

The Goldsmiths' Craft & Design Council awards: medals examine the world we live in

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Fig 1. Entrance to the Hall of the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths

In the Goldsmiths' Craft & Design Council awards for excellence, art medal designs feature, together with the illustrious gold and silver craftsmanship in all its wonderful variety, in the annual competition organised by the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths. From spectacular jewellery to chased and enamelled items, this competition is the Everest of creativity in metalwork. The inclusion of medals is an indication of how the skills of modelling, carving and lost-wax casting are such that they cross boundaries of working in all metals, and can be transferred from fine jewellery to large-scale silver vessels to art held in the hand (fig. 1).

The idea of a livery company and its remit

The Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths, more commonly referred to as the Goldsmiths' Company, is an ancient livery company of the City of London, and this needs some explanation, though it would be similar to an ancient Florentine guild. Some of the livery companies have their own hall, and the Goldsmiths' Hall is among the most grand. It is used for events and exhibitions. The 'livery' in livery company refers to the particular robes that its members wear to distinguish themselves from other guilds or liveries, as the companies came to be called. There are over one hundred livery companies, and some continue to be created. However, among the oldest



The Goldsmiths' Coat of Arms

is the Goldsmiths' Company, formed in 1300 during the reign of Edward I, and given a royal charter in 1327. Its role was to regulate the gold and silver standard of the day, testing the quality of the metals, such as for coinage, and including hallmarking. These early guilds – grocers, drapers and brewers among them – oversaw the making and selling of goods, which protected the customer but also worked to their own benefit, controlling competition, keeping standards high. Concern for the welfare of their guild makers was and continues to be part of the policy of a livery company such as the Goldsmiths: 'We support craftspeople, protect consumers and improve lives' (fig. 2).

The modern Goldsmiths' Company, unlike many of the livery companies today that have lost the connection to their original reason for formation, is constantly seeking new ways to maintain the skills involved in metalwork, in particular, but not exclusively, in gold and silver. Its links to the craft industry include an active interest in training and education, with flourishing results. In 1908 the Goldsmiths' Company initiated the Goldsmiths' Craft & Design Council, whose awards are made with the purpose of promoting 'the pursuit of excellence in craftsmanship

and design amongst all those in the United Kingdom who work within silversmithing, goldsmithing, jewellery and the allied crafts.'¹ Included in the 'allied crafts' is the making of art medals. Starting with an exhibition at Goldsmiths' Hall in the City of London in 1973, called *Medals Today*, the Goldsmiths' Company has acted to revitalise the art of the modern medal, commissioning medals for its own collection, and purchasing outstanding works. Much is owed to their continued initiatives.

The Goldsmiths' Company medals

Another important initiative, begun in 1990, was to commission portrait medals to commemorate the Company's Prime Wardens, the title given to the senior officer, a position held for one year. Prime Wardens who served before this date were also included, and the collection of portrait medals has now reached 46, cast in silver and commissioned from a number of artists, mainly in the UK. The Goldsmiths' Company, as most livery companies, has a structure to govern it, the Court of Assistants and the Court of Wardens being the governing bodies, both chaired by the Prime Warden. Various committees hold responsibility for the projects undertaken by the Company, which takes its brief seriously to bring diversity and inclusion into all its work, including to promote positive change within the bounds of the wide reach of its creative activities. The Company also advises on commissions, competitions and exhibitions.

The Prime Warden medal is most usually taken from a sitting with the subject. Here, the past Prime Warden is Sir Alan Herries Wilson, on a medal by the UK medallist Danuta Solowiej, from one sitting plus photographs (fig. 3). Although Sir Alan was Prime Warden from 1968–1969, the medal was created in 1991, and cast in silver, hallmarked at the London Assay Office. It is 75 mm, which is the diameter size of all medals in this series at the time. Sir Alan Wilson was one of the founders of modern



Fig 3. Medal of Prime Warden Sir Alan Herries Wilson, 1991
Danuta Solowiej
Silver, cast, 75 mm

