically is unmistakably modern. The traditional schneeball vases take their name from the German word for snowball, given to the round, white clumps that hydrangea flowers grow in, which resemble white balls of snow. These flowers are applied all over the schneeball vases, giving them incredible texture and delicacy. Shechet’s work recreates that texture, but with all of these different elements and motifs combined together to create the overall shape. A few flowers still appear around the body of the form, and a few are painted in the traditional style of porcelain flowers used as ornament.

Arlene Shechet’s solo show at RISD entitled “Meissen Recast” ran from January 17 to July 6, 2014. The exhibition used RISD’s existing collection of eighteenth and nineteenth century porcelain and Shechet’s work created in 2012 and 2013. Shechet was given the freedom to display the objects all together in structures she designed to reinforce her ideas about the historical objects and residency at the Meissen manufactory. In this exhibition, Shechet approached the way porcelain was being displayed with the same eye she used during her residency at Meissen two years earlier, as argued by scholar Dominic Molon, in his essay “Re-Make/Re-Model”. The most noticeable way she deconstructed the exposition of porcelain was her installation of stacked plates in a vitrine as opposed to hanging a single precious example. Shechet’s re-installation of the porcelain gallery’s cabinets, according to Molon, realized her intent to “enhance and undermine the preciousness of the materials while subverting traditional approaches to

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17 Dominic Molon, Arlene Shechet: Meissen Recast, p. 18
porcelain display with her introduction of mirrored objects and surfaces."¹⁸ Since she also installed many reflective surfaces, Shechet highlighted the backs and bottoms of objects that are typically not visible in museum display cases. The exhibition highlighted her previous work, but also began ideas about curating porcelain that are still present in her current practice four years later. Molon ultimately argues that the diminished “preciousness” of the eighteenth-century works elicited a renewed contemplation of their more esoteric attributes and qualities.¹⁹ Shechet also included a clip from the 1912-14 silent film “Meissner Porzellan! Lebende Skulpturen der Diodattis im Berlinerwintergarten” (Meissen Porcelain! The Diodattis Living Sculptures at the Berlin Conservatory). Dominic Molon thought this film clip enhanced the theatricality of the exhibition design by implying that the objects themselves had been “staged” like a film.²⁰ Since Shechet was more interested in the process behind porcelain and the factory itself, she celebrates the process of making more than she celebrates the finished product. The many mirrors, backwards objects, and odd angles reinforce the idea that porcelain’s delicacy and perfection needs to be challenged if the medium is going to evolve. Her work in porcelain in this exhibition opened up new possibilities for many artists who came after her and are only starting to discover what can be achieved with this medium that has been around for hundreds of years. It thus reanimates the eighteenth-century style in a new light and shows how rococo porcelain has somehow lasted through the modernism of the twentieth-century and can still be relevant even in its luxury.

¹⁸ Dominic Molon, Arlene Shechet: Meissen Recast. p. 30
¹⁹ Ibid., p. 30
²⁰ Ibid., p. 38
In Arlene Shechet’s following exhibition at the Frick Collection in New York City in 2016 entitled “Porcelain, No Simple Matter,” the New York based ceramic artist combines her work with the historic works which directly inspired it, this time from a private collection instead of a museum. The Arnhold collection consists of 130 works from Henry Arnhold’s gift to the Frick Collection. Formed in Dresden by Lisa (1890-1972) and Heinrich Arnhold (1885-1935), the Arnhold collection came to America with Lisa in 1935. While they collected tableware, vases, and objects of royal or noteworthy provenance in the 1920’s and 1930’s, their son Henry has since expanded the types of objects in the collection while continuing their collecting habits. He acquired more underglaze blue decorations, figures, groups, and mounted objects. All the pieces in the Arnhold Collection are Royal Meissen Manufactory porcelain collected by the family. Lisa and Heinrich Arnhold filled their residence in Dresden with Meissen objects, as well as other contemporary art from the 1920s. The exhibition avoided the typical chronological or thematic order in favor of an approach that creates a dialogue between the historical and the contemporary using purely formal qualities.

Alongside this collection at the Frick, only ten works in the exhibition were Shechet’s own sculptures made during her residency at Meissen. Her initial attraction to working in porcelain comes from her interest in the liquidity of materials. Shechet is especially attracted to liquid materials that set into solid (such as glass or clay). She

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22 Ibid.
works within the concept that artists can use liquid to create a pause in time, and therefore porcelain allows her the freedom to freeze moments. Shechet’s work from her residency freezes moments of the porcelain making process, by including forms of molds, and mismatched shapes and only partially painted finished objects with no glaze. The gallery alongside the garden at the Frick also allowed her to better incorporate her work into the space, because some pieces were placed outside in the garden, while others were set in glass cases against the windowed wall. (figure 3) The gallery is dominated by natural light, and entirely oriented towards the courtyard, unlike the rest of the galleries in the house.

In her most current work, Full Steam Ahead, which runs from September 25, 2018 to April 28, 2019, the artist has created a site-specific work in Madison Square Park, New York City. It establishes entirely new boundaries for porcelain and takes her method of large heavy works and uses them to evoke an eighteenth-century garden through her sculptural intervention. The installation is set in the emptied pool inside the park, and becomes a stage for viewing, encouraging discussion, programming, and long contemplation of the work. Porcelain is normally considered so delicate and luxurious, and this show uses a nineteenth and twentieth century language to break down that barrier.

Full Steam Ahead is integrated into the existing memorial statues of the park, by adding to the dialogue with a wooden ship mermaid, and different “war trophy” style objects that relate to the steam ships that came to New York in the early twentieth

25 Judith Tannebaum, Arlene Shechet: Meissen Recast. p. 17
century. The large porcelain feathers and bits of a lion’s paw however, look more like pieces of cracked marble taken from Rome on a grand tour and returned to sit in some eighteenth-century French garden, as souvenirs of travel. (fig. 4) The massive feather wing laying on the ground is one of the most powerful parts of the installation, because something that should be delicate is extremely bulky and stable attached to the bottom of the pool where anyone can walk up and touch it. (fig. 5) The huge lion paw is also made of ceramic, which applies this new idea of stability and endurance, which is not a common association. It is a medium that tends to carry an air of elegance and refinement, but also of delicacy and breakability. It is important that Shechet is allowing people to get a new feel for what this medium means, because it makes her work, as well as the historical works, much more digestible to our much more casual culture.
Chapter 2: Robin Best (Australian, b. 1953)

Robin Best (b. 1953) is a living ceramic artist who embraces the complicated global discourse which eighteenth century porcelain inspires. Best works in Jingdezhen, China, and is originally from Perth, Western Australia. She is represented by Adrian Sassoon and Ferrin Contemporary who both sell her work alongside other ceramic artists. Adrian Sassoon sells it in the context of antique porcelain pieces as well, providing a historical background for porcelain within the gallery itself. Her work has been presented by Sassoon at TEFAF, Maastricht and Masterpiece London. I sent an interview to Robin Best on November 15, 2018 in which I asked her to describe her historical influences for her practice and specific works, and to discuss the global discourse of her motifs. While her work is heavily referencing historical forms, it is her explicit conversation about the nature of trade within the works themselves that make them contemporary.

Robin grew up near Encounter Bay in South Australia. She is inspired by the history of the area, and cites the 1802 encounter on the Fleurieu Peninsula between Captain Matthew Flinders of England and Captain Charles Baudin of France who were both charting the coastline of Australia for their respective nations, which were at war at the time. They were working up opposite ends and met as they crossed paths. She found this episode to significant because the scientists put their differences aside, and exchanged charts and data despite the great rivalry between France and England as they were both expanding their colonies. The plants and animals collected during Baudin’s voyage, the artist explains, were also brought back to Napoleon and Josephine, who had a menagerie of exotic Australian animals back in France. It is Napoleon’s connection to Australia that also has been a major factor in Best’s work. She is fascinated by
Napoleon’s interest in Egyptology, and the way in which the French Empire Style created during his rule so easily married discoveries in the New World, to classical arts and architecture. Therefore, her work also combines classical references with historical images of Australia and other countries being discovered by Europeans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Best originally worked in three dimensional design and animation using software to create her work, but turned to painting on porcelain when she found it allowed her to practice a very private contemplation of the world, more in line with her views. She is based in Jingdezhen, the place where porcelain was originally created and perfected. The idea that this is the home of a medium that travelled so globally allows her to consider the trade of material goods and ideas within her practice. She designs the shapes of her porcelain vases for each subject or painting she is planning, and has it made by the craftspeople in Jingdezhen. Best explains, “I contemplate that tidal wave of culture that China sent to Europe over the millennium and the Central Asians who made the trade possible.” This return to the roots of porcelain lends a significant credibility to her work, but also involves her in the Chinoiserie conversation, as an artist placing Western images onto these ceramics crafted by Chinese makers.

Furthermore, Best looks to the historical events that inspired waves of immigrants from the Middle East, China, Greece and Italy to come to Australia. They brought their animals and their material culture with them. For example, Best considers how Afghan immigrants brought camels to the Australian dessert. She looks to historical events and the hazards of migration for her design sources, and finds reading historical literary sources extremely helpful. Best explained, “To make a large work such as The Travels of
Marco Polo I will read up to 10 books on the subject and often it is details within the stories that give life to the imagery.” (fig 6) Her style usually incorporates different historical design elements from various periods and cultures, combined in singular pieces of porcelain she paints by hand. She is interested in travel and migration, and the global visual culture we exist in. By looking back to historical scientific depictions of Australia, Best can take out motifs and symbols that she finds represent the time period they come from. Best explains, “There is something touching and sometimes naive in their depiction of these strange new animals...something that causes you to wonder at the mindset of the person who had made the rendering. This kind of wonder does not occur to me when I look at contemporary natural history paintings...they are invariably scientifically correct.” It is the historical and cultural bias where Best looks for her artistic practice. By putting these back onto porcelain forms she designs, Best can highlight this wondrous quality she finds so appealing.

