

GOLDSMITHS'

REVIEW

THE WORSHIPFUL COMPANY OF GOLDSMITHS 2007|2008



Smith & Harris

A match made in heaven



Kettle drummer and drum horse
centrepiece for The Queen's Royal
Hussars, 1997, silver

GUY HILLS

Partnerships, like marriages, are perhaps made in heaven or are in the lap of the gods. Certainly when one sees the relationship between Dennis Smith and Gareth Harris one has the feeling of two minds and characters working as one

The rather unlikely scenario of Smith & Harris joining forces resulted from conversations with their respective partners at the time as to whom each would favour as a business partner. It took the women to make the connections for them and the rest is history.

They actually set up together in 1981 when, through a connection with Alan Kinsey of Bruford & Heming, the workshop of R Hodd and Son in Hatton Garden became available for rent. Apart from a resident electroplater, a small part of the basement was available and, although you could only swing a Manx cat in it, Dennis and Gareth found the cash to buy the lease. Thus was born this enduring partnership of friends and colleagues.

Although both of them had been in the trade for a number of years and their paths had criss-crossed at various times, this was the first serious attempt for both of them to make something of their craft. Dennis had been a four-year diploma student at the Sir John Cass Institute (now London Metropolitan University) and Gareth had been a pre-apprentice student there, and also attended the evening classes. The two had met socially and struck up a friendship. Gareth went off to continue his apprenticeship with the firm of boxmakers, Padgett &

Crab and crayfish salts, 2000,
silver part-oxidised
SMITH & HARRIS

Braham, in north London. There he learnt his craft from his master, Victor De Bossart, a meticulous teacher and a firm believer in the trade union movement. He was a mercurial character and an outstanding craftsman who set the highest standards for his apprentices. Life was not always easy for the young apprentice. When De Bossart fell ill and had to leave the firm for a year, Gareth was left without a master (in his last year of his apprenticeship). He was sent down to Hatton Garden to work in the silversmithing workshop of Edward Barnard & Sons which had been taken over by the Padgett Group. The business was run by George Joynes, with Mike Cutts in charge of the workshop.

To young Gareth this was heaven – making large-scale models with very little flat work – and in amongst the hubbub and buzz of Hatton Garden. This was where he wanted to work. Unfortunately the firm was so busy with these models, in particular Gareth remembered life-size models of oryxes, that he did not have time to make his masterpiece which would have to be a box.

Meanwhile Dennis was working his way through several positions – designing small gold work at K Weiss, self-employed with John Norgate, and working at Barnards illustrating their silver patterns. This was basically making up new designs from the vast array of patterns in the stockroom and rendering the various elements to create a new design. This design would then be drawn and shown to a client, probably from the retail trade, for approval. Within the firm Dennis was known as 'the artist'. However he also wanted some practical work, and this led to his working two days a week at Padgett & Braham whilst Gareth was apprenticed there. As friends they sat next to each other. This arrangement was not approved of by De Bossart who saw Dennis as an 'improver' not a trade trained craftsman.

Trade unionists knew that 'improvers' were paid a lower rate than union craftsmen but they were gradually 'trained up' by picking



up tips and experience from their trade trained colleagues. They were seen as a way of keeping union wages down and, to trade unionists, helping these improvers was regarded as a betrayal of all that the union represented. Gareth suffered from this mindset in his master although to De Bossart's credit he still taught him to be a professional craftsman and later paid a visit to Gareth's workshop when he had set up in partnership with Dennis.

They soon gained an enviable reputation...in Hatton Garden and also in the West End

Following a stint at the Sir John Cass as a workshop technician under Jack Stapley, Dennis moved into the workshop under Bruford & Heming's shop in Conduit Street. Here he learnt more about the retail trade from Alan Kinsey who kept him supplied with all manner of silversmithing and jewellery repair work. This was the contact which led to Dennis and Gareth going into partnership. Alan Kinsey bought out the business of R Hodd & Son and the basement of the premises in Hatton Garden became their starting point.

The business as such consisted mainly of contacts which both of them had made during their relatively brief careers. However, they were willing to take on almost anything which came through the door and soon gained an enviable reputation both locally in Hatton Garden and also in the West End. George Lukes, who had shared a room with Dennis at Barnards, brought in work, and John Norgate provided an excellent contact that produced a stream of work through the Army. With Gareth's trade background, Asprey and Collingwood were also clients and although their work was not being acknowledged they

Gareth Harris and Dennis Smith in their workshop



FEATURE

nevertheless were surviving. They were pleased also that in the early days they had been asked to become sole outworkers for a West End retailer. However, they valued their independent status above the guarantee of a settled income. Sacrifices had to be made and the sale of Gareth's motorbike was translated into a safe which they still have – perhaps a better investment than Gareth's bike!

