

INTRODUCTION

by Sir Roy Strong

from *Kevin Coates: A Hidden Alchemy - Goldsmithing: Jewels and Table-Pieces*
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One of the delights of directing the Victoria & Albert Museum was the discovery of the renaissance in the world of the Applied Arts in Great Britain. I cannot tell you the excitement of meeting contemporary creators, of being able either to exhibit or acquire works by them for the collections. In the case of metalwork my muse was Shirley Bury, whose advocacy and enthusiasm was unbounded, and who shared with me a passionate belief in the museum's role of introducing today's cutting-edge creation to a wider public.

Kevin Coates was amongst those creators, a man whose work fascinated me for its complexity, astonishing technical virtuosity, sophistication of allusion, and unashamed richness of a kind which would have delighted a Medici Grand Duke. Kevin's jewels, when gathered together, resemble something akin to a late Renaissance *Wunderkabinett*, one of those repositories of objects both man-made and natural that attempted to gather within a single compass a microcosm of God's creation.

Western creativity for centuries has drawn on two iconographic founts, the Christian and the classical. Although in Kevin's work the former emerges in many objects, his jewels seem rather to belong to the world of hermetic mystery. We seem to find ourselves in the orbit of Renaissance neb-platonic magic and the attempt through images and incantations to harness the occult forces of the universe. Names like Marsilio Ficino, John Dee and Robert Fludd spring to mind for, if I had to place these jewels anywhere, they would seem to sit happily into that phantasmagoria of images we associate with late Renaissance books of emblems and *impress*, symbolic encyclopedias and alchemical manuals. Add to them a touch of *art nouveau* and surrealism and we have some of the powerful impulses that frame his art. Those jewels are potent and meaningful objects, not to be regarded lightly, but things which have a life of their own disclosing their hidden mysteries only to the initiated. In that sense Kevin is an artist born out of time. I see him as the reincarnation of one of those scholar-creators who worked in places like the imperial workshops of Rudolphine Prague, or those of the Florentine Grand Dukes of Tuscany. The jewels then were often seen to have power to draw down the influences of the heavens, or act as prophylactics warding off evil. Such a stream of thought descends through the seventeenth century via the Rosicrucians to the Freemasons of the Age of the Enlightenment and to Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. Perhaps we should learn to read these jewels as pregnant with some message of a *new* enlightenment, some latter-day revelation within the cosmic order of things which can only be transmitted by means of myth and legend and the abstractions of mathematics and geometry.

I am fortunate enough to have and wear one of Kevin's jewels, a lapel brooch made by him in memory of my late wife, the designer Julia Trevelyan Oman. So I write

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with some knowledge and experience of living with a jewel which has power of presence and in a sense a life of its own. It is recondite, meant to be read by the initiated but a closed book to ignorant eyes. People are puzzled by it because it has the ability to challenge, as indeed Kevin's works always do. What is it, they ask and why do I wear it? When I tell them its inner meaning they are almost embarrassed. It had never occurred to them that a jewel could have a meaning much less encapsulate such profundity. To wear it for me is simultaneously an act of grief, remembrance and joy. Of what other exponent of the art of the jewel today can that be said?

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358 HURON AVENUE • CAMBRIDGE, MA 02138 • 617-876-2109 • mobiliaart@verizon.net • www.mobilia-gallery.com
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