



Don Porritt is one Britain's oldest silversmiths – he will be 90 in 2023. He established his studio and workshop in the village of Menston on the edge of Wharfedale, one of the Yorkshire Dales longest and most beautiful valleys, in 1969. During the summer of 2022, he invited me to spend the day with him at Menston.

I first became interested in modern British silver in 1984, but I did not encounter Don's work until 1997. This was at the time I was really becoming interested in the post WWII British silversmiths who from the 1960s changed the face of British silversmithing. This resulted in a Renaissance of the craft that continues to this day. My acquisition was a stylish and superbly crafted coffee pot commissioned from Don 30 years earlier as a retirement present for the chairman of The Guild of Yorkshire Craftsmen. A further 12 years elapsed before I really got to know Don.

In 2008 I began working on a book that became *Designer British Silver from Studios Established 1930-1985*. It chronologically covers silversmiths from Robert Stone to Rod Kelly. The main section of the work was devoted to the lives of the UK's leading 50 designer silversmiths of the era. A chapter was devoted to each one, which of course included Don. I had my first chat with him in June 2009 and I realised that I was talking to a thoughtful man who had a determination of steel, but one whose pathway to becoming one of the nation's leading post World War II British designer silversmiths, was not conventional.

Born at Pudsey, West Yorkshire in 1933, Don had a leaning towards 'making things' from an early age. At secondary school he had a good grounding in wood and metalwork. He left at the age of 14 and secured a



This coffee pot was presented to P Q H Simon, the retiring chairman of The Guild of Yorkshire Craftsmen by members of the Guild in 1967. Mr Simon was not a craftsperson, but worked for the Council of Small Industries in Rural Areas. The Collection acquired the piece in 1997. In 2012 Don asked if it would be possible to see the pot again. When he visited the *Festival of Silver* in July at the Goldsmiths' Centre in London, it was temporarily reunited with its creator for the first time in 45 years. Height 17.2cm. Sheffield 1967. *Courtesy The Pearson Silver Collection, photographer Bill Burnett*

trainee position with a local cabinetmaker. He left a year later as he felt he could achieve more than he was being taught. He then went to work for a family jeweller in nearby Leeds as a junior sales assistant. This soon resulted in his being offered a five-year apprenticeship at the bench with Marcus Thain. During the day he had hands-on training as a jeweller, silversmith and diamond-mounter, while in the evening he studied at Leeds College of Art (LCA).<sup>1</sup>

At the LCA Allan Fisher, a very accomplished Sheffield-trained silversmith, was in overall charge of the course. Initially Don studied jewellery and engraving at the College and later encouraged by Mr Fisher, silversmithing. At the end of his apprenticeship, like all those who were youngsters during World War II, Don was obliged to undertake his two years of National Service. As a REME trained armourer he served most of his time in Malaya attached to a Gurkha infantry battalion working on the repair of small arms in a challenging open-air environment. Don still draws upon the skills he learnt in Malaya. In particular having the ability to improvise when faced with limited equipment and material resources. When discharged from the army he returned to the bench at Marcus Thain's and although now undertaking higher-grade work, Don felt he needed further stimulus.

Although his apprenticeship was over, he decided to return to the LCA evening classes. It was only later that he realised his tutor Allan Fisher was taking interest in his work. Don found that he was the only member of the trade attending these evening classes, the other attendees were a cross section of the community who wanted to make silver or jewellery as a pastime. Additionally, some of the full-time students were working away in the corners of the room on various projects. Don was impressed at the high level of their motivation. Don was entering into territory that was life-changing.

<sup>1</sup> The College is referred to Leeds College of Art. It is now known as Leeds Arts University.



One evening Allan Fisher walked into the classroom with a wide smile on his face. He made a beeline for Don, shook his hand while congratulating him. As part of his City & Guilds of London Institute Examination in Diamond Mounting, Don had designed and made a silver brooch in the form of a tied bow set with white spinels. He had been awarded the First Prize Bronze Medal, which not only was a great achievement for Don, but also good for the LCA's reputation, albeit that this was already high.

The City & Guilds award was the catalyst that was life changing. It convinced the 25-year-old Don that he should move away from a career in the jewellery trade and undertake a full-time course at LCA. In other words he wanted to add design to his repertoire. The usual route for a student seeking admission to an art college was to undertake a foundation course at an art school and then to submit their portfolio of work when applying for the course at the college of their choice. LCA accepted Don's City & Guilds award in lieu of a portfolio.

