

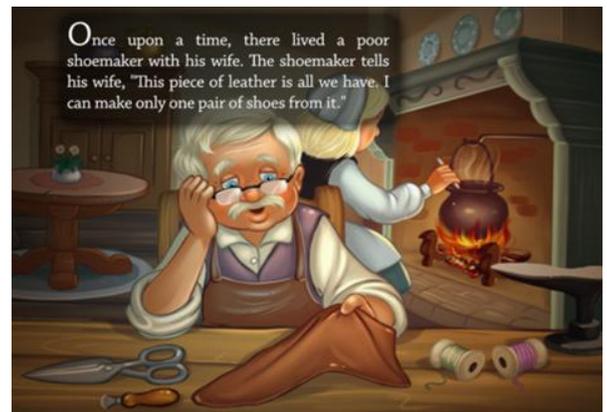
Made to Commission

24 March – 7 May 2018

Co-curated by Devon Guild Vice-President, Gillie Hoyte Byrom, *Made to Commission* shows the work of a group of Devon Guild Members who work to commission, both regularly and on occasion. The exhibition looks at the commissioning process, the relationship between maker and client, the pleasures and potential pitfalls, the diversity of outcomes and the clients' requirements.

Most of the works on show are domestic in scale and have come into being through a direct request from a single client to an individual artist. The exceptions are Debby Mason's commission from Plymouth Trawler Agents who have asked for a poster design for the purpose of education and conservation awareness, and Jill Fanshawe Kato's pieces which were commissioned by Tale Valley Nursery to complement their display at Chelsea Flower show.

Commissioning an artist or maker is sometimes regarded as an exclusive practice which is mostly the preserve of the wealthy but, if we look back prior to industrialisation, commissioning, although it perhaps wasn't called that at the time, was an everyday transaction. Shoes would be ordered and made to measure by the local shoemaker and a new suit or Sunday hat would be purchased in the same way. The industrial revolution and then the post-industrialisation rise of the market economy, coupled with centralised production, decimated artisan employment but happily never quite finished it off. Now, in another directional swing possibly connected to the digital age, there is a steady rise in all things 'craft' or artisanal.



Craft beers, artisan bread, local production of goods and food are all on the rise with makers, artists and the creative economy enjoying a renaissance; there has probably never been a better time for an individual to commission an artist or maker.



So what do the private commissioner and the maker gain from the transaction? In the best case, the purchaser gains something that makes her/him very happy, a result that would also make the artist happy and, particularly if it's an early career transaction, provide a welcome confidence boost. In the worst case, the commissioner doesn't quite get what they want and then negotiations must take place. But public or private, a commission results in a totally individual piece, or pieces, of art where the work is not solely taking shape from the artist's imagination but must consider the client's brief, the potential location, safety considerations and any on-going maintenance or care requirements.

Image: ceramic sculpture by Jill Fanshawe Kato

For public commissions the process is very different and often begins with a call for submissions, expressions of interest or competition, followed by a selection process. Jill Fanshawe Kato's sculptures are the result of winning such a call, the successful execution and outcome of the commission encouraging her to expand her practice and make further sculptural works for exterior locations.

Commissioning is an age-old practice and, in the best cases, leaves a legacy of astonishing works of art and architecture. Throughout history emperors, kings, popes and princes have been the most prolific commissioners of art, using their position, and their commissions, for a variety of purposes.

The Greeks got their Parthenon in the fifth century BC through a commission from the statesman Pericles to Athenian sculptor Phidias – a public building that enriched Athenian culture and still stands as a powerful symbol of Athenian democracy and western civilisation. Nero, on the other hand, is said to have commissioned colossal sculptures of himself, examples of self-aggrandisement not without parallel in some contemporary societies. But not all direct patronage was for personal glory – Pope Julius II's ten-year reign from 1503 – 1513, characterised by aggressive expansion of the Papal State, ambitious building projects and patronage of the arts, was of course for the glory of God and luckily included the Sistine Chapel.



