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LIVING

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or find something I really want that brings me
so much joy and – sometimes – frustration.” **LÉA ZANA**



A herd of tiny elephants, more than 300 pairs of shoes and a ban on the purchase of more ceramics: you can trace the story of Vaisselle founder *Léa Zana* through her eclectic personal collections – though, as she readily admits, this is not so much a collection as an obsession

Léa Zana's kitchen is full of items from her Vaisselle brand, including checked candlesticks and jars and pastel-painted crockery – but there's still space to reflect the designer's childhood fascination with toy elephants



Left: A blue-and-green Vaisselle vase takes pride of place in the hallway; below: Zana's grandmother's chair in one of the bedrooms

IN THIS LATEST CHAPTER of 'Grace's Brilliant Career', I am slowly being enveloped by the Jurassic-proportioned leaves of a *Monstera* that appears to have grown straight out of a 1950s horror movie. With one finger, I gingerly position one of the branches so it artfully frames the shot of Vaisselle founder Léa Zana and her orange-eyed cat, Popi. Zana later tells me that she's had this botanical behemoth for almost 30 years. "Since I was eight years old," she says, gleefully. "The same as that *Ficus*." She points to another (slightly less gigantic) plant in the kitchen. "I took them from my parents' garden when I moved to Paris, and then again when I moved to Alicante, and now they are here with me in London."

This leafy king and queen rule over a kingdom of smaller plants that jostle for space on shelves and windowsills. "I've had many of my cacti for over 15 years. They come from..." She pauses, and then says conspiratorially, "I sound like a creep, but whenever I go on holiday, I'll pick up some leaves and plant them when I get home. I actually took one from the Jardin Majorelle in Marrakech, and now it's growing in my bathroom. I say it's my plant from Yves Saint Laurent."

Zana has always been a collector by nature. "But I wouldn't say it's a collection," she corrects me very seriously. "I would say it's an obsession." Her airy apartment in this quiet pocket of north London is filled with proof of her tendency to gather; from the display boxes of sea urchins and shells that she and her husband found while snorkelling, to the multitude of mirrors from such far-flung destinations as Texas, Italy and India (where Zana's father lives). Her home is also awash in linens, cushions and furniture all inherited from her grandparents. "I think it's because I left my parents so young – just 17 years old," she reasons. "I needed to have things from my family to hold onto."

Zana still has her very first collection: a colourful herd of tiny wooden elephants that march endlessly across a cabinet in the guest room. "My parents are hippies, and when I was a toddler, we went to live in Sri Lanka," she recalls. "I didn't have any toys there, so they kept buying me these little elephants. I was *obsessed* with elephants."

Subsequent acquisitions trace the path of Zana's life. Shoes, for instance, signify a time before Vaisselle, when she was working as a footwear designer. She shows me some of her creations, including a sculptural pair stacked on a colourful heel that looks suspiciously like a Twister ice lolly. (It turns out that it actually was part of a collaboration with ice-cream company Wall's.) "At one point, I had 700 pairs of shoes," Zana confides, nodding gravely. "All in my house. I had to give some to charity when I moved here with my husband because it was just crazy. Now I have about 300." She loves Chanel ("Vintage Chanel even better!"), Gucci and Prada, but her favourites are a pair of crystal-embellished Miu Miu Mary Janes that she bought a few years ago. "They are comfy, they have the bling and they are really me. I think everything Miu Miu does is just super-cute."

So what was the route from shoes and sea urchins to ceramics? "It's all because of my grandmother, Janine," says Zana. "When



Clockwise from left: Zana and her pet cat Popi take centre stage in the open-plan living room, where the shelves host an eye-catching butterfly mirror from India; the bathroom décor is augmented by vintage glass bottles and a bevelled mirror; the designer's Twister-ice-lolly-inspired shoes sit on the stairs that lead up to the bedroom and roof terrace



I was a kid, I lived a lot with my grandparents in a small town in southwest France. Every Sunday, Janine would take me with her when she visited the local flea markets. And I *hated* it." She laughs. "It was dirty, she was just talking with all the other old people, and for me that was a nightmare. But she had an eye for the nice things." She pauses, then adds fondly, "Janine was definitely a hoarder." And while Zana insists *she* is not a hoarder, she does seem to have a lot of plates. And jugs. There's also a vitrine filled with bowls, egg cups and vases. "I am not allowed to buy ceramics anymore," she says, very seriously. "Whenever we go on holiday, my husband has to stop me."

