

CUT IN
THE
Hand Engravers Association
of GREAT BRITAIN
CLERKENWELL

Alan Craxford

Hand Engraver



Interviewed by Rose Kumagai
in Alan's workshop at his home in Leytonstone, London
23 August 2012

Statement

'I have been producing one-off pieces of jewellery and silversmithing for over 40 years, the work gradually evolving and reflecting my own inner development. My approach has always been consistent despite changes in subject matter and materials, and this has been to select fine and unusual materials, combined with a very exacting technique. To me each piece I make has an inner significance as part of my own process. However my work is made also to be used and worn and, yet, a fundamental part of that is that it should be beautiful. One aims to continually refine imagery, technique and materials to give expression to what is in ones deepest unconscious self - always aspiring to produce the finest and most beautiful work whether it is for exhibition or individual commission. The technique for which I am best known is hand engraving and carving. This process appears effortless and fluid yet requires many years of dedicated practice to execute. The technique does produce a particular quality of cut quite distinct from any machine or engine turned surface.

I have always been concerned with light and colour and this has involved the use of a wide range of materials. Coloured golds when they were unfashionable, anodised niobium where colour is created by refracted light, the use of unusual single stones and groupings of small intense stones like black diamonds and vivid pink spinels. The use of the wonderful rich colour produced by enamel and, most recently, metal plating techniques over silver producing deep blues, greys, bronzes and purples. The contrast of surface from polished to brushed to scrubbed to bright engraving, in combination with colour, creates unique work that captures the eye and I hope somewhere touches the heart.'

Alan Craxford



Pendant with amethyst

Date and place of birth and early years:

21 November 1946 in Birmingham.

Alan had no direct family links to the trade but was influenced early on by his father's plastics manufacturing business and factory. The machinery and processes of which involved extraordinary metalworking precision and quality.

Where did you learn to hand engrave?

Alan followed a non-typical path into his work and had no apprenticeships or work experience.

He is more an artist or designer than a conventional artisan. He finds his own commissions and it is up to him to sell his works independently.

His interest in hand skills developed while at the Canterbury College of Art (1962 – 1966) where he began his course at 16. He received his training on what was a course still based on Art and Crafts principles. This involved both designing and making to a high standard and it was here that he learnt metalworking skills.

He finished college at 20 and moved to London. He worked for five years as an industrial designer but realised he was not really happy in the work and eventually that manifested itself in a serious illness. It was during this time that he realised his interest in metals and jewellery in particular as this meant he could work at home with minimal space.

He was taught hand engraving techniques at Sir John Cass College of Art (1974 – 75) before going into the Central School of Art and Design (1973 - 74) in Kingsway to specialise in enamel techniques.

He was inspired and taught by Fred Fryer for one year. When Fryer retired, Stanley Reece took over and trained him in the art of designing and cutting letters. It is a skill which Alan has continued to use in his work for example in the header lettering he did for the Hand Engravers Association and which has been used for the Cut in Clerkenwell project.

How have you passed on your knowledge and skills to others and to whom?

Alan is not now affiliated to any teaching institution and has kept his own work and institutional working life entirely separate.

Alan taught on several Foundation courses but mainly at the Sir John Cass College of Art and Wimbledon School of Art. He helped in the creation of the Design Studies Modular BA at London Guildhall University (now London Metropolitan University) and taught on that course for some 10 years mainly as a First Year Tutor.

He then moved to the Jewellery School where he taught on a new MA course. Shortly after he was asked by the then Head of Jewellery, Joyce Palmer, to set up and run a new short course programme to attract new students to the department and extend the use and development of the facilities. Here Alan organised, advised, managed resources and handled all the publicity material.

They catered for those wanting to change career, improve their skills and refresh their techniques. The course maintained a high teacher:student ratio of around 10:1 and strived to employ the best in their field e.g. Wayne Parrott. The courses included exotic techniques and material usages that were rare at the time. Alongside conventional skills like stone setting (taught by Tony Tigg) Alan also encouraged more exotic and unusual subject areas taught by other artist craftsmen/designer makers e.g. Charlotte de Syllas in stone carving, Alistair McCallum in Mokume Gane.

Types of hand engraving undertaken and materials worked on:

Mainly gold and silver but also niobium, platinum and bronze.

Spinning bowls, boxes, vases, jugs and jewellery where he is especially known for 'Mandala' brooches, pendants and dress rings.

Alan has a consistently strong interest in colour and the colour quality of differing materials.

Memorable projects or collaborations with other engravers:

He worked with David Bedford on a few projects. David's cutting style was well-suited to cutting the rays which spiral outwards on the *Sun Platter*. Alan's delicate, fluid technique is characteristic of jewellery work whereas David, better used to larger scale pieces, was able to achieve a more forceful cut that gains a glittering quality underneath light. For example the dazzling cascade of rice-like shapes across a sake vessel.

He considers himself lucky to be able to pursue his own style. This is a benefit of working in education in order to bring in money and not to have to work only to commissions or sell everything he makes.

What difficulties have you encountered? How did you overcome them?

Trying to attract clients is the most difficult aspect and especially those who have an interest in building up a small collection of pieces.

What motivates you to continue what you are doing?

Alan simply loves doing it.