So Don started a four-year course to secure an Intermediate Certificate in Art and Craft (Silver) and a National Design Diploma, Industrial Design.<sup>2</sup> It is my view that mature students extract more from a course than those who enter via the usual route. This appears to have been the case for Don, who recalls, 'These four years were the best years of my life. Leeds was buzzing and I was not the same person at the end of the course. Life drawing was one of the major influences in my training. The model is a living entity, there is movement, so you have to capture this collection of forms that is the human body. You are looking for structure – and lineal rhythms. It is not about technique. It is really about the study of form. When you can transfer that feeling for form – the plastic form – to paper, it is then much easier to create forms in hard materials like wood and metal. It was possibly the most significant influence in bringing about the conversion of the craftsman into a designer.'



The Cocoon Box. Don never does anything that is easy. Flow lines of textured silver wires spring from end to end to create the structure of the domed openwork cover. These individually shaped wires, in compound curved lines are fused together at intervals to shape the distinctive sculptural and tactile form of the oval box. Leaf-like spatial voids between the wires add to a sense of dynamic movement which is at the core of the design concept. The delicate openwork cover, which needs a 'push' to fit on the body, is mounted within a substantial supporting rim. This element should be grasped when opening and closing the box's cover. It is very sturdy, although it looks delicate. The flowing textured wires are shaped and contoured to the profile of the cover's curvature, then secured together by stainless steel binding wires prior to the soldering process. There are around 100 soldering operations required to complete the piece. Length 5.5cm. Sheffield 2020 Courtesy The Pearson Silver Collection, photographer Bill Burnett

<sup>2</sup>These two qualifications were obtained by the successful completion of two separate concurrent courses each of two years. The course for the Certificate was first with the Diploma following.

The LCA was a cutting-edge institution for design in the 1950s and 1960s, with leading lecturers in the field. Don's course was closely based on Bauhaus influences that championed stark simplicity. For Don, these were formative years. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century he sums up his experience of 1959-1963: 'Exposure to this heady mixture of theory, argument and practice was a significant experience – it effectively shaped my future artistic career even if, at the time, I was not fully aware of the influence being exerted.'

After WWII the Government was using art colleges as vehicles to improve standards of design in the UK by training students to be industrial designers. From the late 1950s, the UK's recently graduated post WWII designer silversmiths began to reject the Scandinavian influence (derived from the Bauhaus school), as they considered it stark or sterile.

In 1962 Don was in the third year of his course and like his fellows was expected to design and make one item of silver. Don decided he would design and make a teapot. The students at Leeds knew that although austerity prevailed for most of the 1950s, the underlying feeling of hope surfaced as the next decade approached. Don described the atmosphere at LCA as 'akin to a pressure cooker'. He explained that, 'Staff were fully engaged with the students and a healthy sense of competition prevailed. Students could also observe that staff, including the principal, were involved with their own specialised field of activity. I believe this four year experience influenced the course of my own career development, particularly in respect of the combined role of teacher and designer.' Following the post War baby boom, 40 per cent of the population were under 25. During the 1960s weekly earnings outstripped the cost of living by a staggering 183 per cent. The combination of youth and affluence resulted in a blossoming of music, fashion and design generally. This was seen as an antidote to post war austerity and there was a hunger for change.



Don designed and made this tea pot while at Leeds College of Art. Students were expected to produce one item of silver in their third year of study as an extension to their main National Design Diploma Industrial Design project work. With its organic form and profusion of curves, it is still one of Don's treasured possessions. Height 12.6cm. Sheffield 1962. *Courtesy Don Porritt*

Don also wanted something different. He disliked the prevalence of sharp edges he was seeing in silver designs at the time. His resulting teapot has neither Scandinavian nor Bauhaus influences. It is very organic in form with a profusion of curves. Although Don designed and made it nearly 60 years ago, it is still one of his favourite possessions. It features what has become a continuous characteristic of his work – a curvilinear line. Don explains, 'Nature is full of curvilinear lines rather than straight ones, so possibly I relate more to the countryside in preference to a city with its dominant reliance on rectilinear forms. My creative imagination is stimulated by nature – but not just to the extent that naturalistic motifs are directly incorporated into the design. Flowing water, waves, rapids or 'white water' and coloured surface patterns invoke a response which – after much experimentation- can produce fluid interpretations in metal.'

