

how to spend it

The empires strike back

The grand old marques of porcelain, crystal and silver are ushering in a bright new era of design. It's daring and, at times, downright fun, says Lucia van der Post



NOVEMBER 04 2013
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When Italy's revered tableware manufacturer Richard Ginori was declared bankrupt earlier this year, one of its newly redundant employees pointed out rather bitterly that while "there are laws to save pandas", there is nothing to help protect something almost as precious – a company with a distinguished 378-year-old history of making beautiful products that not enough people seem to want any longer.

Of course, Ginori isn't alone: Wedgwood Waterford and Rosenthal have both gone into receivership in recent years. And although Ginori has been acquired by Gucci and hopes are high that its fortunes will be restored, the situation is a potent reminder of just how fast modern tastes keep changing and of how fleet of foot even the grandest of haute-luxe companies need to be if they are not to suffer the same fate.

Part of the trouble, it always seems to me, is the very beauty of some of the things these revered companies make. Those who are deeply involved in creating magnificent objects can never believe that one day they might cease to be desired. For years the grand old pottery companies of Stoke-on-Trent would expound on the wonders of their archives, the skills of the craftsmen, the exquisite quality of the wares, without lifting their heads up enough to notice that life had changed. As kitchen suppers largely took over from formal dinners and exotic cuisines tickled modern taste-buds, the dishes required to serve them needed changing too, and Stoke-on-Trent was slow to adapt.

The challenge for all these venerable brands is always the same: how to maintain a sense of their roots, their history, the DNA of the brand, if you like, while at the same time refreshing, innovating and doing what Karl Lagerfeld says is the job of all great designers – “to endlessly reignite desire”.

The fashionable route is now well established: find an up-and-coming designer, preferably young and a bit provocative (to make the customer and the press sit up) and invite them to ginger up the range, always cautioning them to guard, of course, the precious “DNA”. Lladró, the Spanish equivalent of, say, Royal Crown Derby, is a perfect example of the genre. Its ceramic figurines might have been much loved by the Spanish aristocracy and the Vatican, but it couldn’t go on making the same things forever. Six or seven years ago now the company asked the then-little-known designer Jaime Hayon to take over as artistic adviser and the result is fantasy vases, charming mirrors and collections such as The Parrot Party (cutely kitsch bird-adorned *objets*) and The Guest (featuring a new Japanese-comic-like character created by Hayon).

Just launched this year is the company’s Belle de Nuit range of chandeliers, lights and wall lamps made from porcelain. They come in plain white (the most elegant), white and gold, and with brightly coloured porcelain drops; each one is handmade and makes a dramatic alternative to traditional glass. Prices range from £540 for a hanging Lithophane lamp to £18,000 for the largest chandelier with 40 lights. They can be seen in all their glory in Harrods as well as in Lladró’s boutiques.

Royal Delft, the last remaining Delftware factory from the 17th century still producing handmade products, has a striking collection of utterly contemporary china called Blue D1653. Designers ranging from Arian Brekveld to Chris Koens have had fun with the traditional colours and motifs and come up with some charming lidded bottles (from €139), cups (€30 for a set of two) and sushi and tapas tiles (from €29.95). And, as part of a design project commissioned by Dutch interior-design magazine *Gouden Woonboek*, Piet Hein Eek has created two hand-painted plate collections: Stripped Delft Blue and Stripped Polychrome, both once again providing a fresh take on the old themes.

Swedish design group Front has also updated a Royal Delft creation, adapting a classic piece of porcelain with the brilliant Blow Away Vase (£653), a wonderfully desirable object, created for Moooi, that is self-evidently connected to its blue-and-white roots and yet also indubitably of the moment.

