

## Central Queensland University

**Bambi Ward**

### **A taste of Herend Hungarian porcelain: Aesthetics, object biography and writing memoir**

#### Abstract:

Object biography is an analytic process that can be used to enhance contemporary creative works such as family memoirs (Schamberger et al. 2008) as it can depict historical information about a particular time and place that can prove interesting for readers. Author and ceramicist Edward de Waal used this approach to create his award-winning family memoir *The Hare With Amber Eyes*. This paper uses a personal case study to illustrate how an object biography of pieces of Herend – world-famous Hungarian porcelain – can be used in creating a memoir that describes aspects of my family history. Under normal circumstances, I would not have chosen to keep these pieces after my parents' death, as the objects are not to my taste, that is, not aesthetically pleasing to me. Yet, they have great sentimental value because they represent the story of important landmarks in my families' history, including how my paternal grandparents met, and my own pilgrimage to Hungary.

#### Biographical note:

Dr Bambi Ward is a PhD student in creative writing at Central Queensland University. Her thesis will result in an account of her spiritual journey as well as an exegesis on the ethics of writing about family secrets using an autoethnographical method. Bambi has a background in general practice medicine, medical education and oral history.

#### Keywords:

Creative writing – Taste – Memoir – Object biography

## Introduction

The notion of taste is a nebulous one that applies to both realms of gustation and the aesthetic discernment of objects. Philosophers have been grappling with concepts of taste since Aristotle devised a hierarchy of the five senses that listed taste as the second last. Despite the subjective nature of gustatory taste, the latter has been used as a metaphor for aesthetic judgment since the sixteenth century, thus making the concept of taste a faculty of aesthetic judgment (Baer 2004: 2).

A definition of taste that illustrates its meaning within the study of aesthetics appears in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, where taste is ‘the sense of what is appropriate, harmonious, beautiful; especially discernment and appreciation of the beautiful in nature or art; specifically the faculty of perceiving and enjoying what is excellent in heart, literature and the like’. An additional meaning for taste in this sense refers to an individual’s preference for something, where taste is ‘the fact or condition of liking or preferring something; inclination, liking for; appreciation’ (Simpson and Weiner 1989).

Since the time of Aristotle, philosophers and sociologists such as Kant, Hume and Bourdieu have come up with theories and ideas that define what makes an experience aesthetic (Baer 2004: 2). This involves a consideration of what makes the same object appeal to one person and not to another. The trend of two diametrically opposite views regarding the nature of aesthetic experience continues. External theories maintain that the features of the object experienced are of prime importance in determining aesthetic experience. By contrast, internal theories focus on aesthetic experience as a process of reflection and introspection, in which focus, intensity and unity are present. The concept of unity includes the concepts of coherence and completeness (Shelley 2013: 17). The ongoing debate between diametrically opposing views on this subject raises the following question: ‘What can a theory of aesthetic experience be that takes seriously the distinction between the experience of features and the features of experience?’ (Shelley 2013: 18).

The fact that so many differing views have existed throughout the ages suggests that there cannot be a black and white answer to this question. For me, aesthetics is an esoteric and mysterious concept that is difficult to describe in words. Perhaps the answer lies in combining the two opposing theories and synthesising them into one idea. Dealing with dialectic thoughts in this way is a method that I am familiar with from studies of Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism. This paper uses a personal case study to illustrate how pieces of Herend – world famous Hungarian porcelain – either appeal to people’s taste or are rejected. An object biography of pieces of Herend is also used to create a piece of writing that describes an aspect of my family’s history. My case study illustrates how objects can undergo a radical resetting of meaning, once they are alienated from their culture of origin (Gosden & Marshall 1999: 176).

Object biography is an analytical process that can be used to enhance contemporary creative works such as family memoirs (Schamberger et al. 2008 276). This is because it can depict important historical information about a

particular time and place that relates to family members in a way that is more compelling than simply describing the facts around that situation. The idea of studying the biography of objects is discussed by Kopytoff (1986), who posited that in order for objects to be more fully understood, a more holistic view is required than simply looking at an object from one point in its existence (Gosden & Marshall 1999: 170). All objects accumulate histories and there is a connection to the culture in which the object is found, as well as to the events and people to which it is linked. It is this broader understanding of an object's biography that gives the object significance and meaning (Gosden & Marshall 1999: 170).

Hoskins takes a slightly different approach. Rather than looking at how individual people's biographies are linked to objects, she examines ways in which objects are used to create and sustain meaning in people's lives. When interviewing people in Sumba in Eastern Indonesia about their life stories, she obtained minimal responses until she started asking people to talk about significant objects (Gosden & Marshall 1999: 174). This strategy elicited meaningful details about people's life stories. Hoskins' work shows how an object biography can play an important role in revealing more of a person's identity and sense of self.

