

A new wave of silver surfers

If you thought the precious metal had tarnished, think again. Young Irish craftspeople are introducing innovative designs

The hallmark of a "proper" family home used to be the quality of its silver service; even the term "the family silver" implied an inherited level of wealth and taste. Silver has also long been an excellent asset: the price has more than doubled in the past year, and continues to increase daily. Buy a piece by an internationally successful silversmith and you could be looking at a very interesting investment.

The trouble is that silverware for the home has not endured in the fashion stakes, and its trendiness has tarnished as much as its shine. So a few years ago, some innovative Irish silversmiths realised that if there was still going to be a silver lining in our lives, the stuff needed to be reinvented.

Five of the best contemporary silversmiths from Northern Ireland — Michael McCrory, Suzanne Wall, Richard Kirk, Stuart Cairns, and Cara Murphy — are showing at the University of Ulster Silversmithing Exhibition this month, and their work shows just how sharp-looking and contemporary silver designs can be.

"Silver has a very strong heritage within the home, and good design can make it relevant again," says Joe Kelly of Craft NI, which is organising five exhibitions of silver.

The university's School of Art and Design is one of the few places in Ireland where silversmithing is still taught.

McCrory challenges the old-fashioned image of silver by designing his pieces (from about €760) on computer. "When I am commissioned to design and make a piece, I can present the client with a rendered image of exactly how it will look. It's a fantastic way of



ELEANOR FLEGG

Cairns is a maverick silversmith who treats silver with an irreverence that borders on punk. "I'm deeply rooted in the silversmithing tradition, but I'm not obsessed with silver — I mix it with other material," he says.

Cairns's Vessel series (from €100), combine silver with natural found objects, such as thorns and string. A series of napkin rings (from €63) are made of simple rings of silver joined with a range of unusual fastenings — an antique nappy pin, a ribbon or linen thread. His pieces are not functional, but they definitely reference tableware.

A group of British and Irish silversmiths have a concurrent exhibition called Eat & Drink: The Connect Collection. Taking their inspiration from everyday tableware — such as a white porcelain soup bowl designed by Jasper Conran and manufactured by Wedgwood, and an ornate crystal tumbler by Tudor Crystal — they have designed a series of new tabletop forms, both functional and decorative.

"These pieces aren't traditional or run-of-the-mill," says Murphy, who is the only Irish silversmith in the Connect exhibition. "They're experimental pieces that show that silver does have a place in contemporary dining. And they really push the boundaries of what people think that silver can be."

Eat & Drink: The Connect Collection and the University of Ulster Silversmithing Exhibition, will run at Hillsborough Courthouse until August 26; Silver Sounds: Reinterpreting The Queen's University Silver Collection is on display at the Naughton Gallery, Queen's University, Belfast; www.craftni.org, 028 9032 3059; www.nitb.com

All the pieces on show at Hillsborough are for sale. Call 048 9268 9717 for prices.



Seed heads by Cara Murphy — a table centrepiece with salt shakers, pepper grinders and candles



A fine pear, €2,320

The Prickly Pear condiment set and sugar caster are so-called for the finish on the silver — a unique dimpled surface effect, created by hammering the metal from the inside, seen throughout much of the work of its creator, Michael McCrory. The sugar casters, salt sprinklers and pepper shakers are filled through a central cone, which acts as a funnel when upright, and as a deflector when upturned. They can be seen at Eat & Drink: The Connect Collection and the University of Ulster Silversmithing Exhibition, at Hillsborough Courthouse until August 26.

Great quack, €1,379

Cleaning the loo has never been this glamorous. Quack Quack is a toilet duck, handmade out of silver through electroforming, a process similar to silver plating, but using thicker silver deposits. The toilet duck bottle remains intact inside and the piece has a lid, rendering it a fully functional and refillable cleaning product holder. One Quack Quack costs €1,100 (€1,379) while a pair (€2,445) works brilliantly as a comical, conceptual piece of art, the way its designer Suzanne Wall originally intended: one for the dining room, the other destined to sit by the toilet.



Can delight, €10,735

Last year, silversmiths of the Association of British Designer Silversmiths were given a bowl or glass and some silver, and asked to apply their imaginations and silversmithing skills to create a unique design. The theme was "eat and drink".

Keith Tyssen's is one of the most literal. As much a play on words as a playful use of traditional tabletop silver, Indulgence for a Light Drinker is a piece designed to combine the connotations of wine, silver and candlelight in a simple, beautiful form.

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