

“Talking Points”:

Court Cups of the London Goldsmiths’ Company as contemporary silver commissions.

By Dora Thornton

The Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths, more commonly known as the Goldsmiths' Company, is one of the Twelve Great Livery Companies of the City of London. Since it received its first charter in 1327, the Goldsmiths' Company has supported excellence, craftsmanship, community and skill in the goldsmiths' trade. Although the Company accumulated plate for the Hall, mostly as gifts from members, from early days, very little survives the frequent melts made to pay off debts other than the most outstanding gifts, such as the Bowes Cup of 1554-5. From 1740, commissioned plate for use and display at Goldsmiths' Hall has survived. The Company now has one of the finest collections of British silver, including contemporary and historic plate, modern jewelry and art medals. Much of the Collection is still used for its original purpose. Pieces are also displayed in exhibitions and lent elsewhere, as well as being used for teaching the next generations of makers and promoting wider knowledge and patronage of the craft. The Company's pioneering support for contemporary makers through competitions and commissioning has helped to enhance the vitality of design and craftsmanship in silver, jewelry and art medals and continues to do so. The contemporary British silver in the Collection, made by leading artist-makers, stands out for its range and quality.

Court Cups, a special type of commission made by members of the Goldsmiths' Company, offer unique insight into how relationships between patrons and makers work.¹ The concept of a personal Cup, both for use and as a status symbol, goes back thousands of years in human history, with the simple beaker as one of the earliest forms of personal drinking cup. The story of the Company's Court Cups is much more recent, going back only 60 years, but it offers a key to the development of the craft during that period. Court Cups seem to have originated in 1957 as silver cups which were commissioned by members of the Court of Assistants, effectively the Company's main board, but paid for by the Company. The first one was made by Louis Osman for Sir Henry Tizard in 1957.² The idea clearly appealed to the Court, as these cups came to be used more widely when members dined at Goldsmiths' Hall. The Cups document shifts in taste, design and specialist

¹Very little has been published on Court Cups; most of the books referred to here are general surveys of makers. This article grew out of a display done for Goldsmiths' Fair at Goldsmiths' Hall in 2018: <https://www.thegoldsmiths.co.uk/craft/collections/court-cups/>

²Peter Jenkins, *Unravelling the Mystery*, London 1988, Vol.1, pp. 282-4.





Fig. 1

Fig.1 Professor Gerald Benney's Cup, designed and enameled by Gerald Benney, engraved by Malcolm Long, made by Alan Evans, 1981

skills, as well as charting collaborations in the production of a particular Cup. The aim is to involve members of the Court in commissioning a contemporary piece of silver designed for their own use and to give them the experience of working with studio-craftsmen, so that when dining with guests they become natural ambassadors for the craft.

When the designer-silversmiths of the generation after the Second World War began to participate in the management of the Company and were elected to the Court of Assistants in the 1980s, they of course designed and made their own cups. The Company Collection has a series of these, starting with a simple but exquisite beaker designed by Gerald Benney in 1981 for his own use. Benney is among the most important English silversmiths of the late 20th century. He was trained by Dunstan Pruden, who had himself been apprentice to the great English artist Eric Gill. Benney studied at the Royal College of Art and later became Professor of Silversmithing and Jewellery there, with a deep influence on generations of makers. "He was like a father figure, always in the background", recalls the silversmith, Richard Fox, a current Court member.³ Collaboration between specialists in making the beaker is scrupulously recorded in the engraved inscription on the base of the beaker: "Designed and enamelled by Gerald Benney, engraved by Malcolm Long, made by Alan Evans".

[Fig.1] Benney's beaker is spun and it is heavy in the hand and stable in use. It is gilded inside. The plain form is enlivened by its heraldic decoration of flowing scrolls of champlevé enameling. These are cut in grooves into the surface, then set with translucent enamel which takes on an almost sculptural form. The design is taken from the mantling flowing from the Company's crest, the demi-Virgin. The ribbons in shades of pale to darker green form billowing waves around the young woman, who holds tools of the goldsmiths' trade, a touchstone and a pair of scales. It is a modest design, perfectly executed. It has been described as "the most tricky enamel that he had ever attempted", and one of his masterpieces.⁴