Don completed his studies in 1963 aged 30 years. He subsequently enrolled as a trainee designer with the electrical manufacturing company Crompton Parkinson in Doncaster.<sup>3</sup> For 12 months he worked on industrial and commercial light fittings and in 1964 he established his own studio as an industrial designer, silversmith and sculptor. In 1965 he was appointed as an industrial design lecturer at LCA. He was the first fully qualified industrial designer to be appointed at the College. Having left school at 14, it is remarkable that he achieved both of his ambitions almost simultaneously and as an added bonus won five awards from 1962-1964.

Before taking up his appointment at Leeds, with the assistance of a bursary from the Royal Society of Arts, he visited both Holland and Finland. The latter had a significant influence on his work as a silversmith. However, as so often happens with individuals who become educators, teaching takes a great deal of their time at the expense of their own creative output. This was not the case for Don, but his business and role as an educator drew him away from silver. This explains why it took me so long to find any of his early work on the secondary market. There was simply very little to find! Needless to say, I am delighted I have the 1969 coffee pot.

From the mid-1960s, he started receiving commissions for his sculptural work from a variety of local sources, including a double-headed eagle for Williams Deacon's Bank. In the late 1960s commissions for a variety of trophies and achievement awards flowed into his studio. I categorise these as 'sculptures in miniature'. His creations were well-received and Don's reputation in this field grew. There is only one phrase that one could use to describe the resultant body of work – 'a multiplicity of diversity'. For a start, the award themes vary from an expedition to the southwest face of Everest to architecture, from canoeing to overcoming language barriers when exporting to non-English speaking markets. Then there are the materials used: acrylic, aluminium, brass, bronze, silver plated nickel silver, slate, stainless steel and wood together with varying production processes such as casting, machining and etching.

The range of forms that pieces take is astonishing. The YTV Canoeing Trophy, 1969 features a canoeist in action and speaks for itself. However, the use of stainless steel wire cleverly conveys fast moving water. The



cricketing trophy commissioned when AXA Equity & Law sponsored the Sunday League could have featured a batsman posed fending his wicket. Instead Don designs a sculpture, which signifies the dynamics of three cricketing actions – the delivery speed of the ball, the batting stroke and finally the trajectory of the ball as it is

YTV Canoeing Trophy 1969. Awarded to the winner of a 'white water' slalom canoeing event. Made from stainless steel wire and plate, brass and wood. Length 45cm. *Courtesy Don Porritt*

<sup>3</sup> Now part of Brook Crompton.

struck upwards and away. The result is difficult to describe, but knowing what it is designed to signify, the form of the award makes sense. Of course, Don would have received a brief outlining what his client required. He comments, 'Many of these commissions originated from fellow professionals – graphic designers, architects and art directors. The briefs involved in this process proved to be complex and especially demanding. However, the challenging nature of the creative collaboration provided an extremely stimulating and rewarding experience.'

After an initial dialogue a starting point for Don was often a company logo or a special graphic design concept, essentially a flat two-dimensional image. Today designers can use computer-aided design (CAD) to aid in the creation or modification of a design. When Don was designing trophies and awards for 20 years from the late 1960s, the only way of presenting a design was to draw it. Don received a very sound art education while he was at LCA and consequently was very competent in presenting a drawing that makes it relatively easy for those commissioning the trophy or award to imagine what the finished three-dimensional object will look like. This explains why Don's work was well-received and his reputation grew. Sadly, drawing is no longer taught in colleges.

Another life-changing event occurred in 1973 when the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths, generally referred to as the Goldsmiths' Company, awarded him a prestigious 10-12 week Travelling Scholarship. He visited Poland (in Krakow he was impressed with the education system which was more structured than the British and back at LCA he increased the documentation given to students), the USSR and Finland, a country that had impressed him during his 1965 visit and had an even more profound effect eight years later. On this occasion the stay was enhanced by the exchange of homes with a Finnish family. I asked what appealed to him about Finland. The response included, 'I warmed to the place..... there is no graffiti..... the architecture appeals..... the winters are cold and dry and the trees grow straight.' He remembered leaving Leningrad (now St Petersburg), which he found muggy, but on the return train journey to Helsinki, with the windows open, he could again breathe in the distinct quality of the Finnish pine forest atmosphere. However, the overwhelming impact was colour, texture, form and particularly light which all feature in the photographs he took at the time.

