

# Laurent Craste: Disjunctions

Written by **Pascale Beaudet Ph. D.**

**D**ecapitated, flayed, pierced, crushed, hung, disemboweled, trampled, and collapsed—such are the torments Laurent Craste visits upon his works. The vases sometimes incorporate the instrument of their torture: crowbar, screwdriver, knife, bat, axe, wrench, brick. Here I examine the various operative aspects of Craste's *SéVICES* series. Produced between 2008 and 2016, it is his most important work to date.

A ceramicist and video-maker, Craste stretches the limits of his discipline while deconstructing the decorative codes that informed eighteenth- and nineteenth-century objects. Trained in traditional ceramic technique, he makes a stealth run against his acquired virtuosity to create new artifacts, objects that retain decorative value even as they interrogate its meaning.

Innovation cannot be solely predicated on varying the decorative motifs on the vase: its form must also be fashioned. Many contemporary ceramicists still draw on the repertoire of historical vases and plates whilst more or less altering the themes, by adding a death's head, for instance, or scenes of war. Conversely, some reinvent the ceramic support, decorating it with traditional motifs. In his *SéVICES* ("torments" or "abuse"), Craste is mainly inspired by the Sèvres vase in its simplest form, bearing relatively few ornamental details and, often, no figurative scene. First presented in pairs, following historical precedents, and then singly, his vases are deformed, whether by the very tools of their desecration, a crushing gesture, or some internal force.

With respect to Sèvres vases, the exercise is one of inspiration rather than imitation. The copies are neither identical nor perfect, and the goal is above all to pastiche the productions of an era. The ornaments are taken from various sources, especially furniture, but architecture as well. As for the artist's preferred decorative

period, he largely focuses on the nineteenth century, its exacerbated and manifest eclecticism and haphazard addition of unrelated styles.

## Tool as Ornament

As for the tools and their victimized vases, a breach comes into play between the delicacy of the vases and the objects' toughness, as well as between their respective periods of manufacture: the Sèvres vase and its design going back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, against the twentieth-century factory-made tool. This temporal shift signifies the dismissal of prior centuries of *savoir-faire*. The violent act cites social upheavals, the French revolutions of 1789, 1830, and 1848, while also testifying to radical changes in the critical appreciation of ornamentation.

*Ornement et Crime VI* has an axe buried near its neck. Decapitation with an axe—a weapon of war—was once considered an honorable form of execution by aristocrats. The vase is impressive in its construction and by its height: slightly off-kilter, placed on a round base, and impressively decorated with lion and gorgon masks, palm leaves, ram heads, foliage. Intersecting in a dual movement are references to ornamentation and its condemnation, on the one hand, and to French royalty and its dramatic end, on the other. The destructive axe becomes, by an unexpected turn, a new type of ornament—or anti-ornament.

In each of the works in the *SéVICES* series, a violent act is perpetrated on a ceramic vase or recipient and the divide between social classes is reiterated. Religious, artistic and political registers collide. The torments refer, for instance, to the torture inflicted on early Catholic martyrs, such as laid out in Antonio Gallonio's *Tortures and Torments of the Christian Martyrs*, published in 1591. The latter informs us of the said tortures: "amputating women's breasts, cutting

**Ornement et Crime VI.**  
2016, Porcelain, glaze, axe  
122.5 x 52 x 40 cm





**Dépouille au camaïeu sentimental I**, 2012,  
Porcelain, glaze,  
écals, gold, nails,  
46.5 x 37.5 x 15 cm

of the tongue, detaching feet and hands, pulling of the teeth, flaying Christians alive, piercing them, and exposing them to wild beasts”.