It is sometimes said that, in Western culture, the Renaissance gave rise to the idea of the artist as a distinct and talented individual, as opposed to the earlier view as anonymous artisan, but it was not so simple. Artists could still be virtually owned by their patrons to the point of being 'in service' to a great household. Michaelangelo was apparently unhappy at having to paint rather than sculpt for Pope Julius but, when Julius threatened to have him thrown down from the scaffolding if he didn't do as he was told, Michelangelo got on with the job. In contrast Raphael, working on frescoes for Italian banking supremo Antonio Chigi, had the offer of his mistress being installed on-site to save time. This was possibly a mistake as Raphael is said to have died from 'a surfeit of love' after visiting his mistress during the last phase of his work on the frescoes.

As well as losing his crown and his head, our own King Charles I is in the spotlight again as an avid and discerning collector of art¹. Charles bribed Peter Paul Rubens with a knighthood to paint the ceiling of Whitehall Banqueting Hall in 1635 and planned for Rubens to stay on as court painter. However, when the commission and the knighthood were achieved, Rubens disappeared back to Antwerp and Charles had to make do with Rubens' pupil, Anthony Van Dyck.

Public or private, enormous or modest, individual or municipal, commissioned bespoke art, and the relationship between the artist and the commissioner, can raise the bar for achieving great art and cultural engagement. Historically, societies are judged on their art, architecture and cultural artefacts and commissioning art has become a tried and

¹ <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/charles-i-king-and-collector> - 27 Jan – 15 April 2018

tested means for a patron, individual or civic, to ensure a positive reputation for posterity.

The post-industrialisation growth of wealthy businesses and corporations meant that large sums of money became available, giving rise to new funding models combining civic commissioning with corporate sponsorship. This relationship undoubtedly works well in some cases – swelling the coffers of large cultural institutions such as Tate Britain and The British Museum – enabling acquisitions, commissions and generous arts sponsorship in many fields. But nothing is perfect and, for example, as polluting oil poured into the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, environmental campaigners seized on BP's sponsorship as dirty money, forcing Tate Britain to sever their relationship.

In the realm of high profile public commissions, there are examples of good relationships turning sour with both artists and commissioners having to accept that the relationship, and perhaps the artwork as well, did not go according to plan. In the early 1930s John D. Rockefeller commissioned Diego Rivera to design and paint a mural *Man at the Crossroads* for his new Rockefeller Centre. When Rivera refused to replace the face of Lenin with an unknown worker, Rockefeller destroyed the mural but Diego had already pocketed his fee. Back home in Britain, a question was asked in the House of Commons about Eric Gill's naked statue of Ariel commissioned by the BBC. Was it an offence to public morals that Ariel was so obviously a 'he'? There is a popular story that Lord Reith ordered Gill to adjust Ariel's proportions, a request that Gill initially refused. After an intervention by a group of noted Shakespearean scholars who convinced everyone that Ariel's age was reckoned to be about 13, Gill complied with the order and adjusted Ariel so that he became 'younger'. The story is unsubstantiated by the BBC, and Ariel, with his master Prospero, is still outside Broadcasting House.



In 1981, Richard Serra's 40 metre minimalist sculpture, *Tilted Arc*, sited in Manhattan (image left) caused a huge row. Commissioned by the US General Services Administration the work was sited in Federal Plaza near a federal office building. The contract for the sculpture included a 'release', which meant that it became the property of the US. The huge piece sliced across the plaza and it wasn't long before a petition against the work was in place.

The row intensified with many prominent figures speaking for the work but many others speaking against. The art critic for *The New Yorker* magazine wrote, "I think it is perfectly legitimate to question whether public spaces and public funds are the right context for work that appeals to so few people – no matter how far it advances the concept of sculpture." A public hearing was held on the subject of the sculpture in March 1985, with 122 people testifying in favour of keeping the piece and 58 in favour of removing it. Notable artists and art historians and even a psychiatrist spoke for the sculpture to remain in its location. A jury of 5 voted 4 -1 against the sculpture and despite further litigation from Serra, it was duly removed, never to be seen in public again.

The story of the *Tilted Arc* contributed to legislation which protects artist's rights over their work; the 1990 Visual Artists Rights Act (VARA) became an amendment to the US

Copyright Act of 1976, and provides "moral rights" to the artist so that they have rights to attribution and integrity when it comes to paintings, drawings, and sculpture.

