

The dichotomy of silver plate.

Belgian silversmithing in the period 1950–1970 and the choice between creative craftsmanship and commercial production.

In principle the new marks which came into force on January 1st 1942 make silver produced in postwar Belgium easy to identify. The producers, importers and dealers struck their new barrel-shaped marks on their own products as well as on work bought in from other workshops or imported from abroad. After the Second World War most Belgian cities still had their notable silver establishments, but because of the pre-war takeover policy of firms like Wolfers, most were no more than sales outlets. In the 1950s and 60s the majority of the important silver producers were based in Brussels. The leading establishments for civil silver were Wolfers, Delheid Frères, Altenloh and Lemaire & de Vernisy. There were also smaller companies like Simonet, Vansteeger, Roger and Charlent which employed an average of between three and five workers. Devroye, Jacques Frères, Holemans and Vandenhoute specialized in ecclesiastical silver. Then there were a number of silversmiths and designers working independently and on the commercial circuit.

From the 1950s there was a clear division between the manufacturers who were little inclined to innovate because they had to take account of what were preponderantly conservative tastes, and a movement which aimed to revive silversmithing as an artistic craft. Innovation is most apparent in church silver and was stimulated by entries for the pavilions at Expo 58 and by exhibitions of Belgian religious art, which were organized both in Belgium and abroad during the 1950s and 60s. Innovation in church silver in terms of form began a decade before the beginning of the Second Vatican Council and ran parallel with the building of postwar churches. Leading Belgian architects like Roger Bastin and Marc Dessauvage also designed their own church plate.

The generation making contemporary silverware and other sacred art before the Second World War included Camille Colruyt, Philippe Denis, Victor Cassiman, Jean and Constant Ausloos, Emile De Naeyer and after that his son Carl De Naeyer, and the Benedictine Dom Grégoire Watelet who in 1958 was the last director of the École des Métiers d'Art at Maredsous abbey. The postwar generation making or designing contemporary church silver included Victor Kockerols, Roger Bonduel, Willy Ceysens, Emile Souply, Wim Tuyls, Mies De Wilde, Boud van Averbek, Félix Roulin, Raf Verjans, Staf Smets and Wim Ibens, who established the jewellery design department at the Koninklijke Academie voor Schone Kunsten (1968) and the silversmithing workshop at the Nationaal Hoger Instituut voor Schone Kunsten (1975), both in Antwerp. However, the 1960s and 70s saw a decline in commissions as numbers admitted to the ministry of the church fell.

The producers of civil silver had to contend with economic and social change, including new spending patterns on the part of consumers, increasing competition, soaring overheads and plummeting sales figures. Though the product range was broadened by the manufacture of objects and cutlery in white metal and stainless steel, this was not enough to turn the tide. For the silver manufacturers the 1950s and 60s were the beginning of the swansong. In the decades which followed companies and workshops closed down one by one or they survived by concentrating on making jewellery. Seemingly the movement which promoted the revival of silversmithing as a decorative craft had not had the desired effect. However, it was long forgotten that it was in this period that the foundations were laid for contemporary Belgian silver, which may explain the apparent stagnation. It took fifty years and considerable hype around Expo 58 to draw silversmithing out of the misty realms it occupied in the 1950s and 60s.

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