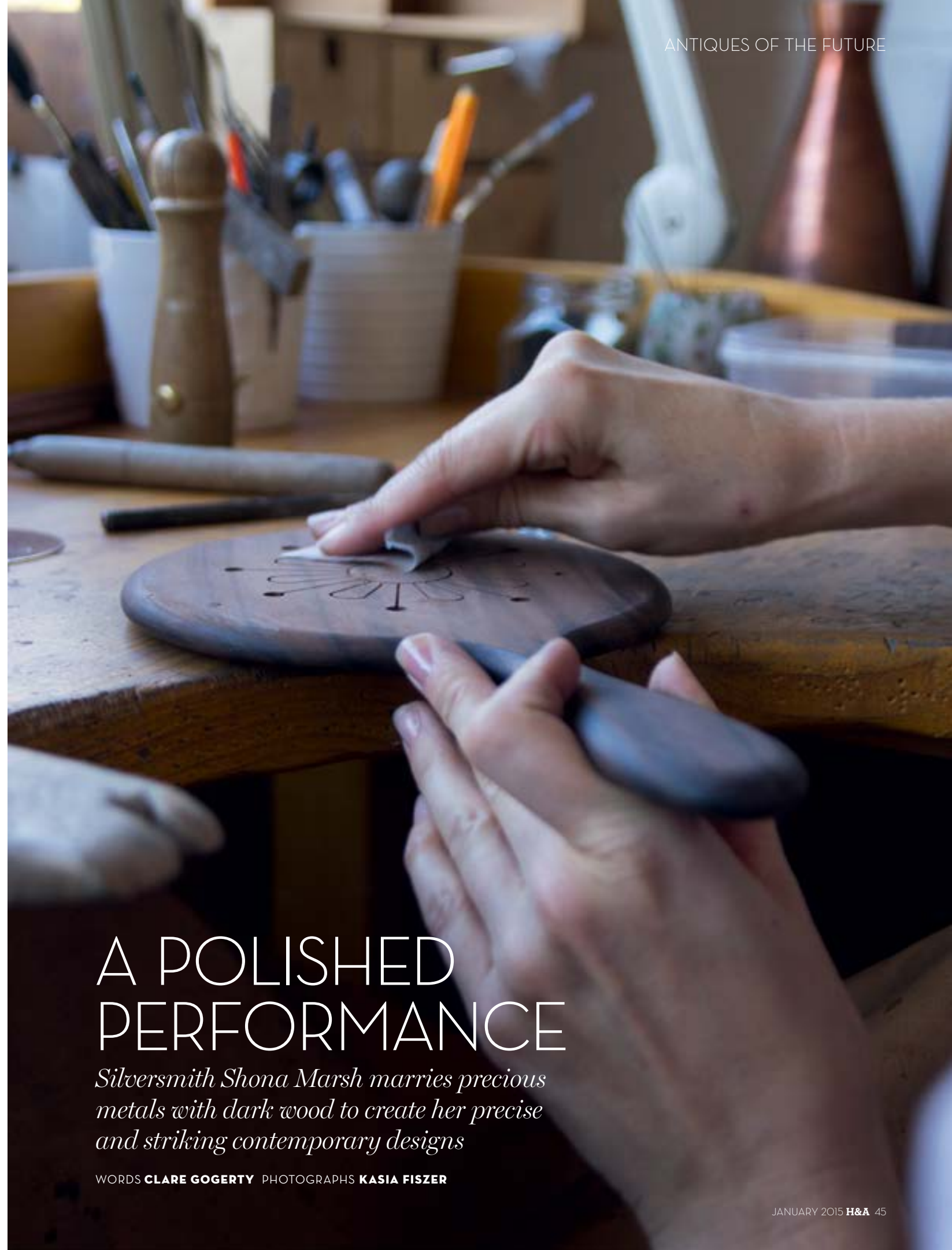


**THIS PAGE, CLOCWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Shona at work on part of a silver candlestick. After casting, the excess metal must be cut away; models are made in copper. When Shona is happy with the design she will order the precise amount of expensive silver sheet that she needs; a copper goblet is heated with a blowtorch as Shona perfects her design; Shona at her workbench surrounded by her tools; pliers used to hold small silver pieces while they are bent, flattened or filed. The masking tape prevents them from being marked **FACING PAGE** Shona sands the back of an antique hand mirror. The precisely milled grooves will be inlaid with silver



# A POLISHED PERFORMANCE

*Silversmith Shona Marsh marries precious metals with dark wood to create her precise and striking contemporary designs*

WORDS **CLARE GOGERTY** PHOTOGRAPHS **KASIA FISZER**



‘I make tableware because I want to make things that are used,’ says contemporary silversmith and jeweller Shona Marsh. ‘I like things that have a purpose.’ On the bench in her Deptford studio in south London is one such example: a salt pinch pot. This shallow silver bowl lined with gold gilt sits off-centre on a mahogany base inlaid with a radial burst of silver wire. A silver spoon rests inside in perfect proportion. This blend of practicality and functionality is reminiscent of the work of the Arts and Crafts movement and the 19th-century designer Christopher Dresser. Shona is an admirer of both: ‘I like their clean, simple designs. You can read them easily – a Christopher Dresser teapot doesn’t pretend to be something it’s not.’

It’s not surprising that pieces such as the salt pinch pot (and its companion pepper pinch pot), with their precise, elegant functionality, are proving popular with buyers, especially those who entertain in some style. ‘A couple recently commissioned me to make a cheeseboard. They wanted something special for the end of the meal,’ says Shona. ‘They’ve bought a few pieces of mine over the years. I find that once someone buys something small they often progress to larger items or commission something grander.’