Stuart Devlin also designed his own Cup in 1987. [Fig.2] Devlin was a pioneering designer and craftsman of great creativity in several fields, as well as an inspiring teacher. He had a long association with the Goldsmiths' Company, joining the Court of

³ Rosemary Ransome-Wallis, *Treasures of Today, Silver from the Goldsmiths' Hall*, London, 1980-2008, London 2008, p.1; Rosemary Ransome-Wallis, *Innovation and Design, Silver from Goldsmiths' Hall*, London, 1900-2001, Koldinghus 2002, cat.143; John Andrew and Derek Styles, *Designer British Silver*, Woodbridge 2015, pp.104-5, illustrated; Rosemary Ransome-Wallis, *Treasures of Today*, London 2000, cat.254.

⁴ Graham Hughes, *Gerald Benney, Goldsmith*, Alfriston 1998, pp.178-80.

Assistants in 1986 and serving as Prime Warden in 1996-7. He was keen to promote the Company's role in education, focusing on creativity and skill. He was one of the driving forces behind the concept of a center of creativity in Clerkenwell, and worked on the establishment of the Goldsmiths' Centre, which opened in 2012. In addition to his highly-successful career as a silversmith and jeweler he also designed the coinages of over 36 countries. Particularly important in the context of Canadian history is his Centennial Presentation Bowl, which is inscribed: "Given by the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths of London to the Parliament of Canada to Mark the Centennial of Confederation 1967 – Don de la Vénérable corporation des orfèvres de Londres au Parlement du Canada à l'occasion du centenaire de la Confédération 1967".⁵ His work is well-represented in the Company's Collection, not least by his Millennium Dish from 1999, commissioned as part of the contemporary buffet at Goldsmiths' Hall, which testifies to his meticulous skill and craftsmanship while working in a completely contemporary idiom.⁶ His Court Cup is a modest piece, fit for purpose and beautifully-balanced in the hand. It has a plain silver bowl, engraved on one side with his arms and motto, and on the other with the arms and motto of the Company. The stem has his signature gilded texture, which works especially well on white linen when viewed by candlelight during formal dining in the Hall.⁷

Grant Macdonald is one of the most influential contemporary silversmiths with an international brand. His London design workshop employs 18 staff, including bench craftsmen. His use of both traditional silversmithing techniques and the latest technology proves that the silver craft can move forward in luxury markets, particularly in the Middle East. His extensive network of trade contacts, both in the UK and abroad, reveals his constant insistence on quality for all his the customized commissions. He served as Prime Warden of the Goldsmiths Company in 2008-2009 and his love for the City of London has brought him numerous commissions from Livery Companies and the City Sheriffs.⁸



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Fig. 2 Stuart Devlin's Court Cup, Stuart Devlin, 1987

Fig. 3 Grant Macdonald's Cup, Grant Macdonald, engraved by George Lukes, 2007

⁵ https://www.ourcommons.ca/About/HistoryArtsArchitecture/collection_profiles/CP_presentation_bowl-e.htm I am grateful to Carole Devlin for this reference.

⁶ Ransome-Wallis 2008, p.40; Ransome-Wallis 2002, cat.189; Carole Devlin, *Stuart Devlin, Designer, Goldsmith and Silversmith*, London 2018, pp.238-41.

⁷ p.230 for the Cup and design sketches.

⁸ David Beasley, *Grant Macdonald, International Silversmith*, London 2018.

When it came to the design of his own Court Cup in 2007, he had a strong concept of what he wanted the piece to be. [Fig.3] “I wanted it to be characteristic of what my workshop was producing at that moment in time....the cup had to incorporate rapid prototyping which was then in its infancy”. The openwork stem unscrews from the mirror-finish bowl for easy cleaning. The demi-Virgin crest of the Company was engraved on the Cup by George Lukes to recall Macdonald’s student days in London, as she sports a Mary Quant hairstyle from the Swinging Sixties.⁹

