THE FOSSIL HUNTER

Tom Loxley meets the Japanese artist who is breathing new life into a British institution, using hundreds-of-year-old flowers and ferns – and dentists' tools

STOKE-ON-TRENT IS AN UNUSUAL PLACE to go in search of fossils. Although the remains of the ceramics industry that once dominated the city are all around, mainly in the singular shape of the bottle ovens, the brick-built kilns that look like squat milk bottles and poke above the rooftops as you drive by.

This is industrial heritage territory. The 1980s put paid to so much nearby – shutting the pits that once fueled the kilns, closing steel works and sending industry overseas to China, where labour was cheap. Back in the 1950s, there were some 2,000 bottle ovens in Stoke, now less than 50 remain. The Potteries carried on, of course, doing what they do best – making pots – though in much fewer numbers, the bottle ovens long since left redundant by the arrival of electricity and the Clean Air Act, a permanent reminder of days gone by.

But south of the city, there is another hidden reminder of the city's past and, perhaps, a pointer to its future. In an industrial-sized shed at the back of the Wedgwood factory in Barlaston are a series of open shelves on which lie dusty wooden trays of plaster models and moulds. In 1759, Josiah Wedgwood, 'the father of English potters', founded his first works in nearby Burslem, in what quickly became the smoke-filled dark heart of the Potteries. He soon moved up the Trent and Mersey Canal to a greenfield site he called Etruria. Barlaston is only the third factory that the company has occupied in nearly 260 years, and Wedgwood has carried its DNA with it in the form of patterns and moulds. Numbered in pencil and sometimes dated on the back, there must be thousands of these fossilised templates in tray after tray, lined loosely with yellowing scraps of paper, stretching the length of the shed and packed floor to ceiling.

The intricately carved pieces were originally made to produce the wafer-thin ceramic figures and motifs – 'sprigs', as they are known – that generations of Wedgwood potters have used on their pots as surface decoration. The plaster moulds look and feel like fossils, especially those in the shapes of flowers, leaves or even trees. Although there are classical features and motifs aplenty – columns for a Greek temple, a drawer full of cupids – there are lots of figures too, mainly heads, some as small as medallions, others life-sized busts of various Greeks and Romans, the occasional Victorian hero and Georgian great. Talk about coming face-to-face with history. What is remarkable is that these moulds aren't presented as treasure locked away in a museum cabinet, catalogued, collected and kept for posterity (Wedgwood has a museum on site that does that). No, this is more storage than archive. You can pick up a sprig, flip it over, wipe off the dust, clock the date – 1848, 1871, 1926, 1789 – and put it down again, seemingly in any old tray, in any old order.

These aren't fossils that are dead and buried, kept for posterity, they are waiting – if not begging – to be brought back to life. What is so surprising to the modern eye, among the motifs, busts and medallions, is the sheer number of moulds that capture the outlines of flowers and foliage. Although, perhaps not so surprising when you dig a little deeper.

Josiah Wedgwood wasn't just 'the father of English potters', he was an industrial pioneer, a paternalistic entrepreneur. The Barlaston factory was built in the 1930s by his descendant Josiah Wedgwood V, but the model village for the workers and the progressive ideas of working in clean air and amid green fields were transplanted from the original Etruria plant, which was built in 1770. The original Josiah was also a pioneer of the Enlightenment – with an interest in science and the world around him clear in his notebooks and inherited by his son John, who was so fascinated by the growing science of botany that he founded the Royal Horticultural Society in 1804.