Light had long since been an interest of Don. Indeed in 1951 when working for Marcus Thain, he designed and made an amethyst and silver brooch. Its Scottish theme and general Celtic motifs are a typical influence of its time, but what is not, is the finish given to the silver. Instead of a highly polished mirror-like surface, he used a satin one as it contrasts more dramatically with the dark purple hue of the stones. While in Finland, the modern Scandinavian silver he saw in visits to museums and galleries re-awoke Don's interest in the medium. Upon his return to the UK he returned to making domestic silver using the traditional technique of hand-raising. In 1974 Don had a small exhibition of his silver at the Goosewell Gallery in the village of Menston on the edge of Wharfedale. Don moved there in 1965, his studio is still in the village. However, it was not until he relinquished his full-time teaching commitment at LCA in 1992 that he was able to devote the time he would like to his true passion – silver.

In 2017 a mini retrospective of Don's work was staged at his alma mater, which explored the impact of the National Design Diploma on his work. Don was interviewed and the last question was, 'Were there challenges to overcome being based in the North of England?' In his response Don mentioned the fact that there were fewer opportunities to exhibit work in the North compared to London and on a practical point, it was challenging to source both metal and tools. Of course, Sheffield, the centre for silversmithing in the north of England is just an hour away, but there are very few serious designer silversmiths between Leeds and the Scottish border. Don certainly felt that he was working in isolation and missed the technical and social interaction with fellow smiths.

In 1996 he was able to secure this interaction and a platform for his work as a group of silversmiths formed The Association of British Designer Silversmiths (since 2009 it has been known as Contemporary British Silversmiths (CBS)). Its main objective is, 'to promote the best of modern British silversmithing and to that end emphasis will be placed on the highest standards of modern design as well as craftsmanship'. CBS has exhibited throughout the UK, Scandinavia, Taipei and the US. Additionally, it has skills training initiatives for both young and established silversmiths. Don has played an active role in CBS and it has been a vehicle, which deservedly brought his work to the fore and to an appreciative wider audience. He also enjoyed the interaction with his fellow smiths, both young and old.

However, it was not the only vehicle Don utilised to promote his creations. In 1998 Don participated in the annual summer exhibition of the Goldsmiths' Company. The title was *Silver and Tea – a perfect blend*. It was an unusual exhibition as it was also a competition. There were 66 entries and the quality of both design and craftsmanship was high. Don's entry is intriguing as the principal elements of the body shape – including the integral spout and the handle socket – was created by developing a single sheet of silver. This is quite a feat, and it is no surprise that Don first had to make a model to satisfy himself that it could be done.

At the beginning of this introduction, I said that my first impression of Don was that he was a thoughtful man. He not only heeds the advice of Allan Fisher speaking about a teapot all those years ago, 'You need a good spout and handle, and it has to work', but designs to enhance the functional qualities. Don comments, 'Spouts are designed to flow smoothly from the body shape and handles are configured to spring out in a positive and elegant manner.' The exhibition teapot certainly ticked those boxes. The enhancements to function form an integral part of Don's designs to 'contribute to a fused aesthetic totality'. Don believes that designing and making the teapot for this exhibition kicked off his concentrating on silver. Certainly, he became prolific in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Looking at the work he has produced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a revelation. When he launched the Curvilinear Jugs at Goldsmiths' Fair in 2000, they were a showstopper which featured in the promotional literature. That they were created and made by a man in his late 60s as opposed to someone in their late 30s is incredible.



When these jugs were first exhibited at Goldsmiths' Fair in 2000 they received considerable exposure in both the media.

Height 15cm and 12cm respectively. Sheffield 2000  
*Courtesy Don Porritt*

Don neatly summarised his approach to launching himself as a designer silversmith when most people are thinking of retiring. 'I create my pieces with no particular market in mind. Just as an artist paints with no regard to a specific gallery or price range, I follow my inner compulsion to create a statement, a significant piece of silver, rather than conforming to a market-led demand. People have said, "Oh your work looks Scandinavian in character of quality." But, if it does, it is a very, very deep subconscious stream of influence which emerges as a particular feeling, rather than any defined stylistic imagery.'

As the Millennium approached, he started designing and making a series of vessels with a curvilinear formation based on the pouring action of liquid. Don explains how he achieves this 'ripple effect'. It is created by the overlap technique, which is used to build the body section by section. The process involved is like clinker boat-building practice (that of fixing wooden planks to each other, so they overlap) – but in reverse – the development progressing internally as opposed to on the external surface. The surface detailing and textured quality of the finished designs evolve in a natural manner, directly from the process of construction.

