

Robert Marsden

Barrett Marsden Gallery, January/February 1999.

Long before Young British Art became an acronym I noticed a blossoming of artistic talents in Great Britain. Where did I first see it? It was at the V&A shop. I did not notice at first that it was sponsored by the Crafts Council. I just knew that the work was outstanding and curated with aesthetic sensitivity. Later I learned that the guiding eye behind this shop was that of Tatjana Marsden. The current puzzle of what to call this art and the genuine confusion about the nomenclature used to describe art or craft or applied art only became apparent later and a discussion here will, I hope, make us better able to view the work of Robert Marsden whose work we are here to celebrate.

Robert Marsden is an artist whose work resists false distinctions which muddle rather than clarify. As critic after critic has written - be it in Great Britain or Japan, Antwerp or Amsterdam, Robert Marsden's work is that of an artist with masterly control of his material. His sculpture reveals the training of someone who has been able to transform the techniques of working metal, whether silver, copper, brass or bronze, into his own personal vocabulary.

We know the pieces are made, but the story of their making is hidden.

Because of Robert's carefully honed skills, it is easy to forget that each piece began as a flat sheet of metal which has been cut, sawn, filed and hammered into precise shapes. Bevelled edges are carefully fitted together before being silver soldered and the apparently seamless forms he creates are the result of painstaking effort to achieve things which look perfectly combined and whole, rather than constructed.

But the soul of the work is in the interaction and relationship of the various and diverse forms, and the subtle changes in the proportions of elements that are otherwise similar in character. Each piece has an almost endless visual interest; balance and counterbalance, and the effect of changing viewpoints reveal ever new perspectives to the eye. A form which may be light and empty appears solid. This solidity is sometimes enhanced by the form having been sliced into parts, and by the use of surface patination which looks integral to the form.

His work sits happily in my home, amongst work by Duchamp and Ken Eastman, Baselitz and Tim Head, David Gentlemen and Chillida, Simon Patterson and Caro.

Definitions of the arts and the crafts may not concern Robert Marsden - whether his work is thought to be 'fine art', 'applied art', 'sculpture' or 'metal work'; but I think it is worth meditating on the seemingly endless and arbitrary definitions of terms, the meaningless distinctions used to describe work .

In the British Library's vast catalogue of 20,000,000 books one finds various associations for the terms 'Fine Art', 'Beaux-Arts', 'Arts et Métiers', 'Sculpture'. 'Fine Arts' appears in the titles of books in 19th century England. What was it? 'The Fine Art of Wedgwood' is a book of ceramic reliefs of copies of Roman and Greek statues and busts. And Beaux-Arts? Only 25 titles before 1750 France. And I add, for a touch of fun, the word 'sculpture' in England in the mid 18th century was applied to laboratory

equipment made in metal. French schools of 'Arts et Métiers' taught the applied use of recently invented technology in various crafts. A 1700 volume on the subject includes 180 pages on the art of bread making and includes making the oven.

Emmanuel Cooper's remarks in the exhibition catalogue for 'On the Edge - Art meets Craft' in 1993 underlines an unhappiness with classification. Describing the work in the show which included Robert's he comments that Cellini, Michelangelo and da Vinci all moved from one discipline to another and were not thought frivolous. In fact the split between art and craft comes from this period and only grew over time due to the theories of Neo-Platonism which came into being with Marsilio Ficino, the darling of the Medici. Neo-Platonist language was first used to describe literature in the 16th and 17th centuries, and then applied to sculpture and painting in the 18th. Genius, melancholy, and divine inspiration were the catch words. The interest had moved away from an admiration for technical skill.

It is a combination of technical skill and artistic sensibility that is so evident in Robert's work, and his virtuosity reveals itself in his use of the cup form for the work in this exhibition. As in music Bach was liberated by the form of Fugue to make extraordinary variations, so the idea of the cup frees Robert. His various explorations with this shape transform it again and again. His skill animates the planes and masses that seem to play joyfully and interact in completely unexpected ways. His sure eye and artistic discipline, and his great care and precision in making, combine into an apparently effortless grace, like a nonchalant 'sprezzatura', on which those artists of the Renaissance prided themselves. What I have in my home is simply marvellous - it is work that never tires but goes on revealing more.

Constance Blackwell