An Aftertaste of Afghanistan in the White House Dining Room

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Earlier this year, when Anna Weatherley delivered her magnolia-patterned china set to the White House, the accompanying spate of profiles covered every aspect of her career--except one: gun runner. Was it true, as the whispers around Washington had it, that she had a secret history as a gun-runner in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan? Not quite, although the truth is just as curious.

Weatherley was no Soldier-of-Fortune radical or a Patty Hearst-styled weekend warrior. Her focus, she says, was always on design.

A few years before the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, Weatherley, a fashionable, mini-skirted Washingtonian, followed her eye for style to Kabul to search out guns, fabric, and furniture, which she sold to shops and private buyers in Australia. "I'd buy and ship these great 19th-century guns that the British left behind, beautiful guns with ivory and mother-of-pearl," she says. "I was naïve and inexperienced."

Did she ever cross paths with Congressman Charlie Wilson, the Texas Democrat whose back-room efforts to finance the mujahideen were the subject of a 2008 film starring Tom Hanks and Julia Roberts? "No. It really had nothing to do with the Afghan war. I was there before Afghanistan was the place to go. Kabul was a fairy-tale place then, and I felt very secure and safe there. It breaks my heart now with all that's going on there."

In the bazaars of Kabul, Weatherley quickly ran through antique-gun supply. "I wasn't an expert," she says. "But I knew these guns were beautiful and decorative. I became such a successful gun buyer that the dealers realized that this was something wonderful. Kabul was just an isolated place then. I was more or less a pioneer."

Weatherley's well-heeled customers, she says, had never seen guns like hers. When she exhausted their stock, bazaar merchants recognized the hot commodity and fooled buyers by removing mother-of-pearl buttons from clothing and gluing them onto ordinary firearms.

With her supplies exhausted, she dropped guns and picked up chiffon. In Washington during the 1970s and 80s, Weatherley had built a successful dress-design business, creating one-of-a-kind garments out of hand-painted, hand-embroidered silk. Elizabeth Taylor, Lady Bird Johnson, and a roll call of D.C.'s stylish doyennes picked up pieces at her townhouse near Watergate or at upscale stores like Henri Bendel and Saks. "Anyone who was anyone in Washington came to buy my dresses," she says. "This was when Washington society was grand. I hope it comes back, but I'm afraid it's gone forever."

Washington's hostesses still turn to Weatherley for a touch of grandeur, but now it's for their tabletops. Her current venture is hand-painted porcelain dinnerware, sold at 400 stores across the country but also available in one-of-a-kind designs, just like her dresses used to be. When the Princess of Wales made a trip to the capital, Katharine Graham held a luncheon in her honor and gave specially commissioned Weatherley porcelain as gifts to guests. The same visit prompted Anna Wintour to place an order for a present for Princess Diana. Weatherley, who specializes in detailed flower patterns reminiscent of 18th-century European botanical illustrations, produced a pair of cachepots decorated with pears, cherries, and gooseberries in the style of well-known British illustrators for a subtle U.K. theme.

Weatherley's custom-order clients might be able to specify exactly what they want, but that doesn't mean they get it quickly. A native of Hungary, she employs 60 master painters there to execute her designs. It's painstaking work; one plate takes two days to paint, and a large dinner set might take as long as three months. "People don't buy plates because they need plates," she says. "Having something hand-painted is a dying art. Nowhere in the world can people do such fine work. I have older workers ... and when they are gone, it's over."

And then there's the First Family. When they arrived at the White House, the Obamas were already furnished with 75 seven-piece place settings of the Magnolia Residence China Service, featuring magnolia blossoms, butterflies, and insects in a design inspired by the flora and fauna found on the White House grounds. The dinner set, which cost $74,000, was delivered during the last week of the Bush administration and never used. "I hope the Obamas like it and use it," Mrs. Bush told reporters before she left the White House. "I think she'll have fun discovering all of those."

Today, the gun business is a distant memory, and Weatherley is focused on her plates and trying to reach a male demographic. "I'm working on new designs for men. Designs with interesting birds and fish. You probably don't know anything about flowery porcelain plates, right? You think like a guy and very few men like you know about such things." Why not gun motifs or Audubon designs? "Yes!" she says. "That's it! See, you are now thinking like a guy!"