

Professor Sir Christopher Frayling Sometime Rector of the Royal College of Art and Chair of Arts Council England

I first met Oliver Makower forty years ago, in 1973, when he was a very active member of the Council of the Royal College of Art, and I had just joined as a part-time tutor.

That year “The Craftsman’s Art” exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum signalled some seismic movements in the landscape of the contemporary crafts; there were intense debates at the College about the rise of conceptual art and its implications for traditional canons of workmanship; articles started appearing about craft as a form of hands-on research for design; there was talk of introducing a business studies component in postgraduate degrees under the deliberately provocative title “is there life after art college?”; and an ambitious generation of postgraduate students was decisively challenging Arts and Crafts assumptions about the art of making – by introducing an avant- garde into the crafts for the first time; in jewellery, the theme of the year was “why do we always use precious metals?”. Robert Goodden had been Professor of Silversmithing and Jewellery (as the department was then called) since 1948, and he had wisely offered as his manifesto: “...a forthright description of good design is that it is design in the creation of which true art has played a part. Following this train of thought I have found (belatedly you will think) that the name of the Royal College of Art was by no means carelessly decided”.

In 1979 Oliver and Pope first publicly expressed their commitment to nurturing young talent in silversmithing and jewellery, by commissioning a graduate of the Royal College of Art to make a piece which was then put on loan at the V&A. At that stage, the idea of genuinely contemporary silver going on public display was new to the museum.

I clearly remember Oliver talking at the College’s Council, in which he was a conscientious participant, about how important it was to build strong bridges – much stronger than existed at that time – between the world of art education and the world of professional practice. Since then, the Makower Trust has placed pieces in Oxford and Cardiff and the Crafts Council as well as the V&A.

Twenty years ago, the Makowers set up their influential training workshop at Bishopsland outside Reading, with its one-year postgraduate programmes focussing on the skills of making, and on exhibiting, pricing, selling and setting up a business: over 150 graduates have so far benefitted from this, and – as I can remember from my time as Rector – some of the best have gone on to the RCA, and successful careers beyond. Ten years ago (this really is the year of anniversaries!) the Makowers started showing at the first “Collect” – which has become an annual fixture in the calendar.

Their tireless support of young silversmiths has helped to maintain standards of excellence in the craft – through judicious commissions, practical advice, exhibiting opportunities, an after-care service and a lot of effort – at a time when “making” in education, access to the best materials and well-equipped workshops are endangered.

They have shown, in spectacular fashion, that there is indeed life after art college – indeed, that the question should never have been asked in the first place.

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