Author and ceramicist Edward de Waal has taken an object biography approach to create his award winning family memoir *The Hare With Amber Eyes*. De Waal's page-turning memoir inspired me to use object biography as a way of telling aspects of my family's history in my own memoir. Under normal circumstances I would not have chosen to keep pieces of Herend porcelain after my parents' death, as the objects are not to my taste, by which I mean that the pieces are not aesthetically pleasing to me. Yet, they have great sentimental value, because they represent the story of important landmarks in my family's history, including how my paternal grandparents met, and my own, much later, pilgrimage to Hungary.

### **Childhood memories of Herend**

As a first generation Australian and only child of Hungarian migrants, I remember spending time looking at the objects my parents proudly displayed behind the glass windows of the bar in our dining room. The pieces included items of Hungarian porcelain and Hummel figurines of a boy with a backpack and a girl standing with some geese. The Hungarian porcelain pieces consisted of a tall coffee pot, several demitasse coffee cups and saucers, and a sugar bowl. As a child, I never thought of asking my parents why those pieces were never used. Looking back, however, it does seem strange, because my father enjoyed drinking strong, hot, black coffee every day. At breakfast time, he would sit at the kitchen table by himself, intently reading his newspaper or book, wearing a black hairnet as he sipped or gulped his steaming coffee noisily from a glass. Even if I had wondered about this, I never would have asked. Such questions were not encouraged in my house.

Mum and Dad called the crockery by its Hungarian name: *Herendi*, however, for the purposes of this paper, I will refer to it by the English name of 'Herend'. The pieces of Herend my parents chose to use were hidden on shelves behind the bar.

These included large round dishes for cold meat platters, a triangle shaped dish for salad, and a large vase for my mother's favourite flowers – long stemmed red gladioli. All these pieces had the same design: Chinese-style butterflies and flowery branches with bits of gold woven into the rim of each piece.



Fig. 1. Dish, Queen Victoria Herend design. Photograph: Bambi Ward, 2014

I later found out that this pattern for a porcelain dinner set became well-known after its first customer, the British Queen Victoria, ordered a dinner set of the gold award-winning pattern for Windsor Castle. Today, a complete dinner set can be purchased in Hungary for around the same price as a small car.

### **Migration, the link with Herend and its eventual sale**

My father migrated to Australia in 1947, after the Second World War. Although he had met my future mother in Hungary, they did not marry until she arrived in Sydney in 1948. As refugees from war-torn Europe, they had very little money, and started married life in a cheap boarding house in Melbourne. My father's parents stayed in Budapest until my father gained permission for them to migrate to Australia. My grandfather, who ran a glass and porcelain shop in Budapest, selling Herend and other porcelain, was a former President of the Glass and Porcelain Dealers' Association.

My father was desperate to earn a good living and become a better provider for his new wife. It made sense to him to do something he had prior knowledge of. So, with assistance from his father in Budapest, my father started importing Herend pieces, with the intention of selling them to department stores and gift shops in Melbourne. This was in 1948, at a time when European culture was unfamiliar to the average Anglo-Australian. Not only that, but the average Australian had markedly different tastes to Europeans. Herend did not appeal to the Australian market, and my parents were stuck with many unsold pieces. They were able to sell a few pieces at prices lower than expected, but the whole venture was very disappointing and was abandoned as an income making scheme in less than a year.

It must have been bittersweet to look at the unsold leftover pieces, however, to my father's credit, he eventually developed a much more successful business that involved selling ladies wear to country stores. By 1949, he was able to put a down

payment on a home in Murrumbena, then an outer suburb of Melbourne. I was raised in that home, and have many memories of it. A floor to ceiling glass vitrine that my father built was an imposing structure in our dining room. It displayed various items, including glasses for alcohol, my grandfather's war medals and about a dozen Herend plates. Each of these plates, measuring around thirteen centimetres in diameter, had a different design.



Fig. 2. Plate, Herend Design. Photograph, Bambi Ward, 2014

They were used as coasters for guest's drinks and some of the designs are now faded from use. I think they are remnants of samples of the various other crockery designs that were available when my father was trying to sell them. I don't recall my parents ever telling me anything much about Herend. Their silence mirrored their silence about their lives in Hungary.

My other childhood memories of Herend centre on regular visits to my paternal grandparents' home in Elsternwick. With great persistence and tenacity on my father's part, my grandparents had finally been granted permission to migrate to Australia in 1956. I remember my grandmother using Herend dishes with the same Queen Victoria design as ours to hold food. But my grandmother never utilised her other Herend crockery. She did use a bonbonniere with a delicate yellow flower on top that served as a handle. I experienced great pleasure at anticipating the mouth-watering treats that awaited me inside that bonbonniere. I loved the round, smooth, dark chocolate buttons that melted in my mouth, and the chocolate covered orange peel.

