

Opening speech: Handmark Gallery, Hobart, 10 November, 2023

Phill & Tyrus Mason: 40 years, 40 awards, 40 pieces

...a celebration of 4 decades of goldsmithing and gemstone faceting...

Many thanks to Phill, and to Handmark Gallery, for inviting me to be here on this notable occasion.

I initially wrote this to speak directly to Phill, and will continue to do so now, even though we have now received the very sad news of his passing this week, at such a critical time in his career.

Phill, you remain with us here today, at the launch of this truly amazing exhibition, and with so many of your long-term supporters.

Your contribution to the crafts world over the last 40 years is exemplary, and it is rewarding to have the opportunity to share this celebration with you. With the title including '40 years, 40 awards and 40 pieces, and four decades of goldsmithing and gemstone faceting', it is inspiring to see these works, made over time by you and your son Tyrus, and with a great contribution to the exhibition by Tyrus and your wife and partner Jane Giblin.

It is impressive to see that the exhibition is arranged in layers, with archives along the base, works from family collections, with some lent by the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in the middle, and on the top new works for sale! And there are intriguing tools in the windows.

In many ways it is strange to be brought back to Tasmania, where I came 50 years ago in 1972, as an imported New Zealander, living here until 1986 (when Phill moved in here), before leaving to write a history of the crafts movement across Australia, and then becoming a museum curator. But it is also an extraordinary pleasure to return, because – as for you, I think, Phill, and for so many others I am sure – coming here was one of the best moves I ever made in my life.

The 1970s and 80s are regarded now as the 'heady years', where so many arts, crafts and design issues associated with education, funding and evolution of important arts organisations, took off and led to amazing and often unexpected opportunities. And so many of us fell in head first. Phill Mason has been very much part of these important years.

Many of my organisational connections are shared with Phill, albeit that he is younger and came later, starting his jewellery career in Tasmania 40 years ago in the early 1980s.

Phill was President of the Crafts Council of Tasmania and vice-President of the national Crafts Council of Australia; and a member of the Community Arts Centre Foundation, later the Salamanca Art Centre Inc. where he spent ten years on the Board (1986-96), with the last four as President; also 'battling for funding to keep such honorary professional bodies afloat'.

He was involved with JMGA, the Jewellers and Metalsmiths Group of Australia, established in 1980 with state branches, and served for some time as its national president; and he was a Foundation member of the Gold & Silversmiths Guild of Australia, in 1989.

He taught at the Hobart College of TAFE from 1987- 92, and he has also written to represent Tasmania and Australia in journals like Craft Arts International, and also in the Hobart Mercury (one was 'The Crafty State in '88').

He also wrote very informatively on his social media pages, and I have drawn on quotes from these here.

An amazing record of contributions!

So – considering the evolution of his career – how did he become such a significant jeweller, here in Tasmania?

He grew up in Sydney, before Whitlam's provision of free tertiary education in the 1970s, and to earn an income in the late 60s he worked in the trenches of the Metropolitan Water, Sewerage and Drainage Board, and then for most of 1970 assisting welders in the tunnels of the Snowy Mountains Authority Hydro-Electric Scheme. An influential start in metal?

Having previously studied in the evenings in 1969, he went on to do full-time theoretical studies in Fine Arts and Geography at Sydney University for 3 years from 1971. These experiences were to become evident in much of his work in jewellery. In 1965 (age 14) he had also joined the Parramatta Lapidary Club, with an interest in precious stones which has also stayed with him.

Somehow, he then moved to Burnie in the 1970s, where for 6 years he ran 'The Electric Jug' cafe and restaurant, and then set up his 'Artisan Studio', while organising The Tasmanian Artisan Terrace, as a space for other makers to set up workshops in different media. Here he taught himself to silver-solder while representing about 35 of Tasmania's top craft artists for a couple of years.

How did he learn gold and silversmithing? While in Burnie in 1983, he went to a private workshop in Yogyakarta in Java, saying 'Rather than enrol at one of the TAFEs or RMIT, I wanted to learn basically what the *metal could do*, rather than what *technology could do* to the metal... this included annealing and polishing silver.