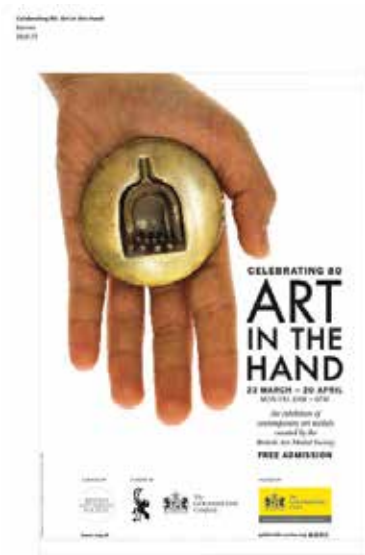


Fig 4. Goldsmiths' Centre banner, *Art in the Hand*, 2017

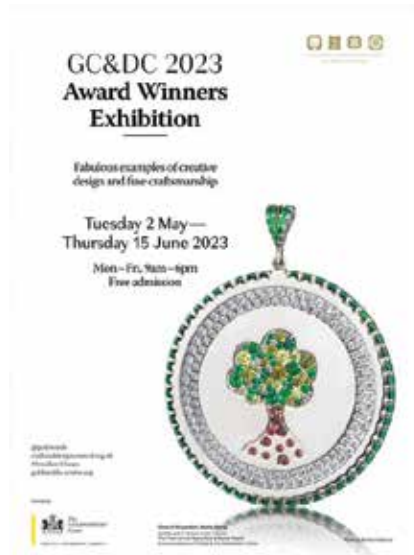


Fig 5. The Goldsmiths' Craft & Design Council Awards banner, 2023

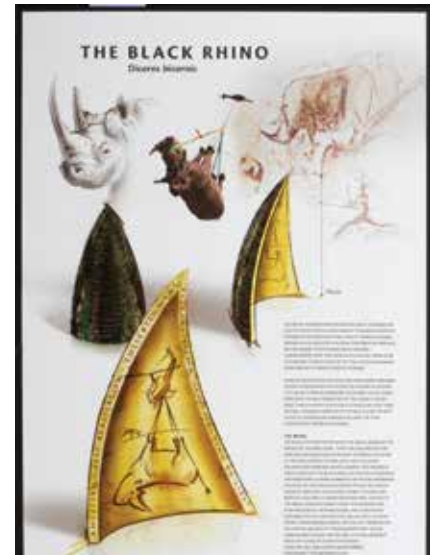


Fig 6. Medal Design for The Black Rhino, *Dicerus bicornis*, 2020
Sue Aperghis

theoretical solid-state physics; his two papers from 1931 were fundamental to further developments. The persona that the artist depicts here radiates contemplation and determination from his outward gaze to the set of his shoulders. The reverse of the medal, following the tradition of Renaissance medals to include motifs that are significant to the subject, depicts a simple cubic structure to reference Sir Alan's early exploratory work.

Creation of the Goldsmiths' Centre

As a charitable institution, and to further its involvement in the teaching of the skill sets involved in metalwork, the Goldsmiths' Company undertook the imaginative step of creating the Goldsmiths' Centre in 2012 by renovating a Victorian London school, combining it with a modern addition (fig. 4). This functions as a location for apprenticeships, for teaching and exhibitions, with workshops, rooms for events and a café. It is a training centre, but also it acts as a charitable branch of the livery, supporting projects such as the BAMS Student Medal Project, which has held two exhibitions there, and has invited students at the Centre to participate in the Project. For instance, a winner in the BAMS Project in 2013, Kyosun Jung (who also made a medal for BAMS in 2016), went on to have a studio at the Goldsmiths' Centre, and ten years later, in 2023, won a Gold category prize for her silver vase in the Goldsmiths' Craft & Design Council Awards.

The Goldsmiths' Craft & Design Council Awards

This annual competition, the GC&DC Awards (fig. 5), is very broad, looking at many different aspects of craftsmanship, including jewellery, gem setting, enamelling, silversmithing, engraving; it presents an award to an art college each year that has excelled in its submissions; a lifetime achievement award is given to an individual or individuals who have made a great difference to the world of craft and design. Entry is free to artists. The judging for all entries in the competition is made by separate small juries of those who have

expertise in each field: 'the only peer reviewed technical and creative awards in the United Kingdom.' The Awards Annual states: 'The competition has become diverse and wide-ranging, embracing every aspect of craft and design activity currently being practised in the industry. It is a truly unique competition.'² In 2023, for the first time, award winners were shown at an exhibition at the Goldsmiths' Centre. Among these were the designs for the modern art medal section of the competition.