Have you received recognition? How and where?

He has won a few awards but would do it anyway. Recognition through his works being acquired is enough.

Looking back over your career would you join the profession again?

He does not regard what he does as a profession. It is more a complete way of life.

He was part of a disparate group of individuals who helped carve out the genre of contemporary jewellery during the 1970's and 80's. This type of work had barely existed during the period of his training in the 1960s. The 'profession' to which he belongs is therefore bound up intimately with his own career development.

The short answer to this would be 'yes'.

Links now or in the past with the Clerkenwell and Hatton Garden areas.

Hatton Gardens is Alan's main source of stones, metals and more specialised skills such as stone setting.

He has friends and connections everywhere in this area due to the amount of time he has spent in the business. It is hard for him to walk around Hatton Garden and Clerkenwell Green without bumping into people he knows.

Shops, workshops, galleries or other places in that area which would be interesting to include on a guided or self-guided walk for the public:

The Goldsmiths' Centre
Wilkins Engravers on Leather Lane
Lesley Craze Gallery
Clockmakers' Museum at The Guildhall Library

Views or thoughts on the future of the hand engraving profession and on your particular area of hand engraving:

Alan comments on the great sense of community within the business. This is something which still operates to a large degree on trust and words of promise.

On the negative side he feels that there are many people in the trade with little to say in their work although he acknowledged this may be a very personal view which others may not share. Personally he thinks that jewellery and art should more widely hold some meaning beyond being purely decorative and that a lot of the work does not meet this criterion.

Hand engraving does not sit well within a world that values speed. Unless the Hand Engravers Association succeeds in putting the value and usefulness of hand engraving in the foreground of public awareness the wider interest will dwindle. Teaching that stresses quick results is not conducive to the high-precision skills and years of training required to gain competence in the profession. Alan puts the level of skill needed into perspective by pointing out that engravers produce with steel tools what most people cannot do with a pencil and paper.

To get young people excited about hand engraving they need to gain a sense of having a 'personal stake' in what they produce. They should be able to expect, and thereby be motivated by, the prospect of gaining personal recognition for their work. Only very rarely does a hand engraver's name gain significant recognition and a personal reputation, as in the case of Ken Hunt or Malcolm Appleby, and this needs to change.

The hand engraving trade could borrow from the example set by the phenomenon of celebrity chefs. By similarly promoting the link between an individual and their work engravers would be motivated to maintain their artistic/artisanal reputation forming a distinctive, creative style and avoiding second-rate efforts.



Star Bowl, 2008/9, 150 mm diameter

bowl - silver, yellow and black gilding, hand engraved, blue enamel
gold leaf stars
base - black obsidian

Photograph - Simon B. Armitt



Element Bowl - Earth, 2007 reworked 2009, 150 mm diameter

bowl - silver, hand engraved and carved
black and yellow gilding, earth/bronze/brown enamel
base - green verdite

Photograph - Simon B. Armitt



Spinning Comet Bowl – Night, 2009, 110 mm diameter

silver hand engraved, set with grey diamond, gold leaf stars fired into deep blue enamel.

Photograph - Simon B. Armitt



Spinning Comet Bowl – Day, 2009, 110 mm diameter

silver, hand engraved, set with grey diamond, gold leaf star fired into yellow/ orange enamel.

Photograph - Simon B. Armitt



Sol and Luna vases, 2010, height 30 cm

pair of triangular vases
silver, hand engraved, yellow and black gilding

Photograph - Simon B. Armit



Arctic Sunset Brooch, 18 ct white gold

hand engraved, setting white and coloured diamonds
fading from white to orange aquamarine drop 9.74 ct

Photograph - Simon B. Armit



Sake Vessel, height 180 mm

silver, hand engraved with pattern based on cascading rice
lemon yellow gilded interior

Photograph - Simon B. Armitt



Dress Ring, 2008, 18 ct gold

shank engraved with rising sun motive
set with marquise rubelite tourmaline

Photograph - Simon B. Armitt



Cocktail Ring Commission, 2008/9

Oval chequerboard cut grey / green Tourmaline, pink treated diamonds, silver, black rhodium plate.

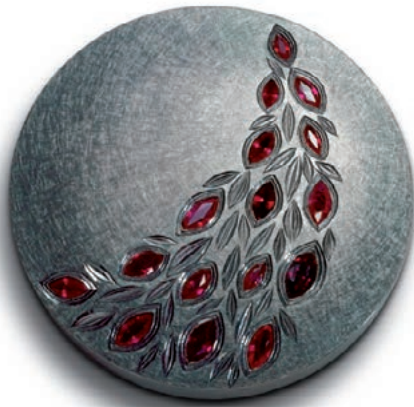
Photograph - Simon B. Armitt



Dress ring, 18ct white gold, hand engraved, rare blue tourmaline.

Commission piece.

Photograph - Joel Degen



Brooch for a Black Prince, 2008-9, 5.8 mm diameter

Silver hand engraved, finished in black rhodium, set with 16 marquise rubies, fittings in 18 ct yellow gold

Photograph - Simon B. Armitt



*Cufflinks, 18ct white gold,
hand engraved.*

Face: 19mm x 25 mm

Photograph - Andra Nelki