Three years later in 1986, he set up his Masons Studio Jewellers at the entrance to Galleria Salamanca, near where the Salamanca Art Centre had opened in Hobart in 1977, and his jewellery career took off from there.

Ten years on, in 1995, he apprenticed his son, Tyrus, who continues as an exemplary collaborator and independent maker, and who has taught silversmithing at the Hobart Lapidary Association.

From 2002 – 2005 Phill also opened a branch in Port Douglas in North Queensland.

Appropriately for today's occasion, Phill recalled that the first solo exhibition he had in Hobart was in 1986 in Handmark Gallery, when it was in Hampden Road. He said he was marking Halley's Comet's appearance, commemorated in jewellery, and that 'while in 1986 we were closest to the comet's elliptical orbit, in 2023 we are now furthest from its orbit', which he called a fortuitous timing. Since then, he said, you will see that the motif of a head-and-tail has been prominent in his work, 'ranging through the juxtaposition of angle and curve, form and line, circle and square, sphere and cube, and so on.'

Over all these years his self-education included becoming familiar with the work of colleagues in Tasmania, and many others throughout Australia through the JMGA organisation, and its regular conferences with exhibitions and workshops in different states. And in 1997 he was convenor for JMGA's 9th Biennial and 5th International Conference in Hobart.

He attended an amazing range of national and international workshops, including for 'Form and Metal Patination'; 'Fold-Forming'; 'Japanese Metalworking'; Enamelling; 'Gold Leafing and Cold-Joining ' and 'Case-making'. We can see outcomes here.

He also travelled regularly overseas, visiting workshops and other centres and participating in a range of inspiring events, starting with a studio-residency at Lakeside, Michigan, in 1992; and with Australia Council funding, in 1994, he was able to study the Medici Collection in Florence. Many more have followed.

As well, he has participated in many interstate and international exhibitions, achieving 40 awards of varying sizes, along the way.

In 1989 the first national biennial jewellery award for 'Contemporary Wearables' was established at the City Gallery in Toowoomba. And in that first year the award was won by – Phill Mason, with a brooch titled 'Locket-Window to Unassailable Purity'!

He was also a winner at the Northern Territory National Crafts Award, in Darwin in 1991 (where I see that I was the judge!).

And in 1992, he was one of those included with Stephen Joyce's Despard Gallery representation at the CINAPE crafts fair in Chicago, and others in following years.

Many will recall that in 2005, he was commissioned by the Tasmanian Government to make an official gift to Tasmanian-born Crown Princess Mary of Denmark, to commemorate the birth of her son, and he made a christening spoon with a hand-turned shaft in amber, the National Gemstone of Denmark, combined with a finial of Crocoite, the State Mineral of Tasmania.

In 2008, his Saturn egg, set with 'Lunarium', the Moonstone which he faceted, took Second Place in 'The Gemmys' an international gemstone faceting competition in the USA.

And this year, in 2023, he was invited by the Mobilia Gallery in Massachusetts, to be in 'The Reverent Ring' group exhibition, where three of the rings he made for it commemorate the centenary of the finding of Tutankhamun's tomb. It is on now!

All great challenges and acknowledgements!

Of special relevance to this exhibition, are the many underlying meanings to Phill's work, in form, materials and designs. Originally he thought of titling the exhibition Quarante, meaning Forty, which is known as a period of gestation, where periods of time of trial and development have been known as Forty Days and Forty nights – and others. Gestation? A 40-year career path!

He also mentions that the past four years have seen him manoeuvring through the pandemic to consolidate his practice, and that of his goldsmith son, Tyrus. Working collaboratively in their many processes, among other things, Tyrus is personally interested in the rare petrified manferns that are found at the Lune River in Southern Tasmania, and experiences such as skateboarding where a skating rink bangle won him a Tasmanian Fine Craft Award, in 1997.

With a special interest in stone-carving, in 2002 Tyrus was awarded third prize in the international Opal Jewellery Design Awards at Lightning Ridge. Recently he has focused on a gothic arch, as part of his own design language. And his work in this exhibition, with stones from many sources faceted by Phill, are extremely enticing in the forms and functions he has fabricated to express his own ideas.

