

# findings

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# Forging New Jewellery Histories

Symposia at Goldsmiths Hall and The V&A focusing on new historical and contemporary research provide a stimulating start to the year

Lieta Marziali

**The weekend of 19-20 January 2018 brought two most interesting symposia to the London scene.**

The first, 'Commerce with all the World' at Goldsmiths' Hall, focused on new historical research into the gold- and silversmithing trade in the 16th and 17th centuries. Organised to celebrate the launch of the landmark publication *Silversmiths in Elizabethan and Stuart London: Their Lives and Their Marks* by David Mitchell, it presented contributions from leading curators and conservators from world-class institutions such as the Ashmolean Museum, the Louvre, the V&A, the Museum of London and the National Trust.

The first two presentations by David Mitchell and Mark Merry focused on the mammoth task of compiling a fully searchable database of the makers on the 1682 Mark Plate (literally, a copper sheet stamped with makers' marks). With records from approximately 14,000 individuals, drawn from indentures, apprenticeships and freedom registers, as well as ledgers, gifts and tax records, it provides an extraordinary window into the social, political and economic environment in which the jewellery, silversmithing and gem trade operated. One has to wonder what a contemporary version of this database would reveal!



Silvia Weidenbach speaking at the V&A



Panel discussion at the V&A, from left Silvia Weidenbach, Dr Julie Lobalzo Wright, Maria MacLennan, Dr Beatriz Chadour-Sampson



The Ashmolean's Matthew Winterbottom presented his research on John Coocus (of whose name there appears with at least 15 different spellings!); his association with Charles II provides an insight into the machinations of political allegiances in the trade, also explored in the National Trust's James Rothwell's talk, and the issue of 'aliens' taking up trade positions in the city, the main topic also of the Louvre's Michèle Bimbenet-Privat's paper on the French Huguenot Etienne Delaune.

The V&A's Tessa Murdoch revealed more about the symbology of silver fire furniture (irons, dogs, bellows and so on) than I think most of us jewellers in the audience realised existed. And while post-doctoral researcher Jasmine Kilburn-Toppin talked about the outstanding moral conduct necessary to operate as an assayer, the Museum of London's Hazel Forsyth brought several shady stories from the medieval jewellery and gem trade to life. For those who have not read it, her book *London's Lost Jewels* on the Cheapside Hoard is one that cannot be put down till the end.

The papers, all deeply rooted in historical and technical research, not only brought to life objects often confined to hidden corners of museum collections, but crucially the often forgotten but intriguing narratives of their associated makers and commissioners, highlighting the difficulties – and yet the joy! – of extrapolating new histories from centuries-old primary sources such as ledgers, letters and inventories.

The second symposium, 'Love and Desire in Gems and Jewels', was held at the V&A. After a historical cavalcade through more than two millennia of jewels' association with love and desire, presented by V&A's leading jewellery curator and historian Beatriz Chadour-Sampson, we were thrust straight into the future by Silvia Weidenbach, who explored ideas of attachments in her ever-joyful playground of the digital and the traditional. The glamour of Hollywood could not be missed in a programme devoted to love and desire, and Warwick University's Julie Lobalzo Wright focused on the transformational power of jewellery, whether sought or imposed, in famous female characters of the silver screen.

The most intriguing presentation was perhaps Dundee University researcher Maria Maclennan's foray into forensic jewellery. Driven by her own curiosity about issues of attachment, provenance



Matthew Winterbottom, Curator of Sculpture and Decorative Arts, Ashmolean Museum

and the habits associated with the giving, receiving and wearing of jewellery, she has pretty much single-handedly developed a new area of jewellery practice, in which she works alongside crime and accident investigators in the search for clues such as victims' and perpetrators' identities and criminal modus operandi and motive.

In the final presentation, Beatriz once again took us back into the lures of historical research with her insight into the magnificent treasure recovered from the Spanish galleon *Nuestra Señora de la Concepción*, shipwrecked in the Marianas Islands in 1638. This final talk showed how global the nature of the jewellery and gems trade was already centuries old then, and how in fact 'made in China / Thailand / the Philippines' are far from modern concepts and were instead the product of a much earlier colonial mercantilism feeding the growing needs and whims of an expanding European middle class.

As contemporary jewellers, it is important to remind ourselves that our discipline was born out of a critical questioning of the historically traditional practices and values associated with body adornment. Study days such as these offer an important insight into the wider context of the art, craft and design as well as manufacture, commerce and consumption of jewellery, without the knowledge of which we ourselves could find no context.



Galleon Trade Routes:  
Image Courtesy of Beatriz  
Chadour-Sampson