

Rauni Higson's remarkable achievement

By John Andrew



Rauni Higson with the cross in her studio. Photographer Stephen Heaton

Completely out of the blue, Rauni Higson, who is one of Britain's leading silversmiths, received a telephone call from the Dean of Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral. Canon Anthony O'Brien asked if she might be interested in making a pair of candlesticks for the city's Catholic cathedral. Rauni was not a stranger to ecclesiastical commissions, for in 2003 she designed and made the episcopal ring and pectoral cross for the Welsh Bishops of Bangor and St Davids¹ and the communion set and a pair of candlesticks for St Catherine's Church at Pontypridd, 12 miles north of Cardiff. Her answer was naturally in the affirmative.

Rauni's Background

Before proceeding, let us wind the clock back to the 1970s. Rauni's parents are both landscape architects and they would take their three daughters to see new buildings and landscaping as well as other places of interest. One excursion was to the then relatively new Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral. Although Rauni could not remember every detail, at least she had an idea of the building. Her parents had met when they were students when her Finnish mother was completing her education in England. One of Rauni's great regrets was that her mother had never taught her Finnish. Having settled on a career as a silversmith, she decided that she would study in Finland as it was by living there that she would learn the language. The most prestigious Finnish institution for would-be jewellers and silversmiths was The Goldsmiths' School at the Lahti Design Institute. The Institute dates back to 1899 when it was an agricultural college. Rauni applied and was successful undertaking a course in Gold and Silversmithing and Design from 1992-1995.

¹ With a population of just over 1600, St Davids is the city with the smallest population in Britain. However, the City of London, known as the 'Square Mile' as it is 1.12 miles square is the smaller in area. Its boundaries closely follow the medieval limits of London. Today London is 607 square miles and has a population of over 8.5 million.

Lahti is a vibrant small city idyllically situated around a bay on Lake Vesijärvi 60 miles north of Helsinki. Historically Finland has a good reputation of both gold and silversmithing, which is testified by several of Peter Carl Fabergé's work masters, as well as his most gifted designer, Alma Pihl, being Finnish. In modern times notable alumni from the Lahti Design Institute have key positions around the world in such companies as Apple, H&M, Honda, Nokia and Toyota. Not only did Rauni appreciate the solid grounding that the course gave her, but she also liked the ambience of the city with its lake and woodland to enjoy.

Nevertheless, she decided to undertake the final year of her course back in the UK at the School of Jewellery, University of Central England in Birmingham, the UK's second largest city. She graduated in June 1996 with a BA (Hons) degree in 3D Design: Silversmithing and Jewellery. Having decided that city life was not for her, her instinct was to 'head for the mountains'. Coincidentally a mature student in the horology department had a very small, but somewhat dilapidated cottage in Snowdonia for sale. This is how Rauni settled in Wales's Snowdonia National Park with Mount Snowdon at 3560 feet being the highest mountain in England and Wales. Add over 100 lakes, craggy peaks and 200 miles of coastline within 823 square miles, one has a place of truly outstanding natural beauty.

A Visit to the Cathedral



The interior of Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral viewed from the raised seating area. Photo by DAVID ILIFF. License: CC BY-SA 3.0. Courtesy Wikipedia Commons

cost no more than £1 million (Can\$1.75 million). The winner was the British architect Sir Frederick Gibberd (1908-84). Construction began in October 1962 and the completed building was consecrated on 14 May 1967. It is the largest Catholic cathedral in Britain. It is estimated that 50-75 per cent of Liverpool's population has Irish ancestry. Indeed Liverpool is so Irish that it has been described as Ireland's second capital.³

² Liverpool's catholic community increased greatly during the Great Irish Famine (1845-1852). In 1853 Edward Welby Pugin was commissioned to design a cathedral but only the Lady Chapel had been built when the project was halted. In 1930 the Catholic Church purchased a 9 acre site. Sir Edward Lutyens designed a cathedral. Work begun in 1933 was halted during WWII, but the crypt had been completed. The cost overruns made this project not feasible. In 1953 Adrian Gilbert Scott produced a smaller version of the Lutyens plans but after being criticized his project was also abandoned.

³ <https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/whats-on/arts-culture-news/12-reasons-liverpool-irelands-second-10085779>



The Acolyte Candles. Photographer Stephen Heaton

Gibberd achieved these requirements by designing a circular building with the altar at its centre and transforming the roof of the crypt into an elevated platform with the cathedral standing at one end. Externally the shape of the edifice is conical surmounted by a lantern tower featuring stained glass, which is topped by a crown of pinnacles. The structure is supported by 16 trusses attached to flying buttresses that give the building the appearance of a tent. It is irreverently nicknamed locally as 'Paddy's Wigwam'. The Dean refers to 'the luminous beauty and spirited atmosphere' of the cathedral's interior. Rauni was immediately bowled over finding it uplifting and inspiring. Center stage is the 10-foot long white marble altar with a bronze crucifix by Elizabeth Frink and silver candlesticks by Robert Goodden who was professor of silversmithing and jewellery at London's Royal College of Art from 1948 to 1974.

