



MAKER'S FOCUS

Time for Tea?

This Christmas, Whitewater Contemporary is brightening up Cornwall's exhibition calendar with a show inspired by the nation's favourite beverage.

When you settle down with a cuppa, do you ever consider the extraordinary history of tea, teacups and your beloved teapot? Perhaps you should, because it is truly fascinating. To inspire you, Whitewater Contemporary in Polzeath presents Time For Tea, an extraordinary exhibition of paintings and ceramics that will appeal to char-lovers and fans of contemporary British craft.

The show leads with a collection of 25 teapots by potter Hugh West, who celebrated his 50th year in ceramics this autumn. In that time, Hugh has made thousands of individual teapots, supplying designer outlets such as Harrods, Heals, Liberty of London and John Lewis.

"Each teapot should have its very own tea," says Hugh, "so that in time, the teapot takes on the unique characteristics of its particular variety." Accordingly, each of his teapots is unique in design, celebrating the flavours and scents of individual tea varieties from around the world including jasmine, oolong, Yunnan, rose, hand-rolled green and white tea, and a special green tea grown by Hugh's long-time friend, respected Korean potter Seungho Yang.

Hugh's porcelain teapots are hand-thrown on the wheel, and each handle is custom-made in clay or rattan with raffia fixings. In addition, each teapot is accompanied by a tea bowl or 'yunomi', a traditional Japanese teacup that fits snugly in both hands without a handle. This oriental reference is important in Western ceramics, since both tea and its accoutrements originated in the East, where tea drinking carries with it an added layer of ritual and cultural significance.

Tea drinking is said to have originated in China more than 3,000 years ago. Legend

has it that in 2737 BC, Chinese Emperor Shen Nung was served boiled water while sitting beneath a *Camellia sinensis* tree, and its leaves blew into his cup. The resulting infusion is what we now call tea. The hot beverage increased in popularity in China during the Tang Dynasty of 618 AD to 908 AD and is now consumed daily around the world.

We Brits are famously obsessed with tea, and this stems back to the marriage of Charles II to the Portuguese princess Catherine of Braganza in 1661. Catherine loved tea above all things, quickly establishing it as a fashionable drink at court and among the wealthy classes. In perhaps the most lucrative business move in history, the British East India Company took note and placed its very first order for China tea in 1664, monopolising its import from then onwards for more than a century.

Formal teapots had first been created in China during the Sung dynasty in 1500 AD, and in 1694 the British East India Company began importing porcelain teapots from China, commissioning artists to create them to the company's own design. Allegedly, since porcelain can withstand sea water damage, teapots were used on East India Company ships for ballast in the cargo area, making the ships more stable during their voyage and keeping the tea stored above safe and dry.

In the mid-18th century, British industrialist William Cookworthy discovered kaolin, aka China Clay, in St Austell, pioneering the English porcelain industry and producing English teapots influenced by Chinese designs; the East India Company subsequently stopped importing porcelain from China in 1791.

While the history of the teapot has developed over 500 years, its classic design

has hardly changed: it simply includes a pot, a spout, a lid and a handle. But variations on its design, from an Art Deco Clarice Cliff teapot to the world's most valuable teapot - the £3 million 'Egoist', paved with diamonds and rubies - have been many and wondrous. "The process of making a handmade teapot, though, is lengthy and requires skill," says Hugh.

It goes without saying that a teapot's key function can never come second to its form or finish, however beautiful. "It must pour well," Hugh confirms. We've surely all encountered the 'dribblesome teapot', which ruins the calming ritual of afternoon tea; equally galling perhaps, is the realisation that a guest in our home is unknowingly using our own, special teacup. It is this feeling of ritual and personalisation that makes the teapot significant and relevant to us all.

Also on show alongside Hugh's works are specially commissioned paintings of teapots by artists including Port Isaac's Caroline Cleave, printmakers Sarah Seddon and Sally Spens, painter Suki Wapshott (selected this year for the Royal Society of Marine Artists' Annual Exhibition at Mall Galleries London), and highly collectable artist Simeon Stafford, whose quirky, wittily British works are included in the private collection of HM Queen Elizabeth II. As an exhibition concept it sounds perfectly delicious. Time for tea, anyone? ●

Words by Mercedes Smith

See Time For Tea? from December 1 to January 6, 2022 at Whitewater Contemporary, The Parade, Polzeath PL27 6SR. www.whitewatercontemporary.co.uk