



This page: the box reflects the dining room's wall and ceiling decorations painted by Hare Krishnas. From 1979 to 1984 Croome served as British headquarters for the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. Opposite: ceramics arranged between Perspex panels have a kaleidoscopic effect. Seen from below, armorial plates 'float' overhead



ALL THAT GLISTERS

The Golden Box in the dining room at Croome Court is dazzling, but the real treasure lies inside: the Sixth Earl of Coventry's rich collection of 18th-century porcelain, recently returned to its original home. Created by Bouke de Vries, the chamber reflects the ceramic artist's view that elite decorative arts are more accessible than they appear, as Matthew Dennison discovers. Photography: Simon Upton



Opposite: Bouke de Vries was guided by colour - in this case, blue - in his selection of pieces. This page, top: reflective surfaces create complex, giddy relationships between the room, the box and its contents. Above left: windows cut into the structure showcase particular pieces. Above right: the Sèvres lidded sugar bowl on the top shelf may have been created for Louis XV's mistress, Madame de Pompadour

FEW INDISPOSITIONS

rival for pleasure the visual indigestion brought about by a surfeit of Sèvres porcelain. The milk-white ceramic body perfected by the porcelain factory of the kings of France in the middle of the 18th century inspired levels of artistry in its makers and decorators unrivalled before or since. Through the genius of its modellers, gilders and painters, Sèvres achieved the ultimate Rococo alchemy, transforming humble clay into the jewel-like accoutrements of princely living at its most unashamedly luxurious.

George William Coventry, Sixth Earl of Coventry, certainly appreciated its glories. His purchases in Paris in the 1760s of items produced in the factories of Sèvres and its forerunner, Vincennes, included a breakfast set decorated with scenes of pastoral life, and vases in several shapes. Coventry's papers, preserved in the Worcester record office, indicate connoisseurship trumping patriotism: among the objects that caught his eye was the wide flower vase known as a *cuvette* Mahon, named to commemorate the seizure of the British-held port on Menorca by French forces in May 1756, at the start of the Seven Years War. As with many obsessions, Coventry's weakness proved decidedly expensive: his journals record multiple shopping sprees within a single week. His second marriage, in 1764, to the heiress Barbara St John, could not have come at a better time both for his bank balance and his hoarding habits.

The aptly named 'Collector Earl' dispatched the fruits of his compulsive acquisitiveness to the family estate of Croome Park, to glitter in exile in the variable sunlight of the Worcestershire countryside. For the better part of two centuries his ceramic collection, which also includes exceptional pieces from the nearby Worcester factory and the German manufactory of Meissen, irradiated the interiors of Croome Court. Following the house's sale in 1948 after the death of the Tenth Earl, these magnificent objects embarked on a second exile. Much was dispersed at auction; the Croome Estate Trust retained only a fifth of the contents, and these too left the house for which they were purchased.

Until now. Visitors to Croome in 2017 can experience again the bravura quality of the Sixth Earl's spendthrift acquisitions. But not as his lordship ever knew them. At the invitation of National Trust curators at the house, the London-based Dutch ceramic artist – and former ceramics conservator – Bouke de Vries has conceived a setting for the Coventry ceramics that recalls the gilded and mirror-lined porcelain chambers of Rococo palaces. His glittering new mini *Porzellankammer*, called the Golden Box, takes the form of a glowing reflective enclosure large enough to walk through. Inside, its walls are lined with the cream of the Coventry porcelain, arranged on invisible Perspex shelves.

The Golden Box stands in the centre of Croome's dining room. In this Grade I-listed Palladian mansion, remodelled, like its setting, in the middle of the 18th century by a youthful Capability Brown, the dining room, empty of its original furniture, forms a final spectacle in visitors' tour of the house. Made of mirrored dye-bond, the Golden Box has a shimmering, barely-there quality from the outside.

Its interior offers a visual glutting of unparalleled richness and lustre.

The selection of pieces was Bouke's own. 'I like to go to quality,' he comments, an impulse that in this instance led him to the most lavish of Lord Coventry's pieces, both English and Continental. He chose Sèvres dessert plates painted with fantastical birds and bouquets of summer flowers in gilded cartouches against the vivid turquoise ground typical of Sèvres of this period. Quite different are the pieces of 'Blind Earl' pattern Worcester china: white plates and dishes moulded in relief with green leaves and stems, sprigs and flowers, a three-dimensional design reputedly inspired by a member of the Coventry family who had lost his sight in a hunting accident. The icy-white ground of Meissen porcelain of a similar date contributes its aloof dazzle. Soft lighting and tiny LED spotlights play over gilded curlicues and the objects' lustrous surfaces. The sole source of artificial light in the room, the box glows like spring sunshine.

There are two entry points to the Golden Box. Visitors approaching see a simple, mirrored geometric shape that reflects the room around it and, from some angles, views over Brown's park beyond the windows. Within the simple rectangle the criss-cross reflections work, Bouke says, 'almost like an infinity mirror'; behind each piece of porcelain mirrors cast reflections on to other pieces and, in turn, other mirrors. Despite differences in style and shape, the ceramics inside the box, sumptuously massed, achieve a glittering visual harmony. 'I chose pieces that worked together colour-wise to prevent it from looking disjointed,' Bouke explains.

As Croome curators anticipated, Bouke's is an unexpected, unpredictable solution to displaying the Sixth Earl's collection. On a sensory level, the box inspires excitement in visitors of all ages, challenging preconceptions about the accessibility and relevance of such elite historic decorative arts. 'Try to make a ten-year-old look at 18th-century porcelain...' Bouke muses. 'Now they walk in and go "Wow!"'

Such a reaction is hardly surprising. Bouke's installation-like solution to Croome's brief was shaped by practical considerations – the impossibility, for example, of any wall mounting in a Grade I-listed room, since this would have involved attaching objects or shelving to surfaces that cannot be drilled or damaged. Yet there is no suggestion here of compromise. Instead, this brave, arresting, strikingly modern approach places these beautiful objects in the very centre of the room, restoring them to something of the status they possessed when Lord Coventry first acquired them from Jean-Jacques Bachelier, director of the Sèvres factory. Unexpected it may be, but the Golden Box successfully acknowledges the impeccable provenance and artistic genius of the items it showcases. It reminds us of the very best aspects of a way of life that was to be destroyed forever by the French Revolution. Croome's skilful redisplay offers new audiences souvenirs of the intoxicating artistry of the finest makers of that ancien régime ■

Croome Court, High Green, Worcs WR8 9DW. For opening times, ring 01905 371006, or visit nationaltrust.org.uk/croome



Opposite: the collection includes pieces from the nearby Worcester manufactory, including the distinctive 3D 'Blind Earl' pattern, with its raised design of leaves and stems. It is said to have been created after a member of the Coventry family lost his sight in a hunting accident