Then there’s crystal manufacturer Saint-Louis, the oldest French glassworks company, which has been making vases, carafes, lanterns and chandeliers for kings, aristocrats and maharajahs for more than two centuries. Its latest project has been to ask three female designers to explore the archive, get to know the skills and capabilities of the craftsmen and then come up with lighting designs. Between them, Ionna Vautrin, Paola Navone and Kiki van Eijk have done the factory and its heritage proud. Unveiled during the Milan Furniture Fair earlier this year, the three collections are different but equally brilliant explorations of how to make lighting newly thrilling. Ionna Vautrin’s Saule collection (from £4,250) features a table lamp, floor lamp and pendant light in clear, grey crystal, based around a handsome crown of twisted rods. Paola

Navone has homed in on cut crystal, using the diamond and other patterns to create richly coloured lamps as well as single-, three- or eight-pendant lights. Finally, Kiki van Eijk's Matrice range was inspired by the moulds she discovered in the Saint-Louis warehouse. She has created a sconce, floor and table lamp from the shape and, just like the mould, they are fashioned from two halves that can be opened or closed.

Venerable porcelain company Meissen, the first factory in Europe to crack the art of making porcelain (previously the sole preserve of the Chinese), decided on an altogether different route to safeguard its future. As demand for baroque figurines and intricately embellished tableware waned (its 1,200 employees have dwindled to around 650 in recent years), something had to be done. Since Meissen is owned by the state of Saxony, which minds terribly not just about the survival of Germany's most famous porcelain company but also about the jobs it provides, five years ago Dr Christian Kurtzke, the company's CEO, was charged with creating a new vision. He decided to turn Meissen into a global luxury lifestyle brand. Quite apart from updating the porcelain line and bringing out dishes fit for sushi and pasta – not just for royal palaces – he has moved into interior design in a very serious way. The first sign of his intentions was seen in April 2012, when Villa Meissen was opened to much fanfare during Milan's annual furniture fair. This ravishing Italianate palazzo in the heart of the city's celebrated golden shopping quarter, just off the Via Napoleone, has been completely restored and furnished from top to toe, so as to show off in sumptuous style Meissen's new foray into interior furnishings as well as a vast array of china on its ground floor. The brand now sets out to provide everything a grand contemporary house might need, from lamps to carpets, sofas, chairs, tables and lighting, not to mention, of course, porcelain – and all aspiring to capture an aura of “discreet European luxury”.

This July the complete Meissen Home range was launched in the UK, with a vast new department at Harrods given over entirely to it. For those who wonder how cushions and sofas can be authentic extensions of the Meissen brand, it's interesting to observe how it's done. Creative director Markus Hilzinger has made sure that every new design is connected in some way to the firm's roots. One of the most ubiquitous fabrics (from £95 per metre), for instance, features a dragon just like the one on its most famous traditional patterned porcelain, while a geometric design found on some floor tiles at Albrechtsburg Castle in Meissen is reproduced on fabrics and rugs (from £9,500). To unify this large collection of furniture and accessories only seven shades are used: a rich yellow gold, pale blue, taupey brown, rusty red, black, ivory and grey – all colours that were traditionally used by Meissen.

The interiors collection is made entirely in Italy, but the porcelain continues to be made in the traditional, painstaking way in Meissen itself. And while the company still produces its grand and very beautiful baroque ornaments, vases and figurines, there is now a collection of exquisite but contemporary products. Take the elegant Cosmopolitan range of cups, saucers, plates and platters, which comes in simpler, plainer shapes, with no twirls or furbelows, merely clean, elegant designs, and is available either in plain-white porcelain or in a variety of pared-down decorative finishes in gold (from £60) or platinum. For those who love Meissen's decorative patterns, Cosmopolitan tableware can also be ordered with an intricate painterly design called Marrakech – all green palms and exotic birds created by the artist Meryanne Loum-Martin. A plain-white dinner plate sells for £64; in a platinum “mesh” pattern it is £166; while, with a full Marrakech hand-painted design, it would be £718. And on top of the standard plates, cups and saucers, there are also vases and sushi sets on offer.

Designer Peter Ting, who created some adventurous new takes on Royal Crown Derby's traditional shapes and patterns, believes that Meissen has shown the way to go. “The surprise of Meissen Home is that the same language of elegance in porcelain has been translated into fabrics and furniture,” he says. “It's as if the hundreds of years of making beauty is used as an incubator for this great leap forward.”

