

The commissioning of cups

The Committee was keen to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Society by commissioning a piece of silver. Gareth Harris is a former chairman of the Society and his firm, Smith & Harris, were asked to come up with a design.

The Silver Society was started in 1958 (as the Society of Silver Collectors) as a convivial group dedicated to furthering their knowledge of silver. After each meeting members had a good dinner, at which they drank from their own cups. For the 50th anniversary, an idea soon formed to create a tumbler cup bearing the legend 'The Silver Society' in punches resembling hallmarks. There would be an alternative version with a foot created by computer-aided design.

A lot has changed in the last 50 years, and a good deal of that has been due to computers. Much of what we use today, from cars to mobile phones, is designed with the aid of computers, and what have previously been prohibitively expensive programs are now within the reach of craftspeople. The process of designing the foot started with an anti design stance. String theory and chaos theory are at the frontiers of scientific thought. Computers are now able to render visual images of chaos (which look like a Romanesco-Veronica cauliflower). The original idea for the foot was to let the program loose on a single string-like wire bouncing off the parameters of a foot. Not surprisingly the result looked like a very untidy ball of string, and was given up. The next idea turned out to be a winner. A tumbler cup was placed on a touch sensitive pad linked to a computer; by rocking the cup, a series of differing arcs were scribed. The cup had designed its own foot.

To bring the idea to reality, Smith & Harris employed the services of Patrick Sieroslowski, a student at the Royal College of Art, who was able to include it as part of his course work. While the jewellery industry has taken up rapid prototyping of computer aided designs, the RCA is one of the few places in the country with the facilities to work to the scale required for the footed cup, and subsequently the Chairman's Cup. To create the foot a resin is 'grown' by 3-D stereo lithography using ultraviolet lasers. Essentially lasers 'fire' in the round into a vat of liquid



Cup and cover, Dennis Smith & Gareth Harris, London 2008. The Chairman's Cup. (photo: Oliver Futter)

resin. Wherever they meet the resin becomes solid and after many hours a 3-D rendering of the design is achieved; this can then be lost wax cast in silver.

The design of the cup reflects the changes in silversmithing that have taken place since 1958. The bowl of the cup is made as it would have been in 1958, or indeed in the seventeenth century, when this design was first produced. The foot, impossible to make by hand, could only have been made in 2008.

In addition to commissioning the cups that members could buy, this year's Chairman, Nicholas Shaw, suggested to David Constable (also on the committee) that the Society should have a loving cup. Not only should the cup be used at the Society's annual dinner, but it could be used

to promote the Society at exhibitions. The Chairman's Cup celebrates the first 50 years of the society. Its bowl is divided into 50 spaces engraved with the names of the first 50 chairmen. It has been given on the understanding that no further names will be engraved on it, but it is hoped that future chairmen will commission another cup at some time.

Given its size (30.5cm (12in) high), the design of the Chairman's Cup pushed available technology to its limits. As excitement grew about the design, it became increasingly difficult to find technicians willing to risk a considerable amount of time on growing the required resins. On a particular day Smith & Harris had a call from Nicholas Shaw asking 'well: can you make it?' and another from a technician saying 'if you think I am putting that in my tank for four days without any guarantee of success, you can think again'. The foot and finial follow the same pattern as the footed tumbler cups – chaos becomes symmetry as the foot meets the table, in honour of the many meetings called to order by the venerable names engraved above.

The Chairman's Cup was presented to the Society by Nicholas Shaw at the Society's 50th anniversary dinner, held at St Bartholomew's Hospital on 19 May 2008. The donors of the cup are all past chairmen: Peter Bentley, David Constable, Simon Davidson, Gerald Davies, Christopher Hartop and Nicholas Shaw.



50th anniversary cup, Dennis Smith & Gareth Harris, London 2008. (photo: Stephanie Cripps)