

English Silversmiths During the Wars: An Assessment from Eric Turner

In preparing the paper on Charles Boyton (1885-1958), Peter Kaellgren contacted his fellow curator Tessa Murdoch at the Victoria and Albert Museum and asked her help in getting in touch with Eric Turner, another V&A curator who had worked on the Art Deco/ World War II period. Eric kindly sent an e-mail describing some of the period information he had discovered in the course of his research. It is reprinted below and helps to provide context for the study of Charles Boyton III:

My knowledge of wartime activity by trained silversmiths is incidental [and] picked up through conversations with various people. When [the Victoria & Albert Museum] purchased a pair of silver candlesticks hall-marked for H.G. Murphy, 1935-36 from Louis Galvin in 1985, he told us briefly about his war experience. Galvin had been apprenticed to Murphy and in 1939, having gained his freedom was fully employed in Murphy's workshop. Galvin, (who incidentally was Jewish) had romantic notions of serving as a fighter pilot in the forthcoming war but as soon as the RAF recruiting officer discovered he was a trained silversmith, drafted him into the Hawker Aircraft factory in Kingston upon Thames where he was initially tasked with producing copper exhaust manifolds for the Hawker Hurricane. Interestingly his skills were evidently superior to those of his colleagues who were probably recruited from the plumbing trade. This was initially resented but in a matter of months, Galvin had managed to train them up to his own high standards.

The silversmith, Clive Burr told me that he knew of an expert spinner [i.e., a worker who shaped the metal by spinning it on a lathe] who spent the Second World war spinning nose cones for Spitfires. Going back as far as the First World War, I did meet Rhoda Bickerdike, the daughter of Nelson and Edith Dawson, the Arts and Crafts silversmiths, jewelers and enamellers who spent some of her youth assembling altimeters for Sopwith Camels [small fighter planes] in the Hammersmith factory of W.A.S. Benson, better known for his copper and brass light fittings and tableware. Again, in the Second World War, the Hatton Garden jewelers E. Wolfe & Co., founded by a German émigré in 1850, made instruments for Spitfires. The current owner and MD [Managing Director], Richard Cornelius, once jokingly said to me that V.E. Day was a disaster for his company. Overnight the orders from the Air Ministry ceased, a profitable income stream had stopped, and the company had to revert to selling silver and jewelry to the domestic market with a punitively high purchase tax.

Purchase tax was introduced [in Britain] in 1940 with the obvious intention of raising revenue for the war effort but with the secondary purpose of diverting consumer spending away from luxury items and to encourage manufacturers of luxury goods to concentrate on producing munitions for the war effort. For jewellery and silver manufacturers the tax levied was 100%. In April 1946, purchase tax was reduced on many goods to 33% but not for silver and jewelry. Unlike VAT which replaced it in 1973, purchase tax was a wholesale tax applied at the point of manufacture and distribution, not at the point of sale. This prevented retailers from building up adequate stocks and discouraged overseas buyers. Purchase tax at the rate it was applied to the silver and jewelry trades was crippling the industry. Many were discouraged from reestablishing their peacetime businesses. Shortly after the war, during the preparations for the Britain Can Make It exhibition there is a revealing letter to George Hughes the Clerk of the Goldsmiths' Company from Walter Belk, of the Sheffield firm of Roberts and Belk who did have a deserved reputation for producing well designed, innovative silver. He concluded his letter with the following words:

“I am taking little active interest in trade these days being tired of the strangleholds imposed upon production and where it may be sent. If we created for the home market in small but various designs we are out of it for export in mass, so that the little man must either wait for better times or stand aside and see rubbish made.”

I suspect that Charles Boyton who in 1945 had already reached the age of 60 must have felt much the same way. His ‘Art Deco’ style of silver was suddenly unfashionable and the business environment for the silver and jewelry trades was extraordinarily difficult. Purchase tax for the silver and jewelry trades wasn’t lowered until 1953 when it became possible again to produce and sell contemporary silver and jewelry competitively. It is not really surprising that Boyton decided to close his business and retire in 1948.

Eric Turner (b.1952) recently retired as a curator of the Victoria and Albert Museum after 45 years. His responsibilities were for the care and development of the late 19th century, 20th century and contemporary metalwork collections. He has lectured and published, nationally and internationally on these subjects and throughout his career has been responsible for major acquisitions. These have included “Scandal”, a bronze relief along with a cast iron fire basket commissioned by Lord Melchett for Mulberry House, Westminster, 1930, published in Apollo Magazine, October, 2009 and most recently, an enamel on copper triptych, “In Praise of Womanhood” by Alexander Fisher, 1901 for a patron in La Crosse, Wisconsin, USA which was published in the July, 2022 edition of the Burlington Magazine.