

Playing with Fire: Edmund de Waal and Axel Salto

22 November 2025 – 4 May 2026

Contemporary British artist and potter Edmund de Waal (born 1964, Nottingham) has selected and curated this exhibition of artwork by 20th century Danish ceramicist Axel Salto.

Edmund has also made new ceramic works for the exhibition, including an installation of porcelain vessels and tiles.

"I love Salto's work and his ideas, his generosity. He loved clay. And he loved words and colour and texture, how lines unfold and trace ideas. He loved storytelling in poetry and music. He loved play and was a powerful advocate for art in children's lives. I am a potter and a writer, and this is my response to him." Edmund de Waal.

AXEL SALTO BIOGRAPHY

1889: Born in Copenhagen, Denmark

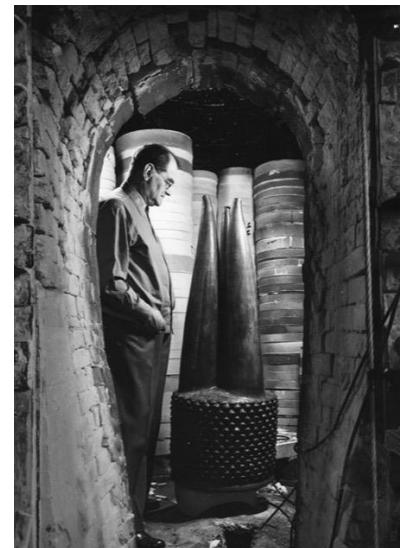
1909-1914: Studied at Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts.

1916: Visited Paris where he met Picasso and Matisse who were big influences.

1920s: Lived and worked in Paris where his work shifted from painting to ceramics. Worked as a designer for ceramics companies, learning his craft.

1933 – 1961: Worked with The Royal Porcelain factory in Copenhagen. Exhibited in cities around Europe and in New York and won major prizes for his work.

1961: Died in Denmark.



NATURAL FORMS

Salto took his ideas from nature, saying, "It is important for an artist to create in the spirit of nature rather than to imitate its outward appearance."

His ceramic shapes and surfaces fall into three styles; fluted, budding and sprouting. The budding and fluted forms come from details in nature, such as a chestnut's spiky casing, an acorn, or a shell.





The sprouting style refers to what he called the "miracle of growth", reflecting the "life force that springs out of nature".

DRAW: Choose what you think are one budding, one fluted and one sprouting pot. Make observational drawings of the three different styles of pot. What natural forms do they remind you of?

TRANSFORMATION

The Kiln, built in the centre of Gallery 7, is a dark space, crowded with pots. The space is similar to the kiln where they would have been fired to harden the clay and transform the surfaces with coloured glazes.



Salto wrote about the sense of anticipation and anxiety as he opened the kiln. This moment of transformation is at the heart of Salto's work. He described it as 'the burning now' - the moment when one thing becomes another.

"The glazes look as if they are still flowing, still in motion. These are pots that seem alive: Salto loved the way that flaws can be transformed into beauty. He is uninterested in perfection or safety - he likes to play with fire..." Edmund de Waal

FEEL: Outside the Kiln space are enormous jars made by Edmund de Waal. He has given visitors permission to touch them! Close your eyes and feel the rough, scratched surfaces. What words would you use to describe the texture?

PLAY

Play is a process which Salto and de Waal both believe is the source of creativity.

"Play is a kind of risk, a way of trying things out, a making a mess and then a delight in bringing odd things together again." Edmund de Waal.

Salto used repetition, making multiple similar marks to create his patterns. He recommended this use of repetition, encouraging both children and adults to use carved inking stamps to produce patterns.

DISCUSS: Think of a time when you experimented with a new material or way of working. What risks did you take? How do you think you can learn from playing?