Her work also often mixes Chinese imagery with symbols of Australia, such as Willow with Wallaby, made in 2010, that juxtaposes a kangaroo with a pagoda, a very personal dichotomy for a woman spending her life between China and Australia. (fig.7) The blue decoration on a white background is very typical of what was once imported to Europe from China. However, the way she lines up a group of vases, and makes a continuous image across them is very modern looking. The majority of the porcelain is left white, and only small motifs are delineated in painted decoration. The shapes of the vases are what give the image its structure, because she has created a height difference and spatial shape the porcelain must be placed in, in order to read the painting effectively.
This use of installation is very contemporary, because it forces the decorative object to be installed a very specific way in order to read the objects.

Another work by Best I want to highlight is *Emu in Chintz*, a porcelain vase designed and painted by Best in 2010 (fig. 8) It is a white porcelain vase with a cobalt blue pencil drawing and a 24 carat gold foiled stopper, which is a common feature across many of her objects. The artist cites her inspiration as Indian chintz, which is a fabric that was so heavily imported into England, that it disastrously affected English cotton mills. The fabric is recreated in blue and white. The packed blue and white floral design reads like eighteenth century chinoiserie, with forms that have been distorted and manipulated to fit onto porcelain surfaces. Because the work is recalling this chintz that was imported from the east and inflated England’s economy, it also opens her work to a larger discussion of orientalism in decorative arts, and patterns of global consumption from this period which is characterized by trade. Best claims that she is interested in world trade networks of the eighteenth century, and seeks to understand how Central Asia linked Europe, China, and India through religion, language and law. This former grandeur of the area of Central Asia is something she is consistently referencing in her latest pieces.

*The First Fleece* (2017), like the previous piece, is made of porcelain with Xin Cai painting and 24 carat gold foil on the stopper. (fig. 9) The name comes from the pink painted imagery, that stylistically resembles transfer ware decoration. It shows John MacArthur, known as “the father of the Sheep industry” who was a British army lieutenant turned full time sheep farmer, when he arrived in Sydney, Australia with his

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wife Elizabeth in 1790. He was involved with the Dutch Cape Colony in the international sheep trade. In ancient Western mythology Jason is charged with recovering “the golden fleece”, which was taken from a sacrificed ram that had divine origins (Poseidon and a nymph descended from Helios). Best takes both mythologies, and has an image of Jason holding his prize, with a ship (probably the Argo) sailing just off shore on one side, and on the other side the British soldier-turned-farmer. MacArthur (the farmer) is shown as a classical nude and faces a kangaroo, who stands across from him on top of a pile of sheep. An angel plays music overhead, and the whole scene is reminiscent of historical motifs and symbolism. The imagery is consistent with traditional styles of porcelain painting and transfer ware designs derived from printed images. It also demonstrates the way in which Best looks to eighteenth-century accounts of Australia, and relates these tales back to mythology.

Ultimately, Robin Best sees the eighteenth-century as an Age of Enlightenment, and personally seeks enlightenment through the study of history. The rococo style absorbed many different cultures into its ornament, especially Asian ones. She believes the current interest in the rococo era of porcelain production comes from the interest in Asian culture, as the Asian art market is now beginning dominate art and design. In her latest work she is looking toward the history of central Asia, and the trade routes that linked the Eastern and Western worlds. Her next set of works will be a garniture of five vases that look to the travels of Moroccan scholar Ibn Battuta. She is also creating

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29 Ibid.
smaller sculptures that will deal with famous people who have been attracted to wild animals.
Chapter III: Beth Katleman (American, b.1959)

Beth Katleman’s art makes for an interesting case to study, because she works entirely in white porcelain, and combines kitsch objects with historical designs. Katleman takes found objects, and casts them in porcelain to be constructed into mirrors, vases, and wall installations. Because the literature on her work is limited, I visited the artist’s studio to better understand her work and her relationship to the eighteenth-century. During this studio visit on September 24, 2018 we discussed her attraction to the eighteenth century, and how her work has changed and grown over time. She explained that she was first attracted to the rococo style because of the incredible expert craftsmanship that dominated the era. Even in the finest pieces of bronze and porcelain, the artist explained, the hand of the artist is so present. While her work thrives in a modernist white cube, their strong dialogue with the past allowed her to participate in multiple years of the Winter Antiques Show in the Park Avenue Armory in New York. Additionally, Katleman’s work has been placed in Christian Dior stores, as a result of the design strategy of interior architect Peter Marino, who designs luxury interior spaces. Her most recent work will be installed in RISD in the fall of 2019, putting her work into a museum collection as well.

Katleman's practice revolves around two main artistic techniques, a white monochrome palette, and the incorporation of kitsch found objects. Katleman is a traditionally trained fine artist, who started out working in colored polychrome. This was problematic however, because she was forced into the pre-trodden footsteps of Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons, who have dominated the dialogue of pop art. She therefore turned to porcelain and eliminated all color from her work. She had to forge her own
path, and thus found inspiration in the eighteenth-century, where decorative arts once thrived.

Katleman’s current practice is inspired by the hidden economic stratification that is present in porcelain (both today and three-hundred years ago). Once enjoyed by Royal families of Europe, porcelain was a fantastic commodity, compared to gold in its heyday. However, France was in economic crisis while Versailles was overflowing with goods, and kings and mistresses pumped money into porcelain manufactories while most of France was starving. The craftspeople (aside from major designers) are all but forgotten. She believes today’s current situation in the United States, with the drastic wealth gap between the 1% and the rest of the country makes her work in porcelain especially relevant.

By playing with scale and eliminating color, Katleman is really presenting her works as a contemporary practice, even though she utilizes forms taken from the eighteenth century. *Fire and Ice* is a diptych originally made in 2015 and was displayed at the 2016 Winter Antiques Show at the Park Avenue Armory. It is inspired by the Robert Frost poem of the same title published in December 1920, which contemplates the end of the world.\(^{30}\) (fig. 10) From a distance, they look like standard ornamented mirrors from the eighteenth century. However, they have a distinctly modern quality in the design, because of the proportional mismatching of the various objects, and the harsh titanium white color. There is a hen larger than the woman next to it, and a little girl is riding a snail on one side. Opposite, a snail is presented in equal size to a squirrel. These

little oddities and inconsistencies are drawn from a more modernist dialogue that only came about in the past century.

Her initial inspiration from pop art is clear in *Fire and Ice*. The darker aspects of these mirrors are the cartoonish exploding head and the girl diving off the piece in a swan boat. (fig. 11) The inspiration of the mirrors refers to the end of the world, and Katleman has found ironic humor in that theme. These found objects consist of mass-produced toys and figurines, from the 1960s and later. Katleman is calling into question our obsession with collecting. This also relates these porcelain trinkets back to the 1700s, when porcelain was being produced all over Europe. The proliferation of exported goods from China led to a proliferation in porcelain objects, especially figurines which were produced by Meissen and other manufactories. Katleman’s figurines from the present day respond to this because objects like these are still being produced at an excessive rate.

*White Rabbit* was presented by design dealer Todd Merrill at the Winter Antiques Show in 2017 at the Park Avenue Armory. (fig. 12) It is a mirror inspired by Lewis Carroll’s book *Alice in Wonderland* and includes the characters from the tale including a Cheshire cat, a hookah smoking caterpillar, a white rabbit, a mad hatter, and a girl, in a very literal translation of the story. Katleman states that this mirror is based off a Chippendale form. It is very much consistent with the earlier mirrors, and the Alice in Wonderland theme does not appear until it is closely inspected. Like her other works that are inspired by the hidden economic issues of porcelain, her irony seeps through here as well. A detail of the mirror shows a small child spilling pills out of an oversized bottle. (fig. 13) While the figures on this mirror recall the biscuit porcelain table figures, which
are usually quite neutral, the child spilling pills represents Katleman’s social commentary she often infuses into her sculpture.

Her interest in historical forms is combined with a more modern social discourse. The *Fire and Ice* mirrors and *White Rabbit* apply her style of cast porcelain knick knacks into a Chippendale inspired shape. By using this Chippendale form, she establishes a direct and coherent dialogue with the past. She piles cast porcelain objects into her work, in an intentionally dense manner. Katleman explained in our interview how she delights in the discoverability within her work. Many of her collectors who live with her pieces only discover little details of them years later.

Katleman’s relationship with the luxury retail market shows how interior design and fashion design are also finding inspiration in historical styles. Her first major installation in white porcelain is described in Peter Marino’s book *Art Architecture* published in 2016. Peter Marino got his start with Andy Warhol and the factory, prior to designing the first Barney’s Women’s store in the 1980s.\(^1\) Thirty-eight years later, Marino runs an architectural practice that serves luxury fashion brands, hotel chains, and private clients around the world. He is considered a master of giving visibility to artists in his spaces, by centering the architectural design around each work of art.\(^2\) When Marino met Beth Katleman, he had an instinct that she should create a work for the Christian Dior boutique he was designing in Hong Kong.\(^3\) Katleman’s work is described in this book about Marino’s design as sumptuous three-dimensional versions of toile de jouy

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\(^2\)Goldfarb, p. 6
\(^3\)Goldfarb, p. 25
wallpaper from a distance.\textsuperscript{34} This reference shows the luxurious, historical nature of her work. “The work already had so many elements related to Christian Dior’s interests and icons” explains the artist in the book “it was a really seamless fit.” \textsuperscript{35} For the Hong Kong boutique specifically, Katleman was commissioned to design an installation for the fragrance area of the store. This inclusion of historically inspired porcelain in a luxury fashion store is characteristic of current associations of these eighteenth-century forms with opulence and wealth.

