

Laurent Craste

Re-viewing History: Subversion and Abuse

by D Wood

Prior to the opening of the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art in Toronto, Canada, in 1984, I had the task, and privilege, to design all of the pottery and porcelain cases. I created scale drawings, placing each porcelain vase and teapot, majolica and Delft charger, and pre-Columbian figure in a vitrine. The majority of the porcelain in the George and Helen Gardiner Collection is Meissen, but a garniture produced by the Sèvres Porcelain Manufactory sticks in my mind, perhaps because of its color, perhaps because of the incongruity of its chinoiserie imagery superimposed on a European Empire-style body.

This garniture originally appealed to a society intrigued by Asian cultures and would have resided in surroundings described by the Royal Collection Trust: “In the sparkling interiors of French royal palaces, grand Parisian houses, and at Carlton House [London residence of King George IV], these pieces were displayed among plush furnishings, luminous candelabra, and chandeliers, contributing to the overall impression of luxury.” That is still the case. A pair





1 Laurent Craste's *Paire de vases Médicis. Série des scènes pittoresques: Hiroshima et Auschwitz*, 15¼ in. (39 cm) in height, 2010. Photo: David Bishop Noriega. 2 Sèvres Porcelain Manufactory, *Garniture of Vases*, to 17¾ in. (45 cm) in height, porcelain, overglaze enamels, gilding, gilt-bronze mounts, 1780. Gift of George and Helen Gardiner. Courtesy of the Gardiner Museum. 3 Laurent Craste's *Iconocraste à la barre à clou II*, 27½ in. (70 cm) in height, porcelain, glaze, bright gold, crowbar, 2019. Photo: Pierre Guillaume. 4 Laurent Craste's *L'arbre*, 23¾ in. (60 cm) in height, 2014. Photo: Daniel Roussel. 1, 4 Materials: porcelain, glaze, lead pigments, matte burnished gold, marble, hand-painted scenes, screen-printed patterns.



of Sèvres porcelain vases and covers of the same period as the Gardiner garniture were estimated to realize between \$80,000–120,000 at Christie's Auction House in New York in 2019.

Canadian artist Laurent Craste takes exception to the luxury represented by these objects of the 18th and 19th centuries. Appalling living conditions, disease, war, and industrialization were the lot of Europe's peasants, while an elite few tried to outdo each other by displaying porcelain dinner services, coffee sets, and ornamental vases. In voicing his objections to this dichotomy, he exploits the very format of the offending ceramics.

Subversion

Subversion is a timely word, in light of the worldwide protests that presently attempt to overturn or abolish an established or existing practice, belief, or rule. It originates in the French and Latin languages, so its adoption by Craste as the umbrella for one of his series of works is appropriate. Sèvres porcelain was concurrent with the French Revolution, another period of upheaval due to opposition by the populace to the feudal system and the monarchy of Louis XVI.

Subversion also means challenging a conventional idea or genre and using it in an unorthodox way. In Craste's *Paire de vases Médicis. Série des scènes pittoresques: Hiroshima et Auschwitz* (Pair of Medici vases. Picturesque Scenes Series: Hiroshima and Auschwitz), this definition is patently evident. The forms of the vases are in the vein of the Gardiner ones—classic shapes, gilt rims and handles, and a color palette of the 18th century—yet the picturesque scene of Chinese buildings, parasols, and figures has been replaced by Craste's drawings of two instances of man's inhumanity to man. The contrast is startling. Craste says that the inseparable pair of vases is "an illustration of the moral bankruptcy of the West, yet at the height of its culture."





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5 *Le cri II*, 18 in. (46 cm) in height, porcelain, glaze, decals, burnished gold, 2017. Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay.

6 *La vengeance d'une femme de chambre*, 22¼ in. (57 cm) in height, porcelain, glaze, decals, burnished gold, scissors, 2015. Photo: Daniel Roussel.

Pertinent to the 2020 racial injustice protests in the US, although Craste is adamant that his objects do not refer to specific incidents or locations, is a group of four vases devoted to riots. *Vase de l'émeute III* (Riot Vase III) shows a conflagration surrounded by white ground that Craste has chosen because “in addition to being the natural color of porcelain, an aristocratic material, [it] is the symbolic color of the French monarchy.” A bee motif, used by Napoleon I in a range of decorative arts, creates a decorative pattern. The bee, representing industry, immortality, and pollination, was an indication of Napoleon’s absolute power, justifying his imperialist invasions of areas of Europe. Elsewhere, Craste replaces the bees with flies, symbolic of death, decay, and stench. He is careful with his choice of visual metaphors. For example he explains that in *Vase de l'émeute III*, “I used the motif of the imperial bee because I did not want to associate an image of the consequences of people’s revolt and anger with an image of death and corruption. I keep the morbid fly motif to associate it with images of the consequences of vanity, greed, etc.”