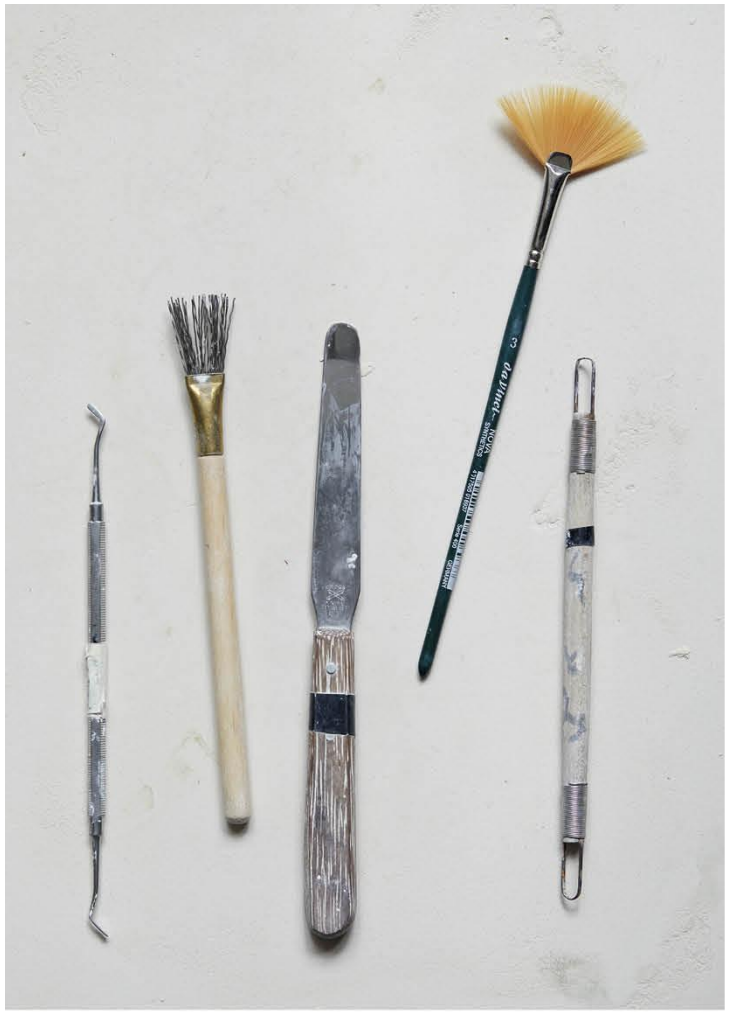
Hitomi Hosono also grew up surrounded by nature, but nearly 200 years later in central Japan. Her father is a rice farmer, like his father before him, and her earliest memories are of the paddy fields. The nearest city Nagoya, famous for Toyota cars, was nearly two hours away but for centuries the region was best known for its ceramics. 'There were a lot of people working in the pottery business, lots of factories, and many mountains to get the clay,' says Hosono describing her home. She calls it the Stoke on Trent of Japan. 'I got a sense of what you could make with clay from when I was very small.'

She also grew up with a keen sense of the value of mastering a skill and the vital importance of craft that transcended her interest in art. 'My grandfather used to work in ceramic tiles; there were lots of tiles everywhere in our house. He didn't make the tiles but he applied them. He was very skilled, and it saved his life,' Hosono says. 'During the Second World War. he was held prisoner in Siberia, where the Russians kept Japanese prisoners in labour camps. In his camp, they were forced to build railways. Many prisoners died. But he survived because the camp commander saw he had a skill and made him tile the fireplace in his house instead. One day I would like to go to Siberia to see the fireplace that saved his life.'

Hosono first glimpsed the fossilised plants hidden inside Wedgwood's dusty shed when she worked there for six weeks as an intern in 2008. A student at the Royal College of Art, she had been honing her skills as a ceramic artist ever since she left school in Japan. Her studies took her first to Kanazawa on the west coast, where she learnt to make porcelain sushi sets that she painted with intricate pictures and patterns, and then to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts Copenhagen, before arriving in Britain. She knew of Wedgwood, of course, and was fascinated by its use of sprigs, but she had seen nothing like the Barlaston cache.

'I was amazed when I first went in there,' she says. 'It's a special place, where the moment you step through the door you feel the company's history. Designs made by artists so long ago, but some of them look so new, so surprisingly detailed. It's extraordinary that they are still there, not decayed, but in the same shape, just sitting in storage and waiting to be used. Of course, they all tell a story; some are to related to Greek myths, others are about history, but so much is to do with nature.'