Aside from obvious space requirements, Katleman was given complete artistic freedom to create this installation. It is the very modern quality of the cast figures that makes this work contemporary, because so many are distinctly twentieth-century plastic toys. Even using these in this eighteenth-century inspired style, Katleman has still created something entirely new. Having a fashion brand exhibit porcelain challenges the traditional notion of it. It is a medium that has somehow resisted the damaging passage of time and is still on the cusp of artistic creation. Katleman thus designed \textit{Demi Folly} specifically for this space. (fig. 14) While her work is strictly done in white porcelain, it appeals to the taste of this major fashion brand. The kitsch trinkets cast in \textit{Demi Folly} are hidden by the pureness of having an entirely white sculpture. It is a wall size installation of evenly patterned foliage and clouds of mini scenes, set up like wallpaper. The resulting pastoral scenes installed on the wall give way to something darker, and the installation gives the store a surrealistic, dreamlike feel. There are caterpillars, strawberries, leaves, butterflies, deer, and smiling kids configured in a rococo manner of playful cherubs. The

\textsuperscript{34} Goldfarb, p. 25
\textsuperscript{35} Goldfarb, p. 25
ultimate effect of her work is that of an eighteenth-century sitting room, with cherubs flying around little pastoral scenes.

Katleman’s work *Arcadia* (2017) perhaps better explains her renewed interest in the eighteenth-century, alongside her interest in pop art. (fig. 15) The rococo style itself is so carefree, that it is often glossed over by art historians, as unique to its time and culturally unimportant. The rococo almost draws more to attention to economic depression, because it only seems to show the upper, white, and very leisurely class of eighteenth-century Europe. Today, Katleman sees the parallel, considering the drastic wealth gap the United States still faces. Therefore, her work in porcelain takes humor to a dark place, calling these practices of luxury that seem so inherent in our material culture into question. *Arcadia* shows another pristine white world, that when inspected closer has been corrupted by consumer culture. 36 According to the description of the work by the artist “The disembodied heads hanging from chains suggest that the price of staying in this odd paradise may be too high altogether.” 37 It uses many of the characters from her oeuvre, such as clowns, figurines of children from vintage Campbell soup advertisements, little dolls and animals. However, one girl is blindfolded and perched on a cliff, possibly on her way to join the decapitated heads. This installation is a commentary on the rococo style itself, which has these pastoral love scenes and dancing cherubs, all floating on clouds and blissfully ignorant of the horrors of the outside world.

Katleman’s studio is currently set up for an installation at RISD in the Fall of 2019 entitled *Raid the Icebox Now*. It is a celebration of the 50th anniversary of *Raid the

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37 Ibid.
Icebox I with Andy Warhol and is going to run from August 23, 2019 to December 27, 2020. Various artists were invited to take over sections of the museum and will “question dominant narratives and highlight the strengths and idiosyncrasies of the museum’s collection” in the same fashion that Andy Warhol intervened with the collection 50 years earlier.  

Katleman was given the period rooms and has decided she will build an immersive porcelain installation. The walls of her studio are currently painted RISD period room green, and there is a sea of matte white objects, ranging from skeleton hands to pin up mermaids holding treasure chests, waiting to be installed according to her vision. She is creating a completely porcelain structure inspired by the elusive and somewhat questionable donator of the rooms to the museum. Little is known about him aside from his gambling addiction and his expulsion from Yale. The artist explained her inspiration somewhat ironically as the goddess of fortune and is drawing on the classical iconography of paradise versus the shipwreck. While on the surface her work is a jumbled fairyland of found objects, she is working within the historical tradition of iconography that has its roots in antiquity. Her work is ultimately an echo of that same eighteenth-century balance between delicate aestheticism and a global artistic culture that porcelain so readily lends itself to.

Porcelain is something she considers integral to our material culture. Katleman believes that we have strong pre-conceived notions of it because it is so heavily used in domestic goods. People so often handle plates and dolls, that she is challenged to present it as a fine art medium. Many contemporary ceramicists have struggled to break free from the domestic mold, but as an artist with her roots more closely tied to pop-art, Katleman

focuses instead on the sculptural qualities of the medium. While Katleman considers the tremendous renaissance of ceramics and clay in contemporary art, she strives to do something different, by creating fine art while implying conspicuous consumption through the implication of European class tradition.
Chapter IV. Molly Hatch

Molly Hatch (b. 1978) is a contemporary American ceramic artist who designs one of a kind fine art installations and mass-produced ceramic products. She is represented by the contemporary design gallery Todd Merrill. She originally trained in studio pottery with Vermont potter Miranda Thomas, who had worked as an assistant to Michael Cardew during the twentieth-century studio pottery movement. This movement was originally started by Bernard Leach and his contemporaries, who were inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement to return to more handcrafted items in a response to industrialization.  

Hatch’s work also returns to earlier forms of porcelain as her inspiration, stemming from her own childhood growing up in a home filled with her family's antiques. Her great grandparents were wealthy and of French and English descent, involved in the same social circles as Isabella Stewart Gardener. Her ceramic practice is thus informed by the turn of the century interest in collecting Chinese ceramics and the perceived cultural value of porcelain at this time. Hatch’s work is interesting because her broader mass marketed objects and her fine art both explore the effects of mass production in the eighteenth-century. Through an interview I conducted with Molly Hatch on November 29th, 2018 I came to better understand how her practice is informed by these historical styles. By examining her inspirations for her decorative patterns, and the resulting sculptural installations she creates out of ceramic plates, it will become apparent how the eighteenth century has inspired her contemporary practice, in terms of decorative ornament and conceptual meaning.

Molly Hatch’s autobiographical work *A Passion for China: A Little Book About the Objects We Eat from, Live with and Love* examines her lifelong love of ceramic objects, and how she grew up with them and later in life visited them in a museum setting. Getting ceramic out of this domestic environment and elevating it to a fine art object is one of the greatest challenges these artists face, but Hatch sees it as her access point. Hatch is fascinated by the high-low nature of ceramic throughout history, and its perceived value at different points in time. By referring to the eighteenth-century, Hatch is referencing a time when porcelain was worth as much as gold, and she believes this elevates the status of her work. As an artist that manufactures household wares while simultaneously creating singular pieces of fine art, this is one of her challenges. Because she paints her work onto white earthenware blank plates, Hatch is positioning her work as painting. The ceramic plates in the background are iconic in her mind, because painting on porcelain was once like painting on gold, and now she considers it to be outdated. Using the blank ceramic plates as canvas however, elevates this style of painting on porcelain by equating it with fine art. Even if people do not understand what she is trying to do on a conceptual level, Hatch sees her work as easy to grasp, because using the plates as canvas for a larger painting make it very straightforward.

One pattern that displays an interesting paradox for Hatch, is the Blue Willow pattern, which she explains as originally designed by Thomas Minton and brought to the market in 1780 by Thomas Turner.40 (fig. 16) It is a pattern that visually tells the tale of a forbidden love, a couples escape and capture amongst pagodas and bridges, and their eventual demise into a geometric labyrinth rim of the plate, and ultimate reincarnation.

40 Hatch, p. 32
Even despite its Chinese imagery and association with Chinese export ware, this pattern was used as a device by European manufacturers to sell more Chinese looking wares, with aspects of Chinese imagery and storytelling. It is an interesting case because it was completely devised by Europeans, even if its inspiration is Eastern.

Hatch considers herself continuing this conversation of eastern and western ornament. She is especially interested in works created in China, specifically for the Western market, as well as works created in the Western market with Chinese motifs that have become abstracted or have no real meaning. They were made to be shipped out and profited from. The perceived authenticity of these works of chinoiserie is what interests her, because they were so highly valued and collected, even though they are not necessarily authentic, or even the best examples of porcelain being produced.

Hatch is inspired by this complicated global trade of ideas that was occurring directly onto these porcelain objects. Chinoiserie is so useful to her, because she claims, “it is no one’s cultural history; it doesn’t really belong to anyone it belongs to the world.” For Hatch’s own practice, she sees her contribution to chinoiserie as “continuing to play a game for the American consumer… as a ceramic artist, continuing to add my revision of the revisionist history that already existed in chinoiserie. I’m playing a game of telephone again.” By designing her manufactured wares and sending them to China to get created in a factory, and then having them sent back to be sold in the U.S. market she sees herself as fully integrated into the conversation. She then highlights this concept with motifs of birds and flowers, taken directly off the eighteenth-century ceramic which inspired her. Whether people understand it or not is not Hatch’s goal. She just wants to use these motifs to create an instant sense of familiarity among her collectors.
For Hatch, smart design is including a conversation about the object itself within the design of the object. Examining Hatch’s installation *Aspire: After Meissen* (2015) her eighteenth-century influence is already evident. (fig. 17) It is one example of many where Hatch takes the pattern off an antique piece of porcelain and uses it to inspire her large-scale paintings on plates. It is based off the Meissen Manufactory’s *Purple Indian* tableware pattern. She believes it ultimately makes the design better to include this reference. The Meissen pattern is blown up to a grand scale, and somewhat distorted as it travels across the plates. Since this type of sculptural installation is digestible to a modern audience, and the inspiration of the pattern is so obviously taken from antique plates, Hatch can stimulate a conversation about pattern decorated tableware within the plates themselves.

*After China Bottle* (2016) is a slightly different type of object, because it is a single standing porcelain vase. (fig. 18) It is also manufactured as one of Hatch’s fine art objects and uses negative space to establish the form of a Chinese porcelain vase that inspires the surface decoration.41 Each of these vases is hand built and hand painted in the blue and white design. This surface pattern is derived from examples of Chinese ornaments from Owen Jones.42 Owen Jones published books on eastern ornament that were widely circulated and used throughout the western world. The vase shaped interior is gilded, further highlighting the negative space. Because this vessel has used the originally negative space to create the vessel itself, and then has interior gilding with the painted decoration on the outside, it provides a very contemporary take on a porcelain

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42 Ibid.
vase. She uses the negative space of the interior to conjure up a strong image, combined with her blue white and gold color choices, that allow viewers to visualize her inspiration.

