



A STERLING RENAISSANCE:

British Silver Design 1957-2018

October 6th 2018—May 12th 2019

By John Andrew

Showcase at International Terminal's Main Hall. It partially shows Chris Knight's (b 1964) vitrine with pieces made from 1991-2001. Photo Courtesy of SFO Museum

This exhibition was staged by SFO Museum in the Main Departures Hall (Pre-Security) in San Francisco International Airport for a period of just over seven months. The footfall was in the millions and the exhibit was very well received. Of the 200 hundred or so items displayed, all but five were from The Pearson Silver Collection, which is the largest devoted to post World War II and contemporary British designer silver in private hands. It has been formed with great care and thought from the mid-1980s. Four of the pieces displayed were from the Modern Collection of London's Goldsmiths' Company, which has its roots in the late 12th century. One piece was from the Modern Goblet Collection of Edinburgh's Incorporation of Goldsmiths, which was formed in the late 15th century.

I was born a collector, my first interest at six being coins. My mentor in my early teenage years also collected British antique silver and I too developed an interest in domestic as well as collectors' pieces such as snuff boxes. I initially financed my modest acquisitions with a Saturday job in a traditional greengrocer's shop and later by writing on coins. Eventually I was writing on numismatics in five countries located over four continents.

I became interested in modern British silver after I interviewed Stuart Devlin, who designed Australia's 1966 decimal coinage and later coins for nearly 40 other countries. He settled in London during the mid-1960s and opened his silversmithing workshop and studio. I had never seen modern designer British silver before and it appealed to me. When I saw a Devlin goblet offered at auction, I bought it. I was virtually a lone figure in the

marketplace. Pieces would generally sell at auction for £10 an ounce, regardless of the quality of craftsmanship or the splendour of their design. This was nonsensical and an insult to those who had created the work. Needless to say, this gradually changed as more people became interested in modern silver in the 21st century.

One can understand why it became popular, as it is completely different to anything that went before. There is texturing, organic shapes and the stunning contrast of matt gilded textured silver against a brilliantly polished silver background. There are exquisite boxes with delicate 18-carat gold embellishment, the reappearance of large enamelled surfaces, interesting goblets and magnificent centrepieces, not to mention candelabra and candlesticks with filigree gilt shades and bowls with edges embellished with gilt filigree. Then there are fascinating paperknives and incredible cutlery. In the early 1970s columnist Godfrey Winn remarked, 'all made me feel as though I was seeing these objects for the first time.'¹

What fascinated me was the explosion of creativity in British silver from the 1960s. During the 1950s, private commissions tended to be innovative resulting in pieces that were 'of their time' but not revolutionary. However, stock items generally were influenced by Scandinavian design, which was derived from the Bauhaus school. Silversmiths were not alone in looking across the North Sea for inspiration – potters, glassblowers and furniture makers did the same. It was what the public wanted.

There were very few books with information on the UK's post World War II silversmiths. The main sources of information were exhibition catalogues, Graham Hughes' book *Modern Silver Throughout the World 1880-1967*² and of course, the silversmiths themselves. The Collection grew and so did my interest in the development of British silver from 1945. This culminated in *Designer British Silver from Studios Established from 1930 to 1985*,³ basically a work about the generation of post World War II UK silversmiths based on one-to-one interviews with the leading fifty. Aimed at being a well-illustrated coffee table book and a standard work it is profusely illustrated, contains a third of a million words and weighs just over 4-kilos.

¹ Collingwood of Conduit Street Limited. Stuart Devlin 1970 Exhibition

² Crown Publishers Inc., New York and Studio Vista Ltd, London, 1967. Out of print, but obtainable on the secondary market.

³ By John Andrew and Derek Styles. Published by Antique Collectors' Club Ltd, 2015. Discounted copies are normally available on Amazon.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

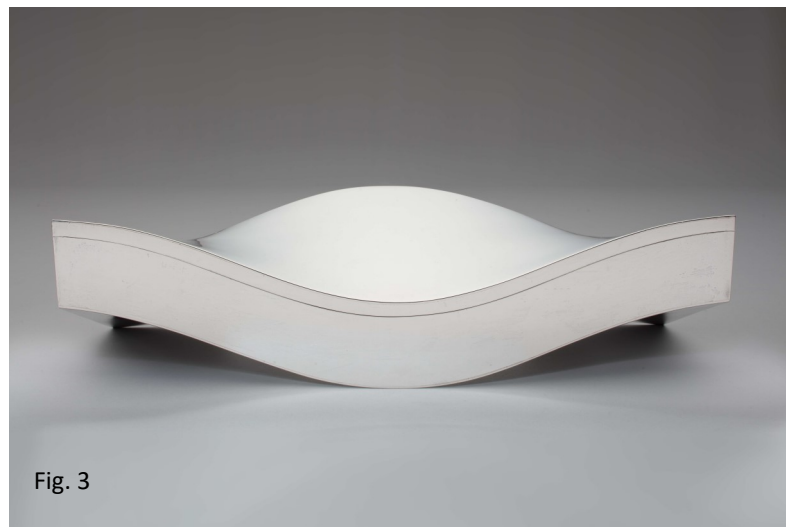


Fig. 3

Fig. 1: Rowan Berry (b 1996) was the youngest participant at the exhibition. In 2017 she was honoured by the Incorporation of Goldsmiths as the Outstanding Scottish Student. Part of her reward was tutelage by the silversmith and master chaser Michael Lloyd (b 1950). She was commissioned by the Incorporation to design and make this goblet while with Michael. Britannia silver, parcel gilt. Height 10cm (3.9in). Edinburgh 2017. *Courtesy the Incorporation of Goldsmiths of the City of Edinburgh, photographed by Nick Strong*