The explanation of the technique is one thing, having skills to undertake the work is another. How does he know all the overlapping pieces will fit? Don always smiles when he is asked that question. He starts by making the outer shell in silver including the spout. Using cardboard, he then makes a provisional template for the first overlap. However, it is not just a case of replicating this in silver. The actual overlap is cut from the silver, after allowances are made for the different thickness between the card and the metal – it is trial and error. 'It's patient work, but you get quicker', Don explained. Having cut the silver and ascertained that it will

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The maker's mark of Don Porritt



The water flagon on the left is in the collection of the Goldsmiths' Company, while its smaller version on the right with a part textured body is in a private collection. Both these vessels are an extension of the curvilinear jugs originally designed in 2000. Height 19.7cm and 15.5cm respectively. Sheffield 2008 and 2007. *Images Courtesy Don Porritt*



Don confesses that this water jug is a slight divergence as he wanted to create a plainer body, while still retaining the curvilinear line. Height 20.4cm. Sheffield 2004. *Courtesy Don Porritt*



The origin for the concept of this water jug can be found in a sketch that featured in the catalogue of Don's retrospective at the Platform Gallery, Clitheroe in 2005. Note the repoussé techniques used at the back of the jug to simulate the flow of water. The wavy highly polished line slanting vertically to the top of the jug, further accentuates the concept of flow. Height of 23.5cm and a capacity of 70cl. Sheffield 2008. *Courtesy Don Porritt*



The biennial Museums Sheffield National Metalwork Award was launched in 2008. The prize was £10,000. Its organizers were looking to reward the best examples of bold, brave and innovative metalwork design. Although an exciting competition, it was quite a commitment for participants. Don calculated he worked on designing and making this tea service over a three-month period for the 2010 competition. Although he undertook some other tasks, this was his main project. Don was one of the 10 finalists and although his service was greatly admired, it did not win. However, it was acquired by a UK collector when it was exhibited at Pangolin London, the fine art gallery in central London. The event was part of British Silver Week 2011. Height of tea pot 10.9cm. Sheffield 2010. *Courtesy Don Porritt*

fit, it then must be soldered into place. This difficult process requires heating the jug to a high temperature and using high-melting solder to ensure the two sheets fit together as closely as a hand in a glove. By repeating the process with solder melting at decreasing temperatures, Don builds-up the layers. It all sounds deceptively simple, but rest assured it is not. 'Why torture yourself?' his colleagues ask. 'Because it is the only way to get a crisp line', Don responds. No wonder he no longer uses time sheets. On average each jug takes 50 hours to make. For a master craftsman who is a perfectionist, it takes as long as it takes to make.

Over the past 20 years Don has produced a diverse body of work. Apart from the Curvilinear Jugs just described, there are water jugs and flagons of various sizes and even a complete tea service. There are centre-pieces, bowls and boxes with a water theme. In the Vessels section Don explores the theme of related but not necessarily identical pairs of vessels. He also looks at the proportional relationships between objects of similar form. This results in an interesting group of jugs, flagons and flasks (the latter also could be used as vases) which have been designed with great thought by Don.



I love visiting silversmiths' workshops and studios and the visit to Menston was no exception. Don's was far larger than expected and it really brought home to me that he was an industrial designer, sculptor and silversmith. A large ceiling fan was sedately cooling the room. He had designed it in the early 1970s for use in India. It was from a different era. A picture says a thousand words, so I suggest you browse the images of his appealing workspace. He spends most days there – I could certainly adopt it as a writer's retreat!



Don Porritt's workshop and studio. *Courtesy John Andrew*

Don's career is unusual in the sense that he came to silversmithing as a mature student and because of his commitment as an educator, his own creativity did not come to the fore until later in life. From 1<sup>st</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> October 2019, he staged an exhibition entitled *Silver: Light, Texture and Form* in Sheffield. Given that the majority of the silver displayed there was designed and crafted after Don had reached three score years and ten, one has to marvel at its contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> century nature. He was a student when the Post World War II Renaissance in British silver was just getting under way. Don just 'rode its wave', despite having been schooled in Bauhaus influences which the first

wave of post World War II British designer silversmiths wanted to break away from. Don Porritt is a designer who is passionate about silver. Since the late 1990s he has developed a very distinctive style that draws on decades of observation and his leaning towards a curvilinear line reflects his love of the countryside. His peers hold him in very high regard, many of whom cannot believe the length to which he will go to achieve perfection.

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