The latest in the series of Court Cups designed and made by a maker for his own use is Richard Fox’s, which he commissioned from his apprentice, Oscar Saurin (the son of a distiller) to his own design. [Fig.4] It is Saurin’s masterpiece, the final project in his apprenticeship studies on the Goldsmiths’ Centre Foundation Programme. The cup is a simple, hand-raised, polished and gilded form reflecting the minimalism of Fox’s work. Set into the knop are six square-cut precious stones: aquamarine, diamond, blue sapphire, yellow topaz, blue and pink tourmalines, each representing a different birthstone of a member of the Fox family. The twelve-faceted stem represents the forms used in some of the many chalices Richard has designed. Fox, a graduate of Royal College of Art, runs a contemporary design-led silver manufacturing company, Silver Fox. He specializes in motor racing trophies, corporate gifts and domestic silver, making one-off commissions for ecclesiastical and other patrons. His Cup recalls a chalice he made in 1993, which is also in the Collection, as a special commission by the Goldsmiths’ Company in honor of their patron saint, St Dunstan. [Fig.5] The chalice is used at their annual church service at St Vedast’s, Foster Lane.¹⁰ Both chalice and Court Cup are gem-set, and share the same shape of hand-chased, fluted foot, which provides a perfect edging for an engraved



Fig.4



Fig. 5

Fig. 4 Richard Fox’s Court Cup, designed by Richard Fox, made by Oscar Saurin, 2018

Fig. 5 St. Dunstan’s Chalice, Richard Fox, 1993

⁹ John Andrew and Derek Styles, *Designer British Silver*, Woodbridge 2015, p.313.

¹⁰ Ransome-Wallis 2002, cat.167; Ransome-Wallis 2008, p.48.

inscription demanded of a Court Cup. The Cup will get plenty of use, as Fox will serve as Prime Warden of the Company from 2020-2021.

Other members of the Court who are not themselves makers have chosen a silversmith to make their Cup, often as a result of looking through the Company's collection, and have then worked closely with the maker in deciding on the form their Cup will take. One of the earliest, commissioned by Ian Threlfall from Hector Miller in 1970, stands out for its originality. It displays Miller's skill in making sculptural silver and his interest in natural forms. It is designed as a parcel-gilt goblet with a wide base, the stem cast in the form of a tree-trunk, splaying out at the roots.¹¹ Sir Paul Girolami's Cup, which was commissioned from Robert Welch in 1986, takes the inspiration for its chased and lobed spiral form from the oldest fully-hallmarked piece of London silver in the Collection, a wine goblet marked for 1493.¹² [Fig.6 and Fig.7] The goblet is an iconic and much-loved piece for members of the Company, as it encapsulates much of their history and the story of hall-marking here at Goldsmiths' Hall since the Assay Office was set up here in 1478. Welch obviously studied the goblet closely in making his Court Cup, as can be seen in the way in which he has closed the base of the Cup so as to hold wine; a development of the double plug used by the unidentified goldsmith who made the Company's goblet in 1493.

Commissioning a Court Cup often involves a special relationship between patron and maker. The best pieces are not only highly personal and biographical, but can be viewed as joint creations; pieces which document an individual's taste and their relationship to the craft, the Company and the trade. Making a Cup involves research into the patron's interests and concerns, as well as exploring suitable designs to convey these concepts in abstract terms. Judith Cobham-Lowe's Cup, made by Rod Kelly in 2015, exemplifies his approach to this special kind of commission as his favorite kind of work. [Fig.8] Cobham-Lowe, who was the first female Prime Warden of the Company from 2017-18, explains: "I was told that the cup should reflect those things that matter or have mattered in your life. Rod's amazing skill was in interpreting a collection of disparate ideas into a single, flowing design." The cup is chased with a complex iconography which could only be Cobham-Lowe's: a gun carriage mounted with artillery, referring to her late husband's career in the Royal Artillery; emblems referring to her work as a patron of the Royal Shakespeare Company and of British Youth Opera; flowers to show her love for her Warwickshire garden; symbols of her Christian faith and even hints to her left-handedness. As a maker, Kelly's work is always instantly recognizable. He was a student of Benney's at the Royal College of Art, and came across hand-chasing, which was to become his trademark technique, almost by chance.¹³ He experimented with chasing in the style of the illustrators and engravers he admires most, Gustave Doré and Aubrey Beardsley, and his style with its particular fantasy and linear flow is a kind of drawing on silver, seen to perfection on this Cup.