To be fair to Zana, there's no suggestion that their home feels like a junkyard. OK, there are a lot of plant pots, but then she has a lot of plants. "It's because I make sure everything is separate," she says, knowingly. "You see, if you put them all together, it's like a crazy collection. But if you disperse them, it's more normal."

And it's not only ceramics. Crowds of colourful glass bottles are interspersed between the pots and vases, while bulbous demijohn jars squat in various bright corners. Some of these are flea-market discoveries, unearthed in Paris and the Cotswolds. Others come from Zana's husband's family. "His great-grandfather had a glass museum in Catalonia, but I don't know much about that because it's his side," >



"MY GRAN WOULD TAKE ME TO THE FLEA MARKETS. AND I HATED IT"



The living room features another mirror from India and – on the side table – more Vauisselle ceramics



Right: A blue-and-white Vauisselle vase is tucked alongside the green chemist's bottle, Zana's favourite piece from her glass collection; far right: the head-shaped Sicilian vase, named Leonie after Zana's great-grandmother, is the designer's most treasured ceramic



“I WANTED TO DO SOMETHING FOR ME... WORST-CASE SCENARIO: I'D HAVE LOADS OF PLATES!”



she says, waving a vague hand. “But every time we go back to visit his mum and we have space in the suitcase, we bring one back. I always worry they might break, but so far, so good.”

Her favourite glass creation – located in what she refers to as the “blue room” – is a vintage green chemist’s bottle. “This is the most beautiful, the most interesting,” she says, after dashing lightly down the hall to fetch it. “I always find amazing things like this in Paris.”

This seems to be a recurring theme throughout Zana’s various collections: if something is not from her family’s archive, it has been discovered somewhere on her travels or purchased from a craftsperson. “I am really drawn to handmade things,” she explains. “My sofa and lots of my clothes are new. But my decorations? No. If there’s no story behind it, I don’t like it.”

For Zana, part of the thrill of collecting is in the chase. “It’s that sensation when I have an idea or find something that I want,” she explains. “It’s such an intense feeling that brings me so much joy and, sometimes, so much frustration. There’s a lot of emotion involved.”

Can she pick a favourite find? “Leonie, my head,” she says without hesitation, proudly pointing to the serene head-shaped vase on the shelf behind me. “I love her. I named her after my great-grandmother. These types of ceramics come from Sicily and I’ve always wanted to bring one back, but have been too scared that it will break. But four years ago, I found Leonie in London. Now she is my most special piece.”

Of course, Zana also has a rotating selection of Vauisselle pieces interspersed throughout her possessions – although not as many as I might have expected. “Between the design process and the development, I get bored of them really quickly,” she says. “But some I like more over time.” She points to a checked item on the shelf. “For example, that one. I don’t think I’m going to switch it for a while because I just love it.”

I always like hearing that someone has turned something they really care about into a career. “Oh, my collection is my inspiration, 200 per cent,” says Zana, smiling back up at Leonie. “Every time I look at each

piece, I see a different detail or become obsessed with reproducing a certain colour. During lockdown, I was looking at them all so much that I felt they were telling me a story.”

Being made redundant from a job in fashion (a situation compounded by, you know, the global pandemic, when she was trapped in her flat for months on end) was the catalyst for Zana to finally make the move from collecting ceramics to designing them herself. “I wanted to do something for me, no pressure. Worst-case scenario: I just have loads of plates!”

Almost two years in, she is successfully running her business entirely via her phone (she doesn’t own a laptop and has no plans to get one – “I hate machines!”). She uses WhatsApp video calls to communicate with the Córdoba-based husband-and-wife duo who craft her designs by hand. “They have done ceramics all their lives – between them, they have 70 years of experience. They know everything about colour. But,” she says, seriously, “I’m really annoying. All the shades we use have to be developed especially for me. But this is good. It’s a challenge.”

Unquestionably, laptop or no, Zana is officially transmitting her obsession with ceramics out into the world. And the name of one of Vauisselle’s most popular designs? Janine, naturally. □



Scan the QR code to shop Léa Zana's Vauisselle ceramics