Thomas Heatherwick's steel sculpture, *B of the Bang*² (image right), commissioned to mark the 2002 Commonwealth Games stood 56m tall. Construction overran and the official unveiling was delayed until 12 January 2005. Six days before the launch, the sculpture suffered the first of three visible structural problems as the tip of one of the spikes detached and fell to the ground. Legal action started a year later, resulting in an out-of-court settlement totalling £1.7 million and *B of the Bang* was dismantled and removed in 2009.



The legal, financial, ethical and safety issues surrounding large publicly sited commissions are enormous but the stories of *Tilted Arc* and *B of the Bang* are exceptions rather than the rule. It must be said that only a very small proportion of commissions end in failure. Many exceptional and treasured art works owe their existence to the practice of commissioning and, as the scope of contemporary public art becomes ever more varied and diverse in terms of materials used, so too does diversity of subject matter and diversity of artists.

Monument to the Unknown Woman Worker (image right) is a 1992 work by Louise Walsh, an Irish artist who lives and works in Dublin. A number of her works have attracted controversy and this one, commissioned in the late 1980s as a public artwork for Belfast to commemorate women's work, was accepted by the project's selection panel but later dropped when Belfast City Council opposed the project. The area the sculpture was to be located in was a former red-light district and it was suggested that the work was really a subversive monument to prostitution. A private developer later re-commissioned the work, which was installed in 1992 very close to the original location. The sculpture incorporates imagery of domestic items, colanders, clothes-pegs, and shopping bags and the women are engaged in conversation, a depiction of an entirely different world to the great majority of public statuary.



Luke Shepherd tells us that the expected lifespan of a bronze sculpture is around 6,000 years so it is interesting to look at the current debate about statues; who or what should be commemorated and, as times change, who should be removed from public view. Luke has also completed a commission from Exeter University for a life-size sculpture of

² *B of the Bang* – named from a quotation by British sprinter Linford Christie, in which he said that he started his races not merely at the "bang" of the starting pistol, but at "the B of the Bang".

Baroness Floella Benjamin to commemorate her time as Chancellor of Exeter University. Floella chose Luke from a shortlist of 20 sculptors as Luke's proposal said he couldn't possibly know how to portray her unless he actually met her. Very significantly, this sculpture is believed to be the only public statue of a named, living black woman in the UK. Hats off to Luke and Floella!



Our fourteen exhibitors in *Made to Commission* have worked with a wide range of materials and techniques; print, silver, ceramic, wood, wire, a variety of textiles, enamel, bronze, vellum and pigment. Diverse materials and diverse works; from the exuberance of Sandy Brown's candelabra to the precision and intricacy of Neil Bromley's panel which incorporates Heraldry and the Arms of Scotland, the works on show have followed both specific instructions and more general directions. Celia Smith's brief for a hanging, swirling sculpture of a

flock of swallows (image above: maquette for *Swirl of Swallows*), to fill an empty room, is both subject and site-specific as well as mobile; several requirements for Celia to take in to account. Gillie Hoyte Byrom pays tribute to her client, a relationship which extends to fifteen years, and one which Gillie acknowledges has extended her technical expertise over the years, culminating in *The Jacques Cartier Memorial Award* in 2007.

Large or small, modest or complex, our exhibitors have risen to the creative challenge and fulfilled their client's requirements in carrying out and delivering work, within budget, on time and Made to Commission.

Devon Guild of Craftsmen would like to thank all those who have loaned the works on show in this exhibition.

Further images and information can be found on the Devon Guild website www.crafts.org.uk

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Devon Guild of Craftsmen is part of the Artsmark partnership programme, an Arts Council England endorsed network of arts and cultural organisations that can support education settings on their Artsmark journey to embed arts and culture across the curriculum. Devon Guild of Craftsmen (DGoC) is pleased to be able to offer support to schools and education settings on their Artsmark journey, inspiring children and young people to create, experience, and participate in great arts and culture.

We encourage visits from schools, colleges and community groups. Let us know in advance and we can arrange an introductory talk & tour of a particular exhibition.

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