

Who Made Me? – The Anonymity of the Blade

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In interview – Karl Cook and Sam Bowker

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In this interview, Karl Cook and Sam Bowker discuss the largely anonymous field of domestic and weaponised cutlery. (15 August 2016)

SB: Why were you investigating cutlery?

KC: I was making historic cutlery for a living. This was for medieval re-enactors, museums, and Australian government departments strangely enough – I had to replace several missing pieces of a state set in Queensland. Cutlery was the whole and sole of it back then, but I have since become a jeweller.

Cutlery covers swords, knives, daggers, anything with a blade. It's very modern to assume we're only talking about eating instruments. In the 14th century, a 'Cutler' was the person who oversaw everything – the sword, a working blade, and the eating knife. He would have the blade forged by a Bladesmith, then sent off to a Handler, especially if the handle was going to have metal on it as well. A Bolister would make the little guard on the end before you hit the blade. It would then go to a Sheather, who makes the sheath or a little scabbard, and then it might go to a Locksmith for final additions.

(We think of a Locksmith now as someone who opens your door when you lock your keys out, but the tradition is much older. The locksmith works on delicate little pieces of metal, sort of like a jeweller but not precious. On that note, the guild of cutlers and the guild of jewellers are amongst the oldest guilds in London)

It eventually goes back to the Cutler who assembles it together and sells it. The Cutler is the managing director over the supply chain. They are the most likely to be named from a long list of skilled individuals.

SB: Should the study of cutlery be considered part of art history, design, or something else?

Very much part of design history. It's an item to be used by people in everyday life, which is design as far as I'm concerned. When talking about especially beautiful pieces – with exceptional materials, or very fine making – we might consider them art, but in these cases it's often the handles that catch our attention. The blade by itself is usually too simple for 'art' collections.

SB: I imagine it also depends on whether we are seeing it in a museum or gallery.

Yes, in the Metropolitan you'll find cutlery near the armour and swords, which makes perfect sense to me. But ancient Egyptian cutlery is another thing entirely – gorgeous, elegant, but another thing.

SB Yes, they're more closely aligned with cosmetics, jewellery, woodwork, and funerary prestige objects. Totally anonymous items, but regarded as artworks by the privileged prioritisation of luxury items for gallery collections.

Basically, when you make a knife, it goes out into the world, but unless you have a good maker's mark, the maker gets forgotten straight away. Cutlery researchers have to work from the few pieces that survive, and unfortunately, they are usually not in good condition. Common everyday utensils are used and abused until it's no longer useful, at which point it's thrown out. Or used by someone else until it is *really* not useful. The life of a knife ends when it no longer cuts.

SB: What do we call historic forms of cutlery, and how do we come up with those names?

It depends on the piece. There are spoons that we call apostle spoons, which have a little figurine on the end. There's thirteen in a set; twelve apostles plus Jesus, who is the same size as the others. The tradition was that when a child was born, you would give them one for the apostle or saint they were named for, so the saint looks after them. These weren't commemorative or collectable spoons, these were regularly used items. I know of about three collections that feature a complete set of all thirteen spoons, so these are very rare.

SB: On the topic of naming, I'm thinking about the rare few carpets that have specific names – the Ardabils, the Trinitarias, and so on. Are there any cutlery items or collections known under a particular name?

There are the State Collections, like Buckingham palace collection, but even these don't have individual names. It's the Buckingham Palace silverware as a whole. (It's called silverware even though it's made of gold)

Daggers, swords, and axes can have individual names, but not tableware. When it comes to things like hunting knives, that's another story. We are more likely to know who owned it.

SB: I presume these blades are seen as prestige instruments, like an engraved silver trowel held by a dignitary at the opening of a construction site? (He's probably the least experienced and most famous 'bricklayer' present, but the only one likely to be acknowledged within an anonymous workforce).

Very much so. Even then it is rare to find the maker's name stamped on it. Unlike a painter or sculptor, a cutler rarely signs their work. There may be a maker's mark, but now, the maker's mark is mostly just 'Made In...' This could be a regulation imposed by the country but I think it's more about national pride.

With hunting knives it becomes a collector's pursuit to own a blade by a particular maker – same with some swords. The Japanese swordsmiths almost always signed their swords. There's this common myth that Japanese swords are wonderful, magical items. In reality, they're not that much better than European steel. They just go through a lot more processing to get to that same level, so there's a mystique around it all.

SB: Is a similar mystique generated by the naming of European swords?

Very few European swords have names, but yes, they share a certain mystique. From the Vikings, we have the famous Ulfberht swords and the Ingelrii swords – there's about 200 of them known today, drawn from archaeological sites more than inherited collections. These have inscriptions written on them, but that's not quite the same as a name – their words are more like a statement or epigram, often written as an acronym.