It is similar in style to *Illume* (2016) which also depicts her contemporary take on a blue and white porcelain vessel with gilded decoration. (fig. 19) In this instance, the eighteenth-century French lidded vase is more clearly delineated, and the gilding provides a background. This image is however, is split up across plates installed on a wall (typical of her output but different then *After China Bottle*, which is a single vessel). While Hatch was inspired by a watercolor from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, she adapts to the color to strictly blue and white, creating a stronger image with greater coherency amongst the separate individual plates. Hatch has written in her own work “I am always drawn to ceramic wares that depict other ceramics on them.” 43 The watercolor she used however, comes from a French design book of porcelain objects that were never manufactured. While Hatch’s influences are strictly European sources, they are still heavily inspired by the economic relationship between Europe and China. Even now in their final contemporary form, it is easy to visualize this cross-cultural dialogue, because of the way she has illustrated ceramic back onto a ceramic surface, without completely rendering the vase.

Many of her works maintain this style of an imaged she distorts across a series of ceramic plates hanging on the wall, often influenced by textiles, prints, ceramics, or paintings. What makes her work contemporary is her ability to deconstruct these ornaments and place them back onto plates, in a way that really reinvigorates their artistic and cultural value. Another installation titled “*Worcester Imari*” (2014) is made up of 99

43 Hatch, p. 88
hand-painted Italian earthenware plates. (fig. 20) They are painted with Hatch’s interpretation of a pair of eighteenth-century painted vases with lids from the Frances-Emory Cocke Collection at Atlanta’s High Museum of Art.\textsuperscript{44} It is another of many examples of her style of showing continuous decoration across a series of hanging plates installed in a large mass.

In addition to her inspiration from the textiles and ceramics that spread throughout Europe, Hatch is inspired by printmaking, and how it allowed artistic ideas to spread as well. Prints and engravings were applied to many porcelain objects, in some cases by objects coming out of China that used European prints for their porcelain decoration. In many cases these prints depicted China itself. \textit{Qiand On Aime Tout est Plaisir; After Fragonard} (2013) was inspired by the eighteenth-century paintings of Jean-Honore Fragonard. (fig. 21) Paintings by Fragonard would have been spread through prints, because of obvious eighteenth-century travelling restrictions. Hatch uses a Japanese slip inlay technique to adhere the print images to the ceramic.\textsuperscript{45} \textit{The Swing}, by Jean-Honore Fragonard is split up here by placing the each of the lovers in their own scene, the swinging woman in one and her lover on the other. This example therefore shows the full extent of the transfer of ideas, because it shows a Western image first printed, then transferred to porcelain, then brought back together to make the first image again. While it is contemporary, it makes an easy metaphor for the dissemination of chinoiserie, because images went to China, were placed on porcelain, and came back somewhat distorted, but obviously from a Western origin. Hatch is also using a popular and easily


\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
recognized rococo image to look back at this practice. While some of her other decorations might not be as easy to discern their sources, most of her audience has probably encountered this image at some point prior.

Molly Hatch also produces ceramics for the wider market, making her an even more relevant case to study. She mass-produces her designs, which started with a 2010 collaboration with retail brand Anthropologie. This led to other collaborations, as well as multiple books which she has published about her own practice. They include pattern books on Moroccan and Scandinavian design, and one catalogue of her illustrations of teacups from the 300-piece archive at the Clark Institute. Like the imported porcelain of the eighteenth-century, which included higher examples and mass-produced objects for the merchant classes, Hatch is producing both fine art and more moderately priced, mass produced design. Many teapots and plates she produces under her brand retail for less than $100. She even makes a series of paper vases that are two dimensional renderings of a blue and white vase on a paper surface. (fig. 22)

This extension of her artistic practice interesting, because beginning in the eighteenth-century porcelain merchants used similar methods. In the present day, Hatch has discovered that this taste for blue and white porcelain is still very present. She is interested in the democratic quality of ceramic and wants to be able to give everyone an access point. While large pieces of ornamental Delftware were prominent features of many wealthy seventeenth and eighteenth-century households, the Delft potteries had to meet an increasing demand for more affordable household imitations of oriental porcelain, to suit a broader range of customers.\footnote{Marion S. Van Aken-Fehmers, Titus M. Eliëns, and Suzanne M.R. Lambooy. \textit{Delftware Wonderware}. The Hague, The Netherlands: Gemeentemuseum den Haag, 2012. Print. p. 52} While the wealthiest members of
society had their garnitures and covered jugs, Delftware was used for simpler kitchen tools and tableware in the eighteenth century as well. What Hatch's company proves is that people are still interested in buying both the mass-produced pieces and the singular works of fine art.

Hatch’s expansive market is a good indicator of how contemporary porcelain is also interacting with the broader design market, outside of fine artists and their collectors. Like many of the artists in this study, Hatch does not strictly consider herself a designer or a fine artist and is comfortable existing in the gray space in between both. While she would argue she is a designer if she were required to give an answer, her art is collected as both fine art and design, so she does not see the necessity of assigning herself a category. While her fine art installations use plates, the way they are hung on the wall and intended to be bought and used as paintings. However, Hatch has made all her earthenware on her fine art installations dishwasher safe, her own private way of giving her work some sort of intrinsic value and irony. Her mass-produced wares however are meant to be used in the kitchen and at the table. It shows the ultimate relevance of her eighteenth-century design style, because it expands outside of the white cube gallery space and makes a larger impact on peoples every day encounter with porcelain and other ceramics. The history of porcelain is an economic one, and it is significant that these artists are using the same marketing tools that Delftware potters used two hundred years ago, when the same styles were appealing to consumers.

Ultimately, Molly Hatch, as well as many others not mentioned in this study but equally significant to the fine art and design market, are using the eighteenth century’s fascination with the orient to inspire contemporary works that examine the global nature
of our modern economy. While it has become trendy for museums and auction houses to show historic works next to modern ones, living artists have been taking this movement a step further, and have actually incorporated historical design elements into their work. It makes their work more credible, but it also allows for a greater dialogue with delftware, Meissen, and other European porcelain that imitated and was inspired by Chinese examples. Molly Hatch specifically looks at the economics of trade as well as the artistic impacts of it and use these global motifs and ideas on her recent pieces, indicating a new interest in chinoiserie, a well acknowledged but understudied aspect of the seventeenth and eighteenth-century decorative arts.
Chapter V: David Wiseman (American, born 1981)

David Wiseman is a young American designer living and working in Los Angeles. Wiseman looks at nature to inspire his contemporary design pieces, which he styles in a very rococo manner. He uses bronze and porcelain to design his decorative works of art that range from household objects to sculptural installations. Since there is scarce literature on Wiseman thus far, I conducted an interview over the phone with Wiseman on November 21, 2018 to discuss his inspirations and his work, and where he believes the state of the art market is at this time. Ultimately, what makes Wiseman’s artwork unique is that he combines the white color palette and sleek texture of modernism, with the eighteenth-century conception of nature. These combine to create work that responds to earlier forms of decorative works and revives them, but also serves to continue exploring design possibilities, and new historical combinations.

Wiseman’s inspiration for his practice extends from the Neolithic period to turn of the century Viennese design, and everything in between. He is obsessed with how humanity has brought nature into our interior and looks to cathedrals and English country homes of the aristocracy for inspiration. His interest in chinoiserie and trade networks also appears in many of his designs. Wiseman stated in an interview, “I try to think about what captivated the eighteenth-century mind. The far east, the orient represented something so exotic, so unknown and mysterious. To them it was like travelling outside the solar system, it was almost Martian.” His work uses motifs of birds and flowers, and asymmetrical shapes that all come from this exploration of European interest with the east. This idea comes through in his pieces that explore the motifs of chinoiserie, but with
a modern aesthetic. He believes chinoiserie offered an escape from the formal, buttoned up room typical of aristocratic houses.

Brothers Eric and Noah Wunsch, co-directors of the Wunsch Americana Foundation, have teamed up with the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, CT and commissioned artists including Wiseman, Wendell Castle and Thaddeus Wolfe to explore how the history of design has affected contemporary practice. Wiseman was commissioned to create a double mirror piece as a companion to an eighteenth-century japanned knee hole desk. (fig 23) Wiseman created this mirror to demonstrate the history of design as well as the current practice of combining historical and contemporary styles, in commercial and educational spaces. The double mirror is constructed out of a bronze frame which holds a candle that reflects off of the form. There is a stylized white porcelain bird and scattered flowers created in the same manner incorporated as ornament. The overall style is asymmetrical but balanced, and highlights the motifs and colors of the japanned desk displayed below it.

Wiseman’s *Branch Chandeliers* and *Bower Bird Tray* draw on this chinoiserie inspired language as well, but with only white porcelain on dark and light colored bronze. (fig. 24 and 25) These motifs have been explored and refined by hundreds of years of design before him. While his forms do have a naturally rugged and organic quality about them, the overall shapes and materials suggest he is inspired by a very “constructed” nature. His simple metal bird has a clean reflective surface, unlike the hand painted, often extremely delicate birds and flowers of antiques. The eighteenth-century artists brought nature into the home and attempted incredible naturalism in their porcelain flowers. Wiseman draws on the rococo natural world, which consisted of floral ornamentation and
exotic and domesticated animals. Instead of striving for illusionism of nature in the interior though, each flower and leaf are abstracted to their simplest shape, then glazed evenly. They are kept completely white and monochrome, and he never paints over the porcelain to give the works color or texture. The bumps and cracks of true nature are lacking in his porcelain works, implying he is not trying to give the illusion of nature, he is only drawing from its forms. Wiseman’s work therefore uses historical interpretations of nature as inspiration.