In 1989, my father died after a long battle with cancer. By 2000, my mother had developed chronic health problems that required the assistance of carers. She decided to sell some of her Herend pieces to an auction house. She claimed she needed the extra cash to pay for her care, but I don't believe that was the real reason. I suspect they were associated with bad memories, as well as her knowledge that neither I, nor my children, had expressed any interest in keeping the pieces for ourselves. The designs did not appeal to us, and we were ignorant of their significance in our family history. So one day, my mother went ahead and organised for her set of Herend coffee pot, cups and saucers to be sold at auction. She did not discuss it with me beforehand, and was pleased with the prices the pieces fetched.

## Hungary: the meaning of Herend becomes clearer



Fig. 3. Entrance to Herend Porcelain manufactory. Photograph, Michael Ward, 2005

It wasn't until July 2005, when I visited Hungary, that I discovered more about Herend. The tour of the porcelain factory in the small town of Herend, a two hour drive south-west of Budapest, commenced with a short film, in which a Hungarian man in his nineties told his granddaughter about the history of Herend porcelain. This man had worked in the factory for all his working life. His voice was dubbed over in Scottish-sounding English. After the film, an enthusiastic male guide took us through the mini-manufactory, where we saw women making baskets of Herend porcelain and hand painting the individual pieces with meticulous care and pride. The women were very focused on their job, but smiled when I spoke to them in broken Hungarian.



Fig. 4. Artist, Herend Porcelain manufactory. Michael Ward, 2005

The factory has over one thousand six hundred workers, all of whom have completed three years of training in a particular area of expertise. Most of the painters specialise in painting one particular design feature such as butterflies, and

then spend their time, year after year, painting the same thing. Despite this apparent monotony, there is a high retention rate of the workers. Many have been at the factory for all their working lives. I learned that the company, which was nationalised in 1948, was re-privatised in 1992. Today, 75 per cent of the company is owned by its management and workers, and sends exports to over 60 countries around the world (Köhegyi 2003: 34).

After the tour, my husband and I spent some time looking at various designs in the on-site museum. The range of designs on display was overwhelming. Room after room was filled with vitrines containing pieces that demonstrated the history Herend designs in chronological order. We learned of the strong support that the Hungarian aristocracy had for Herend in the 1840s, as well as Herend's success at exhibitions in Vienna, Hungary, London, New York and Paris from 1842 to 1873 (Köhegyi 2003: 9, 12-16). The final items on display were of porcelain animals, including various types of birds, fish and rabbits. These latest designs differ so much from the traditional patterns that I would never have guessed they were Herend. They appealed to me even less than the Queen Victoria design.



Fig. 5. Owl, modern Herend design. Photograph Bambi Ward, 2014

After viewing the museum, the guide encouraged us to visit the coffee shop for afternoon tea. I ordered a slice of sacher torte from the mouth-watering selection of cakes, and my husband ordered a cup of black coffee. Imagine my surprise and delight when my cake arrived on a Herend plate decorated with the Queen Victoria design. This was followed by my husband's coffee, also served in a demitasse with the Queen Victoria design. My eyes widened, and the sight of food on a 'forbidden' plate took my breath away. To be permitted to eat off a plate whose use had been prohibited for the entire forty-seven years of my life created a feeling of freedom that I have rarely experienced. I savoured every bite of that cake. Further, to experience this in the birthplace of my family made it even more significant. The whole experience seemed to mirror my spiritual journey. I was breaking out of old patterns and prisons and becoming more of myself.

On that life-changing trip, I was able to track down the location of my grandparents' former shop. This was no easy feat, because the street name had

been changed after the Second World War. I was, however, amazed to find that, fifty-seven years later, it still sold porcelain. We also retraced my family's footsteps by visiting places in Hungary where they lived, studied and worked. This experience had a significant impact on me and I returned home with a much greater sense of who I am and where I came from.



Fig. 6. Afternoon tea, Apicius Café. Photograph, Michael Ward, 2005

### **A shift in attitude towards Herend**

Prior to visiting the factory, I had no attachment to Herend porcelain. Its design did not appeal to me, and I had no desire to inherit my parents' pieces. However, the visit to Europe and my mother's advancing years prompted me to start questioning her about her life. Over a period of two years, I recorded more than twenty hours of interviews with my mother. It was during these interviews that I found out the important role Herend had played in the meeting of my father's parents. My paternal grandmother grew up in Budapest with her mother, father and four brothers. Her father owned a porcelain shop, and the family lived above the shop. My paternal grandfather sold porcelain to various shops. It was through selling Herend to his future father-in-law's shop that my grandfather met his future wife, who was helping out in the shop. This knowledge made my mother's remaining Herend pieces much more meaningful and significant to me.