They also worked seven days a week because their policy was never to turn work away.

By the late 1980s they were beginning to see some daylight ahead and with a good solid client base they felt confident enough to begin to design their own work. Their overriding priority was to pay the rent, their wages and operating costs. Any surplus was used to buy machinery but thereafter any remaining money would be used to design and make something of their own. There was nothing radical which emerged but they based their work on bankable pieces such as tumbler cups, butter shells and napkin rings, and began to hold annual soirées where, encouragingly, their work, bearing their mark, was sold.

These evening events proved successful and word began to get around that here was a partnership which could make well-made objects at reasonable prices and could also produce their own designs. A highpoint at this time was the De Beers Diamond Stakes trophy which was to be a centrepiece. Susan Farmer asked them to sketch out some ideas. Dennis came up with the most difficult design he could think of, mainly to test Gareth's box-making skills. The shape of the box was triangular but the novel idea was that whichever side of the box was facing you the box lid would open, *ie* on all three sides – not simultaneously obviously. This would require excellent craft and formidable technical design skills and it is typical of the approach to their work that they relished the challenge of setting themselves something different and perhaps technically difficult and using their

skills to see it through to completion. Central to their 'making something of their craft' is their determination to do as much in-house as possible. To this end it is hard to think of a technical process which they have not mastered – making the cedar wood linings for boxes, polishing, engraving, calligraphy (they designed their own script for the De Beers trophy), die-sinking, stamping, modelling, mould-making, casting, spinning, turning, welding, gem-setting, photography, and – if pushed to it Dennis can even repair watches! Whether this is a reaction to the way the trade had become so specialised when they trained, or a fortunate meeting of minds which believe anything is possible it is difficult to think of another partnership which tests itself in this way.

The De Beers commission was a watershed for the partnership because it moved the whole business up a gear both in terms of its public profile and its skills base. This marked a change of emphasis in the type of work being put to them.

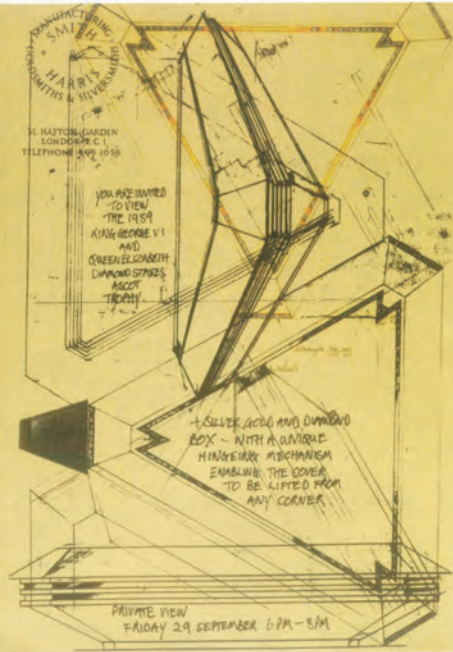
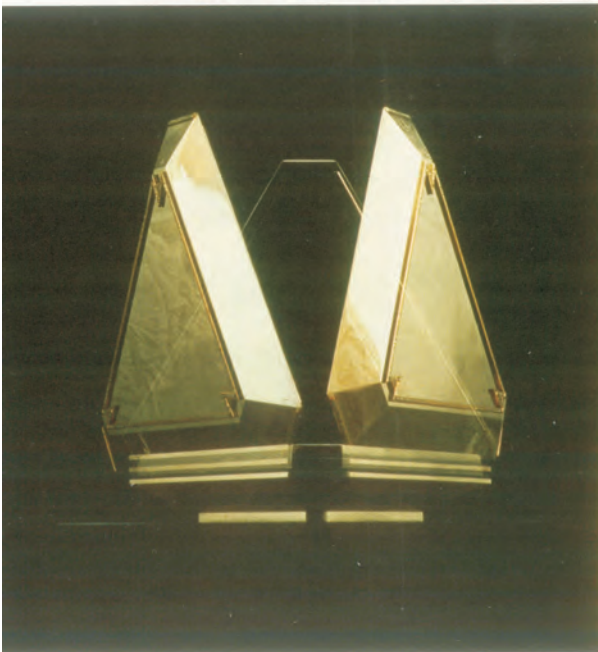
Instead of jobbing work, they were being asked to create items and to undertake special commissions. A magnificent centrepiece for the Queen's Own Hussars – to commemorate the amalgamation of two cavalry regiments and the presentation of new battle honours by HM The Queen Mother – was another momentous piece and a lasting tribute to their silversmithing skills. Another aspect of this step-up was the interesting people they met and the extraordinary places which they visited. Gareth explained the change in this way: "It is not every profession that takes you to the Tower of London (for the Fusiliers), Harry Oppenheimer's office (De Beers), and Coutts Bank (for a tour of the premises by Lord Young). The mysteries of the City livery companies are laid bare as are the inner workings of churches, synagogues and temples. Discussing silver design with Princess Anne, being given his latest novel by a grateful John McLaren