Art medal designs

Over the years of the GC&DC Awards, medal designs – which have been a part of it continuously since 2005 – varied widely in topic and type. At times there was an emphasis on the medal being either worn or purposed as an award for achievement, including for youth sports or to celebrate a heroic personage. In 2015 the brief suggested that the medal 'look outside the circle to design an idea of a contemporary medal.' The dedicated team at the Goldsmiths' Company have, year on year, expanded the scope of the competition, finding new sponsors and exploring different categories of craftsmanship. The Council for the awards is always considering new ideas; for instance, in 2023 they sought to 'highlight and further promote the crucial importance and contribution that design plays in the industry,' recollecting that the first Goldsmiths' Company Award for 2D design in 2013 went to a medal design, the topic of which was 'Conserving the Arctic habitat.' To have such a large and prestigious organisation as the Goldsmiths' Company promoting the design of medals is a huge boost to this often overlooked medium.

Medal designs of the past four years

A brief that focuses on matters of world concern, and a wider sweep of artists, especially those teaching at and attending art colleges, has resulted latterly in greater participation in the 2D medal design, which has been part of the competition since 2000. The past four years, from 2020 to 2023, have seen a greater response and



Fig 7. Medal design for Reflections on a Polar Bear, 2020
Sue Aperghis

innovative medal designs. Brian Hill, who previously chaired the GC&DC and has been the Consultant since 2012, comments:

Historically, attracting designers to this specialist area has been difficult; through liaising with BAMS this enabled the design challenges to reach a wider audience, which brought enhanced creativity and participation. We have revitalised the medal section with exciting, topical and environmental themes that have caught the imagination and participation from a greater variety of designer and artist backgrounds.³

Brian Hill has been involved with the CG&DC for 32 years, and counting, and he and his team continually seek new directions for the Awards, encouraging makers at the bench everywhere.

Endangered species: looking at the Red List, 2020

The Goldsmiths' Craft & Design Awards team makes the brief for the year available online, and this is sent to a wide range of artists, professionals and students. They can then download the application form, and send in multiple designs if they so wish. In 2020, entrants were asked to look at the World Wildlife Fund list of endangered animal species, including insects. It was thought that more information about what constituted an art medal would be helpful, and therefore an accompanying statement mentioned size, weight, the use of both sides and the edge, and stressed the tactility of the hand-held object. Kate Harrison, an experienced medal maker and former winner, proposed that entrants could be asked to choose one animal, to show the threats, dangers to habitat, and a possible way forward for preservation. Added to the brief was the clear idea that the medal should create a narrative from one side to the other, 'two parts of the equation,' should engage with the edge and was not intended to be worn.



Fig 8. Medal design for The 20 Ton Gold Ring, 2021
Sarah McQuarrie

The combined result of widening the brief, explaining more fully the nature of the art medal and approaching younger makers resulted in increased submissions. As well as sending in the design itself, entrants took care with their presentation, knowing that the winners would be displayed at the Goldsmiths' Hall. Judges are free to award – or not to award – as they see fit. One design may merit a gold award, several may reach silver or bronze. There is no monetary prize. It is sufficient to receive this accolade; in recent years, the foundry G W Lunt has offered to cast a winning medal from wax if the winner so wishes. The judges confer and reach consensus, with complete anonymity of the artists. In 2020 there was no gold awarded, but there were four silver awards.

Two of the silver awards went to the same maker – no names are on the presentation cards – a mature student at City & Guilds of London, specialising in carving, Sue Aperghis. It was slightly embarrassing to two of the judges to realise afterwards that she was known to them, but they did not recognise anything about her entries. As it happens, Aperghis went on to win the BAMS New Medallist travel and study bursary in 2022.