Chasing with a very different, almost austere, aesthetic is seen on Michael Prideaux's Cup, commissioned from Angela Cork in 2016.¹⁴ [Fig.9] The project started with meticulous drawings, made up by Cork into

¹¹ Claude Blair, *The Goldsmith and the Grape, Silver in the service of wine*, London 1983, cat.188.

¹² Rosemary Ransome-Wallis, "Henry VII Wine Cup, 1493", *Goldsmiths' Review* 1975-6, pp.33-6; Claude Blair, *The Goldsmith and the Grape: Silver in the service of wine*, 1983, cat.11; John S.Forbes, *Hallmark, A history of the Assay Office*, London 1998, p. 43; Richard Marks and Paul Williamson, eds., *Gothic: Art for England, 1400-1547*, VAM, 2003, cat.192; Ian Pickford, ed., *Jackson's Silver and Gold Marks of England, Scotland and Ireland*, Woodbridge 2011, p. 48; Timothy Schroder, *English Silver before the Civil War: The David Little Collection*, Cambridge 2015, p.41.

¹³ Andrew and Styles, 2015, p.272.



Fig.6

Fig. 6 Sir Paul Girolami's Cup, Robert Welch, 1987

Fig. 7 Wine goblet, London 1493-4, unidentified maker

Fig. 8 Judith Cobham-Lowe's Cup, Rod Kelly, 2015

Fig. 9 Michael Prideaux's Cup, Angela Cork, 2016



Fig. 8



Fig. 7

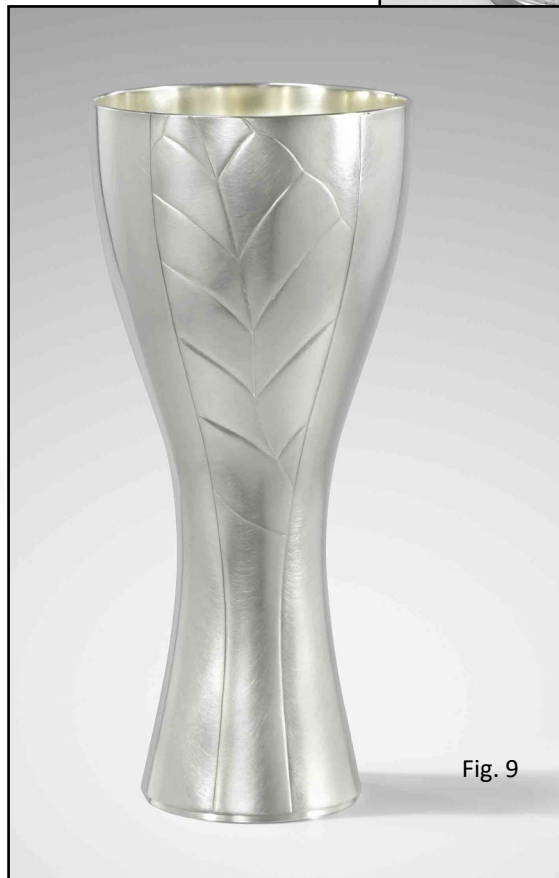


Fig. 9

albums as inspirations for stylized, abstract designs chased on each section of the Cup. The design evokes aspects of the patron's career: in his own words, "the tobacco leaf, which symbolizes my career with British American Tobacco.. the symbolism of the front door expressing communications and 'opening doors'; talking about things; and then you have the rhododendron leaf from the garden...what then struck us was that you could see how these three abstractions could complement each other. The idea of the panels definitely came from Angela---how she thought it could be done." The chased image of Edvard Munch's *The Scream* inside the base is a witty reference to his wife's biography of this Norwegian painter, though Prideaux says it provides an excuse to keep his Cup topped up with wine so as to keep the agonized face hidden. There is plenty of wit on display here, but the purpose of the tradition of Court Cups is serious enough. Prideaux, who served as Prime Warden of the Company from 2018-19, explains: 'If the 20th century was about big brands and mass production, the 21st century is perhaps more about high quality objects and also about experiences. Somehow commissioning could really strike a chord, because you get the beautiful object at the end, but you also get the experience of making a commission. It is a wonderful opportunity to make something that much more personal. I can't think of a richer way of having a deeper experience than commissioning something.'