Fig. 2: A commissioned raptor jug designed and patinated by Anthony Elson (b 1935), silversmithing by Norman Bassant (b 1932) and chasing and repoussé work by Richard Price (b1935). The combined age of the three craftsmen is over 240. Sadly it was their last collaboration. Sterling silver, parcel gilt. Ht 20.3cm (8in). London 2017. *Courtesy The Pearson Silver Collection, photographer Richard Valencia*

Fig. 3: A cigarette box shaped-rectangular of helix twist form it was designed by Tony Laws (b 1935) and made by Ian Calvert (b 1938) and bears the marks of both Tony Laws Studios Ltd and Ian Calvert. Length 33.1cm (13in). Sterling silver. London 1975. *Courtesy The Pearson Silver Collection, photographed by SFO Museum*



Fig. 4

Fig. 4: A wedged-shaped box, being one of three four-sided (as opposed to the conventional six-sided) boxes Rebecca de Quin (b 1958) made. Sterling silver. Length 14cm (5.5in). London 2002. *Courtesy The Pearson Silver Collection, photographed by SFO Museum*



Fig. 5

Fig. 5: Toby Russell's vase has been made with a technique designed by Toby Russell (b 1963) that involves folding and soldering silver. His pieces have interesting forms with movement. Britannia silver. Ht 32.4cm (12.75in). *Courtesy The Pearson Silver Collection, photographed by SFO Museum*

The exhibition was a display of the changes in British silver design during the reign of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. It featured the work of the two silversmiths who led the Renaissance – the native Gerald Benney and the Australian-born Stuart Devlin, as well as 33 other smiths. The youngest was Rowan Berry (b. 1996) who in 2017 was honoured with the Incorporation of Goldsmiths' Outstanding Scottish Student Award while attending the Glasgow School of Art. This gave her the opportunity to design and create a silver goblet (Fig. 1) for the Incorporation while under the tutelage of silversmith and master chaser Michael Lloyd (b. 1950). The goblet was displayed with work by Lloyd made from 1978-2018. A stunning raptor jug (Fig. 2) was designed and made by the oldest participating craftsmen, each over 80 years of age. It was designed and patinated by Anthony Elson (b. 1935), raised by Norman Bassant (b. 1932) and chased by Richard Price (b.1935). It is a masterpiece and is sadly the last collaborative item the trio will create.

A stunning combination of design and outstanding craftsmanship illustrating a high standard of technical ability, was shown in a cigarette box designed by Tony Laws and made by Ian Calvert. (Fig. 3) Described as 'a shaped-rectangular of helix twist form', it looks as if a rectangular box had been placed in the hands of a giant, who expertly 'twisted' it. Rebecca de Quin's four (as opposed to six-sided) box (Fig. 4) shows one of her creative approaches to traditional form. Her water set featuring a jug with no handle was another of her explorations of traditional form.

The reflective property of silver was brilliantly shown in Toby Russell's vase. (Fig. 5) It is made by his signature technique of scoring, folding and soldering silver sheet so as to emphasize the reflection



Fig. 6: Persephone Vase, designed and spun and hand-raised by Rauni Higson (b 1970). Britannia silver. Ht 54cm (21.25in). London 2012.

Courtesy the Goldsmiths' Company, photographed by SFO Museum

and movement of water. A vase lent by the Goldsmiths' Company also uses folding in the making process. Designed and made by Rauni Higson, whose studio is situated in the dramatic landscape of Wales' Snowdonia mountain region, it is inspired by Higson's fascination with the irrepressible growth of springtime vegetation in Snowdonia's harsh, albeit beautiful, environment. (Fig. 6) She uses the fold-forming technique pioneered by the Canada-based Charles Lewton Brain in the early 1980s. Simplistically, after folding the sheet metal it is hammered and annealed and then unfolded. The result can be surprisingly naturalistic forms.

The exhibition was spread over 20 vitrines, with the last two being devoted to 'The Next Generation', including silversmiths from continental Europe, Scandinavia and Asia who not only trained in the UK, but also stayed to establish their studios. The objective was to showcase the British blossoming of creativity in silver post World War II. From all accounts, this was achieved. In early May 2019, I attended the Scottish Gemmological Association's annual conference. On the first evening I sat next to a delegate from the United States. 'What are you interested in?' he asked. I responded modern British silver. His response indicated that he was unusually well-informed as he talked about the Renaissance of British silver design post World War II. I remarked that he was very well informed, 'Oh I recently saw a terrific exhibition of modern British silver in San Francisco.' His words were like nectar from heaven!

John Andrew is the curator of The Pearson Silver Collection

During the exhibition's run of 7 months and 2 weeks, approximately 4.6 million people passed through the gallery with an estimated 700,000 stopping to engage with the exhibits.