

# Silver renaissance

*British Silver Week promises to showcase new talent. By Susan Moore*

Contemporary silversmithing is flourishing, and nowhere is this more evident than in the UK where, since the 1970s, an unrivalled nation-wide network of art colleges and studios have emerged, dedicated to its vocational teaching. The intellectually rigorous, design-lead approach of these courses has resulted in the medium evolving beyond traditional tableware and vessels and into areas previously the reserve of fine art and sculpture.

"We have achieved a critical mass," explains market analyst and publisher Gordon Hamme, who puts the number of designer-makers currently working in Britain at around 1,500-2,000. "There have never been such a large number of fine silversmiths working in Britain at any one time." It is to promote this talent – and bring it to the high street – that he has launched British Silver Week (June 10-17).

Established and up-and-coming silversmiths were invited to submit up to five specially designed unique or limited edition "signature" pieces for the event. Over 100 responded. Their pieces, each of which has been struck with a special British Silver Week 2008 hallmark, will go on show in 24 sale exhibitions in galleries and shops around the country. Many of the gallerists and retailers are also offering the public the opportunity to meet the makers.

One of the most striking recent developments in silversmithing has been the way in which the audience for contemporary silver has expanded, thanks in no small part to the support of the Goldsmiths' Company and its



**Sculptural** Signature pieces by Olive Burr, left; Ndidi Ekubia, above, and Suzie Horan, right, on show at British Silver Week

annual fairs, the Crafts Council galleries at the V&A and to pioneering private initiatives such as the Metal Gallery in the London Silver Vaults.

British silver has been regarded as the best in the world for decades, bringing a steady stream of commissions – corporate and private – from as far afield as the Middle and Far East. According to Hamme, however, British-based silversmiths are now also experiencing a growing domestic demand, not least for minimalist sculptural pieces.

British Silver Week offers the opportunity for both commissioning and buying, with prices ranging from £200 to over £100,000 for items including the hand-raised and enamelled bowl and jug by Christopher Lawrence, made in collaboration with Fred Rich, on show at the Barbara Tipple Gallery in London's West End.

"Commissioning silver is not as expensive as people imagine. You can commission something for the price of a weekend in Paris," says silver historian Philippa Glanville. As one of the judges selecting 30 signature pieces to go on display at Goldsmiths' Hall on June 9 to launch British Silver Week, she was struck by the diversity of techniques, textures and finishes employed by the makers.

Established clockmaker and silversmith Olive Burr, for instance, has produced a limited edition of five tall tubular jugs made from a seamed sheet of hammered silver, their angular spouts gradually disappearing as they reach a perfectly round base. Lavishly lined with lemon gilding to prevent any contamination of taste, they also rejoice in hand-carved handles beautifully enamelled in appropriately watery hues by Jane Short. They can be seen at the "Masters of their Craft" show at Richard Jarvis of Pall Mall.

Emerging talent includes Ndidi Ekubia who confects bold hand-raised vessels. One of her Flamingo Vases is on show at Hamilton & Inches in Knightsbridge (around £1,800) while her wine coolers can be found at Eric N. Smith in Glasgow and Primavera in Cambridge (from £5,000).

Also noteworthy is recent graduate Suzie Horan, who is already developing new tools in order to achieve sea-inspired reflections and rippling effects. Her silver and jewellery is inspired by the Welsh coast; her signature piece is an ammonite-shaped bowl which contrasts the gleam of polished silver with oxidised matt black, the reflection from the latter rippling the bowl's surface. She is joined by five others exhibiting at the Studio Fusion Gallery, 1.06 Oxo Tower Wharf.

DO IT YOURSELF

## Workshop: make your own 'collectable'

Steve Wager's silversmith workshop, organised by the Goldsmiths Company, teaches attendees about the arcane world of planishing, quenching, pickling and blocking. At the end of the day-long course (£140, including lunch), you can walk out with your own, self-made silver "collectable" in the form of a spoon and a cup.

Wager formed his first silver object at the age of 12 and went on to work for Asprey for more than 20 years, making works of art – both practical and frivolous

– for everyone from the Sultan of Brunei to the Prince of Wales before the economic backlash of 9/11 saw orders plummet and Wager out of a job.

He set up on his own soon afterwards and has since enjoyed a steady stream of commissions for jewellery and silver objects that he makes in the workshop that he shares with two other craftsmen.

Everyone on the Saturday silversmithing course is provided with around three ounces of silver, a workbench and

unrestricted access to all the tools of Wager's trade (including his impressive collection of 400 hammers).

Under his guidance you will file, forge (stretch the silver with a hammer), block (beaten the bowl of a spoon by heating it into a hollowed-out lump of wood) and, if you so wish, "planish", with lots of gentle tapping, to achieve a turtle-shell effect. Annealing (heating the metal to a cherry red colour), quenching (cooling in water) and pickling (dipping it in acid)

take place at regular intervals throughout the process in order to keep the metal soft and malleable.

The result is a pair of objects that are truly unique – even if not always for the right reasons.

Steve Wager and fellow silversmith Howard Fenn hold regular Saturday workshops during the summer at The Leathermarket, Weston Street, London SE1  
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[www.britishsilverweek.co.uk](http://www.britishsilverweek.co.uk)