The best known torture is likely that of z Sebastien, the Roman soldier and Christian convert who was tied to a column and shot through with arrows. Andrea Mantegna transformed him into a canon of male beauty. Other martyrs were less well represented; Saint Denis, for instance, who carried his decapitated head to his tomb, was sculpted in Notre-Dame Cathedral’s Portal of the Virgin, in Paris. Saint Lawrence was tied to a burning gridiron, his martyrdom depicted by Titian, among others. Saint Bartholomew was skinned alive and represented by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Not to speak of Christ’s crucifixion and His various wounds . . . It is what French philosopher Michel Onfray called the martyrological jubilation of Catholicism. Brought up within it, Craste would have had many memories of this religious and artistic tradition.

*Représailles II* cites both royalty, with its gold fleur de lys, and the crucifixion. The spindle vase is crucified by its rosette handles. On its body, reiterating the allusion to royalty, a wreath motif forms a cartouche decorated with a palmette and fleur de lys. Somewhat deformed, it yawns open slightly where the cover meets the vase, suggesting a half-open mouth: here the vase is a metaphor for the tortured body. The traditional form of the Sèvres vase is as extinct today as French royalty; one cannot say the same for Catholicism, which, while less dominant than in the eighteenth century, remains an active force in French and Quebecois society.

### Fall of Royalty

The magnificent Sèvres vases produced by the Manufacture royale de Sèvres (though not only by them) were definitely intended for the privileged and, before the revolution, for the royal family and French nobility. We know Louis XVI was decapitated by guillotine, and many other aristocrats suffered the same fate. However, there were some whose bodies were subject to further desecrations, the princess of Lamballe among them, in a postmortem decapitation to which *Vase Princesse de Lamballe II* refers.

The princess of Lamballe organized the pleasures of Marie-Antoinette. Imprisoned during the revolution, she was taken out of her cell and executed with pike and sabre. Decapitated, her head was stuck on a pike and brandished at Marie-Antoinette’s windows. The covered vase with “feminine” decor of garlands and shells is a first incursion toward the form of Craste’s *Dépouille*—“remains” or “hide”—pieces: the

vase begins to flatten, leaving a part of its body attached to the wall. Suggesting (though not literally) the torments of Madame de Lamballe, it is nearly split in two.

The most gripping encapsulations in this series are to be found among the *Dépouille* and *Carcasse* sculptures. In these works, reminiscent at once of martyrology and of Rembrandt’s *Slaughtered Ox*, the vases take on an animal aspect, their “skin” splayed out on the wall, offering their coloured flesh to our gaze. The vase feet change into paws, as if under the transformative spell of a Greek god. Beyond that, some vases offer a traced decor, as in *Dépouille au camaïeu sentimental*. Wim Delvoye tattooed pigs; Laurent Craste decorates his pseudo flayings with light-hearted eighteenth-century scenes: a young man excitedly discovers a sleeping, faux shepherdess, her breasts laid bare. Centred squarely on the vase, the main motif can be read as a painting, identical though diminishing motifs being repeated on the base, body, and neck, as if the vase surface were truly flattened onto the wall. The vase is sparsely decorated: only some gilding adds luster to the grey monotone. In choosing this scene, the artist is criticizing the aristocrats’ idealized vision of pastoral life and their refusal to see the peasantry’s abject reality, which provoked the 1789 revolution. The skinned vase figures the fallen aristocrat brought to the guillotine. At the same time, the polished craftsmanship testifies to know-how going back to the eighteenth century and carried on by the Manufacture royale de Sèvres. Craste’s work is anything but unequivocal.

### The Fall of Ornamentation

In art history, the status of the ornament has varied, but it has been judged essentially on the basis of morality or social position. The denunciation of ornamentation was emphatically expressed in the early twentieth century in a collection of texts by architect Adolf Loos, *Ornament and Crime*, published in 1931. This rejection, however, for the most part concerned façades—inside, Loos set no restriction, for instance, on textured surfaces or veined marble. His preface to the collection is terse: “I have emerged victorious from my thirty years of struggle. I have freed mankind from superfluous ornament. ‘Ornament’ once signified ‘beautiful.’ Today, thanks to my life’s work, it signifies something ‘of inferior value.’” Craste cites Loos, particularly in the titles Adolf Loos’ *Wet Dream* and *Ornement et crime*, and these citations translate the artist’s ambivalence toward ornamentation and its condemnation by twentieth-century formalism.

