



POTTERY 3.0



If ceramicist Josiah Wedgwood were alive today, how would the innovative entrepreneur adapt his much-celebrated brand to modern tech and tastes? GRACE CAIN goes on a journey of discovery

IF YOU’VE EVER SCROLLED through the comments of your local Facebook group, you’ll know what I mean when I say you can’t please everyone. The same can be said of Wedgwood’s social media accounts. Ever since the brand began posting neon-hued vases and paint-splattered tea sets, the response has largely consisted of heart emojis and comments such as “NEED THIS”. However, not everyone has been so enthusiastic. “Josiah [Wedgwood] must be rolling over in his grave,” writes one disgruntled follower. But (I think, as I restrain myself from replying to a total stranger on the internet) would he really? After all, this was a man who lived by the mantra ‘everything gives way to experiment’ – and his drive for innovation has always been at the heart of this historic brand.

“When I first started researching Josiah, I really got a sense of his entrepreneurial spirit, radical approach and philanthropic attitude,” says Alice Bastin, Wedgwood’s creative director for a little over 18 months. And as an alumna of fashion brands including Celine and Alexander McQueen, she brings the forward-looking perspective that has powered the brand’s latest moves. “I began to apply a philosophy of: ‘What would Josiah do?’” she explains. “If he were alive today, what would Wedgwood stand for as a brand? What would we sell? What new technologies would we be utilising?”

Bastin and her team believe that the answer to the last question is Web 3.0. In the digital realm, Wedgwood’s creations can exist far beyond the current physical >

limitations and complexities of ceramic. When Josiah Wedgwood first developed jasperware, in the 1770s, it took him several years and thousands of experiments to achieve the right finish. You can still see the results of these tests today in the vast V&A Wedgwood Collection in Barlaston, Stoke-on-Trent – trays and trays of meticulously marked and numbered fragments, arranged in palettes of powdery greens, blues and lilacs. Josiah Wedgwood was always constrained in the colours he could achieve; Bastin and Assaf Reeb's XXII Studio (with whom the brand collaborated to produce its NFTs) are not. A combination of 3D scanning and clever coding mean the brand's famous Portland vase can now zing in orange or lime green. "I'm very drawn to the neoclassical artworks in the Wedgwood archive, and how these can be juxtaposed with pop colours," says Bastin.

It's a very 'What would Josiah do?' approach. The Portland vase – which the potter referred to as his "great work" – was itself an example of old-meets-new experimentation. Wedgwood's 18th-century version is a copy; the original vase is a cameo glass vessel that was discovered in a Roman tomb. After Josiah Wedgwood

managed to borrow it from its owner, the Duke of Portland, he dedicated the latter years of his career to creating an iteration in jasperware. As well as proving his factory's technical and artistic superiority, Wedgwood knew that it would appeal to the neoclassical sensibilities of his customers thanks to a slew of high-profile Greek and Roman archaeological finds. Ancient-core (if I may use the modern vernacular) was all the rage.

This ability to tap into contemporary trends was one of the keys to Wedgwood's success – although savvy marketing also helped. Josiah Wedgwood completely understood the importance of having your products seen with the right people in the right places. Today, he'd have the pick of Instagram and TikTok; in the 1760s, the height of influence was the British Royal Court, and when Queen Charlotte commissioned a creamware tea set, Wedgwood #gifted a crate of extra samples that ultimately led to more orders and the official title 'Potter to Her Majesty'. And if you've guessed that Josiah Wedgwood was the type of person who would include that accolade on every order and every invoice, you'd be correct – were he working today, it would definitely be in his Instagram bio.

Getty Images/Wedgwood

Josiah Wedgwood was also very open to working with both the celebrated and the upcoming artists of his day, among them George Stubbs (he of horse-painting fame) and the neoclassical sculptor John Flaxman. This collaborative spirit has remained a cornerstone of Wedgwood's DNA, propelling the brand through two centuries of changing tastes – from the early-1900s Arts and Crafts aesthetic of Alfred and Louise Powell to Daisy Makeig-Jones' Art Nouveau era and more recent partnerships, including Sheila Bridges and Vera Wang – and now, of course, boundary-pushing label Charles Jeffrey Loverboy.