Some time after our return from Europe, my mother sat my family down in her lounge room. She wanted me to make a list of her important possessions, and to work out who would get what after her death. Given the extra knowledge about our family history, I chose to keep the pieces of Herend that Mum had used, as well as the pieces that my parents had inherited from my father's parents. My daughter also wanted to keep several pieces. Had we not known the significance of Herend in our family's story, I would not have wanted to keep the pieces and I suspect my daughter would have felt the same way.

Mum died in 2009. The Herend I inherited is not on display. It is hidden away in her beautiful pink salmon wall unit. It is hidden because I still don't like the look of the pieces, and they are very large. I also wonder if hiding them is a metaphor for the part of my Jewish identity that I have hidden from the world for so long.

As I write this, I realise that I have chosen to display two pieces of Herend that I inherited from my mother's best friend. When Mum's friend died, her son asked me to choose some items as a keepsake from a selection of his late mother's special things. I chose several pieces of Herend, including an owl with the modern design that I dislike. Why did I choose it, and why is it on display? I suppose it is because it is an ornament and a much smaller piece than the large Herend dishes bearing the Queen Victoria design. I also chose a very small delicate bonbonniere with a modern floral design and a basket like the one we saw being painted and made in the factory.

I am certain that I would not have picked any of these pieces if I hadn't been to the Herend manufactory and museum, and if I was still unaware of its connection to how my grandparents met each other. It is as though, by holding onto objects of significance that belonged to deceased loved ones, the objects serve as a reminder of our connection to those people, even though their physical body is no longer alive. When I look at the Herend pieces, I remember my mother, my grandparents, the home I grew up in, my trip to Hungary and my mother's best friend. I feel gratitude that Herend brought my grandparents together. If not for Herend, I would not be here, and that is why I treasure it.

## Conclusion

The concepts of taste and aesthetic judgment are both complex and subjective. Attempts to define them using philosophical ideas have yielded diametrically opposing views regarding the importance of external or internal factors. I posit that both are important and relevant.

In my case, the Herend objects held no aesthetic appeal until I discovered the significance of the pieces to my family's history. This information resulted in me choosing to keep the pieces I inherited rather than selling them. Despite this significance, the large pieces remain hidden in my home. On the other hand, my Hungarian parents displayed most of their Herend pieces; they loved the look of the pieces and considered them too precious to be used. Although Herend clearly appealed to my parents, the pieces were associated with bittersweet memories as a result of my parents' failure to create a successful business importing Herend to Australia from Hungary in 1948. At that time, the average Anglo-Australian did not appreciate fine handmade Herend porcelain; it was deemed too expensive and did not appeal to their taste.

When I visited the Herend factory in Hungary, I saw the enormous pride and dedication amongst the artists and workers who make the handmade pieces; it is clear that the workers see much beauty in their creations. I also discovered that the café in the Herend factory serves its food on Herend crockery. The factory has thereby achieved a balance between the practical use of Herend as well as an appreciation of its beauty – a feat that none of my family have been able to achieve to date.

The reasons for the differences in my family's attitude towards, and taste in,

Herend became much clearer once I completed an object biography on our Herend pieces. The case study also illustrates how the meaning of an object can be much more important than its appearance and characteristics. Gosden and Marshall describe how objects can bring with them fragments of old lives and threads of earlier meanings (1999: 177). This is certainly applicable to these Herend pieces in my case.

It would have been easy to simply research the facts about Herend porcelain on the Internet, however, this approach would have yielded minimal, dry content for my memoir. Combining object biography with oral history, a visit to the Herend factory and a personal pilgrimage to Hungary, I was able to obtain a more holistic view of the role and significance of Herend in my family's lives. Finally, the case study illustrates how object biography can be a useful tool in deepening one's understanding of self, and in producing meaningful material for a memoir. A consideration of factors involved in determining whether Herend appealed to people's taste has enhanced the object biography and memoir even further.

### Works cited

- Baer, N 2004 'Theories of media' U of Chicago, at  
<<http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/taste.htm>> (accessed 5 February 2014)
- de Waal, E 2010 *The hare with amber eyes*, New York: Picador
- Gosden, C and Y Marshall 1999 'The cultural biography of objects' *World Archaeology* 31: 2, 169–78
- Köhegyi, O 2003 *Herend Porcelain*, Veszprém-Budapest: Magyar Képek
- Schamberger, K, M Sear, K Wehner, J Wilson and the Australian Journeys Gallery Development Team, National Museum of Australia 2008 'Living in a material world: object biography and transnational lives', *Transnational ties: Australian lives in the world*, eds D Deacon, P Russell and A Woollacott, Canberra: ANU E Press, 275–97
- Shelley, J 2013 'The concept of the aesthetic', *Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aesthetic-concept>> (accessed 5 February 2014)
- Simpson, JA and ESC Weiner eds 1989 *Oxford English Dictionary* 2nd ed, New York: Oxford UP