The 'Tritonia' sword in Sweden was named after the place it was found, and this is a common way to name swords – sometimes after battles in which they made an appearance. The names of their makers are almost never known.

SB: Are any cutlers named and known?

There are famous dedicated cutlers like David Mellor in Sheffield, or Georg Jensen, but these are exceptions to the rule. Well-known designers usually contract the making of the cutlery out to others who remain anonymous. The designer's own brand gets stamped all over it. The modern trend of a designer who stamps his name on something he likes is quite prevalent, but it's very rare to find a cutler – at any point in history – who makes eating cutlery that has his name stamped on it.

I know of one person who designed a cutlery set in modern use, and his name is clearly written on it. That's Carl Faberge. His cutlery was not made by his own hand, but he had a say in every piece of it. He was a designer, like Louis Comfort Tiffany, but Faberge took a more direct hand in the making of things. By comparison, Tiffany usually drew the design and then saw it again as a finished item.

Another name that comes to mind is William Morris, but we rarely see his metalwork. He made ceramics, but also tea services. Christopher Dresser is another designer renowned for metalwork but not known for his cutlery, although he did some.

SB: Why might these famous designers be known for things that are not cutlery?

I think cutlery shows a prejudice in design history more generally. Every designer likes chairs, for example. Chairs are what we sit on, but we notice them even when we're not sitting on them. By contrast, cutlery's kept in a drawer. They're small, they aren't noticed.

Cutlery is seen as a low status thing, even on a vernacular scale. But a teapot – these people would rave for hours about a well-made, well-designed teapot. It sits at the centre of a table – the design equivalent of a plinth. Cutlery's just the thing in your hand.

SB: Who are the 'big names' in cutlery scholarship?

There are a few, but not many. Jochen Amme is one. He wrote *Historische Bestecke* ('Historic Cutlery', first published in 1988), which is a cutlery historian's bible. It is three large volumes in English and German, and probably the best example of a scholarly cutlery collection that goes from stone tools to the twentieth century. It's a design book that every school should have.

One other important work for cutlery historians comes immediately to mind – *Knives and Scabbards*. It was written by Jane Cowgill, Margrethe de. Neergaard, and Nick Griffiths in 2013 as a catalogue of all the small blades, shears, scissors and scabbards in the Museum of London. For anyone recreating one of these items, it's a vital resource for proper scientific drawings and measurements, details not always covered by other books. Once again, it's all material analysis – including maker's marks.

Beyond table cutlery and towards swords, the big name is Ewart Oakeshott. He was a prolific specialist and his *Records of the Medieval Sword* is the best book in widespread use – every sword scholar I've ever met has copies of his books. He and his partner Sybil Marshall gave us a classification system for swords – a typology based on blade shape, pole shape, crossguard shape and handle. It's a system based on what's in our hands at the time. Since the 1960s, historians have been calling swords by their 'Oakeshott Type', which was a refinement of the systems devised by Jan Petersen and then R.E.M. Wheeler.

Oakeshott always referred to himself as an amateur. He was a freelance researcher, illustrator and lecturer, but he was eventually awarded a doctorate for his scholarship. His passing in 2002 was a great loss to the academic world.

SB: What is distinctive about research in a field where the name of the maker is unlikely to be known? (For example, what questions do we ask in lieu of 'who made this?')

We only work from extant examples, so most of our work is based on material analysis. Archaeology informs it to a great deal – techniques like dendrochronology help for dating handles, and by association, the blade. Probably the most common question is 'where did it come from?' A lot of the time we can find the city or town it came from, like Sheffield for example – the most famous city for English cutlery. It was actually quite a late starter, as there are German towns today that produced cutlery and little else. The workshops in those towns are still known, and they've been run for generations – documented generations. It's sometimes possible to work out who the cutlers were, but not which pieces they made.

SB: I remember the idea of the supposed humility in removing a craftsman's name from the object. It becomes a piece that speaks for itself, rather than advertising

the maker.

I don't know actually, it's not a thing I've thought about. It's a bit self-defeating if you are trying to make something to make a living. The only reason you might remove your name is if you are not happy with the work. An apprentice's work was rarely stamped with a maker's mark for the reason that the work was not often up to spec. It took time to develop skill. Once the master was happy, they could start stamping the work. Once the apprentice became a journeyman, their own mark would be used for the rest of their career. At that point there is usually some form of record of who they were. These can be well-documented through guild archives – including Ottoman and Persian archives.

SB: Why is cutlery an important field for further research, despite the challenges posed by anonymity?

For me, if I don't do it, no-one else will. Everyone's interested in swords and daggers and the big important pieces, but they seem to forget about the smaller blades. This is the way we lose information. Small things are forgotten first, and once forgotten, it's hard to discover what they were, especially when very little was known to begin with.