Two winners for 2020

There is so much to consider about this design of *The Black Rhino*: *Diceros bicornis*, starting with the presentation (fig. 6). Aperghis has set her entry for the medal into a background story, with drawings that depict life on earth and the relationship of man and animal from pre-history, including cave drawings. Immediately, one is drawn into a sense of the importance of living creatures, and, indeed, around the edge of the medal are the words 'ancestry', 'responsibility', 'the meaning of life'. She explains in her written accompaniment that, 'humans saw in the rhino characteristics that they wanted to emulate, a fearless creature.' However, humans also have hunted the rhino almost to extinction. Experimentation with the medallic shape, reflecting the rhino's horn, serves to illustrate this terrible connection, where horn becomes nearly worth its weight in gold. The medal has two sides: the obverse, or the exterior, takes the texture of keratin, the protein that makes up the rhino horn. The interior, or the reverse of the medal, is golden and polished, a suggestion of its



Fig 9. Medal design for Three Sisters, 2021
Abigail Burt

value on the commercial market. Here, though, unlike the prehistoric hunter with his bow and arrow, Aperghis cites the work of the World Wildlife Foundation, illustrating how modern technology – in the form of helicopter rescue – can be used to move endangered rhinos to places of safety, where they can breed under protection, free from poaching. This, the artist writes, is ‘self-realisation and enlightenment.’

The second silver award given to Sue Aperghis in the same year was for *Reflections on a Polar Bear* (fig. 7). For the obverse, Aperghis interpreted the bear according to carvings she had seen made by the Inuit and illustrated her presentation with one of them. Her bear echoes this power of boldly drawn lines, creating an unadorned shape. ‘The bear is looking down at its own disappearing reflection; it is in a perilous situation.’ The small perch upon which the bear stands resembles cracked and melting ice, a stark statement about life on the edge for these animals. The reverse is, as Aperghis writes, ‘an absurdly ergonomic design which is seemingly melting away in your palm.’ More than this, whether intentional or not, the reverse resembles what could be a human skull. This is an uncomfortable narrative, which is exactly as it is intended to be.

Land Erosion: losing the earth, 2021

For the following year, there was discussion among those at the GC&DC, including the judges, of how to improve understanding of the modern art medal and its production processes, including modelling and casting. For those artists who are new to the medium, a reminder is needed that this is not a piece to be worn, but a two-sided artwork held in the hand. Also, greater explanation about what a foundry can successfully cast can be put into a note to go out with the papers for entrants. It was felt that looking at the world we live in could be a very wide-reaching and appropriate theme. While an environmental topic suggests a broad sweep, it suits the medal so well, because artists can then focus very closely on a specific subject, giving it undivided attention.

In 2020 (when the medal brief for 2021 is sent out) there had been much in the news about land loss through desertification, destruction of habitat, agricultural mismanagement. The theme set was ‘Land Erosion.’ The (shortened) brief stated: ‘Design a medal to depict and represent this. Erosion is the wearing away of the earth’s surface. It has led to increased pollution and sedimentation in streams, causing declines in fish and other species. Degraded land is often less able to hold water, which can worsen flooding.’⁴ The introduction and context of the brief went on to discuss the use of both sides of the medal, to include ideas for prevention and action and to make use of the edge. It looks very challenging, but the entries were up to 40 in number. They examined mining, land management, deforestation, glacial melt, the price of beef, among other excellent ideas.

Gold Award

Two designs received gold awards and two received silver. In the gold category, Sarah McQuarrie, at the time a student at Glasgow School of Art, looked at the damage that mining does to the earth, with her design, entitled *The 20 Ton Gold Ring* (fig. 8). McQuarrie is interested in light



Fig 10. Three Sisters, 2022
Abigail Burt
Bronze, cast, 80 x 65 mm



Fig 11. Medal design for Cookware Medal (Wok and Pan), 2022
Binyan Qu

and reflection, and the many facets of the design demand attention from the viewer. She wrote in her accompanying statement: 'The majority of the world's gold is extracted from open pit mines. It is estimated that around 20 tons of rock and soil is mined and discarded to produce enough raw gold for just one gold ring.' Not only that, but the waste contaminates the soil and water, there is a loss of biodiversity, and growing health problems in the vicinity. A jumble of heaped discarded rocks covers the obverse and falls over the edge of the medal design; the reverse depicts the enormity of the open cast mine, while the hole through the centre suggests the shape of one gold ring.