His *Cielo de las Granadas, Gingko Dining Room, Linden + Wisteria, and Cherry Blossom Canopy* are a series of foliage installations, that are drawn from historical sources but maintain his strict white color palette and streamlined, modernist style. (fig 26) One of his references for these wall vines is the English country home relief work within the interior walls. He is inspired by the way nature was incorporated into the interior, but he tries to recreate it in a way that is more consistent with a contemporary aesthetic. These ceiling works have such a presence and a volume, that they cannot be mistaken for anything of the past. The monochrome palette of the works keeps them modern and streamlined, despite the historical reference. The foliate porcelain sculptures dominate rooms, instead of providing elegant background noise. Bunches of vines and leaves sticking out randomly give the sense that they are an invasive species, entering the space naturally. However, this kind of design uses the vocabulary of plaster work on walls of the eighteenth century. Unlike Katleman’s evenly spaced wallpaper-eqsue sculptures, these are much more wild, and grow around the ceiling unexpectedly. The foliage however is even, white, highly glazed ceramic that may be inspired by history, but maintains the clean lines of modernism.
The most fascinating aspect of Wisemans work is that it connects back to the language of setting porcelain flowers into metal structures. This is a form of ornament that was taken to its full extent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By using his method of a clean, stylized, and white monochrome porcelain flower, he makes it fresh and modern again. Porcelain flowers were produced by manufactories (i.e. Sèvres, Meissen, Nymphenburg, etc.) to decorate sconces, girandoles, and exquisite chandeliers. They used hand formed petals, each painted and textured to resemble real flowers. The image of these delicate painted flowers decorating a wall light is so conspicuous and overdone in terms of decoration, that during the twentieth-century it was all but eliminated in design. Wiseman’s style of ornamentation however is so sleek, with the contrast of shiny glazed white flowers on dark metal, that he has managed to revive the style, without copying it. The whiteness of the flowers borrows from modernism, as does their streamlined shape. Every flower is perfectly whole, stylized, and white. Instead of hand painting them in an illusionistic way to copy the eighteenth century versions, he is eliminating color all together. Wiseman is avoiding the actual ornamentation used in historical pieces, because he feels they go too far back in time, and result in a stale, ossified interior. His ornament is intentionally done like this, so that his audience can appreciate this style of ornamentation in design, but place it into our contemporary interiors.

The Collage Chandeliers also have a geometric elements scattered through the branches and are unmistakably contemporary, despite these historically inspired elements. (fig. 27) The asymmetrical ropes and glass lights, and a precarious cobweb in gold seem very inspired by a mundane garage or backyard tool shed. Unlike the
eighteenth-century predecessors, they are more twentieth century in their style of found objects and unexpected forms. Wiseman takes the asymmetry of these chinoiserie inspired porcelain flowers and makes them more dramatic, with uneven weights and mismatched shapes that do not normally appear on ceilings.

During our interview, Wiseman referred to the treatise on *Ornament and Crime*, which led the charge against ornament in the twentieth-century. He finds interest in the class upheaval in Europe, which pitted ornament as a symbol of decadence. Wiseman finds it interesting that ornamentation styles were even named after rulers, like Edwardian and Louis XV. After the industrial revolution, designers were then encouraged to reinvent the ideals of decoration and create styles that no longer represented this decadent ruling class. Form and function were really explored throughout the twentieth-century, and heavily inform what artists and designers are still encouraged to create. However, Wiseman feels that this tradition of modernism did not pay homage to the rich tradition of visual culture that existed, especially in Europe. It did however, react against ornament, so strongly that he considers this modernity a lack of ornamentation in itself. Since the reaction against it is so overwhelming, it becomes a main factor in the style of design. One of his goals within his work is bring back this long history of ornamentation in the decorative arts, but in a way that maintains the lessons learned from the twentieth-century.

David Wiseman’s work is an example of material culture caught between the realm of fine artist and design. Wiseman produces objects traditionally considered decorative, such as candlesticks, mirrors, fire screens, surtout de tables, vases, etc., that are handcrafted in his studio. Wiseman models his workshop after a nineteenth-century
atelier. His work is not sub-contracted to outside manufacturers. Wiseman has chosen not to label himself as either designer or fine artist, because he believes the perceived hierarchy of art we have created does a disservice to the art itself.

The trend of reviving the eighteenth-century rococo style is something Wiseman sees going beyond the art world as part of a greater movement in all markets. The emphasis on hand crafted, hand made goods in the food and retail industry stems from a greater appreciation for transparency and quality. More consumers are preferring high quality, singular luxury products over mass-produced goods. Wiseman believes this is feeding makers who spend time perfecting their craft, and it is causing the move in the art market toward a historical, pre-industrial inspiration. Especially in design, many of the artists I am looking at are respected for their desire to work in porcelain and explore the possibilities of the medium. They are more focused on creating works of art rather than designs that can be easily reproduced and marketed. Although I have been considering the revival of the eighteenth century rococo style, Wiseman would call this a move towards a more artisanal approach.

Therefore, while there is a revival of rococo style in his art and in the work of many others, he believes the market is large enough, that many tastes and styles can be produced at once and the market supports all of it. Porcelain lends itself to an eighteenth-century revival because that was a time of global expansion of porcelain as an artistic medium, but not every artists and designer finds this time period as useful to their practice. Wiseman feels that we are in a “post-style period” in our fashion, architecture, and art. The market can support the creation of clean lines and modernism as well as artists who prefer maximalism. We no longer have movements where artists form
collectives and all work around the same ideals. “For better or worse,” claims Wiseman, “artists and designers are free to do their own thing.”
Conclusion

In the introduction to their collection of essays titled *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain*, Alden Cavanaugh and Michael Yonan write, “In many respects, porcelain as an artistic form transcends the traditionally defined categories of art and material culture, as well as the division between high and low art, “decorative” and meaningful, art and craft, and many other such binary oppositions used to interpret cultures.” While they are discussing European porcelain of the 1700s, the same argument could be applied to the work of today’s porcelain objects. The contemporary designers mentioned in this study similarly walk the line between art design, and functional objects versus purely sculptural ones. Today’s luxury design market has allowed for a new fluidity between fine and decorative art. Most of the artists in this study not only avoid a definition of artist or designer, but some find slight offense to the question, because categorization is detrimental to their practice. During the eighteenth-century artists and designers also overlapped in these categories. Porcelain is a medium which allows for this gray area. Because of its durability and hardness, it is a common domestic tool, and lends itself to vessels and tableware. However, because of its incredible whiteness and translucency, and the vast array of forms it can create, it has captivated the minds of Western artists from the early seventeenth century to today. Therefore, porcelain has always served the dual purpose of fine art and domestic function, and it is not surprising so many artists continue to be inspired by this period of discovery and challenge in eighteenth-century Europe.

In the artists defined in this study, there is a clear commonality in their use of rococo ornament and chinoiserie influence in their contemporary porcelain styles. A few specific stylistic links that appear in the output of all the artists described, is the use of white monochrome. This whiteness is borrowed from early twentieth-century design, that first stripped the excess ornament of the nineteenth-century. Whiteness is also a quality of porcelain, that was highly sought after by Europeans, who eventually covered it in painted enamels and vibrant ground colors. Stripping these colors back to the medium in its original form allows these designers to link porcelain back to its historic roots, and really consider the artistic and economic implications of such a widely appreciated medium. The conceptual aspects of these works also make them distinctly contemporary. The process of design in many cases is of equal importance to the finished product. Each artist mentioned, in their own way, incites a conversation with the past. By adapting the motifs and shapes of the past using modern concepts, these makers are taking porcelain to the forefront of design again.

Porcelain is being challenged by artists such as Arlene Shechet, who has taken it out of the museum, and onto the streets of New York City. She has given it not only the scholarly conversation it deserves, but also a newfound sense of durability and structure. Robin Best designs porcelain objects in Jingdezhen, where porcelain was initially developed. Her works takes on a multicultural aspect, by looking at the merging of the east and west, and considering how this work has travelled around the globe. Her very traditional vase forms are married to her colorful painted motifs, that show the subjectivity and bias of European scientists and historians who initially encountered the rest of the world during the eighteenth-century. Beth Katleman’s work takes whiteness to
molly hatch takes white ceramic plates, and paints eighteenth century motifs on to them taken from pieces of chinoiserie, imported textiles, and drawings which disseminated artistic ideas. this return to painting on porcelain elevates it to fine art and equates her practice to historical forms of painted porcelain. her wider practice of creating manufactured goods also uses these motifs, but in a quieter, much more digestible way. hatch genuinely wants accessibility in her art, and wants collectors at every level to have an access point at which they can enjoy the dialogue she is establishing, without requiring a deeply conceptual explanation. finally, david wiseman has been building his output of bronze, glass, and porcelain, and is rethinking traditional objects. his forms use ornamented porcelain flowers and look to the rococo interpretation of nature, which first brought the natural world into the interior. at the same time, the sleek nature of his metalworking and the highly glazed, smooth surfaces of his porcelain keep his work consistent with the modernist interiors which are so popular in the united states and drastically altered the artistic landscape.

this study should serve as an introductory text to contemporary porcelain. it examines one stylistic aspect in a luxury market that expands the entire globe and incorporates every style and taste imaginable. because all these artists are actively creating, this rococo revival is specific to this moment in time. it is occurring because the
market has allowed for this incredible expansion, and artists are free to choose what inspirations suit their style. Molly Hatch and Robin Best specifically see our current global culture as conducive to the continued practice of chinoiserie. Beth Katleman admires high quality decorative art and recreates it in her sculptural installations which are considered equals to the antiques which she looks to. Arlene Shechet and David Wiseman have both used the shapes and ornaments of eighteenth-century porcelain products, and have modelled their studio practice to recreate these and adapt porcelain to our current stylistic mindset.

