



The 18th-century export plates collected by Willa's American grandmother.



Across Continents

*The search for beauty and joy is what drives many collectors, says **Willa Latham**, and the desire to spread happiness was the catalyst she needed to start dealing in British porcelain*

People often ask me what I collect and, as a dealer, how I let go of the pieces I find. They're also curious about how a non-British woman got into British porcelain.

I started collecting and dealing in porcelain because I was starved of beauty in a world that can easily seem ugly. Humans are capable of evil, but equally of turning the goodness of life into wonderful things. Someone needs to make beauty visible for everyone to see... This was the vision for my business.

In terms of collecting, I had to make a pact with myself: as I live in a small London flat I can't hold on to much so, besides the odd Bow or Derby figure, I only collect Henry Daniel porcelain. This very sophisticated maker from the early 1800s left behind a small treasure trove of exceptionally beautiful porcelain, and I will write more about him some time later this year.

But how do I let go of all the other things I find? I won't say I don't sometimes find it difficult (Oh! That Bow figure of Bellona made in 1755... I shall never forget it!) Found dirty and forgotten at auctions, in people's attics or with other dealers, there is no greater joy than to clean the pieces, research them, sometimes get them repaired and then offer them to

good homes where they will be loved and appreciated again. Waking up to a client's WhatsApp photo of the item in its new home always makes my day. These things were made with so much care, and in today's throwaway world it means a lot to spend a small fortune on something that we really, truly love – and it really is, in my opinion, an act of love.

My passion for porcelain all started with my American grandmother. When I was a little girl I spent a lot of time with her in her house in the very north of the Netherlands. It was filled to the brim with Chinese export porcelain; I remember the feeling of running my little finger over the surface of 18th-century blue and white plates. My grandmother had grown up in a good family in West Virginia and appreciated antiques; I drank my hot chocolate from a large Limoges chocolate cup that had belonged to my great-grandmother.

My grandparents were stuck in the Netherlands during the war and they started collecting during the post-war chaos. Canadian and American soldiers stuck around for a while and many wrote home to their families to send boxes of clothes and chocolate. Some shipped things back home – pieces they'd bought from the locals, including antiques – and my

grandmother, being American, saw an opportunity. She stood to inherit the family's horse farm in West Virginia, but needed money to retire, and so she started an antiques business: buying pieces at auction and exporting them to the US, well into the 1950s.

But the family farm burnt down, and there was nothing to go back to, so my grandparents remained in the Netherlands in their house full of antiques. When my grandmother died, my mother packed up all the porcelain and had it valued, and I assumed she sold it. I never thought about it again and moved on with my life, eventually making the UK my home.

Two decades later I ended up a porcelain dealer, and it took me a while to realise that it was my grandmother's collection that had planted the seed. One day my father mentioned: 'Oh, there's still some porcelain in the attic.' I went to look and there it was, neatly packed in newspapers from 1990, the entire collection! I spent days unpacking this treasure, wrapped up painstakingly by my mother in her unmistakable manner. Many pieces were like old friends and it was a particular joy to find new homes for them. Now mostly sold, I know where every piece is. I especially love the fact that many of these items have travelled back to China after 300 years.

I ended up falling in love with British porcelain with its creative shapes, beautiful flowers and fascinating history; I love uncovering the human spirit that produced it. Love of beauty travels across generations and continents, and perhaps being an 'outsider' makes us capable of revealing the 'inside'. That, after all, is universal: in a troubled world, what we love unites us.

Willa Latham

Read Willa's blog gentlerattleofchina.com or follow her @gentlerattleofchina

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A 17th-century Chongzhen ewer; Willa kept this 18th-century 'blood and milk' Chinese plate from her grandmother's collection: 'She told me it was my mother and me saying goodbye to my father going on one of his many business trips and I thought it was a little strange that he was wearing a dress!'; Willa's grandparents in the 1950s; Willa's Derby shepherdess, a favourite Henry Daniel vase and coffee cup, and a blanket, hand-quilted by a happy client.

