

Playing with Fire

Information about the exhibition



Enamelling is a versatile process which has been used for centuries to make intricate objects of great value. It is also a process used to make household utility wares, advertising and street signage. Enamel is stable, weatherproof and hard wearing.



The Playing with Fire exhibition invited applications from any maker in the UK working with enamel and the selection panel¹ then chose the exhibitors with the main aim of raising the appreciation of contemporary practice in the UK.

The resulting exhibition is an overview of contemporary British enamel where our exhibitors, although making use of traditional enamelling process and techniques, boldly go their own way. They are not restricted by tradition and should be described as makers, designers and artists not enamellers. Their materials and techniques are diverse and they are as likely to make work which is led by an idea (conceptual) as by tradition.

Jilly Morris, for example, uses wire, nylon thread, steel, slate and wood in combination with enamel to express aspects of memory and experience. Her work in this exhibition diverges from tradition in appearance as well as concept. *The Things We Leave Behind* is a memorial to a friend, the smooth, pale enamelled steel components standing out against the texture of the earth and wood. Her panels include large areas of matt enamel with scratched and drawn marks, closer to painting than the more usual 'small and shiny' attributes of traditional enamelling.

Liana Pattihis makes enamel jewellery but the way she makes it, and the end result, is entirely new. Each piece has multiple firings so the layers of texture and colour are carefully built up (so far, so traditional) but her pieces have nothing rigid or precise about them as they resemble moving, living entities.

¹ Simon Fraser, Dorothy Hogg, Evangeline Long and Elizabeth Turrell.

New technologies, including digital transfer printing, laser cutting, computer generated design, photo-etching and electro-forming, add to the versatility of the material which enables new approaches and possibilities for contemporary makers.

This is beautifully shown by Stephen Bottomley's *Matrici* pendant, a piece which shows 'the innovative potential for synthesising digital design into craft-based practice.'² Or, as Silvio Fuso says in the same publication, Stephen's work 'links artistic know-how and technology.' Stephen uses digital scanning, reverse engineering, rapid prototyping, photoetching, laser cutting, and laser engraving. He undoes the total precision of digital technology with his use of craft skills and, in these pieces, clearly relates his jewellery to the rich tradition of ornamentation.

Enamel, in simple terms, is powdered glass fused onto metal. The clear flux or frit is composed of materials such as flint, sand, potash, soda and lead with the addition of various powdered metal oxides for colour. The 'Fire Arts', enamel, ceramics and glass, all use the same raw materials but there are marked differences in composition, firing techniques and temperatures. Enamels are fired to temperatures between 760°C and 900°C, low by ceramic standards, but a low firing temperature allows the intense, jewel-like colours. The melting temperature of the metal to which the enamel is fused is also critical.



Traditional enamelling techniques³, cloisonné, champlevé and plique à jour, have a romantic ring to their names, perhaps conjuring up the image of a mediaeval craftsman making a fabulous casket for a holy relic or an altarpiece designed to inspire reverence in the viewer. The body of artefacts known as Limoges Enamels are exactly that.



The best pieces, made by the goldsmiths of Limoges between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, were prized for 'their rich colours, highly polished surfaces, glimmering gold,

² Stephen Bottomley, *Tech-Tile*, Sheffield Hallam University & Musei Civici Veneziani, 2007

³ See glossary

inventive designs and appealing narratives.⁴ It's debatable if, for example, St Valerie carrying her own severed head to her bishop is 'an appealing narrative' but the iconography of most of the Limoges enamels is religious and many of the loveliest pieces are reliquaries, caskets where bits and pieces of martyred saints were kept. These amazing examples of mediaeval craftsmanship have survived partly because of their robust materials and construction but also because they are beautiful and, despite the many religious, political and military upheavals in the turbulent centuries since they were made, they have been treasured, and often hidden for safety, by their various keepers.

'Like other arts, enamelling has had its peaks and troughs and in its own way illustrates the trends in fashion of any given time in history.'⁵

Religion gave way to secular imagery in England and Bilston, a name which has strong associations with enamelling as a craft and an industry, became a production hub for snuff boxes, trinket boxes, patch boxes and pocket watches. Eighteenth century fashion contributed to the establishment of many craft workshops in Bilston.



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These workshops, often small family-run businesses, specialised in decorative enamelling and metalwork. The enamelling skills arrived with a group of French Huguenot refugees who settled in Bilston around 1745. The heyday for Bilston enamels was 1760 – 1790 and then the industry began to decline. A change in fashion, the rise of the iron and coal industries, the Napoleonic wars, the ability of the rising pottery industry to make small items at lower cost or even the longevity of the enamels themselves (a good snuffbox can last several lifetimes) are all possible reasons for the decline.⁷

John Grayson's work in this exhibition revisits Bilston with a charming contemporary take on 'special little boxes' which, as he says, 'make connections between past and present customs or events.'

