

j-dex Stephen Goldsmith

Stephen Goldsmith, Gold & Silver Polisher

Stephen started his career 34 years ago when he was 15. His first step was to go to Art College where he studied on a Foundation course all aspects of the trade at the Medway Arts College at Rochester in Kent. 'You study everything from ceramics to jewellery, setting, engraving, silversmithing and of course, polishing. I did this for a year to help me make an educated guess about what I wanted to do with my future.' Stephen chose to make gold & silver polishing his career and started as an indentured apprentice where he worked next to one man for 4 years whom he only knew as 'Mac', since no first names were ever used in the workshop. 'I was expected to speak to each craftsman using his surname, but take no advice from anybody but my Master. I was called a 'boy' and the term still lives on with all apprentices.'



jewellery by Theo Fennell



Stephen worked with 7 polishers, about 15 silversmiths and 6 spoonies in a very dirty workshop. It was the 3-day week whilst he was there, and there was even a strike, so he learnt how to paint as well, because if there was no Master around he was not allowed to work. 'My first week's wages were £8, not like today where you would not even consider starting on very low wages with perhaps the prospect later on of making very big money. Consequently, I did all the usual things like making the tea and keeping the workshop tidy.'

Whilst he was serving his apprenticeship Stephen was expected to study Silversmithing at the Art College 1 day a week so that he could converse with a silversmith and explain what he wanted him to do, as it was up to the polisher to make sure that the

piece ended up being of the highest quality. 'While I studied at College, I did make various pieces and did win competitions - which did not go down well with the silversmith apprentice as I beat him! As you could guess, I could make my piece look better than his!'

Once Stephen had finished his apprenticeship he was made a Freeman of the City of London and a Freeman of Goldsmiths' Hall. He soon went on to work for Stuart Devlin, who specialised in Faberge-style eggs and very modern pieces of silver. There were 7 Polishers and about 30 Silversmiths in that workshop. Although he only stayed there for 7 months and moved on, because he gained more enjoyment from polishing traditional pieces.

Stephen explained, 'My next company was "Nayler Brothers" which was owned by Garrards the Crown Jewellers and we were the main workshop for the showroom. This was 1977 and the Queen's Jubilee which was a very busy year indeed. Later I was involved in the Wedding Presents for Prince Charles & Lady Diana.

While I was there I learnt how to gold & silver plate, which is always a dodgy business because you have to work with some very serious poisons, such as cyanide, etc. - although polishing is not without its risks as well.

Very soon after I started at Garrards, one man left and so there was a craftsman who was in his late 60's and a boy. The boy came out of his time then the other craftsman was asked to retire at 69 and so I was made Foreman. 'I may have been only over one man but I was responsible for the quality control for what Garrards sold in the showroom, and I had to deal with 12 silversmiths at the time.'

During his time at Nayler's Stephen dealt with the famous and the very rich, including the Royal Household. He used to look after the Queen's Tea Pot for her, which was just right for two cups, also advising the Queen's Household on how to look after the silver and he often had visits from the Polishers from Buckingham Palace.

'I also used to advise the Royal Army on how to look after their silver. What happened is that they spent a week with the hand polishers who looked after the silver in the showroom and then they were sent to me.

