

PROFILE

ROD KELLY, designer of the Brunel £2 and the £5 crown to commemorate the 450th anniversary of the accession of Queen Elizabeth I, talks to JOHN ANDREW

Rod Kelly's is an interesting story, as he appears to stumble into areas quite by chance and then excels. A highly regarded silversmith and goldsmith and the country's leading chaser, he has recently added two coin designs to his repertoire. However, it was not until his late teens that he decided that his career would evolve in the artistic world.

'I had no formal art education until I was 19', Rod told me. 'I studied economics, history and sociology at A-level. However, I became fascinated by an article in the *Sunday Telegraph* on the work of Gustave Doré, one of the most prolific and successful book illustrators of the 19th century. I also loved the work of Aubrey Beardsley, the leading British illustrator of the 1890s. I liked the intensity of the black lines and the vivid movement in both artists' work.'

In 1975, he was accepted on to a foundation course in art at Lancashire Polytechnic. 'On the strength of one drawing', he added with a smile. 'I found myself surrounded by new influences and a wide range of media.' At the end of the year he was accepted on a three-year degree course in 3-D design at the Birmingham School of Jewellery.

'I stumbled upon the technique of chasing by chance', Rod told me. Chasing looks very much like engraving as it involves producing a linear design upon the metal. However, the metal is not cut away, but is pushed by a tool into the desired pattern. The technique involves the use of hammers and punches. He continued, 'I liked the lines, controlling the metal and the black and white colours of silver. Those early influences of Doré, Beardsley and others led me to try and create experimental low relief forms in silver using lines and low relief depth. Everything fell into place.'

Having obtained a BA degree with 1st Class Honours, Rod secured a place at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London. 'This gave me a wonderful opportunity to hone my skills as a chaser of silver and to develop ideas and line forms that would adorn pieces of hand raised silver', said Rod. After graduating he set-up his workshop in

Norfolk. Today, his work is owned by members of the Royal Family, livery companies in the City of London, is used at 10 Downing Street, in churches, is displayed in museums and owned by collectors throughout the world.

If it was not for the fact that Kevin Clancy, Librarian and Curator of the Royal Mint Museum visited the exhibition *Creation – an insight into the mind of the modern silversmith* at Goldsmiths' Hall in the summer of 2004, Rod's life could well have continued in this way. However, Kevin was impressed with Rod's chasing and asked if he had ever designed coins. While Rod had designed a medal for the Fellows of New College, Oxford, he had never turned his hand to coin design. However, he indicated it was an area that interested him. In May 2006, Kevin sent him the brief for the £2 coin to commemorate the 200th Anniversary of the birth of Isambard Brunel. However, he advised Rod not to hold his breath, as he was inexperienced at this aspect of design.

Together with five other designers, Rod submitted his drawings. Much to his surprise, he was short-listed. The Design Committee makes its final selection from a plaster model of the design. For expediency, Rod trusted this work to Robert Elderton, a former Royal Mint employee, who lived within easy driving distance. The two men hit it off and Rod was surprised to learn that they shared the same professional vocabulary, which made Rod's supervision of the task easier.

To his greater surprise, Rod's design was chosen. He told me how he felt designing a coin as opposed to a piece of silver. 'One of the joys of designing a coin is that the size and shape is already set, so I did not have to consider the three dimensional aspects. Designing a piece of silver is far more complex as the decoration has to work in harmony with the shape and the function also has to be considered.'

'Coin design for a silversmith is quite liberating. I found it to be great fun and possibly brought a different approach to the design process. I enjoy striving to include a list of objects or images associated with a celebration. These images form a brief and I play around with ideas and shapes, often cutting them out, pasting them together, photocopying them, removing details with correction fluid and re-assembling them in a different grouping.'

'With Brunel, I had the evocative black and white photographs that I had seen during my History of Art lectures at the RCA. I felt his portrait was synonymous with his work

and I based his image for the coin on one of the photographs, changing the detail but keeping the outline. With this particular photograph, huge chains hang in the background as a backdrop. This was a very powerful detail – I believe they were used to slow down a new ship's entry into the water during its launch. I considered the chains would be perfect for the frame around the portrait of Brunel. This feature also works well as a bimetallic coin is divided into two distinct parts.'

'Brunel of course is known for his huge engineering projects. I wanted to illustrate the scale of his achievements on the coin; so, I selected a part image of his Royal Albert Bridge at Saltash in Devon and a wheel from one of his drawings. I used these in the background. The lettering used on the coin for the date and denomination is the same typeface used for Brunel's name and dates on the bridge's two main supports. I thought that the perfect vehicle for both the date and the denomination would be the rivets used in the bridge's construction. Little details like this I believe are important. In all my designs and want everything to have a reason and a purpose.'

Rod was also invited to submit his design for the 2008 £5 crown to celebrate the 450th Anniversary of the Accession of Queen Elizabeth I. It was fascinating to hear how Rod's design developed. 'I had been reading an architectural book on the building and construction of Europe's largest cathedrals. My attention was drawn towards the mathematics of the buildings. The four main pillars of the nave and choir crossing set out the proportion and foundation of the building. As Elizabeth was often in conflict with the Church, I thought the four roses symbolising the four pillars would be the pivotal part of the design.'

'The arches are struck from these four points within the design creating a mandoria, which is the Italian for almond. In traditional Christian art, the Virgin Mary is often depicted within a mandorla and this signified, amongst other things, that she was a virgin. I considered this the ideal shape for a framework to encompass the head of Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen. Of course, her relationship with Robert Dudley, her loyal servant, was suspected to be more than just platonic. Dudley ended up in the Tower of London. Before he lost his head he carved a floral pattern in the stonework within the Tower. It seemed fitting to include this as in the design the leaves give movement and complete what is quite a tight structure.'

'The lettering came from an Elizabethan text. The Roman capitals have scrolls and tails, quite unlike a more traditional Roman alphabet. The scrolls and tails reflected

the movement of the leaves and I feel that the lettering becomes part of the design, rather than just an addition placed around the circumference. The portrait of Elizabeth was based upon the painting by George Gower, but to give a little insight in to the modern age, I digitally reversed the image so that she is looking the other way. The selected images arrive after a great deal of research. I start with so many ideas and images and slowly select details that I know will interact and produce what I believe to be an exciting design based upon historical fact.'

Rod's entry into the world of coin design was not without excitement for the whole of the Kelly family. Together with his wife Shelia and two sons Angus and Jamie, Rod travelled to the Royal Mint at Llantrisant to watch the first Brunel two-pound coins being struck. In fact, Jamie actually struck the first proof examples. Then aged 12, it is unlikely he will never forget the sound as the multi-ton press came down on to the blank after he pressed the button. Rod remarked, 'It was absolutely amazing to see a blank turn into a coin. After Jamie had struck the fifth coin he looked up at me and said, "Dad, this is just like making money".' Indeed, it was.

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