

mayfair times

MAYFAIR / ST JAMES'S / MARYLEBONE
NOVEMBER 2020

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TEA TIME

Newby Teas founder Nirmal Sethia is the owner of the world's largest and most important teaware collection - named after his late wife Chitra

WORDS SELMA DAY



Admiral Lord Nelson's teapot, 1799-1802

This silver teapot, engraved with the initial 'N', belonged to Nelson (1758-1805). After his death, it passed to his sister Catherine 'Kitty' Matcham in whose family it remained until 2005. This type of teapot is known as a bachelor teapot because it would have contained the ideal amount of tea for one person. It may even have been used on board one of his ships.



Fabergé caddy, Moscow, Russia, c.1910

The House of Fabergé was the most prestigious manufacturer of luxury goods in Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This tea caddy embodies the art nouveau style, or "Stil Moderne" as it was known in Russia, which became fashionable from 1900 to the revolution of 1917. The matte enamel ground with raised silver decoration was a specialty of the Moscow workshop.



Egoist teapot, N. Sethia (designer), Italy, 2016

The Egoist teapot is officially certified by Guinness World Records as the world's most valuable teapot. It is entirely paved in 1,658 white diamonds and 386 rubies, with a central 6.67 carat ruby which once formed part of Sethia's wife Chitra's jewellery collection. The teapot's name refers to its small size - designed to brew just enough tea for one cup.

Luxury tea company Newby Teas has been dubbed “the world’s most awarded tea brand” for winning an unprecedented number of global tea championship awards – more than any other tea brand in the world. Its founder Nirmal Sethia created the not-for-profit brand with a mission to “promote and revive fine tea culture”. You’ll find it in Selfridges as well as some of Mayfair’s top hotels including the Grosvenor House and the May Fair Hotel.

The N. Sethia Foundation is the sole benefactor of Newby Teas, with profits going towards its charitable causes. This year, the company donated one million Newby teabags to hospitals dealing with Covid-19 globally.

In 2011, Sethia embarked upon creating a private collection of rare tea antiquities, the Chitra Collection, named after his late wife. Recognised as the world’s largest relating to tea history and comprising nearly 2,000 objects dating back to the 10th century BC, it has toured major museums and art fairs.

One of the collection’s great treasures is a contemporary teapot – named the ‘The Egoist’ and designed by Sethi himself. It was recorded by Guinness World Records in 2016 as “the world’s most valuable teapot”.

Recent partnerships have included a collaboration with the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam and a collection with British designer Matthew Williamson. We spoke to Sethi about the Chitra Collection.

How and why did you start to collect teaware?

I lost my dear wife Chitra at the end of November 2010. I distinctly remember the 1st of January – I was walking around Hyde Park Corner and wondering what I could do to honour her as she was the one who pushed me into the tea business and if there was any substance in starting my own collection.

When I came home, I browsed through most of the museums and discovered there was little dedicated to tea. So began my mission.

I went to talk to art dealers, seeking specific items, going around the world, visiting museums and trying to understand what I could do that would be unmatched by any museums in the world. That was the birth of the Chitra Collection.

How did the collection grow?

I acquired many objects, most with great provenance, and some had to be reconsidered. The world was soon getting to know about the collection – we started looking at the best auction houses and prominent art dealers and this is how the collection grew over time.

To pay tribute to the 21st century and the tea culture, I decided to design some teapots and caddies for the collection. To make them truly unique, all these pieces were studded with diamonds, emeralds and rubies,

cast from gold and silver and crafted by great European goldsmiths.

I wanted to create something the world had never seen, and was befitting of my wife’s character and dignity.

To make my designs truly personal, rubies and diamonds from the family collection of jewels were used to create ‘The Egoist’ teapot. It is an object dedicated to the memory of my late wife and created for the Chitra Collection.

I derived its name from teapots made in the 18th century which were designed to serve only enough tea for one person. One such piece in our collection is a Rubinglas teapot made for Augustus the Strong, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland.

What are your favourite pieces in the collection?

It is impossible for me to name one object. I would say, out of nearly 2,000 objects, the 1700-1800 pieces are my favourite. They are all fantastic and unique and tell such an interesting story about tea’s rich history.

All the pieces displayed in the collection are authenticated, some with great provenance, such as Lord Admiral Nelson’s teapot which I was lucky enough to acquire. Some pieces with royal provenance would have cost a fortune at the time they were made. These pieces are impossible to value and are priceless.



Rubinglas teapot, Germany, c.1713-18

This teapot was designed in honour of Augustus the Strong, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland, whose royal arms are etched on the glass body. Johann Kunckel, the court chemist to the Elector of Saxony, became the director of the Potsdam glass factory in Berlin in 1678. It remained active until 1736, and it is likely that this teapot is from the later years of production.



Teapot, N. Sethia (designer), Italy, 2012

This ostrich egg teapot features silver mounts and the Sethia crest in gold. It was inspired by a white teapot owned by Elizabeth Murray, Countess of Dysart and later Countess and Duchess of Lauderdale (1626-1698). The Duchess’s teapot, a Chinese porcelain Zhangzhou white ware still sits on a tea table in her private closet in Ham House in Richmond.



Monkey teapot, Meissen, Germany, c.1735

This teapot was made at the Meissen porcelain factory in 1735 to designs by the modeller Johann Joachim Kändler. Frederick Augustus I, the Elector of Saxony and founder of Meissen, appointed Kändler as his court sculptor in 1730. One year later he became a modeller for Meissen. This teapot was previously in the collection of the 1st Duke of Windsor, formerly King Edward VIII.