The commission obviously was discussed. In fact it was not for a pair of ordinary candlesticks but for two Acolyte Candles or Torches carried at the head of the choir in the procession of the clergy and choir prior to a service. During the service one torch is placed each side of the ambo (pulpit). Those in use were really not fit for such a grand building, being light-weight and likely to have been purchased from an ecclesiastical supplier. Towards the end of the meeting a single reference was made in passing to a Processional Cross. Rauni returned to Snowdonia to design the Acolyte Candles.



Soldering the top of one of the Acolyte Candles. Courtesy Rauni Higson

A Processional Cross



The second meeting soon went to a completely different level. A processional cross was catapulted to the top of agenda. The Wikipedia of a processional cross states, 'it is a crucifix or cross which is carried in Christian processions'. The only stipulation made by the Cathedral was that it was not to be so heavy that it could not be carried. Speaking from her workshop in an old Methodist Chapel at Talysarn in the slate quarrying Nantlle Valley in Gwynedd, Wales she recalled, 'The Cathedral has an enormous circular cavernous interior and every time I visit I am really moved and inspired by the space. I wanted to create something uplifting and inspiring in response to it. It is very three-dimensional and appears as a cross form from every direction, due to having eight 'arms', arranged in a circular form, like the points of a compass. The design, which hopefully has a quality of renewal and regeneration, seems prescient in these times. I hope people will see it as a symbol of hope for their vibrant city.'

Having drawn a quick charcoal sketch of her idea, she made an aluminium model. This certainly is not a traditional processional cross in the making. Then a friend dropped a bombshell, 'Isn't the cathedral a Catholic one? Surely their processional crosses are the traditional crucifix with Christ on a cross?' Her friend was right, but Rauni still went ahead with presenting her

concept to the Dean and the Chair of the Art Committee at the cathedral. After the unveiling the Dean said, 'This is not what I was expecting.' Then with a glint in his eye, he added, 'One thing is missing.' Rauni replied, 'Oh you mean the figure of Christ? I thought I would put it here at the very heart of the cross above the eight arms and below the crown of thorns.' This was a touch of genius as it was unanimously agreed that Christ should be at the heart of the cross and the concept was approved without any dissent. Rauni is convinced that this would not have worked if she did not had the aluminium model there to demonstrate the effectiveness of putting the figure of Christ at the very heart of her creation.



Above: Rauni working on the Processional Cross's Crown of Thorns. Photographer Stephen Heaton

Below: Close-up of the top of the Processional Cross featuring the gilded figure of Christ. Photographer Stephen Heaton



The Processional Cross in the Cathedral on the day it was delivered. Courtesy Rauni Higson

Of course, having an approved plan is one thing, but the making of the piece is another matter. She commented, 'The piece has a huge amount of invisible engineering, as all the parts fit together with nuts and bolts as well as bayonets and I didn't want anybody to see that. I wanted it to look like it just happened effortlessly [an aside, I can assure you this is not the case]. It appears as a cross from every direction, as the cathedral is round. The eight arms are hollow, so it is light enough to carry. The delivery was planned before Easter of 2020 (12th April) and I had agreed to attend a ceremony prior to that, but unfortunately Covid-19 put pay to that.' However, it gave Rauni extra time to work on engineering matters. The Processional Cross and Acolyte Candles were finally delivered on 6th October 2020, but Rauni has not seen it being used, apart from on screen.

It was only when it was delivered that Rauni discovered from one of the Cathedral's clerics that in the past Christ was portrayed initially with his arms out stretched and his eyes open looking towards heaven and that the portrayal of Christ as crucified by the Romans was more recent. It would appear from Medievalists.net,⁴ that during the early years of Christianity, the depiction of Jesus on the cross rarely appeared as the idea of someone being crucified was disliked at the time. The early Christians preferred to show him as having 'risen'. With the purported discovery of the True Cross by Constantine's mother, Helena on 14th September 320 AD,⁵ and the growing interest in the cross as a relic, the depiction of the crucifixion became more common.

Rauni was not aware of this and her decision to design a cross that was uplifting, inspiring, with a quality of renewal and regeneration was indeed prescient. My view is that it is a modern masterpiece that will possibly change the way in which Christ is portrayed for generations. So what does Rauni think about her creation? 'I don't mind saying out loud, it's my proudest achievement in my working life, my creative life (so far).' It is certainly a fantastic achievement. Well done Rauni!!

⁴ <https://www.medievalists.net/2015/04/the-crucifixion-of-jesus-in-medieval-art/>

⁵ The 1955 Roman Catholic Marian Missal

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