



Guillaume de Bernadac teaching children how to use cutlery during an etiquette and manners class in central Shanghai. — AFP photos



Guillaume de Bernadac (back left) and Miona Milakov (back right) posing for photographs with children after an etiquette and manners class in central Shanghai.

## CHILDREN OF CHINESE ELITE WALK RED LINE TO 'PERFECTION'



Danielle Liu balancing a book on her head during an etiquette and manners class in central Shanghai.



Danielle Liu eating during an etiquette and manners class in central Shanghai.



Miona Milakov (center) teaching children how to balance a book on their head during an etiquette and manners class in central Shanghai.

Danielle Liu stares straight ahead, a book balanced precariously on her head, and carefully walks along a red line on the floor. The 10-year-old's mother hopes the exercise will help make Danielle "a little lady" and allow her to shine among the offspring of China's ultra-competitive elite. Danielle is with seven other young children spending their Saturday holed up on the top floor of a five-star hotel in central Shanghai for a class in etiquette and manners. The four boys look dapper in bow ties, suits and shiny black shoes. The four girls are all billowing dresses and angelic smiles.

"You have a stability problem," Guillaume de Bernadac, the self-styled French doyen of all things etiquette in Shanghai, tells one boy of his attempt to walk and keep the book on his head. If the children, who in this class are aged between nearly seven and 11, enjoy that exercise, they are less keen on having to sit straight and keep their elbows off the table at lunch. "I'm scared," Zachary repeats as he attempts to eat his pea-and-mint soup while keeping two pieces of white paper tucked under his armpits. The paper is to ensure they eat with their elbows in, but soon enough, the carpeted floor is littered with A4. The children also have a red ribbon tied behind their shoulders to stop them slouching. Those that do are gently upbraided by de Bernadac or his staff in English or Chinese.

### 'Fierce competition'

Danielle's mother Cheng Liyan, who also uses the English name Shirley, wants her only child to be "perfect". "To be lady-like, to be athletic, also academic, I hope she can develop herself in an all-round way," said Cheng, a teacher, in near-faultless English. Danielle already takes part in extra-curricular swimming, piano and dancing, which is her favorite. "I always talk to her and ask if she likes it," said Cheng, but admitted there is



Miona Milakov (left) guiding Zoey Zhang on how to walk during an etiquette and manners class in central Shanghai.

"fierce competition" to stand out in Shanghai, China's most international city and which has a population of about 25 million.

Cheng and the other parents pay the 31-year-old de Bernadac 2,688 yuan (\$390) for four hours of practical instruction for one child. Against a soundtrack of classical music, the children learn social skills, dining manners and deportment—hence the books on heads to teach them to walk nicely. Other exercises include how to introduce themselves and greet people, including "air kisses", and even what topics are appropriate to discuss at the dinner table. De Bernadac, who first came to China as a student,

says that demand has surged since he started his company Academie de Bernadac in 2014. Shanghai authorities recently approached him about designing programmes for schools across the city and he also does classes for adults and private firms.

### 'Fast-tracked to adulthood'

De Bernadac is adamant that he is not simply trying to make the kids more Western. "Our point is really to say if you go abroad, or even within China if you move to an international environment where you may be facing other cultures, we give you the keys to adapt," he said. De Bernadac has no formal training, but according to him, his great grandfather and his great-great uncle were sent to Morocco in the 1920s as tutors to the nobility.

Among the subjects they taught was "how to be polite, how to behave" and the then-future king, Hassan II, was among their students, he said. De Bernadac, who sports a cravat and well-rehearsed smile, said that the interest in his classes in Shanghai and other main cities in China shows the country wants to be "part of the global village". "The elite are ready to make some effort, some steps, towards the international community," he added.

Cheng, sitting elegantly next to daughter Danielle when class is done, brushes off concerns that at their age, these children should be playing outside and having fun. Apart from the dining part, the children mainly seem to enjoy being fast-tracked to adulthood. "Kids should be kids, that's true, but at least they should have some discipline," said Cheng. She explained: "For example in a public situation, they can't yell, they can't scream. It's so inappropriate." — AFP

## British art dealer unveils pioneering robot artist

Billed as "one of the most exciting artists of our time", Ai-Da differs from generations of past masters in one inescapable way: she is a robot. Ai-Da is the brainchild of Aidan Meller, who claims she is the world's first ultra-realistic humanoid artist, able to draw creatively thanks to in-built artificial intelligence (AI) technology. The 46-year-old art dealer unveiled Ai-Da—dressed in a brown wig and period-style painter's blouse—in Oxford on Wednesday, ahead of an exhibition of her first works opening next week in the English university city. "She is fully algorithmic... fully creative," Meller told reporters, standing alongside his creation. "She is not an expensive printer. We do not know what she's going to do," he insisted.

