



a collector's life

Charmian Adams has spent the last 40 years buying pieces of contemporary applied art. Here she explains why. Interview by Charlotte Abrahams

'I am a collector of the applied arts,' says Charmian Adams as she leads me up the picture-lined staircase of her Grade 1 listed Regency home. 'The applied arts is a term which includes a very eclectic group of objects – everything from ceramics, silver and glass to jewellery, woodwork and textiles – and my collection of these pieces, most of which have been bought from young makers at the start of their careers, is now regarded as an important representation of the period.'

I nod. I know this already, after all, it's word of her collection that has led me here. Then she opens the door to her living room and I am rendered utterly speechless. The room itself, with its exquisite cornices and three long windows, is a perfect example of Regency elegance and it contains almost all of this notable collection. To my right is a rosewood side board, commissioned in 1970 from Desmond Ryan, a graduate of the Royal College of Art. It houses work by Lucie Rie, Julian Stair and Edmund de Waal. A neckpiece from Wendy Ramshaw's highly acclaimed series *Picasso's Ladies* hangs in the window, refracting chips of sunlight onto Neil Wilkin's magnificent blown glass chandelier, which appears to burst from the ceiling rose. To my left, I can see work by Walter Keeler and glass artist

Sally Fawkes and on the dining table is a fleet of nine silver candleholders by leading silversmith Steve Ottewill. Every maker of note of the last four decades seems to be in this room, as well as many who have yet to become big names.

Adams has always loved beautiful things – she bought a set of hand painted plates with the first £50 she ever earned – but the serious collecting dates back to 1986, when she found herself living near the Crafts Council and various London art schools. She still regards degree shows as the best places to find new talent and visits the group graduate exhibition *New Designers* at the Business Design Centre in London every year. 'I walk all round the show and make a mental note of what to go back to,' she says. 'I have eclectic taste but I am looking for good things, by which I mean things that are original, very well made, genuine and unpretentious.'

Charmian Adams' eye is unfailing. She has a sculptural blown glass piece by Thomas Heatherwick, made before he turned into an international super designer and she bought from ceramicist Katharine Morling's degree show at the RCA. This summer, Morling exhibited her witty and exquisitely realised three dimensional drawings at the Royal Academy's *Summer Exhibition*.





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Everything in this room, and downstairs in her study and bedroom, is important but that is not what interests her. 'I don't go down the flamboyant path looking for the largest or most valuable things,' she says. 'What matters is artistic value and excellent craftsmanship.' Nor is she interested in the idea of legacy. 'I get terribly frustrated by museums and their insistence on longevity and legacy,' she says. 'Things don't have to last forever if they give pleasure now and what I have here is a very private and personal collection which will be passed on to my children.'

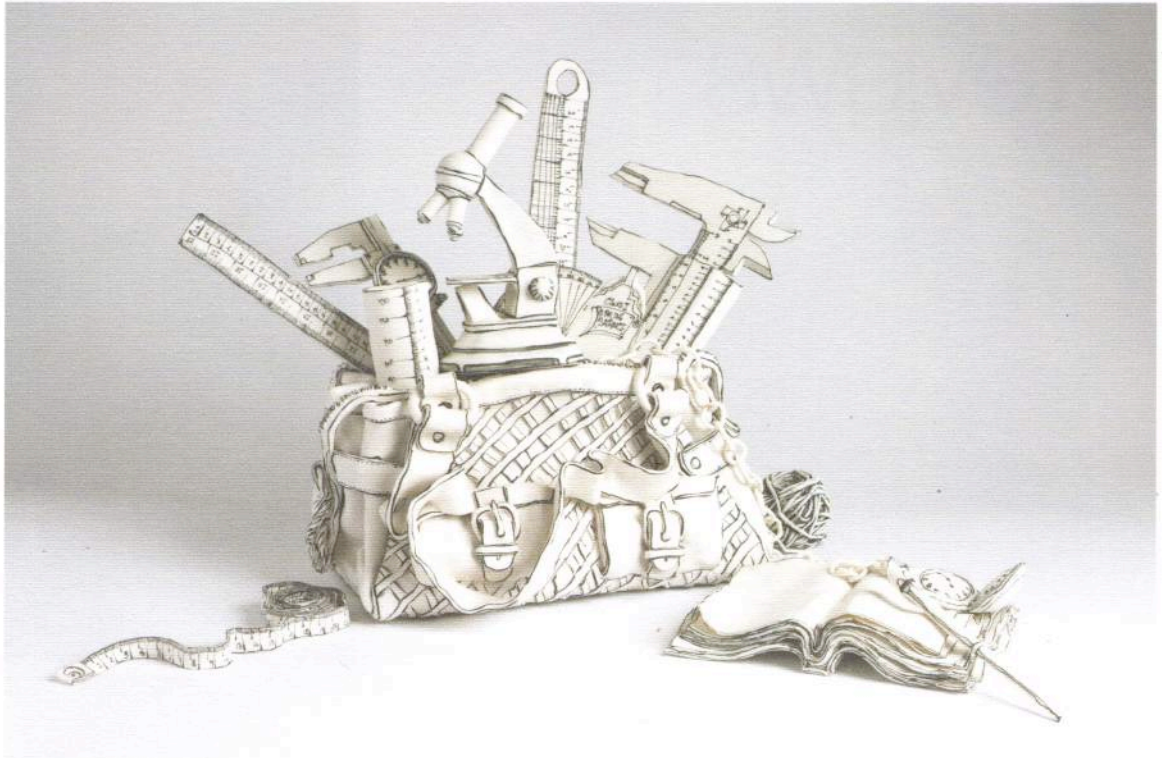
Private it may be, but Adams' operates a generous open door policy to anyone who expresses an interest. And, unlike museum curators, she actively encourages visitors to touch the work. I have barely regained my composure before she hands me an absolutely exquisite Mokume Gane dish made from silver, copper and gilding metal by Alistair McCallum. When we sit down on her yellow sofas (which were bought from *John Lewis* but are now covered in hand quilted fabric designed by Mary Little), I am given a delicious Florentine on a 1920s hand painted Chinese plate. 'It doesn't matter to me whether things are useful,' she says, 'but if they are useful, then I will use them. And I don't shut things in cabinets.'

