



A peerless collection of teapots

A love of tea inspired an entrepreneur's peerless collection of pots, caddies and cups dedicated to his beloved late wife. Claire Wrathall reports. Portrait by Dylan Thomas



WHERE TO FIND

The Chitra Collection, www.chitracollection.com. Kevin Page Oriental Art, 2-4 Camden Passage, London N1 (020-7226 8558; www.antiques-oriental.co.uk). LAPADA - The Association of Art & Antiques Dealers, www.lapada.org.

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It is not unusual, on the death of a loved one, to want to establish an enduring memorial. Often it is a charitable foundation. But by the time he was widowed in November 2010, the Calcutta-born entrepreneur Nirmal Sethia already had one of those (to educate girls and empower widows in India, among other noble initiatives). His idea, instead, was to build a collection in memory of his adored wife, Chitra. "I had to do something to express my gratitude to her for all she had done for me," he says. "She was like a teacher. She was my backbone!"

It occurred to him that there was no serious collection “anywhere in the world” of teapots and other **tea-related accessories**. “And **tea** has a glorious history. I have [a ewer] going back to the 10th century BC,” he says, adding, “teapots only came into use in seventh-century China, during the Tang dynasty.” He also has very rare – possibly Qin dynasty – bowls from the third century BC and a number of supremely beautiful Song dynasty (960-1279 AD), pieces so contemporary in style they could easily be mistaken for modern **studio ceramics**.



R&D Hennell c1799 silver teapot, once owned by Lord Nelson

Though the interests of the N Sethia Group, of which he is chairman and director, have grown to embrace the manufacture of security ink, banking, **real estate**, finance, sugar refining and tea production, it was as an apprentice tea taster that Sethia’s career began, and from managing tea estates to the creation of **connoisseur-quality tea brand** Newby Teas, tea has always been important to him. As now are teapots. Since Chitra’s death, he has been buying at a prodigious rate: about 1,700 items to date. They are kept in London in electronically controlled movable stacks in a state-of-the-art temperature-regulated environment that would be the envy of museums the world over.

The first piece he shows me is a rare silver-gilt Trinkspiele made in Augsburg in 1600 in the form of a monkey with two young, which he bought in 2012 at the Zurich auction house Koller. It is not strictly a teapot, but in the 1730s Meissen used it as the basis of one attributed to the great modeller Johann Joachim Kändler. Sethia had a hunch it would be a good investment. “The auctioneer called me and said, ‘Look, you’re buying at your own risk.’ I said OK. There was nothing to show it was fake and I just adored it. I would have paid a million euros for it” (though he got it for a hammer price of SFr70,000, about £56,000). Sure enough, it did turn out to have influenced Meissen; 135 years later the porcelain house used it as the basis of hundreds of near-identical monkey teapots. Sethia has one of those too, “which was owned by the **Duke of Windsor**”.

Sethia is fascinated by provenance, history and the individuals who owned these works before him. There's a c1910 Fabergé caddy, thought to have been made for the Romanovs, as well as a silver octagonal one that belonged to Theodore Roosevelt, and an 18th-century silver teapot given by Winston Churchill's private office to his daughter Mary as a wedding present in 1947. But one of his favourite items is a small, simple teapot made around 1799 by the English silversmith R&D Hennell and monogrammed with a single "N" that he bought at Sotheby's in London in 2014 for £56,250 (against a lower estimate of £8,000). "It belonged to Lord Nelson," he says, "and I feel so lucky to have it. I love that it was in the battlefield and that he drank tea without milk, which is how it should be drunk." How does he know? "There was no milk pot to go with it. I like to think it was tea that brought victory to our country."

Given that tea drinking originated in Asia, much of the collection derives from China and Japan. It was a desire to explore these reaches of the subject that led him to the London dealer Kevin Page, a specialist in oriental art, into whose gallery, not far from Sethia's London office, "he just wandered one afternoon," Page recalls.



Fabergé c1910 Russian tea caddy

“I had to go on tiptoe!” says Sethia, laughing. “He has thousands of pieces there, all over the floor. You have to be so careful. But we got talking,” a conversation that lasted long past the gallery’s official closing time. “I thought, this guy’s a genius!”

“And he bought something,” chips in Page. “And then you came back and bought some more.”



1600 German silver-gilt Trinkspiele

“Though I can’t remember exactly what came first,” says Sethia. “I was still so down and depressed after losing my wife.”

“It was all Satsuma,” says Page, referring to the style of **Japanese earthenware** from what is now southern Kyushu, “from the golden age at the end of the 19th century. There’s some rubbish that was made for tourists, but the good studio pieces from that period are incredible. You look at them and think: how did someone paint this? The fineness of the detail is exquisite.”



c1880 Satsuma teapot by Nakamura Baikei

Page points to a complete tea set by Hasegawa with a dozen **cups and saucers**, each representing a month of the year; then a tiny teapot painted by Nakamura Baikei. In terms of prices, a teapot by Yabu Meizan – “the best artist in Satsuma” (of whose work Sethia has several pieces) – might start at £8,000-£10,000, says Page. “But **the real beauty of Japanese ceramics**,” he continues, “is that every month I find something I’ve never seen before. The adrenaline that comes from seeing something fantastic for the first time... I still get goosebumps.”

Page shows me a tea bowl by the artist Miyagawa Kozan from the early Meiji period (1868-1880), the interior of which is painted with sumo wrestlers and their audience. “If you look at it under magnification you can see the expression of each person watching the match – all different. How he painted it on the inside of a bowl is incredible.”



19th-century Satsuma tea bowl by Miyagawa Kozan

Another exquisite bowl from Sethia's collection, signed by the master craftsman Juzan, is painted with perhaps 1,000 interlocking butterflies and flowers; and another, with unusually steep sides, with figures and immortals at a temple, also by Kozan. "Shape is very important," says Page. "The deeper the bowl, the greater respect a Japanese buyer will have for it."

"Most of what I sell leaves the country," he adds, clearly delighted both to be advising a collector who is interested only in the very finest examples and whose collection is destined to stay in the UK, though Sethia has received overtures from the Swiss government to move it and put it on show there. "When a lot of Satsuma was being made a great deal was exported to England" – which is still where Page sources most of what he deals in. "These days I sell a lot of it back to the Japanese. They were poor when they made it and now they are rich they want it back."

Sethia and Page do not see much of each other any more because Sethia has recently relocated from London to Dubai. But one can't help sensing that building the Chitra Collection and all the energy, intellectual engagement, research and deals involved in doing so have been instrumental in renewing Sethia's lust for life, sustained no doubt by his passion for tea itself. "Tea is like a beautiful woman," he insists. "It has to be judged for its character, not for its appearance." The teapots, the caddies, the cups, the ewers and urns that constitute the collection are the couture outfits and precious jewels that enhance it. Its namesake, his beloved late wife, would surely have approved.

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