

# BOOK REVIEW

By Philip Cheong



The Brooch Unpinned

The Goldsmiths' Company Collection 1961-2021

Dora Thornton

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*The Brooch Unpinned* is a delightful catalogue devoted to the art of the brooch in Britain and is the accompanying catalogue of an exhibition of brooches collected by the Goldsmiths' Company since the 1960s and was exhibited at the Goldsmiths' Centre. The Goldsmiths' Company itself is an institution that dates back some seven hundred years and is one of the major Livery companies of the City of London. The aim of the Goldsmiths' Company is to foster the professional training of goldsmiths and to bring together emerging and established goldsmiths with those interested in jewellery, silversmithing and the allied industries. The catalogue is divided into a number of sections that details the history and growth of the collection and how it became a part of the Modern Jewellery Collection at the Company as many of the creators were also associated with the Goldsmiths' Company either as Freeman or Liveryman. As it is a guild, it was also in the Company's interest to promote the work of its members.

A substantial portion of the catalogue is devoted to chronologically illustrating the collection of individual brooches selected by the Curator of the Company's Collection followed by design drawings and marks and inscriptions. This catalogue is an important addition to not only the study of modern jewellery designers but to the costume historian and the fashionista interested in fashion accessories of the 1960s period up to the present period. As the author, Dora Thornton writes:

"The story is told through the jewels themselves, which have been chosen to reveal an individual maker's approach to design and technology at their most characteristic – with a few surprises thrown in...these highly wearable accessories give us a unique insight into the story of contemporary design..."

Historically, the brooch was an ornamental fastening and as the Helen Drutt English proclaims in the preface, "They are meant to be worn, not hidden in a drawer or displayed on a shelf." They are personal adornments but they also speak volumes of the social status and power of the owner and can be a subtle or bold visual statement as proclaimed by Madeleine K. Albright, the first female American Secretary of State who



Fig. 1

Brooch, 1962, Andrew Grima (made by H. J. Co. Ltd) – Photographer: Clarissa Bruce



Fig. 2

Brooch, 2007, Daphne Krinos – Photographer: Clarissa Bruce

owned over three hundred pins to match her daily political engagements or by Queen Elizabeth, who chooses her brooches very carefully to complement the occasion.

The Company has over six hundred pieces of jewellery in its collection and brooches make up a portion of this number. The collection started in 1961 following an exhibition of international modern jewellery from the period of 1890 to 1961 curated by the Art Director of the Company, Graham Hughes who was instrumental in creating the collection and promoting its creators. This was a ground breaking exhibition which also took place at Goldsmiths' Hall and it launched a whole new interest in the brooch as an art object. At the time, the brooch, as an item of personal adornment was on the decline with the younger generation as it was perceived as old fashioned. As a result of this exhibition and Hughes' support of young emerging jewellers, the Goldsmiths' Company became a major patron and advocate of this new art form of contemporary studio art jewellery and the collection that was started is considered seminal. Financial support came from De Beers Consolidated Mines Ltd for an open national competition and submitted works were meant to be "both experimental and beautiful, frankly belonging to 1961, which would not have been made at any other time; as uninhibited as modern sculpture of fashion: individual, imaginative, feminine and smart".

The exhibition became a catalyst for change in the collecting policy of the Goldsmiths' Company which had been to that point, concentrating its focus on contemporary silversmiths from 1926 to 1961. Another change was the shift in focus from precious materials to relatively inexpensive materials on an experimental nature where the emphasis now was on design as the chapter "Boasting is out. Beauty is in" illustrates.

The Sixties was an exciting time for experimentation in fashion and design, in the visual and performing arts and we can see this in the example from the earliest piece acquired in 1961. The brooch by Mary Kessell, created from gilt-silver and diamonds resembles a strand of yarn loosely twirled around or as the author describes it, "a Jackson Pollock painting in gold." This airiness and open spaces was a radical departure from the conventional brooch form at the time.

In comparison, the silver-gilt brooch by Bernard Meadows, who was Henry Moore's assistant and Professor of Sculpture at the Royal College of Art is cast using the lost wax method, elevated the sculptural qualities of the brooch to an artistic work of art. Similarly, Andrew Grima's brooch, (Fig. 1) shows the use of crystallized agate and gold mounts. Where previously, any brooch of note would place the focus and attention of the gem stone such as a diamond, sapphire, ruby or emerald, the focus here is on a stone in its natural state with the attention on the untouched beauty of the stone. The gold mounts here are simply used to accentuate the rock and frame it.

The period of the 1960s is well represented in the exhibit and the exhibition advances chronologically through to 2020 but skips the 1970s, has three examples representing the 1980s and 1990s with the majority from the 2001 period onwards. All but two brooches were acquired by the Goldsmiths' Company while the



Fig. 3

remaining two were gifts to the collection. To reflect the diversity of the younger generation of goldsmiths, the last brooch from 2020 in the collection is the work of a young Japanese goldsmith, Kayo Saito who came to London to study at the Guildhall and the Royal Academy of Art. Her work, entitled "Moon Brooch A" is of textured gold leaves attached to a white marble disk and is a reference to Japanese poem of the Nara Period by Abe no Nakamaro (698-770 AD) whose theme is the nostalgia for one's homeland. The poem recalls a Japanese emissary to Tang China who never returned home and his longing for his homeland but is reminded that the moon that he saw in Japan is the same moon in China. In Saito's case, instead of the moon seen over a mountaintop in the poem, it is a moon glimpsed through leaves. Like many who were separated or prevented from visiting loved ones abroad due to the COVID-19 pandemic, she and this brooch speaks of the experience of separation and loss.

Brooch, 2020, Moon Brooch A,  
 Kayo Saito Photographer: Richard  
 Valencia Photography  
<https://m.facebook.com/goldsmithsfair/photos/a.172583674363343/241835357438174/?type=3&source=48>

Towards the end, there a separate section covering the design process with illustrated drawings and photos followed by the marks of the individual goldsmiths. The design process is often neglected by the consumer when we admire the finished product and is a welcomed addition to the catalogue as it takes us into the thought and design process of the artist. The Goldsmiths' Company as a group of creators themselves has highlighted this important aspect of the work and has made it an integral part of the commissioning process to collect drawings and artist's statements to create a holistic view.

This exhibition catalogue sheds lustrous light into a little corner of the jeweller's vitrine, into a very specific type of personal body adornment and into a slice of the last sixty years of British jewellery design and will be a welcomed addition to any home with an interest in modern and contemporary design and fashion.