

Katherine Purcell Invites Us Inside Wartski

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A profile of Katherine Purcell, joint managing director of Wartski.

by Mary Miers

I've come to St. James's Street, SW1 to talk to Katherine Purcell about her role as joint managing director of Wartski and what it's like to be one of the few women prominent in the world of antique jewellery. So it comes as a surprise to find myself standing in a room lined with dove grey velvet holding a strawberry-red coal scuttle. It is, Katherine tells me, one of the two most exquisite examples of Fabergé's hand-engraved enamel work that she has ever seen. Handing me a loupe, she urges me to turn it in my fingers, to admire the complexity of the gold rococo decoration that appears to bounce through the translucent enamel. The diamond-set bonbonnière measures just 3.1cm and sits on tiny paw feet. 'It's the scrollwork cut to different depths that's achieving the reflections you see when you move it in the light. To think that this extraordinary engraving was done entirely by hand; it's such a miracle'.

Katherine's enthusiasm for her subject is radiant, her impulse to share it irrepressible. I've come to interview her, but before long she's whisked me onto the shop floor and is operating the discreet mechanisms that raise the glass fronts of the showcases set into the walls. 'It's where the magic begins,' she enthuses, insisting that I examine some of the finest examples of 19th-century goldsmiths' craftsmanship as she tells me about their history and techniques. 'You can see why there was a revolution,' she says, picking out a parasol handle of reeded gold set with diamonds and cabochon rubies. 'Fabergé made bell-pushes as well. And look at the lavishness of this hat pin by René Lalique! He's chosen to use plique-à-jour rather than solid enamel, so you can see through it, and the gold is worked from both sides. But what I love is this little kink in its stem; only Lalique could have mirrored such irregularity found in nature. This is why he's so unique. And you can see why I fell in love with these,' she adds, moving to a vitrine of cloisonné enamelled locket based on Hokusai prints by her heroes Alexis and Lucien Falize.



An enamelled silver bonbonnière in the Japanese taste by Eugène Feuillâtre, exhibited at the Salon des Artistes Français in 1902. Feuillâtre ran René Lalique's enamelling workshop for 8 years before exhibiting under his own name. [Learn more at the Wartski website.](#)

Katherine describes as 'a fluke' how she ended up at Wartski, the Polish business established by Morris Wartski in Wales in the 1880s that became famous for its association with the work of Carl Fabergé. She accepted the job of secretary and book-keeper reluctantly, having failed to find work with a fine art gallery or museum. 'Useless at maths, shy and with no gemmological training, [she] looked like a hippy, with beads and long hair,' but she did have an art-history degree and could speak Italian and fluent French. Before long, she was helping with the first exhibition devoted to Castellani and Giuliano and working evenings for Vivienne Becker, who was organising the world's first show of Lalique jewellery, which opened at Goldsmiths' Hall in 1987. 'I began to realise that jewellery didn't have to be all about precious stones; it could be to do with artistry, different techniques, design and so on. When I discovered the work of Lalique, a whole new world opened up'. She'd visit the auction rooms at lunchtime and the V&A library on Saturdays and began publishing articles and developing an interest in French 19th-century enamellers. She became an expert on Falize, befriending family descendants and unearthing much unknown material, which culminated in her book *Falize; A Dynasty of Jewellers* in 1999. Two years later she published her translation of Henri Vever's magisterial three-volume *La Bijouterie Française au XIXe Siècle*.

Promotion to the shop floor gave her the opportunity to handle objects—'essential if you're to write about them in an intelligent way; the more you handle the more experienced you are'. She became a director in 1996 and has organised a number of the firm's exhibitions, notably 'Japonisme: From Falize to Fabergé' (2011). 'Nobody had focused on Japonisme through the jeweller or goldsmith's eyes before. This was a really important project for me that took four years to organise and research'. She's now working on a book on the subject.

Wartski is difficult to pigeonhole, Katherine says, because it's a commercial shop that promotes independent research. 'It's taken me a long time to discover that this is fairly unique. I know of galleries where the owners have insisted on signing pieces written by colleagues and keep all their information to themselves, which actually doesn't help their business at all.' It was Kenneth Snowman (1919-2002), son of Wartski's son-in-law Emanuel Snowman, who changed the direction of the company and instilled its academic reputation. Emanuel had transacted the first purchases of Russian works of art from the Soviet government in the 1920s, including several of the famous Imperial Easter Eggs, and his son turned Fabergé into a specialist subject. Kenneth became custodian of a significant Fabergé archive, mounted the first exhibition devoted to the firm in 1949 and published his first book on Carl Fabergé in 1953. Still owned by the Snowman family, Wartski maintains this intellectual heft and the spirit of generosity that prompted Kenneth to encourage employees to specialise in their particular interests.



A gold and cloisonné enamelled locket in the Japanese taste by Alexis Falize, exhibited at the Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs in 1869. It is highly unusual in being decorated on all four faces. [See more on the Wartski website.](#)

'Thanks to [director] Thomas Holman's knowledge and research, people come here to look at ancient intaglios and 19th-century cameos,' Katherine says. 'Kieran McCarthy [her co-managing director] has published widely on the Imperial Russian goldsmiths and added a whole new dimension to Fabergé by researching its London branch. And Giovanni Massa, our latest recruit, is pursuing research on another revivalist jeweller.'

Wartski's directors make joint decisions about what to buy, thereby avoiding situations where one of them is so focussed on a subject that they launch full tilt into acquiring something completely unsaleable. 'That said, sometimes you're so proud to own a piece that's far removed from everyday appreciation that you buy it anyway and sell it at a fraction above its cost price, because it's such a fantastic thing to be able to display and talk about. We're unusual in that respect; some mercenary dealers slap a percentage on everything. Wartski's approach is different. We only buy pieces that we're really passionate about and I think that shines through and enhances our reputation. Some say we're difficult to sell to because they can't guess what will please us and what won't. We like disparate and eccentric things. We also believe in some pieces being totally educational, so we have a showcase devoted to curious early pieces and why they were made—not necessarily to adorn, but to protect or contain religious relics.'

Ever proud of its Welsh roots—it remains 'Wartski of Llandudno' and still banks there—the firm has been based in London since 1913 and has a broad-ranging and international clientele. Having moved from Grafton Street in 2018, it finds itself at home and busier in St. James's, where 'many of our co-exhibitors from fairs like Maastricht are based, along with many of the royal warrant holders.' It took the move to take on board that everything on Bond Street is branded, whereas here there are one-off, specialist businesses with a different type of clientele.

There's always been this huge appreciation of antique jewellery in London and most of the long-established firms are based here. Even for 19th-century French pieces, there's now a greater density in London than in Paris, where most of the big firms have closed. Most of the businesses are represented by their owners, and they're mostly still men, so in that respect, too, I guess Wartski is unusual.

It says a lot that once you arrive here, you stay. This was my first job out of university and I've been at Wartski for over 40 years. I'm so fortunate to have been taught to look at things by experts who were willing to share their knowledge and I feel glad that I can continue their example today.'

A Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths and Chair of the Society of Jewellery Historians, Katherine is also the only woman on the advisory board of The Treasure House Fair. 'Wartski sits outside Frieze because it's not Old Masters or ancient manuscripts, and neither does it quite fit into the niches of PAD or LAPADA. It's crucial that there should be an event in London representing arts across the board and Treasure House is now the only multi-disciplinary fair of stature'.



Katherine Purcell of [Wartski](#) with Harry van der Hooft, founder of The Treasure House Fair and CEO of [Stabiko International](#).