



Willa Latham in her stock room in Hackney Wick, east London.

FACING PAGE The beautiful 18th-century Japanese plate that started Willa's love affair with antique porcelain; an average day in Willa's photo studio, which will be familiar to followers of her hugely popular Instagram account @gentlerattleofchina

A very personal passion

In the first edition of her new column **Willa Latham** explains her love of British porcelain

It is early Saturday morning and I am savouring my coffee in a bright green Henry Daniel Rococo Revival cup. The sunlight is falling onto my dining table, which doubles as a pandemic home office and porcelain-packing station during the week, but is now peaceful and clean for the weekend. Two vases, also made by Henry Daniel, stand full of bright daffodils, which peer over my laptop. I am getting ready for a new adventure: an attempt to tell the full and varied story of British porcelain.

My love story with porcelain started at my American grandmother's house in a northern Dutch village. I used to marvel at her antiques while she told me about their history. This impressed me with a deep love for the beauty of porcelain, and I can still remember the feeling of running my tiny finger over an 18th-century Japanese plate. Then I grew up. Life got busy and I forgot about porcelain – except that I have always loved drinking from a very nice coffee cup. But one morning, five years ago, I woke up and decided to make British porcelain my next career. I have no idea where this impulse came from; it was a calling, which has grown into an ongoing adventure, the end of which is nowhere near in sight.

Why British porcelain? Well, as I found out, it is the only porcelain industry that has always been entirely privately owned and funded: it has never been controlled by government or owned by royalty. This allowed for



complete artistic freedom as well as fierce competition between makers to come up with the most creative and novel designs. In European porcelain, expertise and tradition came first, resulting in wares of unparalleled quality. But, in Britain, it was creativity and novelty that came first, resulting in a stunning array of artistic beauty and great originality.

I soon found out that nothing is so delightful, nor more confusing, than British porcelain. I started sharing my discoveries on Instagram and my blog, and people responded with corrections and questions, the most frequent being: 'Where can I read the whole story?' And there lies the problem with British porcelain: there is no single, easy-to-follow narrative. Of course, there is Edmund de Waal's masterpiece, *The White Road*, which recounts the history of porcelain, starting in China. Then there is the famous academic Geoffrey A. Godden whose vast tome, *English China*, is forensic and slightly exasperating in its detail. But every other book I've come across focuses on individual makers or just one aspect of the industry. Unless you are up for years

of study, you will feel confused. So when *H&A* invited me to write a column about porcelain, I couldn't have been more thrilled.

Being neither academic nor expert, having come to this after decades of cultural studies, I had started to spot a narrative. Being an immigrant probably helps; it allows me to think about the rich history of my adopted home and to place it within the international context of my mixed heritage. As I have said, this is a long journey, the road is not straight, but wonderfully bendy and unpredictable. Like the English landscape, we go up a hill, down a valley, along a river and by the sea. We take tea on a splendid hill top overlooking the landscape. We travel from Chelsea to Derby, via Wales to Staffordshire, down to Plymouth and across the water to Belleek.

So, in the months to come, please join me on this journey. I promise you it will not be straightforward or logical – but then one thing I have learned in making Britain my home is that the best of British is not necessarily logical, but endlessly creative, innovative and fascinating! ■

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