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries represent another peak for enamel. The Arts and Crafts movement in Britain and Art Nouveau period in France, which came about partly as a reaction to the industrial revolution, saw a new flowering for decorative and applied arts. René Lalique, jeweller, designer and enameller is probably the best known enameller of this period. He designed enamel jewellery, in the Art Nouveau style, from about 1880 until 1900. The legacy of Art Nouveau, stylised flora and fauna, is still seen in enamel jewellery made today.

⁴ *Enamels of Limoges, 1100-1350*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1966

⁵ Jeanne Werge-Hartley, *Enamelling on Precious Metals*, The Crowood Press, 2002

⁶ Bilston enamel box, 1780, Image courtesy of Wolverhampton City Council.

⁷ Sourced from *Bilston Enamels of the 18th Century*, Tom Cope, The Black Country Society



Around 1901, facilities for enamelling became available in British art schools and at this point the momentum might have continued if the following fifty years had been less volatile. Two world wars, a depression and the 'austerity years' were not ideal conditions for decorative arts. Elizabeth Turrell⁸ points out that 'enamel is still on the margins of the applied arts, largely due to its exclusion as a defined area of study in higher education.'

Fortunately, enamelling has great appeal for some contemporary jewellers and Zsuzsi Morrison's beautifully made pieces illustrate the expressive qualities of the medium. She has used her own history, her father's experience as a POW and a medal for her mother who had eleven children, as the stories behind two of her pieces. As she says, 'the maker's hand is implicit and essential in each piece'.

Kimberley Scott's graphic tile piece, *An Urban Diary*, shows the versatility of enamelled metal. She has used multiple application methods and firing techniques to make a rich visual collection of what she describes as her 'everyday experiences'. Her enamelled copper tiles capture evocative snapshots of an urban environment but also show a maker elated by her materials and making processes. Kimberley has used stencilling, painting, screen printing, transfer printing and lazertran, a mixture of traditional and non-traditional techniques, with an engaging contemporary result.

Beate Gegenwart's enamelled, laser cut steel panels balance the qualities of the precision of the laser cutting with the 'chance, surprise and the unknown' qualities of the fired material, enamel. The pristine steel surface gives the pieces a definite twenty-first century, if not futuristic, feeling appropriate to Beate's reference points of global movement and culture exchange.

Large-scale enamel work is perfectly suited to exterior (or interior) installation and this is an area which, hopefully, is gaining ground. In her catalogue essay Elizabeth Turrell cites an architectural mural by Stephen Knapp (1960) which measured two hundred feet in length and fifty feet in height! However, large pieces need a large kiln and The Enamel Research Centre at The University of The West of England (UWE) has recently funded the purchase and installation of just such an item. This facility, led by Elizabeth Turrell, is working to add to the body of knowledge and understanding of vitreous enamel. UWE is undertaking research into large-scale enamel work, assisting with large public art

⁸ Senior Research Fellow in Enamel at UWE. Playing with Fire catalogue essay 'A Point of View'.

commissions and running courses, workshops and master classes as well as collaborating with industry.

This exhibition aims to give an overview of contemporary practice in the UK and show the range and versatility of the artists and the material. From jewellery to giant cacti, each exhibitor shows something of themselves and something of enamel. The Devon Guild is pleased to be hosting such an interesting show and delighted that the show is touring to other venues in the country through 2008 -2010.

Studio Fusion Gallery, which specialises in contemporary enamel, is holding a related exhibition, *Kindling the Fire* (18th September – 28th October 2008), showing drawings and samples related to artist's work in *Playing with Fire*.

The *Playing with Fire* catalogue includes a statement from each exhibitor, information on the selection panel and a highly informative essay by Elizabeth Turrell. The catalogue is available to buy from the shop.

P. de Burlet, The Devon Guild of Craftsmen, September 2008

Further information:

Studio Fusion Gallery, 020 7928 3600 www.studiofusiongallery.co.uk
(info@studiofusiongallery.co.uk)

The British Society of Enamellers, www.enamellers.org
BSOE aims to support and encourage good practice in contemporary enamelling. Its ethos is to promote original design in conjunction with a technical competence in the qualities unique to enamel.

The Guild of Enamellers, www.guildofenamellers.org
The Guild of Enamellers is a non-profit making association for the advancement of enamelling, whether in the UK or overseas.
Membership offers a UK regional network, quarterly journal, access to the Guild's library and an annual Spring Conference with a bursary scheme.

<http://archives.uwe.ac.uk>

acc. name: enamel

pw: enamel

The Enamel Research Centre at The University of the West of England is a practically and theoretically orientated cluster of artists and makers who explore non-traditional approaches to vitreous enamel on metal. Led by Elizabeth Turrell, a Senior Research Fellow in Enamel, the group's objective is to develop a contemporary language for enamel.