The fires depicted in Craste’s work often contain burning cars and tires, which are frequently set alight and destroyed during riots. He has clear views on what the automobile stands for: “The car comes back regularly as an iconographic subject in my work. I consider the car as an object, which projects a status of social ascension and social achievement, which is the mark of the owners and of individualism, as well as the object which has most profoundly upset and contributed to damaging the environment in a short span of time in human history.” *L'arbre* (The Tree) represents nature’s victory over a society obsessed with independent transportation and *Vase à la cour à scrap* (Vase at the Scrap Yard) highlights the consequences of this obsession for those who can afford to trade in the used for the new.

Some of these pieces are preceded by studies: flattened vases that explore the theme before Craste sits down at the wheel. He explains that these “devolumized” objects seem to be “deflated of their pride as an art object.” I would also suggest that flattening the vases is another form of subversion, in the sense of making them insipid. Their association with power and wealth is figuratively deflated, as if stomped on by a heavy proletarian boot.

Abuse

It is impossible to separate the *Subversion* series from Craste’s *Abuse* series. He says that the link between the two is manifest in *Le cri II* (The Scream II) because of the physical intervention and the fleur-de-lis graphics. *Le cri II* is anthropomorphic, displaying body language and a gaping mouth in place of a subversive image. It is as if the vase is yelling, “I’m as mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore.” *Le cri II* is still connected to the French monarchy, with the fleur-de-lis motif, but whereas the royal fleur-de-lis is gold, here it’s blue, which references French society in Quebec.

Grand Vase Montcalm I, also with blue fleur-de-lis, refers to the French general, the Marquis de Montcalm who was defeated by the English under the command of James Wolfe on the Plains of Abraham in Quebec in 1759. Montcalm, as a vase, is stabbed by darts topped with the Union Jack, the British flag. Craste sees this playful metaphor as a “symbolic illustration of the fragile destiny of the French factor in an Anglo-Protestant ocean in North America.”

The *Abuse* sculptures begin on the potter’s wheel, with sections assembled before or after firing. Craste states that the next stage requires “rigorous drying management.” He has to strategically rewet sections for the insertion of whatever tool—axe, crowbar, baseball bat—is appropriate to the theme. He explains, “The drying must be managed so that the object is able to deform under the impact of the tool, without collapsing (too wet) or breaking (too dry). The physical intervention must be both controlled (so as not to break the vase) and spontaneous (for a natural and dynamic appearance), which is



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paradoxical, and requires many trial-and-error attempts.” The tool is then removed and an assessment of the amount of shrinkage that will take place in drying and firing ensures that the tool can be reinserted and fixed in place after the object is removed from the kiln. This time-consuming and heartbreaking process, rife with failure, is rewarded by the one successful vase that will sit on a gallery pedestal.

La vengeance d'une femme de chambre (The Vengeance of the Maid), and *Iconocraste à la barre à clou II* (Iconocraste at the Crowbar II), demonstrate the skill with which Laurent manipulates the clay to create an impression (pun intended) of reality. Iconocraste is a play on words: iconoclast (person who destroys works of art) combined with the artist's surname.

The French Connection

Laurent Craste was born in France and knew from a young age that he wanted to be an artist of some sort. However, coming from a traditional French family, he was pressured into studying science. He earned qualification as a doctor of veterinary medicine and then, within the framework of university exchanges between France and Quebec, achieved a master's in animal physiology at the Université de Montréal. When it came time to return home, he says that it was “the weight of history, the history of art as much as the political history of Europe” that coerced him to stay in North America. He felt inhibited by European art and was aware of the hierarchical environment in the art world there. Also, he believed that ceramic traditions were sacrosanct, with little tolerance for experimentation. He concluded that “to live as an artist, free and freed, it was essential, paradoxically, for me to leave these places so laden with art. Canada, a country more open and less hierarchical, less constrained by traditions, is an ideal place for me as a creator.” Craste studied ceramics at the Centre de Céramique Bonsecours in Montréal and then obtained an MFA from the Université du Québec à Montréal. The rest, as they say, is history: political, cultural, and ceramic history.

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7 *Révolution II*, 24½ in. (63 cm) in height, porcelain, glaze, gold, axe, 2014-15. 8 *Vase de l'émeute III*, 20 in. (51 cm) in height, porcelain, glaze, digital decal, burnished gold, marble, 2019. Photo: Pierre Guillaume. 9 *Grand Vase Montcalm I*, 22 in. (56 cm) in height, porcelain, glaze, decals, burnished gold, darts, 2016. 10 *Vase à la cour à scrap*, 18½ in. (47 cm) in height, porcelain, glaze, lead pigments, burnished gold, marble, screen-printed patterns and scene, 2014. 7, 9, 10 Photo: Daniel Roussel.