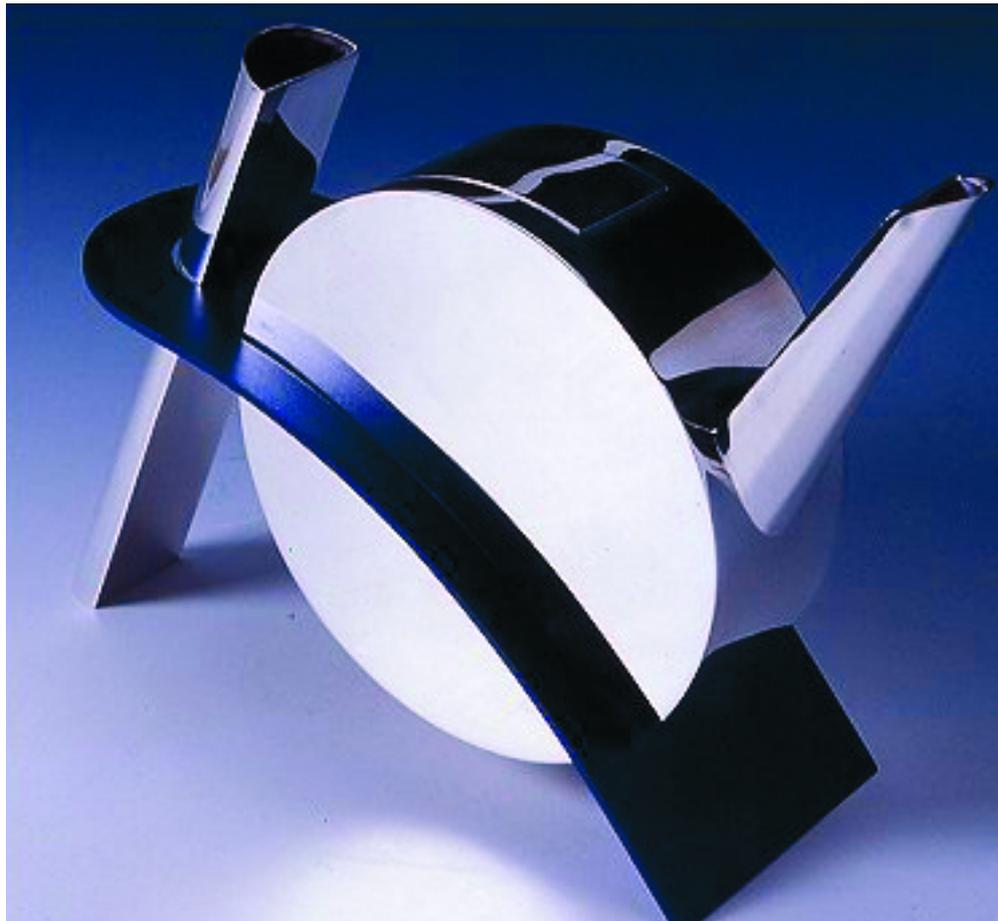
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Coffee table in 18ct yellow and white gold set with 380 1ct diamonds. Enameled and with 18ct gold aircraft set in lapis lazuli. Sold in 1985 for £2.5 million

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I was expected to show them around the silver workshop and demonstrate a few tips and tricks about polishing and I was expected to do this within an hour because time was money. Sometimes men were flown down from Scotland for the day for that hour with me. My fame grew because even 2 years ago, the Army was looking for craftsmen to run a course for their Silverman and by this time Garrards had amalgamated with Asprey's, and Asprey's knew nothing about this added talent of mine. It was discovered that I was the only man who was able to run a course with a certificate. Indeed, one time I met the former butler to Camilla Parker-Bowles and he said that it was the most memorable day of his life to spend the day with me, and I felt very honoured.' Stephen was asked to go to the Tower of London to the Jewel House and to take along a camera as well as a silversmith. He was presented with a very large, extremely heavy, wine cistern, dating from 1830, having taken ten years to make, with 110 pieces bolted to the sides in the form of lobsters, crabs and shells, all gold plated. He was told to take photographs of the cistern, which were later confiscated, in case he tried to make a copy from the pictures. The cistern was taken into a room and dismantled by the silversmith and then Stephen was asked to restore the piece to its former glory, which meant that he had to work in the Jewel House for 11 days under armed guard.



One of Stephen's TV appearances concerned the America's Cup. A Maori in New Zealand destroyed the Cup over land rights. Garrards had made the Cup 150 years before and offered to repair the Cup free of charge. New Zealand TV made a film about the restoration of the cup and Stephen was told that he was seen in newspapers and on TV on the other side of the world. He remembers the interviewer being very amused when having restored it so that it looked like new he then proceeded to make it look 150 years old, in front of his very eyes! Two years ago, the workshops of Asprey & Garrards were amalgamated and 3 other polishers joined Stephen. That meant that we had 60 craftsmen working in one building - ranging from engravers, leather workers, clock & watch makers, jewellers and of course the silversmiths who totalled 30. It was the biggest workshop in the country. Sadly for Stephen Asprey have now moved all the work to Italy and the workshop was downsized. Stephen was a casualty along with 20 other craftsmen. That was at the beginning of April 2003 and since then he has started his own company, known as "SMG (Kent) Ltd". 'I have always been responsible for the silver at Aylesford Priory and the National Shrine of St. Jude at Faversham over the years, and they have been very kind to me over the last year making sure that I remain busy.' Of the several organisations Stephen works with he helps the students at KIAD to complete their course work for the end of their final year. He has been accepted into the Institute of Professional Goldsmiths being the only polisher to receive such status. More recently Stephen was hired by the top West-End Jeweller, Theo Fennell and ensures that every piece in the showroom Sparkles and Blings. Contact Tel: 0207 591 5098

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