Enameling is the outstanding element on Dame Lynne Brindley's Cup, made by Clive Burr and enameled by Jane Short.¹⁵ [Fig.10] As the first woman on the Court, she was the first woman patron to commission a Court Cup. Brindley wanted a small, jewel-like Cup which would evoke her love of Cornwall and her deep family roots there. She was keen that the piece should express the spirit of her interest in collecting abstract Cornish landscape paintings and ceramics, and her experience of walking the beautiful coastline and wild moors of the county. Dame Lynne wanted to involve a woman in the design or making of her piece. Jane Short, a highly-accomplished enameller, was her choice. Short's swirling enamels evoke the brilliant colors of Atlantic waves. Dame Lynne adds: "Then I thought it would be a lovely idea to have a thread of Cornish

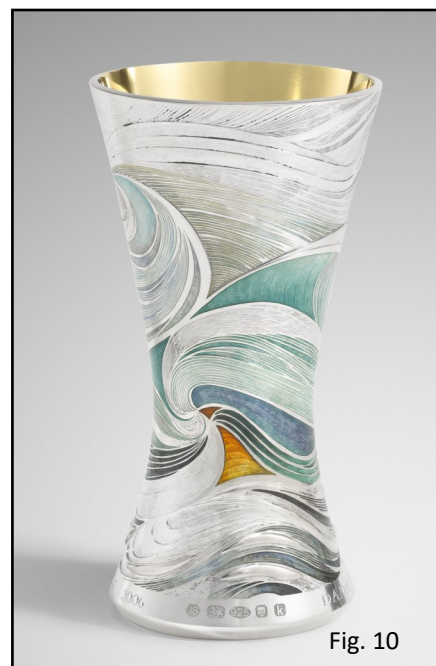


Fig. 10

Fig. 10 Dame Lynne Brindley's Cup, Clive Burr and Jane Short, 2009



Fig. 11

Fig. 11 Professor Richard Himsforth's Cup, Maureen Edgar and Russell Rimes, 1998

¹⁴ For Cork see Rosemary Ransome-Wallis, *The Silversmiths' Art*, London 2015, pp.42-47.

¹⁵ Ransome-Wallis 2015, pp.176-7.



Fig. 12 Bruno Schroder's Cup, 'The Schroder Cup', Kevin Coates, 1990

gold to make the connection with the Goldsmiths as well.' She asked Burr to incorporate a nugget of Cornish gold in its making—a demanding thing to do, which can be felt as part of the texture of the Cup when held in the hand.

Very different in its enameling technique and philosophy is Professor Richard Himsworth's Cup, which is the work of Maureen Edgar and Russell Rimes in 1998. [Fig.11] Himsworth, who served as Prime Warden from 2007-8, is a distinguished physician, clinical scientist and academic, as expressed by the design of his Cup, which shows how closely he worked with Maureen Edgar on the enameled decoration. The black band around the Cup is sprinkled with gold immunoglobulin and thyroxine molecules realized in cloisonné enamel; the champlevé enamel on the stem refers to the doctor's caduceus as a symbol of medicine. In Himsworth's words: "The caduceus is defined, deliberately, by a double helix of gold wire on either side. We cannot omit genetics these days!"¹⁶ The design is somber and restrained, but full of life, showing Edgar's extraordinary painterly enameling and her unique sense of color and texture.

Form, color and fantasy are the distinguishing characteristics of Kevin Coates' Court Cups for two members of the Schroder family. His pieces always attract special attention from visitors to the Hall. The Cup made for Bruno Schroder in 1990 (he served as Prime Warden from 2001-2) crafts a whole mythology out of biographical elements. [Fig.12] The dragon stem is inspired by the patron's collection of Renaissance silver ---miniature copies of pieces in the Schroder Collection are guarded by the dragon's sharp claws, while it supports a shield with the Schroder arms. The dragon's wings allude to the patron's love of flying, and the thistle-form of the cup to his passion for Scotland.¹⁷ The sculpted, gilded dragon with its bright scales contrasts with the smoky oxidized surfaces of the cup, sprinkled with stars. Kevin Coates is a highly-accomplished goldsmith who started life as a Renaissance musician and instrument-maker before turning to

¹⁶ Andrew and Styles 2015, pp.194-5.

