

Profile: E & H Manners

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By Huon Mallalieu

Huon Mallalieu is a historian who writes on art, antiques and collecting for The Times, Country Life and The Oldie. He is the author or editor of many books, including The Dictionary of British Watercolour Artists and 1066 and Rather More, a Walk through History. He is FSA and Hon RWS.

In his 1896 Florentine Painters of the Renaissance Bernard Berenson discussed the “tactile values” that “occur in representations of solid objects when communicated, not as mere reproductions (no matter how veracious), but in a way that stirs the imagination to feel their bulk, heft their weight, realise their potential resistance, span their distance from us, and encourage us, always imaginatively, to come into close touch with, to grasp, to embrace, or to walk around them”

I rather think that tactile values have been out of fashion for a while in art history courses but are now making a come-back. In any event, when applied to objects rather than just to paintings, and to the actual sense of touch rather than a notional one, this is something that is widely understood among dealers and connoisseurs. The surface of a terracotta or a good bronze, of a wood or marble carving, fine patina on furniture, balance of a knife, all demand to be felt and judged literally by hand. Some people are made wary when assessing even a framed painting that feels dead in the hand.

Errol Manners speaks about porcelain with erudition and enthusiasm, and it is not long before he mentions how much he loves the feel of it. Good dealers must also be historians and lovers of stories. Porcelain is rich in stories, and Errol, Henriette and their son Henry Manners are as happy in their researches as they are in making a good sale. Their catalogues are as scholarly as they are handsome and often contain notable additions to knowledge of the subject. Here Henry's previous job with a publisher is a bonus.

As with many people in and around the trade it was a childhood fascination with the romance of historic objects that started Errol on his way. “I had what I grandly described as a museum (actually a small cabinet), and friends and uncles would give me anything from Indian carving to a fragment of Roman pottery. Coins particularly, which come with so much historic baggage, caught my imagination.” Later, in his early twenties, he found a broken late 18th century Chinese export porcelain bowl on a market stall. “It was £11, simple but quite beautifully decorated, and I recall taking it back to my flat and staring in awe at something that had come all the way from China through trials and storms and had delighted a sea captain or sailor and then, and after all this time, thrilled me”.

For a moment he had thought that he might follow a distinguished family tradition and join the navy, but instead followed his heart and signed on as a porter at Christie's. At that time, together with study in museums, the London auctioneers' Front Counters and portering were the best possible training for anyone keen to learn. You saw and handled everything, good and bad, fake and fabulous. Later he was given a position as a cataloguer in the European and Chinese ceramic department, where he found himself working for the first time with Henriette, the Dutch secretary, who was to become his wife and business partner.

After five years they left to set up their own business, operating for 18 months from a stall in Portobello Market, and then from 1986 as E & H Manners at a series of addresses in Kensington Church Street. They have not only become one of the world's foremost dealers in 17th to 19th century British and European ceramics, but have expanded their range from the Middle Ages to the 20th century embracing the Arts and Crafts and Modern Movements, and across the world to include East Asian, Near Eastern and Mexican colonial period ceramics. Since Henry joined them in 2015 early glass has also become a speciality.

Among the more exotic wares they have handled was a pair of large Mexican redware vases from Tonala. Such búcaros were highly fashionable in the 17th century, and one may have a starring role in art history. The clay is soft and fragrant, and was not only used to give a delicate flavour to medicinal potions, but thought to be beneficial in itself; it was nibbled, especially by young women and sickly children, for internal problems and to whiten the complexion. In fact, it was harmful and mildly narcotic, which may explain why the Infanta being offered what has been said to be a small búcaro in Velasquez' Las Meninas died aged only 21. On the other hand, that may turn out to be a Portuguese pot. Luckily no one tried a nibble before the Manners pair was sold to the Metropolitan Museum, New York.

Another satisfying early piece in current stock is a tin-glazed earthenware jug boldly dated 1558. It matches pieces excavated from a kiln site in Utrecht, where an archaeological report suggested that in about 1560 a potter from Antwerp introduced Italian maiolica techniques to the Northern Netherlands, foreshadowing the Dutch Delft tradition. As they say, “It is not often that one finds something that rewrites ceramics history, even if only by a couple of years”.

An ambitious project, also current and to be launched at The Treasure House Fair, is the compilation of a major catalogue of Hausmalerei, 18th century century ceramics decorated by home-workers for Meissen and Vienna porcelain, followed by factories in France and Britain.

Below: Errol, Henriette and Henry Manners.

[Image courtesy of E&H Manners](#)