As he spoke, an occasionally blinking Ai-Da, built with cameras for eyes and a robotic arm to draw with, worked on a sketch of him from behind a desk. Forty-five minutes later, a delicate expressionist drawing of Meller, comprising deft pencil strokes, emerged. Several dozen of Ai-Da's other works adorned the nearby walls. They include similarly styled pencil sketches of historical figures from Leonardo da Vinci to Alan Turing. There are also colorful paintings and sculptures based on her initial sketches, completed by human assistants. Ai-Da can currently only hold certain hard tools like pencils, not brushes. Meller told AFP the artwork was "genuine innovation".

### Capturing the zeitgeist

Meller, also an art gallery director, first dreamed up Ai-Da—named after Ada Lovelace, the English mathematician and writer often called the world's first computer coder—



An oil painting entitled Bee-Shattered Space, created by other artists based on an illustration by Ai-Da the AI humanoid robot artist is seen in an exhibition space during a launch event for Ai-Da's first solo exhibition in Oxford.

eight years ago. But he only began seriously working on the project in 2017, after concluding that the common thread linking history's greatest artists was that they had all captured "the zeitgeist of their time". Reasoning that the coming age of AI was today's equivalent, Meller set about creating a robotic artist to fuse his ideas into one grand artistic endeavor. "It's a nuts project, completely left of field," he said.

With the help of British robotics company Engineered Arts, and researchers at both Leeds and Oxford universi-

ties, Ai-Da was finally completed in April. Meller was eager for her to adopt a female persona because he argued the art and coding worlds need more women represented. "She's got a persona, she's an avatar, she's fiction, she's real," he said.

The avatar uses her camera "eyes" to capture what is in front of her, which an internal computer—and its machine-learning technology—translates into the coordinates of a corresponding image to be plotted on a page. She can move, allowing what Meller calls "performance art" which features in several videos at the upcoming exhibition.

Meller hopes that Ai-Da will also eventually be able to intuitively communicate and perhaps describe her own artwork. But for the moment she is given voice by a human helper listening from her home studio outside Oxford, who responded to reporters' questions.

### Racking up sales

Despite technology's paramount role in the work produced by Ai-Da, Meller is adamant it is also the fruit of a "highly creative" process. "She has the incredible technologies and abilities to produce remarkable, innovative, creative artwork," he said, noting no two works are ever the same.

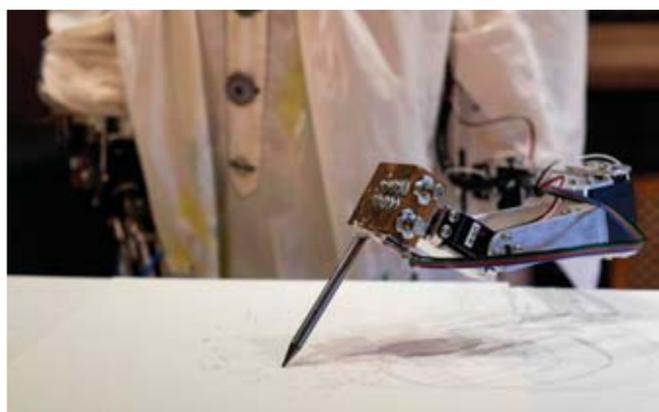
Meller is cagey about how much the project has cost, saying only that funding has come from sales of the resulting artworks. He noted that everything in this first exhibition had already sold, for over £1 million (\$1.27 million, 1.13 million euros). — AFP



A picture shows the back of Ai-Da the AI humanoid robot artist.



Gallery Director and inventor of Ai-Da the AI humanoid robot artist, Aidan Meller, (right) poses with Ai-Da and an oil on canvas painting (left) created by other artists based on a sketch by Ai-Da during a launch event for its first solo exhibition in Oxford.



Ai-Da the AI humanoid robot artist draws a portrait of her creator Aidan Meller.



An illustration by Ai-Da the AI humanoid robot artist described as depicting British Mathematician and code breaker Alan Turing is seen at a press conference.