Silver Award

Another area of land loss and degradation was taken up by Abigail Burt, who received a silver award for her design *Three Sisters* (fig. 9). Agricultural damage from endless ploughing and monocrop farming using artificial means could be ameliorated by returning to a form of growing essential crops through a sustainable farming method that goes back thousands of years, companion farming or 'three sisters' farming. Burt's design shows three crops together on the obverse: squash, corn (or maize) and beans. The corn and beans are planted together on small mounds, with the squash between. The cornstalks act as a trellis for the beans; the beans stabilise the maize with its nutrients; the squash leaves shield the soil, conserving water. The shape of the design is oval, seed shaped. Each leaf is botanically distinguishable, and they reach over an edge to where, on the obverse, a parched, eroded and

cracked surface shows the result of unsustainable land use.

In 2022, the opportunity came to have *Three Sisters* cast in bronze as part of a group of BAMS New Medallists who were invited to exhibit their medals in London (fig. 10). It is weighty in the hand, but comfortable in its shape that promises potential growth. Carved in low relief, the plants intertwine, much as they might do in a farm field. Both of these responses to the brief about erosion, one looking at the devastation of mining and the other at the loss of harmonious farming methods, show how the medal can take up important current issues, using the art form to make outstanding statements.

Fusion: variations on diversity, 2022

In the year that the extraordinary silversmith, goldsmith, engraver and 'specialist in medals' Malcolm Appleby was presented with the GC&DC Lifetime Achievement Award, the theme set for the medal designs continued to focus on aspects of the world we live in, but moved away from environmental issues to thoughts about people, their interactions and influences, and how diversified societies have become. 'Fusion: food, music and culture' made up the suggested subjects, and although the entries were strong, there were fewer of them. The brief read: 'Fusion should be interpreted through your own unique lens to convey how these themes have flourished, evolved and developed. You can explore contrast, and find compatibility. Think spicy-sweet, tradition modernity, energy-serenity as ideas of the diverse ingredients in this melting pot!'⁵ The brief also reminded entrants about the parameters of the medal.

Gold Award

One particular medal stands out from the entries as most successfully taking up the idea of fusion, perhaps inspired by all the food references. *Cookware Medal (Wok and Pan)* by Binyan Qu, a student at Central Saint Martins College of Art, received a gold award (fig. 11). Her accompanying text stated: 'This medal is inspired by my own experience living in London working with cookware from different cultures. The front side is shaped and textured as the famous *zhangqiu wok* from China. The texture of this type of hand forged wok provides non-stick effect without coating. The sunken shape well suits the purpose of frying. Cooking with this particular type of wok could create what is called *guo chi*, which is the secret to delicious Chinese dishes.'⁶

The reverse, as one might guess, is a British frying pan, flat, best used with electric and gas stoves to provide an even heat. The surface is smooth, dark, as is the obverse. The indented and polished edge is intended to suggest an hourglass, to represent the fusion of the two cultures, over time. Looking at this beautiful design, one would be forgiven for seeing it as equally fusing ideas for medals and jewellery, coming as it does from a student in jewellery design.



Fig 12. Medal design for Rockpools and Rivulets, 2023
Sally Costen

It is propitious to have artists from different backgrounds investigating medals. Ever since the *Medals Today* exhibition in 1973, the Goldsmiths' Company has nurtured the art medal through the Company's connections with artistic societies, educational institutions and symposia and of course with its own commissions and its collection. As Dora Thornton, the Goldsmiths' Company Curator, writes in her recent book *The Art of Fame*, 'medals can do many things.'⁷ Nevertheless, despite their power to express thoughts on everything from politics to plants, they constitute a shy medium in the showy world of modern art. Inclusion of medals in the annual event of the GC&DC Awards provides publicity and reaches artists who might never have considered attempting medallic work. They discover it can be daunting.

Water: essential to life, 2023

'This year entrants are invited to consider the critical value of water in the world, and the myriad ways in which water can be depicted on two sides of an art medal to create a coherent narrative about a material on which all life depends,' is how this year's competition brief introduced the theme.⁸ It was suggested that artists visit the BAMS website, and that perhaps expressing two opposing ideas about water – such as clean or polluted, wild or plumed, puddled or torrential, or contained in a glass or falling from a mountain – would be ways to engage with the two sides and the edge, as they were reminded. Entries went up. No gold was given, as it is the prerogative of the judges, who have complete discretion to decide the awards. However, two silver awards were given.