This thesis provides a focused look on Arlene Shechet, Robin Best, Beth Katleman, Molly Hatch, and David Wiseman. These artists are associated by their chosen medium of porcelain, and the style in which they use it. While the works shown have been distinctive to each artist and represents their individual influences, their common use of the conceptual aspects of the rococo and chinoiserie techniques links them in this dialogue. While these art historical styles are often cast off as frivolous, overtly luxurious, and somewhat ignorant of the cultures which they represent and borrow from, our current globally connected society has allowed these designers to revisit the styles in a highly intellectual way, that deconstructs their initial ignorance and relates these forms to a more modern material culture.
Illustrations

Fig. 1
_Aisan Vase Pair_, Arlene Shechet, RISD, 2013, gazed Meissen porcelain, platinum, gold.

Fig. 2
_Swan Vase_, Arlene Shechet, RISD, 2013, glazed Meissen porcelain, gold.
Fig. 3

Fig. 4
Full Steam Ahead, Installation view depicting porcelain lion paw, Madison Square Park, NY.
Fig. 5
*Full Steam Ahead*, Installation view depicting porcelain feathered wing, Madison Square Park, NY.

Fig. 6
*The Travels of Marco Polo*, Robin Best, Adrian Sassoon, 2018, garniture of five porcelain vases with cobalt blue painting and gold foil on lids.
Fig. 7
*Willow with Wallaby*, Robin Best, Adrian Sassoon, 2010, set our four vases in porcelain, with cobalt blue pencil-drawing.

Fig. 8
*Emu in Chintz*, Robin Best, Adrian Sassoon, 2010, porcelain with cobalt blue pencil drawing and 24-carat gold foil on stopper
Fig. 9
*The First Fleece* (front and back) Robin Best, Adrian Sassoon, 2017, porcelain with Xin Cai painting and 24 carat gold foil on stopper

Fig. 10
*Fire and Ice*, Beth Katleman, 2015, porcelain, mirror, wood, and wire. Photo: Malcolm Varon.
Fig. 11
Detail of *Fire and Ice*, Beth Katleman, 2015, porcelain, mirror, wood, and wire. Photo: Malcolm Varon.

Fig. 12
Fig. 13

Fig. 14
Fig. 15

Fig. 16
Fig. 17
*Aspire: After Meissen*, Molly Hatch, Todd Merrill Studio, 2015, 60 ceramic plates with accents of 11 carat gold.

Fig. 18
*After China Bottle*, Molly Hatch, Todd Merrill Studio, 2016, ceramic with gold accents.
Fig. 19
*Illume*, Molly Hatch, Todd Merrill Studio, 2016, 45 hand painted earthenware plates with 11 carat gilded background.

Fig. 20
Fig. 21
Qiand On Aime Tout est Plaisir; After Fragonard, Molly Hatch, Todd Merrill Studio, 2013, ceramic plates with Mishima (Japanese slip inlay technique).

Fig. 22
China Blue Table Vase, Molly Hatch, Hatch Designs, LLC, 2018. Printed on paper.
Fig. 23
*Double Mirror* with 18th Century Japanned Kneehole Desk, David Wiseman, Hartford Athenaeum, CT. Image rights: @thewadsworth instagram

Fig. 24
*Branch Chandelier*, David Wiseman, porcelain and metal
Fig. 25
*Bower Bird Tray*, David Wiseman, porcelain and metal

Fig. 26
*Cherry Blossom Canopy*, David Wiseman
Fig. 27
*Collage Chandelier*, David Wiseman, mixed media
Bibliography


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Appendix

Interview Transcript with Robin Best

Ariel Senackerib: How do you come up with your painted decorations? Where do you go for design sources?

Robin Best: I grew up near Encounter Bay in South Australia where in 1802 Captain Matthew Flinders encountered Captain Charles Baudin - both were charting the coastline of Australia but from different directions. Though their respective countries England and France were at war they exchanged charts and scientific data. Both Voyages of Discovery were accompanied by natural scientists who were also very accomplished artists in the persons of Ferdinand Bauer and Charles Lesueur. This was my introduction to the romance of history and natural history and hence my fascination for the great rivalry between the French and the English; and the legendary of Napoleon. Napoleon and his wife Josephine collected exotic plants and animals and at their home, and they kept and a menagerie of Australian animals. Some of these animals were collected during Baudin’s voyage. Napoleon being a well self-educated and cultured person read history voraciously. It is believed that he wanted to follow in the footsteps of Alexander the Great to conquer Egypt while asserting that he could hamper British trade routes through the Mediterranean. He took with him to Egypt 167 savants to record the art and architecture and natural history of this famous land thus creating the science of Egyptology. Napoleon was inspired by discoveries in both the New World and the ancient world of Greece and Rome to the extent that he created the French Empire Style and having himself crowned with a golden laurel wreath. So the famous ancient geological coastline of the Fleurieu Peninsula in South Australia where a chance meeting at Encounter Bay between the French and the English in 1802 is linked to Napoleon and Napoleon is linked to Classical Greece and Rome. Of course Australia is a land of immigrants that came in waves due to historical events. Many Europeans especially Greeks and Italians came after the WWII – the Greeks became the fishermen and the Italians builders. Afgans and Chinese were among the first migrants – the Afgans bringing camels for desert transport and the Chinese came to dig gold but stayed on to build railways through the desert then to open restaurants and laundries.

To find the imagery for my work I read widely and scan the internet for images. To make a large work such as The Travels of Marco Polo I will read up to 10 books on the subject and often it is details within the stories that give life to the imagery.

AS: The First Fleece and The Italian Migration both mix classical iconography with 18th and 19th century historical episodes. How are you able to blend art from different time periods and cultures, and how would you describe your thought process in works like these? (For example, do you start with the classical myth and trace the evolution of it forward, or do you pick a more recent historical event and work backwards?)

RB: I use Australian history and the history of Australian migration as an introduction but I try to link the hazards of migration and the history of a particular event to those of the
classics….writers and artists have always used the classics for emphasis or humour. I am not doing anything new here.

AS: Works like Florida Vases and Napoleon in Egypt show this very colorful, visual spread of new ideas during past centuries. Are you trying to actively educate your audience or just delight them with imagery?

RB: These stories are about those who recorded of natural history and the dedication of those scientists who explored new and dangerous worlds. My particular interest in their work is seeing how their preconceptions affected their drawings of animals of the New Worlds. There is something touching and sometimes naive in their depiction of these strange new animals….something that causes you to wonder at the mindset of the person who had made the rendering. This kind of wonder does not occur to me when I look at contemporary natural history paintings….they are invariably scientifically correct.

AS: Your painted decoration tends to be the focus of many of the works. How do the forms of the vessels affect what you are doing? Are they just background or do you paint specific imagery on specific shapes? How closely involved are you in the making of the porcelain?

RB: I design the shapes for each painting or subject and I have the porcelain made by craftspeople in Jingdezhen. I have a passion for porcelain and paper. I make a lot of drawings on paper.

AS: Why do you show this 18th century global spread of ideas and how do you think it relates to our current global culture? For example, Emu in Chintz very explicitly deals with the way global trade affects the economy. Why are you interested in this now?

RB: I am interested in World Trade and how it has evolved over the centuries in order to understand why there is so much turmoil in Central Asia which was once the great region of Enlightenment long before 18th Century and how it linked Europe to China and India with its common religion, language and law. Most of the work that I am doing now has some reference to the grandeur of Central Asia.

AS: Why do you think so many other artists are starting to look back to the 18th century and really develop some of these styles in 2018? Do you think this is another rococo revival or a broader artistic movement of its own? Where do you see yourself fitting in to the artistic dialogue?

RB: The 18th Century was the Age of the Enlightenment in Europe– I suppose we want to know what happened to the Enlightenment and perhaps rekindle its ideals. I seek enlightenment through the study of history. The Rococo absorbed many cultures into its vast array of ornament especially those from Asia and as we are now seeing the rise of Asian economies we will also see Asian cultures reemerging and dominating art and design.
AS: Do you think your work should be sold alongside antiques or do you think it makes more sense in a contemporary gallery/white cube type of space? What is your ideal presentation format?

RB: I am lucky to be represented by arguably the most influential dealer in Europe in Adrian Sassoon. He shows my work alongside antiques, art and design at TEFAF, Maastricht and MASTERPIECE London. He shows both antique and contemporary works and many Asian artists. The collectors who buy my work also collect contemporary art and they also collect antiques.

AS: Where do you draw the line between fine art and design? Your work seems to exist somewhere in between, because you are painting on traditionally “decorative art” objects.

RB: I paint the subjects that interest me and I paint them on porcelain because I like the medium. The design/fine art debate doesn’t interest me. The best work in any genre will hopefully ask questions of its audience and not supply all the answers.

AS: Have you always worked in painting on porcelain or has your medium/style evolved over time, and what influenced these changes, if any?

RB: I used to work with computers doing 3-D design and animation using high-end software but now I prefer to work directly with my hands using a brush…it is private contemplation on the way I see the world. Inside my studio overlooking the mountains of Jingdezhen the home of porcelain the art form that took the world by storm during the Ming Dynasty, I contemplate that tidal wave of culture that China sent to Europe over the millennium and the Central Asians who made the trade possible.

AS: Finally, what is next for you? Are you currently working on anything new?

RB: Every work is new for me…in every work I attempt I learn more about historical cultural connections. I am interested in the history of Central Asia and how those peoples forged the trade routes between the East and the West. My next work (a garniture of 5 vases) is about the travels of the Moroccan scholar and traveler Ibn Battuta. I am also working on some new small sculptures about about famous people who were attracted to wild animals….once again stories involving history and natural history. These follow on from the sculpture of Harold, based on Byron’s poem Childe Harold who travelled Europe in search of enlightenment.
Interview Transcript with Molly Hatch

AS: What purpose do historical styles serve in your work?

