



Fragile Masterpieces

By Roger Grody

Artist Lissi Kaplan brings color and life to delicate porcelain, taking high tea to new heights.

While most painters work with canvases, some apply their skills to wood or metal and others, sometimes controversially, transform buildings. Artist Lissi Kaplan's work is preserved on fragile porcelain, often contemplated over tea service in opulent salons. She is one of the premier porcelain painters in America and her work is coveted by collectors and exclusive hotels.

Born into an artistic family, Los Angeles-based Kaplan was once an aspiring opera singer who studied voice in college, but eventually embraced her creative spirit as an interior designer. With the passing of her mother in 1997, however, she found herself searching for a more personal form of expression, and when she discovered the porcelain collection her mother left her, she

knew she had inherited much more than just table settings.

When Kaplan began painting, it was not only therapeutic during a period when she needed healing, but was also a tribute to her late mother. "I had so many memories of sipping tea with her, so I was happy to be able to create artwork around that ritual," says Kaplan, explaining that her mom was her first voice coach and they would warm up their vocal chords over cups of tea.

"That art form spoke to me... a little painting under glaze forever. I was attracted to porcelain painting because it's functional art and an heirloom that can be passed from generation to generation," explains Kaplan. "There's something about applying a brush to that smooth surface that is very soothing to the spirit.... You almost become one with the porcelain," says Kaplan, who notes the

use of fire adds another layer of magic to the process.

Kaplan has been in constant demand for two decades, commissioned by a wide range of celebrities and institutions. She created a collection for the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, but her bipartisan career also included an exquisite set of porcelain designed for Hillary Clinton. Kaplan prepared hand-painted gifts — porcelain emblazoned with poppies, the State Flower — for visiting dignitaries to California Governor Gray Davis, and her work can be found in the collections of Deepak Chopra, Tony Blair and Madeleine Albright.

When creating tableware for individuals, Kaplan's artistic approach is informed by personal characteristics observed through one-on-one interactions. The bold colors used for Secretary Clinton reflect her strong

personality and convictions, while Mrs. Reagan's collection features softer tones expressed through peonies, a flower beloved by the late First Lady. Kaplan continues to be commissioned by clients seeking table settings with family crests or initials incorporated into ornate designs. In the vanishing art of porcelain painting, a five-piece set can take four months to produce.

Nature has always been one of Kaplan's greatest inspirations, but the flowers and butterflies that populate her table settings are not precise scientific representations. "I think my work resonates with people because the designs are more whimsical and ethereal," explains Kaplan, who suggests that like Chinese brush painting, her art is more about the spirit than science.

Roses, which Kaplan reports are among the most technically challenging images to create on porcelain, appear on a fluted dessert plate with 24-karat gold accents, an ornate Limoges tea table or even a whimsical hand-painted piggy bank that makes a unique baby shower gift. Images of tiger orchids create a dramatic effect and a leopard skin pattern appearing on vases and tea sets is created with gold leaf. Kaplan says this design, originally produced for actress Fran Drescher, is particularly labor-intensive as each of five separate layers of painting



PHOTO BY LINDSEY BAUMSTEIGER

Kaplan applies her art to a three-piece tea set with matching Limoges tea table.



PHOTO BY LINDSEY BAUMSTEIGER

An exquisite hand-painted California wildflower collection elevates the elegance of tea service.

must be fired in the kiln separately.

Grand hotels are among Kaplan's biggest patrons and she was recently commissioned to create a new silver-laced tea collection commemorating the 25th anniversary of The Peninsula Beverly Hills. Other hotels that have served high tea on Kaplan-designed porcelain include The Montage in Beverly Hills and Santa Barbara's El Encanto resort. Today, many renowned hotels opt for mass-produced porcelain, concerned with breakage of the more precious handcrafted items.

Kaplan's first book deal was the direct result of tea service at The Peninsula, when influential literary editor Judith Regan admired the hotel's porcelain, part of a 600-piece original collection Kaplan created for the Beverly Hills hotel. "She looked at my teacups and said, 'This artwork is speaking to me,'" reports the artist, whose book *The Power of a Teacup* (William Morrow, 2003) is personal and heartfelt.

In an era when many of the world's porcelain manufacturers make concessions to mass production — even some producers in the revered village of Limoges, France's capital of artisanal porcelain, now use decals — hand-painted porcelain is truly appreciated. Artists like Kaplan are increasingly rare and

their work viewed as exquisite treasures.

Kaplan is moving into new territories, with her delicate brushwork appearing on textiles and wallpaper. Her most recent book *Light as a Feather* (Little Finch Press, 2016) is an endearing coming-of-age fable whose illustrations create a world of Kaplan's signature pastel etherealness. If the pages look like they were lifted from an opulent tea room, it is because they were, in a sense. Each image was painted onto a porcelain tile, the medium this artist has mastered with great intimacy, then transferred to paper for publication. "When you put your heart into anything you love, it will be felt by others," says Kaplan, an alchemist and dreamer whose passion elevates a cup of tea.



PHOTO BY STEVE REISCH

Lissi Kaplan
lissikaplan.com
818.517.5293