



Carved stones that swoop and glide

**Charlotte De Syllas:
Sculpted Gemstones**

Goldsmiths' Hall, London

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Reviewed by Corinne Julius

It is rare for a retrospective to include nearly all of an artist's work, from student pieces to their latest commissions, but that is what is on show at the Goldsmiths' Hall in their current display of jeweller/stone carver Charlotte De Syllas. In a career spanning over 50 years, De Syllas has worked slowly and nearly always to commission, fashioning jewellery that summed up the personality and likes of her clients in an array of carved, but rarely faceted gemstones. Her pieces swoop and glide, echoing the natural forms from which they are derived; birds, insects, fish and shells. The works embody contradictory qualities; dramatic, yet strangely restrained, figurative yet abstracted, elegant but powerful. They are not to everyone's taste, yet they are a strikingly personal aesthetic.

De Syllas's aesthetic originated under the influence of her architect father and her interior designer mother; both committed modernists. She grew up in



Kent at St Julian's, a community of artists, architects, poets and academics. Interested in dance, mime and fine art, she was swept away by an exhibition of jewellery by Georges Braque and decided to become a jeweller. Through family connections she discovered that the innovative émigré jeweller Gerda Flöckinger was formulating a radical new course at Hornsey in which jewellery was to be viewed as an artform, rather than the acquisition of craft skills. De Syllas spent three years there.

Flöckinger was key to De Syllas's development, as is clear in her early student pieces, which show her progression from Flöckinger lookalikes, to a carved stone necklace that she acknowledges owes much to her parents' modernist aesthetics, through to her own emerging voice. She experimented with different techniques, including emulating her Greek grandmother's guipure lace by soaking lace tubes in slip and firing them, casting silver in cuttlefish bone and inviting herself to the gunsmiths Purdey's to learn how to engrave Damascus steel. Graham Hughes of the Goldsmiths' Company bought her complete student works (except one that De Syllas presented to Flöckinger) for his emerging collection at the Hall, and promoted her in exhibitions at home and abroad.

She loves colour and after early trials with enamel failed to yield the right results, she followed Flöckinger's advice and began to carve stones, which offered a material coloured in itself. Self-taught, she experimented with complex carving techniques using a dental burr and diamond files and applied dental casting techniques to jewellery. A later trip to Finland stimulated her use of mechanical tools and today she uses laser welding.

De Syllas developed her own style, transforming carved gemstones into ornamental jewels with intricate metalwork. Her initial approach was to design first and then seek out the appropriate stones; she later reversed this, preferring to work from the stone, to develop a final design. Her stones of choice are black, white and green jade as well as translucent tourmaline, topaz, aquamarine, amethyst and heliodor. She sometimes works opaque white cacholong and occasionally uses pearls and coral. She hollows out stones to make them lighter to wear. Her kind of stone carving has a long pedigree, but is rarely used in the UK and requires a deep understanding of mineral structure. She has pushed the boundaries in technique and form. She is short-sighted and claims that this influences her love of fine detail.

De Syllas has always combined family responsibilities with her work; she used

to take her first baby to the RCA, leaving him in a basket under a desk while she taught. Family and financial constraints as well as the very slow process of carving have limited her output, yet each piece is a work of art.

Her extraordinary *Magpie* necklace in black and white jade, labradorite, silver and silk kumihimo braids is as beautiful and meticulously made on the back as the front. Her *Wisteria* necklace, carved in lavender jadeite and made for a client who loved the wisterias that grew on her house, echoes the twisting stems.

Necklaces and rings are her forte. From her first commission, *Bobby's Ring*, through her twist rings, where the stones seem to wind around the gold settings, to *Sophie's Ring* carved from a single piece of jade – all have a very distinct aesthetic.

This is (excuse the pun) a gem of an exhibition. It shows a life's work in a few display cases, and is the simplest and strongest presentation of jewellery at the Hall in a long time. There are clear information panels that trace De Syllas's career and approach, supported by a simulation of her workbench and a film of her at work. It is a comprehensive and helpful display. Her carving skills should inspire a new generation of jewellers.

Corinne Julius is an independent design critic, journalist and curator