MH: For the one of a kind work, I’m seeing my work as sort of offering a conversation with history, and I’m using very specific references and I think the 18th century opulent pinnacle of craftsmanship and relationship to wealth is sort of interesting to me, there’s sort of a class of object…. There’s a few different conversations happening for me. So one of them is about, for me, the high-low nature of the history of ceramic, and sort of the perception of the value of ceramic and in particular porcelain in the 18th century was almost, at times, perceived at the same value as gold, because of it’s rarity. And so the sort of play on that and that reference to that time period is a fun way to pull that into the conversation but in a pretty subtle way. Like not everyone picks up on that. A few people pick up on that in the contemporary conversation that I’m having with using earthenware blanks and playing with these high low perceptions of the medium, even within the sort of “art world academic conversation” about material and value. I’m obviously positioning it as painting, as sort of an assertion of ceramic material as being as valuable as it was in the 18th century as painting is to us now, so to speak. And then also there’s a familiarity. I’m taking a plate out of a normal context and putting it into a new context, and asking you to view it as a painting, and value it as a painting. But in order for it to still feel like you know what you’re looking at and understand some of the conversation it really helps to have an image or an iconic reference in your mind so that your eye can sort of do the work of putting back together what I’m taking apart in the abstraction of the plates with the overall raw image.

AS: So you use it to almost reinforce the idea that these are fine works of art?

MH: Totally.

AS: And you’re drawing from the 18th century idea that they are fine works of art because there wasn’t that separation between art and design as much as we have it now?

MH: Right. And also the material value at that time was completely different from the material value now and we just consume it wildly at this point. Like it’s a basic cheap material, and it’s no longer valued the same way. At that time, in the 18th century, it was like having a painting on gold. So a plate with a painting on it was super valuable, whereas now it’s just sort of tacky.

AS: Designers are starting to go back to this transition again, and they are starting to transition between furniture design, and painting and they do all this different stuff.

MH: Right, but I would argue that today’s interest in that materialism is more to do with the physicality of an object in consuming something in three-dimensions. I think I’m operating outside of that sort of contemporary interest in ceramic as a material. I’m really using it, in that sense as more of a design material. In relationship with furniture makes a kind of sense, and using it as decorative art conversation. And I’m working in a
continuum almost. I’d say Francesca di Matteo is really playing with the goopy materiality of ceramic rather than using it as a canvas or another vehicle for another kind of conversation. It’s really about itself, almost.

AS: I spoke with Beth Katleman because I’m looking at her work as well, and she said that one of her biggest problems is that we have so many plates and ceramics in our lives that it’s hard to separate people’s perceptions of them from ceramic as fine art. Because we are so used to handling them and eating off of them it’s a whole different context.

MH: And I’m using that as an access point. So I’m taking advantage of that in my work, I would say.

AS: By using this plate form to paint on top of?

MH: Right, so and almost using an “icon” of a plate. So they’re these like plates that are pretty shapeless and really banal, like really really basic shapes. And so they become iconic of a plate. And that being said, a layman audience in a museum for example could walk in and still understand how to relate to the objects on the wall even if they don’t understand the conceptual underpinnings of what I’m trying to do in a bigger conceptual conversation. They can look at that and go “oh, it’s a plate, and it’s a painting, and I know how to relate to that object.” And that, for me, is also super powerful. And I love, some of my favorite parts of making art are when its for public consumption and not for private consumption because of that… that is something that I’m thinking about and sort of giving everyone an access point. So there’s this sort of democratic quality to what ceramics does as a material to the work.

AS: That’s interesting that you say that, because you make much more accessible designs that sell for a different price point than your fine art. It’s cool that you make your fine art to be more accessible, because you’re also allowing people to consume your designs in a really different way.

MH: And playing with similar conversations but on a more consumable day to day platform.

AS: I noticed a lot of your plates and tableware take a singular bird motif or a flower, and that’s the design.

MH: I have a vase collection that’s a series of 18th century drawings that are still acting like vases but they are more of a 2-D rendering of the vase. And then I’ll play with a lot of the borders or motifs around text in my work are pulled from back stamps from the 18th century manufacturers at that time. And they’re re-rendered or played with and altered to make that reference still there, and that sort of internal conversation about ceramics still there but in a very quiet way, and you wouldn’t necessarily know it unless you were someone who’s like studying backstamps from pottery. But for me its smart design in that it’s including a conversation about itself in the object. And whether
someone understands that or not doesn’t matter to me. It comes across as thoughtful regardless.

AS: We’re so used to seeing these ornaments and designs even if we don’t necessarily know where they come from. They are present in our culture. I’m also really interested in your use of chinoiserie because you use so much of that blue and white style, and European imitation of Chinese objects, so I am wondering how you make chinoiserie relevant to your collectors today and why do you think it has become so interesting for artists now to look at chinoiserie?

MH: Particularly, in the history of ceramics and relative to ceramics, that game of telephone with pattern, or Chinese whispers as the British would say, with pattern is really fascinating to me because the export porcelain that the Chinese were making at the peak Ming dynasty era. That sort of group of objects that were being sent were being made specifically for Europeans. They were not making those things for their own people. They were making things that they thought the European market wanted. And the European market took whatever because they thought it was authentically Chinese. So you have this funny weird Chinese version of Western culture and the Western culture adopting that as authentic Chinese culture, and then replicating it and becoming its own really bizarre nonsensical thing of its own. And so a lot of the motifs have become abstracted and watered down because they lost their meaning, or they didn’t have any meaning in the first place. And so then to take that as the contemporary descendant of that, my family’s French and English and I grew up with a lot of objects that were from the 18th century and collected as one did at the turn of the 20th century in Boston Brahmin families. Along the lines of Isabella Stewart Gardener, who would have been socializing with my great grandparents who were collecting objects at the time. So the things that I grew up with were reflective of that period’s interest in those objects and the perceived value of those objects and so for me, it was like continuing to play a game for the American consumer, and as a ceramic artist adding my twist and my contemporary revision of the revisionist history that already existed in Chinoiserie. So I’m playing a game of telephone again. And you know the best part of that for me, especially in the manufactured goods that I’m bringing back to the US, that are being made in China is that they’ve come full circle. I’m playing with the history, and they’re manufactured again for export and again back to the US. It’s this really fun game for me. Whether people understand that or not, it’s not hugely important to me. But again, its that familiarity and accessibility that “I think I know that thing, but she’s changing it and its not that thing anymore. But I know that thing and I feel comfortable with it.” And so it’s an exciting, deep, deep well of no one’s cultural history. Really, it doesn’t belong to anyone it belongs to the world, because it was never really anyone’s to begin with.

AS: We live in such a global culture now it’s easy to see that dialogue. While it was being made maybe people weren’t necessarily as aware of it.

MH: I think they were just sort of being what they thought was good merchants. And they were making what they thought their customer wanted. I bet there wasn’t a whole lot of homework done on what they thought, and they reserved the best things for their own
marketplace. I think they realized they had a rarified commodity and banked on it, and why not? I find it really fascinating because some really whacky stuff came out of that time period, that’s totally weird marriages of crests form Portuguese aristocracy merged with traditional Chinese pattern on the rim of a plate, that has nothing to do with the family.

AS: I’ve some weird George Washington depictions on porcelain as well.

MH: Or the whole Delft obsession with rendering the Chinese characters but they look so Western, they’re just so obviously Dutch when you look at them. And they’re goofy and they don’t mean anything. They’re these very strange little vignettes of garden parties that don’t make any sense at all. And I love it. And the perspective is weird and naive. Every aspect of them is charming because of that. And so playing with that and adapting that for how we live and what you know, so maybe it’s not on a teacup because I don’t drink tea with a pinky up so much, I drink out of a mug. So how do you recontextualize that for contemporary day to day lifestyle? I think that’s where I’m adding to the conversation, or reinventing the wheel.

AS: People don’t necessary collect those antiques anymore. And the prices for things are so drastically lower. People don’t want antiques as much anymore, but so many designers are looking to these styles and continuing the conversation like you are and those are really valued.

MH: I’m playing with that in a lot of the art pieces that I do for Todd. There’s an example of one that is an iron colored hexagonal wall piece that is an 18th century Portuguese import of a Chinese painted plate in that cast iron red-orange. And they had added their family crest to it and it was a custom commissioned thing. But the original imagery that it was incorporated with was far more fascinating. So I removed it and re configured the artwork so that it would work with the composition that I wanted it to. But it’s like sort like giving it back, and honoring that history. And so same goes with the ginger jar paintings where I’m putting gold halos all around them. Those are referencing French plans for making 18th century versions of Chinese ginger jars that never actually happened, but they’re sort of me playing with this French reverence for that and adding my own reverence to that. And you can’t even really read the pattern anymore because its become so an abstracting of the small painting of the French painting of the…. So its happening all over the place.

AS: It’s basically what was happening in the 18th century when they were handing stuff back and forth and it got blown up to a point where you can’t even tell where it comes from, or it’s really difficult to tell. My last question I have, is that do you see yourself as a designer or as a fine artist and where do you see yourself fitting in to that dialogue? Because I think the lines between fine art and design are really starting to blur.

MH: I am not sure I would assign a category, because I think I’ve been collected as both and I’m not sure that I’m as particularly concerned about where I’m positioned and nor is my gallery. Todd shows at art fairs and he shows at design fairs. However, he sees me as
a being in his contemporary art category in his gallery which is interesting because I’m certainly not a furniture maker. However decorative arts have always been in a funny, neither here nor there place. I kind of like that it’s categorically a gray area that I’m working in. I think the work is considered installation. But I think if I were hard pressed I would say I’m a designer and not an artist.

AS: You exist in that gray area and a lot of people do now. And he and other galleries present the same artists at both types of fairs. Its funny that we still try to separate them.

MH: And I think that its nice being in a gallery environment that’s more of a showroom and the work is always on view in some capacity and that its styled like a home. Instead of objects coldly presented in their own right, cause I always feel like there’s a relationship to us as people with those objects, unless I’m making a museum scale installation. Which is very much for that architectural space and that environment and its consumed differently. I love that I’m in position with furniture makers and object makers that range from sculptural to functional allover. And I think that’s a really good position to be in with the work. I think its easier for people to understand how they relate to it.

AS: So you think about how people are going to live with your objects and how they make sense in contemporary interior where people may have different styles together in their house?