Silver award

One of the silver awards went to Sally Costen for *Rockpools and Rivulets*, designed to be made in silver with blue geode agate and one dark pearl (fig. 12). Not surprisingly, Costen is a professional jeweller. The subject is how tidal water creates its own landscape where it wears

through rock and forms pools. On one side twisting tiers of silver rivulets circle around a small central pool; on the other side, blue agate, representing still water, wrapped intermittently by silver sides, contains one set pearl in the bottom depths, suggesting the value of water.

The medal shows extraordinary skill and craftsmanship, such control over the material with a balance of colour from one side to the other. The edge of Costen's medal is particularly noteworthy in the way she gently wraps small dollops of the silver from obverse to reverse to give a sense of containment of water, a depth one can gaze into. Is there too much sense of the precious and beautiful, thinking as a jeweller perhaps? This raises the question that, while fulfilling the traditional parameters of the medal – that is, two sides and an edge in a narrative – the medal would be difficult to make, to cast, as an edition in the Renaissance tradition. How could this truly be a multiple? Is that essential? How far from the model of Pisanello does one want the modern medal to stray?

Bronze award

Maiko Nagayama received a bronze award for her medal, *Every Last Drop*, a piece which shakes up traditional ideas of the medal without serious fallout (fig. 13): it could be duplicated in bronze and it makes stunning use of both sides, yet Nagayama moves right away from the circular boundary, giving her design the shape of a small bag of drinking water, a heat-sealed sachet used in South East Asia and Africa in particular. The sachets are cheaper to produce than plastic bottles and easier to transport. Here is a medal that teaches us something about water, as the brief requests, looking at its critical value. 'The medal is to convey the message about the value of safe drinking water. We often forget how lucky we are to have easy access to safe drinking water. We never know how important something is until we lose it,' Nagayama writes.⁹



Fig 13. Medal design for Every Last Drop, 2023
Maiko Nagayama

The small sachet can be carried in the hand, and the medal would fit right into the palm. The obverse depicts the tied up sachet, with textured string knotted around the opening, and drops of clean water in relief falling down the side. The ties continue along one edge, with a slightly pleated top. The reverse, a shocking contrast, is a punctured bag, and a cracked, parched land, with a drop of water to suggest scarcity. This side is textured, compared to the polished obverse. Lettering on the other edge tells the title in incised capitals: *Every Last Drop*.

Maiko Nagayama is a jeweller, working in London after graduating from Central Saint Martins. Her jewellery is spoken of as being unconventional, innovative, futuristic and pioneering. Very often jewellers find that making medals frees them from always working with the body in mind, a chance for exploration. The wide world of the modern art medal makes such investigation possible, not only for jewellers, but for all artists who are searching for a medium upon which they can place their thoughts and dreams and also express their distress and anger about the world we all live in, while offering solutions for hope. As Kathryn Bishop writes, in her article in the Goldsmiths Craft & Design Awards Annual of 2023: 'The world of art medals is brimming with stories and talismans that provide a commentary on the causes, concerns and opportunities affecting peoples and the planet.'¹⁰ Many thanks are owed to the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths Craft & Design Council for their enthusiastic embrace of the modern art medal.

Thanks to the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths, the Goldsmiths' Centre; especially to Brian Hill and to Alexandra Tosto; also to Dora Thornton, author of *The Art of Fame*; and to Kathryn Bishop, who wrote the article 'A Moment with Medals' for the *Awards Annual* 2023.

PHOTO CREDITS:

The Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths, except for Abigail Burt *Three Sisters* cast bronze medal.

NOTES

1. GC&DC *Awards Annual* 2020 (and others).
2. GC&DC *Awards Annual* 2020 (and others).
3. Brian Hill, email to the author, 18th May 2023.
4. Design Brief, 2021.
5. Design Brief, 2022.
6. Qu, B.: *Awards Annual*, 2022, re: *Cookware Medal (Wok and Pan)*.
7. Thornton, D.: *The Art of Fame*, London, 2023, p. 11.
8. Design Brief, 2023.
9. Nagayama, M.: *Awards Annual*, 2023, re: *Every Last Drop*.
10. Bishop, K.: A moment with medals, *Awards Annual*, 2023, p. 11.