

The commission

As an ancient gold ewer with a problematic provenance is returned to Turkey, silversmith Adi Toch honours its story with a new intervention at the V&A. *Isabella Smith* hears more



ANTONIA BOSTRÖM
Director of collections, V&A

I was visiting Adi Toch's east London studio with patrons from our Director's Circle, when out of the blue she asked me what had happened to the Anatolian gold ewer held by the V&A. I couldn't speak freely, as the discovery of its problematic provenance was highly confidential. This fact was unearthed by Jacques Schuhmacher, provenance curator for the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Collection. Jacques discovered that the dealer who sold

the ewer to the collector Arthur Gilbert in 1989 was involved in the trade of illicit antiquities. Experts established that it had been illegally excavated and exported from Turkey; Gilbert had been deceived as to its provenance. Because of the 1983 National Heritage Act, the V&A can't restitute its objects without an Act of Parliament. But as the ewer belonged to the Gilbert Trust for the Arts, the situation was different; it's a unique case.

Adi's question that day sparked an idea. What if she created an object in homage to the ewer – an object that could be left behind as its legacy? The Gilbert Trust felt that the ewer's presence needed to be acknowledged within the Gilbert Collection, so they commissioned Adi to create a piece in response.

The result, *Place to Place*, is remarkable – not least because of the depth of research she

poured into understanding the ewer. The artwork is now displayed in The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Galleries alongside a film featuring Adi and Jacques, which gives background to the artistic concept and its execution, alongside Jacques' explanation of the ewer's return. There is also an accompanying publication, featuring contributions by Edmund de Waal and Adi.

In October, the original ewer went on display in the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations in Ankara. The story was covered heavily in the Turkish press, and met with a hugely positive response – they are proud to have it back on home ground. vam.ac.uk

From above left: Adi Toch handling the ancient ewer; the silversmith creating her response to the historic object; the final piece, *Place to Place*, 2021



ADI TOCH
Silversmith

I first came across the ancient gold ewer during a handling session in 2015 and connected with it immediately. It's roughly 4,250 years old and was hand-raised – a technique that I use today – from a single sheet of gold, with a pattern embossed on its lower half. It has a rounded bottom, which made sense in a time before tables, and bears a swastika (the ancient symbol of the sun) on its base. It's surprisingly heavy yet the rims are almost paper-thin. After

that first encounter, I became obsessed and kept returning to see it.

The ewer was made by a metalsmith of the Hattian people in Anatolia (modern-day Turkey), probably for ritual purposes, somewhere between 2500 and 2000 BC. Such objects were often buried with the dead to accompany them into the afterlife.

In 2019, I tried to book a handling session, as I'd often done before, but was told that the ewer was unavailable. Antonia Boström explained that, as its provenance had come under suspicion, it was being given to the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations. This prompted a conversation about how we could convey its narrative to the public. I was asked to propose a piece in response to the ewer, then began working in the greatest secrecy, as the story was strictly under embargo.

The ewer was made before we developed the technology to separate metals, so it's an alloy: 90% gold, 9% silver and 1% copper. I decided to recreate this same alloy and make my piece using techniques that the Hattian goldsmith would have used. It's missing its spout, and this seemed symbolic of the ewer's lost direction, ending up here in London.

I decided to make a funnel: a vessel with two openings, which I view as a generous form because it contains fluid, yet lets it pass through. It represents in-betweenness and transition, so I titled it *Place to Place*. The inside is highly polished, to give it a reflective, liquid-like surface. I placed it on a cube of chalcedony, a stone I sourced from Turkey. My aim was to trigger a conversation about the movement and hierarchy of objects. aditoch.com



Toch: photos Ros Atkinson | Ewer: photo Margaret Conroy