Hosono learnt to work with Jasperware, a specific sort of stoneware developed by Josiah Wedgwood in the late 18th century and reckoned to be his masterpiece. It is less pliable



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than porcelain, but is almost as fine-grained, and captures the detail in moulds crisply. But, most importantly, when it was invented in 1779, it brought about the mass production of stoneware that was as delicate as glass.

After her six weeks at Wedgwood was up, Hosono returned to the Royal College of Art to finish her master’s, but the seeds of an idea had been sown. She soon set about developing a talent for making fine porcelain pots densely covered in delicate leaves and flowers in her own studio, using techniques inspired by the pieces that she had seen at Barlaston. Working alone and by hand, her pots – all of which she throws and fires herself – take up to two years to complete. It takes a month to apply the sprigs, and the drying time alone is half a year.

At home in her north London studio, Hosono later shows me how she presses porcelain clay into moulds that she has painstakingly made by hand to create impressions of hundreds of tiny leaves and flowers. She intricately carves each sprig into even finer detail, using dentists’ tools, the precise, sharp, scraping implements you normally only see momentarily before they disappear into your mouth to prod painfully. She then attaches these sprigs to a hand-thrown core, before she reaches for her dentist tools again to carve them some more.

Her own work now sells for around £10,000 a pot, and her pieces are held in the permanent collections of the British Museum and the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. So in 2017, when Wedgwood decided to hire an artist-in-residence, with a brief to reconnect it with its horticultural heritage, Hosono was the obvious choice to create a new collection.

Back in Barlaston, she could call on the help of skilled craftsmen and women in the factory – and the moulds in the archive. She made pots in days rather than months, but the attention to detail remained the same. ‘What fascinates me is the detail in nature. I want to photograph it, analyse it and define it,’ she explains. ‘The sprigs I chose had to have that level of fascination. The leaves and flowers that she dug out of the wooden trays to decorate her collection included chrysanthemums, cherry leaves, and lots and lots of daisies – indeed, one of her pots features 1,150 of the tiny white flowers. ‘If I was working on it all by myself it might have taken forever,’ she admits. ‘Instead, it took two days. But it was the ferns she

stumbled upon that caught her imagination, so much so that they are at the heart of her new collection in the form of a daring reinvention of a Wedgwood classic: the Portland Vase.

Josiah Wedgwood created the first Portland vase in basalt black, decorated with classical figures and a Roman fruit tree, to mimic an antique glass vase bought by British aristocrat Lady Portland, which dated back to 100 BC. Hosono's version is turquoise and is covered in sinuous ferns. 'I wanted to repeat the same leaves many times and create a sense of movement. But it had to be subtle,' she says. 'I wanted to make the collection like spring, really light, and the colours had to be in harmony with each other. If the colour is too strong, the contrast is too much. It is reminds me of Japan. I'm from the East. I wanted to connect myself to my country.'

Not that the two cultures are so far apart. Although Barlaston may lack the paddy fields of her childhood, Hosono has found much to make her feel at home. 'The attention to detail is very Japanese. I see the same sensitivity in the way people talk. Both British and Japanese people are very reserved and respectful. And the love of tea! Although we use a different type of tableware.' But beyond tea and tableware, and a love of flowers and foliage, Hosono has found something else deep in the Barlaston storage facility – she has helped a great British institution rediscover its past and, in the process, point towards the future. 'It is extraordinary to work with something made so long ago,' she says. 'Especially now it has got its life back. Humans like to make things and we like to look at nature. Over 260 years, that's never changed. It is embedded in our DNA. Nowadays, we really care.'

It is only when I return from Barlaston that I discover a coda to this story. Josiah Wedgwood was fascinated by fossils and when he wasn't inventing ceramics, he liked to track them down. He amassed a collection during his lifetime that made him one of the world's leading fossil pioneers. Clearly he understood that only by appreciating the past can you unlock the future. Looking at the ferns on Hosono's Portland vase, I'm sure he would have approved. •

Photographs – Simon Upton
Portrait and tools – Anthony Prothero