Owning, using and sharing the work she collects is clearly a source of pleasure but what really motivates Adams is the fact that by buying from makers at the start of their careers, she is providing support at the time when they need it most. She rejects the term patron because it implies that she just hands out money, but she does some very patronly things. For example, she is President of the Gloucestershire Guild of Craftsmen and sponsors the annual *Contemporary British Silversmith Award*. Previous winners of the £1,000 prize include Phil Jordan, Martin Keane, Malin Winberg, Hazel Thorn and Noeleen Logue. This year, the award went to Loucinda Nims from New Bucks University who impressed the judges with her enthusiasm and commitment to silversmithing, as well as the high standard of her work.

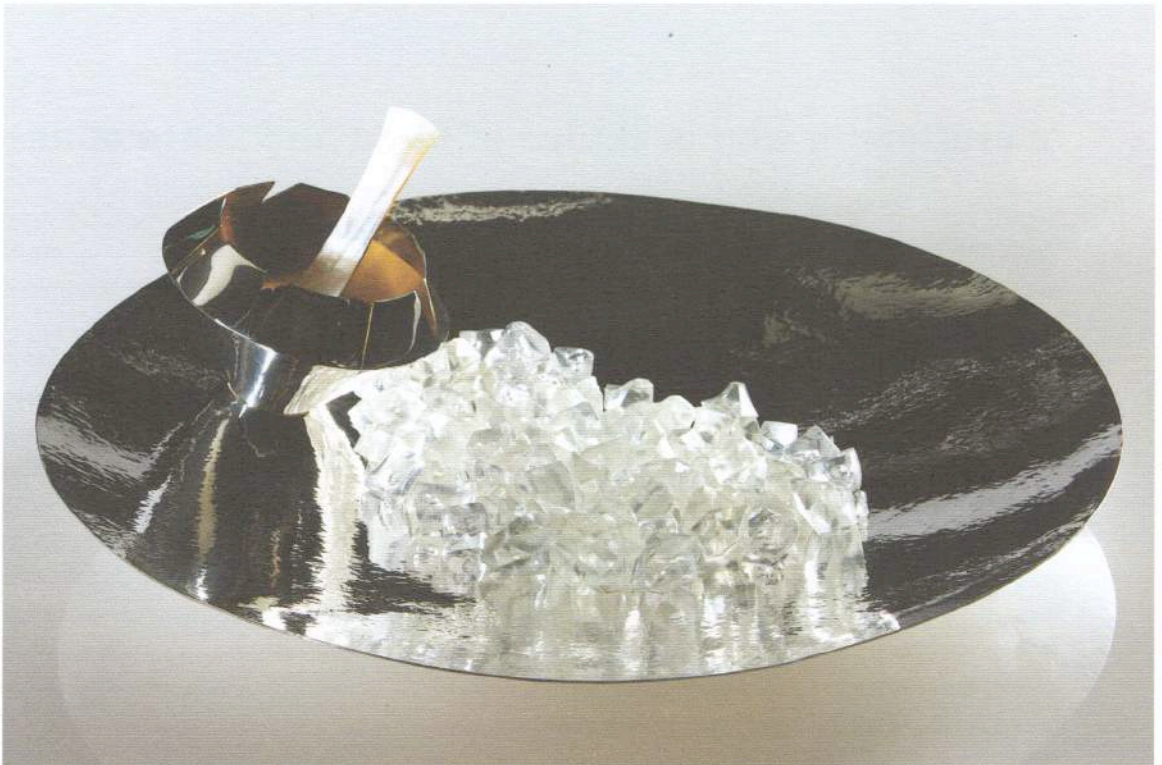
'It is so important to support talented makers,' Adams says. 'I enjoy following their careers and it seems that they in turn are rather thrilled to be part of my collection.'

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charmian adams



everyday exploration by katharine morling



silver caviar bowl by loucinda nims

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