Facing similar challenges to Meissen is Puiforcat, which could be said to have done for silver what Meissen did for porcelain. Founded in 1820, it is one of the two great French names in silverware (the other being Christofle), but its pieces have never been widely available in the UK. Now, it too is being given a splendid showing at Harrods, where customers will be able to get a much better idea of what this fine old company, today part of the Hermès group, is all about. Although it has embarked on a number of wonderful new ventures – most notably a range of beautiful knives created in 2011 with chef Pierre Gagnaire (a set of six steak knives is £2,275), as well as a stainless-steel cutlery set (from £46) designed by Patrick Jouin in 2010 – some of the things I like best are the reproductions of visionary objects by Jean Puiforcat, who headed the company in the 1920s. His designs have a clean and sculptural quality all their own. In sterling silver, his tea or coffee pot is £20,250, the creamer is £16,200, shot glasses are £1,911 each and the cocktail shaker £17,290, while his strikingly good-looking art deco-influenced lamp in sterling silver and white onyx (now with LED lights) is £25,000.

Like Meissen, Puiforcat has looked to its past to move into the future. This year its Ruban collection of silver-plated picture frames (£300), vases (£728), a teapot (£592) and bowls (£1,593) all tap into a spiral-ribbon design that was integral to a Ruban candlestick first created in 1930. There are also some truly stupendous pieces – sculpturally appealing vases, candlesticks and tables – in the Magnificat Puiforcat collection produced by Spanish designers Juan and Paloma Garrido. They come in limited editions from £16,000.

Meanwhile, the wonderful old glass company of Lalique has not been caught napping. It was bought by the Swiss businessman and passionate collector Silvio Denz on Valentine's Day in 2008 as a present to himself. He hasn't stop innovating ever since. There's been a collaboration with French avant-garde musician Jean Michel Jarre, which resulted in the AeroSystem One (£10,000), a sound system that is compatible with iPods and iPhones and does all the other fancy things a modern sound system has to do, but does them exquisitely and elegantly, encased, as it is, in Lalique crystal embellished with the famous Masque de Femme motif. Here too, there's a move to create a complete lifestyle brand, something that's been kick-started by Lalique Maison, a collaboration between Sir Philip Green's wife Tina Green and designer Pietro Mingarelli. The result is a blow-you-away collection of film-star-glam furniture (in black or natural ebony, black-lacquered or ivory ash), chandeliers, stately mirrors, carved panels, lamps and glass-beaded cushions and throws (each bead is hand-stitched), almost all replicating some of Lalique's most famous motifs – the Masque de Femme, the bunches of grapes, the prancing horses or curving fish. Much of it is made to order and prices range from about £2,500 for a cushion to £100,000 for a special Cactus table.

Possibly of more interest to most of us, though, is an austere beautiful range of wine glasses (from £85) and carafes (from £535) created with James Suckling, a former editor of *Wine Spectator* and well-known wine critic. The glasses especially would make splendid presents. Coming up next year will be a collaboration with architect Zaha Hadid – it's still being worked on, but rumour has it that it will be a range of vases.

All these wonderful companies have come to terms with the fact that heritage, history and craft skills are not enough. They know that if they don't innovate they die. All the signs are that they are alive and well, and more than kicking.

Harrods, 87-135 Brompton Road, London SW1 (020-7730 1234; www.harrods.com). **Lalique**, 47 Conduit Street, London W1 (020-7292 0443; www.lalique.com) and branches. **Lladró**, 194 Piccadilly, London W1 (020-7494 0407; www.lladro.com) and see Harrods. **Meissen**, 020-7893 8815; www.meissen.com and see Harrods. **Moooli**, 555 Harrow Road, London W1 (020-8962 5691; www.moooli.com) and stockists. **Puiforcat**, www.puiforcat.com and see Harrods. **Royal Crown Derby**, 01332-268 902; www.royalcrownderby.co.uk. **Royal Delft**, Rotterdamseweg 196, 2628 AR Delft, The Netherlands (+311-5251 2030; www.royaldelft.com). **Saint-Louis**, www.saint-louis.com and see Harrods.

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