MH: Yeah, at the end of the day I really, it’s sort of funny, but like you can eat off of everything. There’s nothing that you couldn’t take off the wall in an Armageddon style situation and use. And there’s still something valuable to me about that. I’ve designed it so that you can put these clay paintings through the dishwasher and they would be fine.

AS: Wow, are they microwave safe too?

MH: No there’s metal in a lot of them. And the hardware that hangs them on the wall could go through the dishwasher and you can easily just hang it back on the wall. But there’s a part of me that is super tied to my history in studio pottery as a maker of functional things. And so there is this sort of funny little part of me that is like “well if they’re not valuable for anything else, you could just take them off the wall and eat off them anyway”.
Interview Transcript with David Wiseman

Ariel Senackerib: My thesis is based on a group of artists who are all using porcelain to make very rococo style works. Do you consider the 18th century in your work or do you look more broadly at decorative arts?

David Wiseman: Starting with the Neolithic period to turn of the century Viennese design and sort of everything in between. It kind of stops around WWI. I’m obsessed with how we, humanity, choose to honor nature and live with it in our interior, our habitat. It’s kind of our way of making sense of the chaos. And our way to show gratitude toward it, our way to highlight aspects of the mysterious and the sublime and the magical, showing our devotion to the natural world. The eighteenth century was a time of incredible artistry, between the great tradition of clerical cathedral interiors, or the country estates of the aristocracy. And chinoiserie and opening of trade networks.

AS: I’ve noticed a lot of chinoiserie in your works with pagodas, birds, and asymmetry.

DW: As politically incorrect as it is now, I try to think about what captivated the 18th century mind. The far east, the orient represented something so exotic, so unknown and mysterious. To them it was like travelling outside the solar system, it was almost Martian. So they were so excited by this fantasy of the unknown. And at its core its about well….I’m getting ahead of myself there is so much I want to say about it…This emphasis on depicting exotic flora and fauna. And bringing that into an interior. Its this idea of wonder and kind of overwhelming the senses. And I think it appealed to people of the 18th century because decorative arts kind of, the well appointed room could be very buttoned up and in some ways very formal, so this is purely my opinion, but it was a chance to break away from the very regimented notion of a very dignified formality. Its anti-formality.

AS: Through this exotic, “other” culture people could let loose a little bit. They dressed up as oriental characters and drank tea in their chinoiserie rooms.

DW: Or garden follies. It was an escapism I think form the overly formal.

AS: So are you trying to update that to the 21st century or are you trying to be in dialogue with it in our work?

DW: I would say dialogue. I’m in keeping with the notion that our interiors should reference the sublime and hopefully transport us to other realms. So I feel an affinity to the driving force behind chinoiserie, but not exactly trying to recreate japonisme or chinoiserie.

AS: Would you say your main artistic inspirations then are 17th and 18th century artists or more modern artists?
DW: I would say there on one of any. Grinling Gibbons the British wood worker and wood carver made some incredible wall ornaments and relief. And there’s the Chatsworth House.

AS: Is that what inspires your wall vines?

DW: It was one of them. Kind of updating the English country homes, the relief work. It’s like the walls that are teeming with nature. But doing so in a way that would be more consistent with contemporary aesthetic. Nothing I do is symmetrical, nothing I do has the 17th century scrollwork or something that you would think of as rococo or baroque. It is the inspiration for it but I’m not trying to recreate it. The blossoms are more abstracted.

AS: Your forms are highly glazed and even. And white, whereas an 18th century porcelain flower decoration is very hand painted and kind of crumbling, and has a different aesthetic to it.

DW: Completely different. That’s very much intentional. There’s part of a period room when you enter that feels stuck in time and I’m definitely not interested in tapping into that. So I stay far away from the actual ornamentation that was used there because I feel like it takes you back in time. And it feels stuck. And it’s like recreation of claw footed chairs or bathtubs that just feels very ossified.

AS: It is. And It’s very old fashioned and not the same kind of interior that we live in. It’s made for that darker more cluttered room. But you do have a lot of ornament. All of your flowers are ornament, and there’s porcelain flowers on everything.

DW: So there was this thing that happened, are you familiar with the Treatise Ornament and Crime?

AS: Yes, by Adolf Loos?

DW: Exactly. There was this huge upheaval within class systems in Europe, and ornament became a symbol of decadence and of the entrenched aristocracy. Because they were actually named after rulers, there was Edwardian style, there was Louis XV style. So when Europe went through these social changes, the philosophers felt that ornament represented this decadent caste, and designer’s and architects were urged to reinvent the ideals. The end result was I think the Bauhaus interior, or an interior stripped of its pattern, of its ornament. And to me I felt that, in early 21st century America, that we were given this tradition of modernism that didn’t pay tribute to this incredibly rich history that brought things like wonder and awe and a romantic ideal of nature into interior. My goal is an attempt to bring them back, but in a way that felt relevant to our aesthetic sensibility of today.

AS: That’s really interesting. I think modernism stripped the interior down.
DW: It’s sort of tragic. I love modernism, don’t get me wrong I’m a big fan. When I see a Zumpthor or a John Possen or these reductionist, simple planes of steel and glass interception. I feel like that’s vibrating with a type of ornament. It’s free of ornament, but it’s so …..

AS: It’s in direct response to it?

DW: Yeah, it’s a reaction to it. By virtue of its reaction it’s overwhelming in its reaction. That’s all I see is kind of this reaction against ornament. Yeah, that’s the full thought there. I really feel that a minimalist interior is full of ornament.

AS: Because its reacting to it?

DW: Yes.

AS: Interesting. So do you think that this ornament and this rich decorative history is almost inherently something people respond and want to collect then?

DW: I found a really loyal, great group of collectors that I think were feeling as I do. This was a refreshing way for us to integrate the natural world into our interiors and to bring life and the organic and love of nature into a contemporary space. I feel like there was just this incredible attraction to that idea now because we were so hit over the head with machines for living. It created this niche.

AS: It is interesting because in the 18th century the rococo was modern.

DW: And then the pendulum swung in the other direction. And that just felt so old world.

AS: Many of the artists I am researching exist somewhere in the realm between fine art and design. I think there is a connection to how many 18th century artists like Boucher were considered fine artists, but also designed porcelain and textiles. Where do you see yourself fitting into that spectrum and where exactly would you draw the line? Do you think the divide between fine and decorative arts still exists?

DW: I’m really passionate about this topic. I feel like this hierarchy that we perceive of fine artist, it even has the word fine before it (which is sort of an indicator of how we value the word to the category), I feel is just a construct, it’s a real disservice to create these very strict hierarchies between the different arts. That I go about making a vase in the same that I go about, with the same intensity as a ceiling, with the same intensity as a textile design. And I feel that, while I understand these categories exist in our museums and people’s perceptions, I just choose to live in a world in which they don’t exist.

AS: That is interesting, because it is a really murky area especially with designers. So much of the work you’re doing is so sculptural, and really has to be considered as sculpture.
DW: And we’re also creating it all. My studio is very much modeled after a 19th century atelier. It’s not exactly a design studio where were 3D modelling and having it printed and fabricated in China. We’re all artists.

AS: So the historical method of making has infiltrated into your practice as well?

DW: Exactly.

AS: Do you think this historically inspired stuff is just getting started, or do you think you’re at the tail end of this movement? Where do you see it going?

DW: That’s a really good question. I don’t know. I can only think its growing, when you see the emphasis of the word “handcrafted coffee”, “hand made leather goods”, you see this prevalence throughout every market of people wanting the bespoke, wanting the custom, wanting the piece made with love and care as a reaction to the it box stores. If you can invest in something once and have heirloom quality, a wallet or whatever it is, I think people more and more see the value in that. And that is feeding makers who spend the time to perfect their craft. So in that way I think the market is supporting this approach. We can call it a more 18th approach but it’s just becoming more artisanal. So yeah I see it growing.

AS: I was also thinking, I wasn’t sure if this a rococo revival, like in the 19th century, or if this was a greater trend, or what was happening?

DW: My feeling is that we’re in a post-style period within fashion, architecture and art. The market is so big for so many different things that there will always be people who prefer clean lines modernist design. And there will always be people who prefer the floral and the sort of maximal design. And now that the market isn’t necessarily reacting to one trend, the market can support so many different ones at the same time.

AS: After postmodernism you’re saying we’ve reached a point where we are beyond “artistic movements”?

DW: I think so. If you’ve been to Art Basel and Design Miami and just sort of seeing the vast spectrum of what people are interested in there is really a broad array. The market’s huge, which is a great thing. We don’t have movements now like cubism or fauvism, where lets all collectify and riff of a theme. For better or worse, artists and designers are free to do their own thing. And if they find a gallery to represent or collectors to support then off they go. I’m with my brother, we’re building this acre property in LA, where there’s also a separate exhibition space and gallery to show all the works all year round. And its attached to the foundry and the studio.

AS: Do you think you’ll have any antiques alongside your work in that or will it just be contemporary?
DW: Probably. Currently in my little showroom attached to my overflow space where I put finished pieces there are some Breuer chairs and mid century pieces alongside it. They offer a nice contrast.

AS: They offer a more modernist dialogue that you use even though you look back to the historical works you still have very clean lines and shapes that are more related to modernism.

DW: I think those contrasts are better and they’re a little bit more ubiquitous. Its just what I’ve been collecting. I recently did a piece at the Wadsworth, it’s on display at the moment, where I did a double mirror piece that’s a companion to an 18th century japanned knee hole desk.

AS: And you made the work specifically for that desk?

DW: Yeah it was specifically to be paired with that. This was commissioned by the Wunsch Americana foundation which is the largest collection 18th century American furniture. And Noah and Eric Wunsch, the brothers that are inheriting the collection, are doing some really interesting things with pairing contemporary makers. I’m one of them but they also chose Wendell Castle and Thaddeus Wolfe.