This latest pairing does feel like another vibe shift in Wedgwood's long history. Fashion designer Charles Jeffrey is known for his subversive post-punk optimism, proudly queer approach and gender-inclusive designs. His take on jasperware is typically radical: the music video that accompanies his collection shows Jeffrey, his bandmates (the multidisciplinary artist Robert Fox and musician Tom Furse) and some very '80s haircuts striding into the Barlaston factory, where they proceed to scribble over vases while paint splashes fly everywhere. The result?

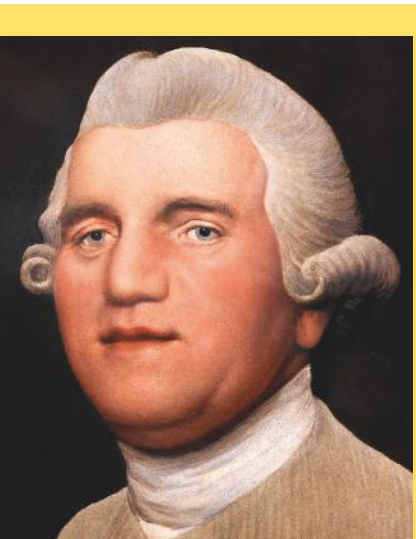
A newly colourful set of Wedgwood-blue teapots, teacups and plates, each one a unique work of art. Wedgwood returned the favour, giving Jeffrey more preloved pieces for his 'These New Caroleans' SS24 menswear show, where set designer and artist David Curtis-Ring used blue jasper dishes and christening spoons to construct body armour, a sword and a lion-head-shaped helmet.

So, returning to our original question: what would Josiah Wedgwood think of the brand that bears his name in 2023? Well, it's innovative, it's collaborative and it's certainly got people talking. Tick, tick and tick. And for Bastin, Josiah Wedgwood's philosophy gives her licence to develop the brand for a world he couldn't have envisioned in his lifetime. "At the crux of Wedgwood's legacy is Josiah's ability to be respectful to history while creating a modern way to reinvent stories of the past," she says. "This has empowered me. It's given me permission to move the brand forward, because cultural relevance and innovation are what Wedgwood was built upon." □



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Josiah Wedgwood I (above) comes from a family of potters in the ceramic-producing region of Staffordshire known as the Potteries, so perhaps he is destined to establish his own business, which he does this year. And in less than a decade, his creations garner favour with the British Royal Court, earning him the title 'Potter to Her Majesty'.

1759



The best example of Josiah's inventive spirit is also his most famous: jasperware (below, right). In 1774, after thousands of experiments, this revolutionary type of unglazed stoneware first appeared in fashionable shades of green, lilac, yellow and (of course) light blue.

1774



1790

It takes five years of tests and trials, but in 1790, Josiah is finally ready to launch his jasper copy of the Roman cameo glass vessel, which is known as the Portland vase (shown far right as an NFT). He marks the occasion with an exhibition designed to display his factory's skill, and refers to the vase as "my great work". And as (left) this London-based Wedgwood china shop shows, by the early 19th century, business is brisk.



1851

Wedgwood exhibits at the Great Exhibition of 1851 following a period of financial hardship. In the decades that follow, a new generation of Wedgwoods ensure the company's rejuvenation, working with innovative young artists to produce painterly pieces with mass appeal.



1931

Daisy Makeig-Jones' fairy-tale-inspired lustreware (left) dominated Wedgwood's output in the early 20th century, but in 1931, she is asked to retire as Josiah Wedgwood V takes over. The subsequent years bring yet another artistic resurgence, and in 1940, the company will ultimately move from its old premises (far left) to a purpose-built factory in Barlaston.



2023

From acid-hued NFTs (below) to limited-edition collabs (left) with designers David Curtis-Ring and Charles Jeffrey (who also created a teacup and saucer, below left), Wedgwood enters a new era of boundary-pushing artistry, with one question remaining the guiding principle for current creative director Alice Bastin: 'What would Josiah do...?'

