

A bowl made from recycled and ethically sourced silver is helping to make a point about responsible working, reports Ian Soutar

Galvanized into action

BY setting up a Sustainable Silver Commission in partnership with Ruskin Mill Educational Trust and Museums Sheffield, Galvanize Sheffield aims to send out a message about the need for a new approach in metal design and craftsmanship.

Stefan Tooke's Fruit Bowl, made of ethically sourced, recycled silver, is on display in the exhibition *Can Art Save Us* at the Millennium Gallery, which raises the issue of the role of art in sustainability and protecting the environment.

The award was the brainchild of Duncan Edwards, manager of the Academy of Makers, Ruskin Mill Educational Trust's arm which provides practical metalworking work experience for their students.

"As a silversmith I have worked for customers in the Far East and Middle East where huge amounts of material have been used which kept a lot of people in Sheffield in work," he explains.

"But I started to think about where it comes from and who digs it up. Sheffield has a huge heritage in metal craft and the amount of silver that must have gone through Sheffield is immense. We have a debt of honour to repay."

Edwards explored the realities of ethical silver with Greg Valerio, a pioneer in the establishment of ethical mining, and founder member of the Association for Responsible Mining. Also founding director of Cred Jewellery, the world's first ethical fair trade gold retailer, Valerio has led the way to educating both the trade and the public about the horrors of mining around the world, practices driven by greed, desperation and survival.

"We should give something back," continues Edwards. "The practices behind silver are almost as bad as dirty gold. About a quarter of silver produced uses mercury, especially in the Amazon basin, and the residue goes straight into the river. For them it is easier and cheaper compared with cyanide used elsewhere."

The crushed ore is mixed with mercury which then forms an amalgam with the silver or gold, making it easier to extract, a process that has been in use on a small scale since Roman times. Finding data about mining operations is difficult because of the nature of the process which resides in a black economy.

"So you cannot source ethical silver yet," concludes Edwards.

The answer is using recycled silver and that was the brief for the Sustainable Silver Commission. To this end 20 young contemporary silversmiths were chosen by a panel for the quality of their handcrafted work to pitch for the award from which a



Duncan Edwards, left, from Ruskin Mill with Stefan Tooke and his piece

PICTURE: STEVE ELLIS

shortlist of four were provided with the commission criteria.

The requirements for the final piece, to be produced in certified sustainable silver funded by Ruskin Mill Educational Trust and supplied by Greg Valerio, had to be bold, innovative, contemporary and reflect the quality of design, imagination and craftsmanship Sheffield is renowned for. Yet underlying this had to reflect the environmental and ethical issues in the trade through design, economy of material and manufacture and also complement the Ruskinian values of *Can Art Save Us*?

Stefan Tooke's flowing flower form made

from recycled silver and copper was seen as a testament to hand-forged, handcrafted skills blended with computer design.

Has he always had a concern for sustainability? "I have always had it at the back of my mind – and my parents are members of the Green Party," he offers.

Edwards thinks there was something else about his background that proved crucial. "This sinuous shape, flowing snakelike and then rearing into delicate blossoms, could be envisaged emerging from the leaf mould of a Guyanese rainforest or prising its way through the bark of a fallen forest giant in the cloud forests of Ecuador.

"The nature of his submission and the way he has embraced the ethos of the award is perhaps partially a result of his childhood spent exploring the tropical butterfly house run by his parents in Bridlington."

Since graduating from a silversmithing degree at Sheffield Hallam University, Tooke has gone on to become a member of the Contemporary British Silversmiths and has a studio at Persistence Works as part of Yorkshire Artspace Society's start-up scheme sponsored by the Assay Office.

Can Art Save Us continues at the Millennium Gallery until January 31.