¹⁷ Ransome-Wallis 2000, cat.292; Ransome-Wallis 2008, p.32; Andrew and Styles 2015, pp.146-7.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Goring, Helen Clifford, Nel Romano, Françoise Carli, Kevin Coates, *Kevin Coates, A Hidden Alchemy, Goldsmithing: jewels and table-pieces*, Stuttgart 2008, p.48, fig,5 and 95, fig.7.

¹⁹ Sir Walter Sherburne Prideaux, *Memorials of the Goldsmiths' Company*, London 1896, Vol.1, p.150, 157.

jewelry design. Helen Clifford writes of him: “Through his fertile imagination and consummate skill, Coates brings the past ---real and fictive, actual and symbolic--- into present life, ensuring it will survive into the future.”¹⁸ Geometry is the key to his design and thinking as a maker. Golden Section geometries govern the proportions of Coates’ second Court Cup and its profile, as seen in Coates’s exquisite design drawing for the piece which reveals what he calls “the occult geometric scaffold”. [Figs.13 and 14] The Harmony of Arts and Virtues Cup, named by Coates and made in 2006, promotes the values of Renaissance humanism—the patron, Dr Timothy Schroder, is a historian of the period. At the center of the stem, a tree of red coral grows from a chrysoprase mound, a direct visual quotation from one of the exquisite woodcut illustrations in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, a dream sequence novel which was printed in Venice in 1499. The coral branch flames within an openwork cage of twisted silver ribbon, held to the Cup by two wax-like seals. Inscribed on the ribbon are the Latin names of the liberal arts and virtues. The gilded cup - unusually for these pieces---is engraved inside the lip with the name of the patron, making the meaning of the cup all the more personal, for all its drama.

It is the blend of public and private that makes these objects distinctive and different within the wider Goldsmiths’ Company Collection. At their best, they are witty, urbane pieces which would be striking and attractive conversation pieces in almost any context. Court Cups in the 21st Century have a social life at Goldsmiths’ Hall, something which was recognized by 17th Century donors of silver drinking cups to the Company in the inscriptions which they had engraved on their gifts. Such inscriptions demonstrate exactly why these gifts were important, both to the donors and to the Company, in showing who they were as individuals and as a corporate body. Mr Leadam, Warden in 1630, hoped “that when I dye this gift of myne/Amongst my friends may live”. William Avenon’s cup, given in 1628,



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

Fig. 13 Timothy Schroder’s Cup, ‘The Harmony of Arts and Virtues’, Kevin Coates, 2006

Fig. 14 Kevin Coates, design for the Cup in Fig. 13. Published by courtesy of the artist.

records dinners in Hall: “When at your Hall doth shine with plate/And all your dishes served in state/When might abound & wine is free/Then [freely drinking] think on me”.¹⁹ Poignant is the inscription on Mr Croshawe’s Pott, which speaks in its own silvery voice: “Keep me cleane bruise me not/For I am Richard Croshawe’s pot.” All these sentiments are recorded in the Court Minutes of the Goldsmiths’ Company from the early 17th Century. However fond or funny the inscriptions, it did not save the pieces from the series of melts of silver which the Company made to settle their debts, until Charles Hosier, the Huguenot banker, finally balanced the books in the 1740s. That is when the Goldsmiths’ Company Collection of silver can truly be said to have originated. From then on, silver commissioned by the Company for use in the Hall survived, much of it still being used for its original purpose today.

Seen within this context, the Company’s Court Cups have a special role. Dr Timothy Schroder, Prime Warden in 2015 -16 and 2019-20, comments: ‘Court Cups are semi-public objects. They may be made for one person’s use, but they are there for the world to see and they are meant to be talking points and to show what goldsmiths can do.’ They show the texture of the relationships between patrons and silversmiths and how they collaborated in these most personal of commissions made by the Company over sixty years. Above all, they tell a human story; that of the Company through its people, both makers and patrons, into the 21st Century.

NOTE: I am grateful to the owners of the Court Cups described here for their permission to publish their pieces, and for telling me more about them. I am also grateful to Kevin Coates for permission to publish his design drawing for The Harmony of Arts and Virtues Cup, for which he also kindly supplied an image. Dr Timothy Schroder and John Andrew were attentive and helpful readers.

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