

WINNING CAST LONDON

Preface: At a small workshop in London’s Hatton Garden jewellery district, master goldsmith Gareth Harris oversees the production of fine metalwork while passing on artisanal skills to his apprentice, Stavros Constantinou.

Company: Smith & Harris
Location: London
Founded: 1981
Number of employees when founded: 2
Number of employees now: 3
Start-up cost: £2,000
Number of premises: 1
Bestselling product: Tumbler cup

Quote: *‘Considering the people we deal with, trust is a huge part of the business’*

Master goldsmith Gareth Harris is rummaging for a twig in a box of solid gold, baling twine and cast-silver frogs – the inspiration for his latest project. The twig, which fell onto his head during a walk in London’s Highgate Wood, has been transformed into a solid-silver reproduction that retains the fine grain of the original. Soon it will be crafted into a belt buckle and sold on Savile Row. “In our private work we can afford an element of play,” says Harris. “Play is where you push yourself and discover where you want to be.”

Harris has earned the right to experiment having been based in Hatton Garden, London’s jewellery quarter, since 1981. There is a tradition of skilled metalworking in the district stretching back 1,000 years: armourers equipped the Knights Templar from nearby Fetter Lane and the machine gun was invented here. “Some of the tools we use are more than 400 years old,” says Harris.

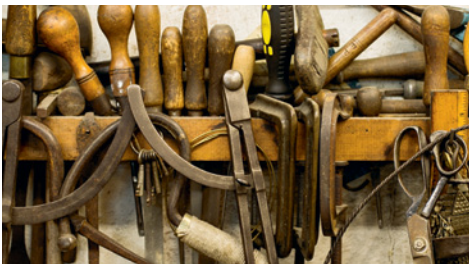
Another constant in the trade is apprenticeship, a tradition that stretches back for as long as the involvement of the Goldsmiths’ Company guild, which has regulated the industry here since 1300. When we meet Harris’s current apprentice, Stavros Constantinou, he is carefully bending a piece of silver. He turns to his master and asks him to check the results as the edge of the metal

has risen irregularly with the stresses of the process. Harris peers at the buckle. “I think we keep the imperfections,” Harris says approvingly.

The firm has also worked with artists, creating work for them in silver and gold. These collaborations started with the Swiss-German artist Rolf Sachs and other commissions have followed. Constantinou has also been involved in technical work for the likes of Damien Hirst and Marc Quinn.

Constantinou arrived at the firm in 2004 following a degree in jewellery and silversmithing at London Metropolitan University. There he studied under Harris’s co-founder, Dennis Smith, and first visited the workshop to finish his final-year piece: a church lantern (his uncle is a Greek orthodox priest). He impressed with his skill and character. “Considering the sort of people we deal with and the nature of our materials, trust is a huge part of the business,” says Harris.

Constantinou’s education contrasts markedly with Harris’s more formal training: first a one-year pre-apprenticeship and then a five-year contract with Padgett & Braham, a gold and silver box maker. This was 1975 and a long way from the Victorian boom years. The industry was on the wane and only one of the other five apprentices Harris trained with



got jobs. But the decline led to the trade restructuring into its current form where, according to Harris, “We’ve gone back to a pre-Victorian model with lots of small workshops, all interrelated.”

Harris encourages Constantinou to talk about his inspirations. Constantinou studied Mayan metalwork and enjoys making big pieces, looking to create an “innocence” in his work. Harris’s own innovation is proved by a number of pieces he produces from his safe to illustrate his point: a series of “tumbler cups” so called for their ability to withstand the rigours of stagecoach travel. Harris has modernised the design by adding a lattice-work base.

This complex play of ideas, technologies and histories is working for the goldsmiths’ trade in London. One-time competitors in Paris and Augsburg have seen their ancient structures fall away and yet the Goldsmiths’ Company in London has invested £17.5m in the Goldsmiths’ Centre, a training facility with subsidised workshops that opened in 2012.

On whether Constantinou is ready to strike out alone, Harris is candid. “There’s no question. But it’s a dreadfully expensive way of life here. It’s a matter of managing your artistic temperament and the hard economic factors. Setting up on your own is always a leap of faith.” — (M)