Her winning combination of silver and wood inlay is her signature style, and a technique she has developed over several years. ‘I like the warmth of wood in comparison to silver,’ she says. ‘The inlay work happened almost by accident when I was playing around in the studio. I thought, “This looks nice,” and pushed the technique.’ Inlaid wood has a tradition in gun smithing and cabinet-making but is relatively unused in silversmithing. This doesn’t faze Shona who, right from the start of her career, has made her own way and built her business with great single-mindedness.

‘I was determined that art would be my career from an early age,’ she says. ‘It was a strong area in my school and I had three really good teachers. I’ve always had good people behind me who have driven me to think about what to do and to go for it.’ Growing up in Stafford, these people included her family, several of whom are painters and graphic artists. ‘They explained that it isn’t an easy route to go down. They knew it could be a bit of a slog.’

#### THE MAKING OF THINGS

Undeterred, Shona followed art A level with a foundation course and then went to Edinburgh College of Art to study tapestry, which, she explains, wasn’t really textile-based but was multi-media and involved a lot of drawing. ‘I liked the hands-on stuff, the making of things,’



she says, ‘but I kept a keen interest in drawing.’ She also liked the discipline imposed by the course leaders. Students started work at 9.30am every day and kept regular hours, a professionalism she has carried with her since: her studio walls are lined with Post-it-stickered charts recording amount of hours worked, projects to be completed and errands to be run.

After Edinburgh, Shona worked for a year before continuing her education with an HND in jewellery at Birmingham College of Art, which taught her the technicalities of silversmithing and jewellery making. ‘Figuring out how to put everything together is my favourite part of the process,’ she says. ‘And how to take it apart: the candlesticks I recently designed for Garrard, for example, can be dismantled and used as a centrepiece or to hold tea lights.’ The Garrard commission came after its design team approached Shona at a show. ‘They wanted a silversmith to collaborate with,’ she says clearly chuffed, ‘and they liked my ideas.’

After college Shona set up a studio in a rural community, building a body of work to show at exhibitions. ‘My very first show was dreadful and I didn’t sell a thing,’ she says. ‘I’d only been out of college a year and I jumped in a bit too fast.’ Her >

**ABOVE** This salt pinch pot, which is lined with gold gilt and sits on a wooden base inlaid with silver, is typical of Shona’s work: functional, elegant and precise **FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Hand files for smoothing off edges and soldered joints; a finished upcycled antique mirror with a radial sunburst of inlaid silver; Shona at her jewellery bench cleaning up a casting; this jug, with its flat bottom and angular design, is a new direction for Shona; scale drawings for the jug. All of Shona’s designs begin life as a series of sketches



*‘I like the warmth of wood in comparison to silver. The inlay work happened almost by accident when I was playing around in the studio’*





**ABOVE** A doming block and punches used for creating dome shapes, such as spoons, from flat sheets of metal. In the background are forming shapes made from steel and wood used to create cone shapes  
**RIGHT** Shona's jewellery bench in her studio at Cockpit Arts, Deptford



work began to be noticed after the Birmingham Assay Office commissioned her to create a piece to mark the bicentenary of Matthew Boulton, a silversmithing pioneer, in 2009. 'He is right up my street,' says Shona. 'He introduced stamping and hydraulic presses to the industry, making silver more accessible. I looked at his pattern books and referenced elements of his design and techniques to create a candelabra with a central rose bowl.'

This led to the mother of all commissions: to make a gift for Pope Benedict XVI, who was visiting Birmingham to see the recently discovered Staffordshire Hoard. 'I shunted everything else out of the window in order to do it,' she says. The result, a replica cross, made of silver and gold and set with garnet, is now in the Vatican. The papal commission gave Shona's reputation a well-earned boost: 'Customers tell their friends that the girl who made the water jug they are using also made something for the Pope,' she says.

### CREATIVE PROCESS

These days her studio at Cockpit Arts, a community of 65 designer-makers, constantly hums with hammering and scratching as she works on her latest commissions. Her creative process combines traditional techniques with new technologies: she uses CAD (computer-aided design) programmes to build a 3D structure, which then translates to a wax model and CNC (computer-controlled cutting) to fashion her intricate designs. 'I'm a perfectionist,' she says. 'You have to be with silver. My work is very clean, simple and balanced. There's no room for error.'

Alongside tableware, she also makes jewellery, mostly high-end bespoke engagement and wedding rings, and has also introduced a line of upcycled antique mirrors, their backs inlaid with silver tracery in her signature style. 'I find the mirrors in antique shops,' she says. 'Some aren't in very good condition and need a lot of work to remove the dirty varnish and reveal the grain.' The backs of the mirrors are then milled following a CAD drawing and a sheet of silver is cut to fit exactly into the routed design with a precision that is typical of Shona's work.

What next for this hard-working, talented silversmith? 'I'm going to work on some new designs using different woods and silver in new patterns, which I'm really excited about,' she says. 'And I'm going to introduce some new shapes. They will be different but still recognisable as my work. I think it's important to move my work on a little bit, not to become stagnant.' We don't think there's any danger of that. ■  
*Prices for Shona's work begin at £100 for a 5cm diameter mirror compact (07966 952793; shonamarsh.com)*

## COLLECTING SHONA MARSH

**VANESSA SWANN, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF COCKPIT ARTS**



'Shona's work will undoubtedly have lasting value. It's well-crafted, based on pure design principles using materials of quality that are fashioned with a high level of skill. Her signature technique is silver inlay in wood. The complex inlay patterns reflect in the surface of her silver forms, creating a talking point. Shona loves to hear how her work is used as a focal point at a dinner party or to elevate the everyday. Her work is certainly worth collecting for all these reasons. Private clients are just as important to her as the prestigious organisations who commission from her and hold her in very high regard.'