Phill says of this Quarante 40-year time span: 'The selection of motifs and themes present ranges over the gamut of my work ... but far from exhausts it, and ranges from sculpture and objets d'art, through jewellery statements, to the faceting of pearls and gemstones; all undertaken with the library of techniques which I have mastered over the decades...'

It is fascinating for us, now understanding more of his background and interests, to look closely at his work and identify some of the results of those underlying motivations. You may notice that central to his work has been a form of 'geometric expressionism', or what he calls 'Geometric Annulus'. He says: "The 'four' of this 'Quarante' has been ever-important in my work, in combination with 'three': the square and the triangle; the square and the circle... the resolution of the duality between Heaven (circle) and Earth (square); not just the squaring of the circle, but the cubing of the sphere; and the curving of the angle."

Phill has also noted that he likes to work with 'chenier', which I find is a name for hollow tubing used in jewellery making. Now where would he have become interested in pipes? And as well as recalling those years in the Hydro Schemes, he has also responded to local and contemporary events: earlier this year the Wooden Boat Festival in Hobart following CoVid pandemic inspired him to make a 'Keel and Clinker' Pendant with curves of a typical cross-section of the tall ships and wooden boats, and a tiny rose-gold ring.

And then there are the stones. Travelling regularly overseas, Phill has always maintained contact with sources of interesting rough stones, a significant rationale being that using rough stones sourced straight from their mines enables him to facet them to his own designs. He has maintained a stockpile of stones including what has been described as 'about a ton of his first lapidary love – agate' and it is recorded that his stockpile includes chrysoprase, green garnets, blue tourmalines, moonstone and opal. As well, of course, he notes that Tasmania is famous for its pure blue-white Topaz: the 'Killiecrankie Diamond' (found on Flinders Island, where Phill is now at rest). Along the way he has also developed new styles of cutting, using computer aided design (CAD), resulting, for example, in the Quilt Cut Designs and the Cupola Designs. At the end of last year, Phill wrote that his Ziggurat Ring, lathed in a stepped cone, and 'once again promoting our local, under-appreciated, Tasmanian black spinel', was another leap of direction in his signature style.

In thanking his followers for fostering his growth during the past four decades, he mentioned online the development of his work through what I can read now as an impressive summary of much in this exhibition. These include: ...' rose-window brooches; anti-whaling pieces; spoons and ladles; blades and cutting-edges, Saturns and geometry of space; enormous angular lapel brooches; hinged and 'unhinged' containers; 'up-setting' of gemstones; bezel-setting of pearls undrilled; faceting of pearls; use of opal as components in larger assemblages; vessels and glasses; table-pieces and objets d'art, drawing upon 60 years as a lapidary; innovation of chains with novel linkages; games of knuckle-bones and other palm-pieces; titanium combs; experimental setting of stones into unusual materials like slate, mica, titanium, shell; and the ever-present squaring of the circle, and cubing of the sphere; and of course the forty years of designing with eucalyptus leaves, gumnuts, and other botanical motifs...'

Within their own directions, Phill and Tyrus have worked collaboratively throughout their time together, eventuating with Phill focusing on faceting, and Tyrus on the metalwork. And Tyrus has pointed out to me that the most recent finished work, is in this exhibition as 'The Snake'.

And further considering significant dates and numbers, it turns out that eleven is very important. Tomorrow, the day after the exhibition opening, the 11th November appears to be Saturn Day and Phill recalls that 'the eleventh of the eleventh is the most significant day in Australian history' including Ned Kelly's hanging, The Dismissal, and also the formation of the Ballarat Reform League which laid the basis for the Eureka Stockade. It is also the date on which he opened 'The Electric Jug' and 'Artisan Studio' businesses, all those years ago. And happily, he had now been with his wife Jane Giblin for 11 years!

So warmest congratulations to you Phill, to Tyrus for your long-term working partnership; and to Jane and Tyrus who have both so worked hard on the exhibition. And very much to Allannah and Handmark Gallery for hosting this wonderful celebration and presenting it so well.

This huge audience includes Tyrus and his sister Bronte and their families, and Jane's family Tom and Nina. We are thinking of you all as we remember Phill, and we all enjoy inspecting these works, with many insights into what he has done along these 40 years, and recognition of what this means to all of us!

Grace Cochrane AM

Curator, author, historian, and former senior curator, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.