and manhandling body casts of Alexander McQueen's models are probably not part of many people's everyday routine. We never thought we would have half of Europe's museum curators in the workshop participating in a Victoria and Albert Museum casting symposium, or Flashback television, filming us making a reproduction of King Edward's crown from the Crown Jewels".

In more recent years the work has taken off and led to commissions for staves (Bristol University), a Beadle's staff and Founder's cup (the Company of Security Professionals); a loving cup for the Chartered Secretaries; presentation pieces for the Clothworkers' and the Watermen and Lightermen's Companies; a set of



Below and above: King George VI and the Queen Elizabeth Diamond Stakes trophy, 1989, diamonds and silver





RICHARD VALENCIA

Loving cup, 2006, silver, for the Worshipful Company of Chartered Secretaries

cutlery; tumbler cups (The Silver Society), and church plate, currently an altar cross (Framlingham Church, Norfolk). Also their work has moved in another interesting direction. The growing success of English artists worldwide has led to spin-offs in the jewellery business. Louisa Guinness, who owns an art gallery which deals in 'art' jewellery by artists such as Picasso and Calder, approached Dennis and Gareth through a mutual acquaintance to ask them to make up contemporary artists' designs for jewellery. These were to be in limited editions, mostly 10 in number, in 18ct and 22ct gold. Smith & Harris are now using their technical experience to assist these artists. Gareth clarified their role in the process: "What we do is interpret an existing art work, which could be anything from a neon 'word piece' to a two-dimensional drawing, into a piece of jewellery". Dennis had taught for some time with Simone Ten Hompel, David Clark and others, and Gareth owned and ran a contemporary art gallery in the 1990s and knows artists such as Tracey Emin personally. It is because they understand contemporary art that artists are happy to work with them. This line of work has proved to be very successful and these commissions have extended further their repertoire of skills.

When I went to the workshop to speak to Dennis and Gareth earlier this year, there was a most extraordinary sight – a life-size model of the 'golden' girl Kate Moss. They had been approached by the artist, Marc Quinn, perhaps best known for his sculpture in marble of Alison Lapper which sat on the 'vacant' plinth in Trafalgar Square for several months in 2005. They had worked for artists before having made a number of objects for George Weil in the 1980s and Rolf Sachs in the 1990s. It was in one of those idle 'cup of tea' moments in the workshop that Marc asked how large they could work in gold, the rest is now part of Gareth's and Dennis's history. Marc Quinn wanted to

SMITH & HARRIS



RICHARD VALENCIA



RICHARD VALENCIA

Jewellery for Mark Quinn (left) 18ct gold and diamonds and for Anish Kapoor (right) 22ct and 18ct gold

produce a version of his sculpture of Kate Moss in gold (the original sculpture was in painted bronze). How does one even begin to quote for a job like this? Nevertheless the work has been completed and the partnership has solved a raft of technical difficulties which have added considerably to their experience and perhaps a few grey hairs as well! They had experimented with TIG welding before but it was the Goldsmiths' masterclass by Hector Miller that gave them the final push. Hector Miller has been unfailingly helpful in getting them involved with the welding technique which leaves no discernible joint and gives a more pleasing aesthetic to objects and sculpture in particular. The finished object is a work of great beauty and the gold colour of the sculpture gives warmth and an effulgent glow which the painted bronze, from photographs, does not seem to have – being somewhat cold to the eye.

When one looks back to see the remarkable progress which this partnership has achieved in a relatively short time, one can only speculate on how far they can progress. They have now reached the stage where, through their own hard work and application, they are being rewarded by being offered projects which satisfy both the creative urge in them and their pleasure in 'making things'. ■

DAVID BEASLEY

Teapot, 1988, silver and ebony



RICHARD VALENCIA