If visual arts and architecture have condemned ornamentation (a position that was revised in post-modern architecture and then passed by altogether, to the extent that the shapes of contemporary skyscrapers have become ornaments unto themselves), the crafts have generally preserved a favorable attitude toward decoration.

Ornamentation has been consubstantial with creative work among craftsmen, particularly since the eighteenth century. If a reaction took place following the decorative excess of that era, and other trends, advancing a purer aesthetic, have emerged, the tradition remains powerfully prescriptive nonetheless. Educated with the greatest respect for this decorative tradition, Craste brings it into question, thanks in part to the influence of contemporary visual arts. He is somewhat at odds with his discipline, creating perfect vases, which he strives to transform without destroying.

Inserting objects into his vases, deforming them by crushing them under his feet, Craste must develop an inverse virtuosity, must perfect techniques of constructive destruction. The limits of the plasticity of the vases are thoroughly tested, incurring many losses. Gaining a keen familiarity with the resistance threshold of clay, Craste has developed an as yet unheard of specialty.

### The Fall

In fact, it is not exclusively a matter of torments inflicted on Christians and aristocrats, but, more generally, of physical and psychological suffering common to human beings and the infliction of violence of all kinds. *Petit affaissement*, for instance, refers to depression, as the vase collapses on itself. *La fin d'une potiche* reproduces a suicide scene, a pedestal table thrown on the ground and the vase hung from the neck, inclined like that of hung person. Immolation recalls the sacrificial ceremonies of the Aztecs, where priests tore out their victims hearts. And even in a work that would appear to be more neutral, *Étude de ruine à la manière de Piranèse*, the body of the vase is gnawed, as if cut up or eviscerated. The object of the artist's reflections is, ultimately, the vast repertoire of abuse that human beings invent to torment their enemies and themselves. The pain here isn't gory, but it is deeply present. And faultlessly expressed.

These torments were present in other forms in the artist's prior work: in *Assiette de Christs*, produced in 2007, a video is projected onto a ceramic plate in which the artist takes up the pose of the crucifixion until he can't hold it any longer; in *Les vases communicants*, a video cast

onto a vase, the artist digs soil until exhausted. Although the performances created for these works required different strategies than the sculptures, a correspondence certainly exists between the self-inflicted sufferings of the first works and those wreaked upon the vases in the *SéVICES* series. All these torments are not without an underlying humour, most often evinced in the titles, though sometimes also in the works themselves, setting the main subject at a distance while enriching its meaning. ■

### About the Author

Pascale Beaudet has a Ph. D. in art history from the Université de Rennes 2 (France). She is an independent curator, author and lecturer. She worked as project manager for the Percent for Art Policy of the Province of Quebec. Among other positions, she has been curator of the Musée d'art de Joliette (Canada), and lecturer at UQAM (Montreal, Canada) and Ottawa University (Ottawa, Canada). As a curator, she has developed more than 20 contemporary art exhibitions. In 2009, she curated 2 international biennials: an outdoor sculpture

symposium at the Fondation Derouin (Val-David, Canada) and the Biennale internationale du lin de Portneuf (Deschambault, Canada). She will be one of the curators of Art souterrain in March 2018 (Montreal, Canada). As an author, she has written numerous texts on modern and contemporary art, and many have been published in exhibition catalogs. Magazines such as *Ceramics: Art & Perception*, *Critique d'art* (Rennes, France), *C Magazine* (Toronto, Canada) and *Esse* (Montreal, Canada) have published her articles.

Below: *Représailles II*, 2013,  
Porcelain, glaze, nails  
50 x 25.1 x 12 cm

Right: *Princesse de Lamballe II*, 2011,  
Vase, 50 x 25.1 x 12 cm



