

## Omar Ramsden

“He [Ramsden] maintained a successful undertaking for forty years, producing work of the finest calibre and bearing the responsibility of keeping his craftsmen employed,” writes Helen Ashton, author of *In Search of Ramsden and Carr* (2018). Born in Sheffield as the son of an engraver, Omar Ramsden (1873-1939) remains one of the leading pioneers of English silverware design. Along with Alwyn Carr (1872-1940), the two formed one of the most successful silversmith partnerships in the 20th century, and employed a talented team of engravers, chasers and enamellers.



Figure 1. Portrait of Omar Ramsden, 27th March, 1930<sup>1</sup>.

Omar Ramsden was born on the 21st August, 1873 to Benjamin (b. 1850) and Norah Ramsden (1850-1929), named after his maternal uncle Omar Pasha Ibbotson. Their address is given as 16 Fir Street in Walkley, an area 2 miles away from Sheffield, a city known for silver, silver cutlery, and at the time, rapid industrialisation. On his paternal side, Omar Ramsden’s grandfather was a labourer and iron moulder, and his father and uncles all served apprenticeships in the metal and cutlery industry as engravers<sup>2</sup>.

Between 1879 and 1885, Omar Ramsden and his family lived abroad in America. Two years after their return to Sheffield, Omar Ramsden began his 10-year apprenticeship in 1887 to ‘a firm of Sheffield silversmiths’ at which his father was employed as a manager. This education gave Ramsden a solid grounding in large-scale silver manufacturing, and starting from 1888, Omar Ramsden attended evening classes at the Sheffield School of Art where he met Alwyn Carr, developing a long-lasting friendship, rivalry and partnership.

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<sup>1</sup> Ashton, H. (2018), loc. 53

<sup>2</sup> Ashton, H. (2018), loc. 152



Figure 2. St. George's Museum at Bell Hagg Road, Wakely, 1875-90<sup>3</sup>.

One of the key influences on Ramsden was the establishment of a museum (fig. 2) in Wakely by the highly influential art critic and socio-political thinker John Ruskin (1819-1900), a primary proponent of the Arts and Craft movement<sup>4</sup>. Ruskin had an idealised view of the Middle Ages, whereby craftsmen had a satisfying relationship with their craft in comparison to the mass industrialisation of goods at the time, which he found 'dehumanising'. The museum exhibited drawings, books, copies of famous medieval paintings, and geological and botanical specimens that were available to the public to study, enjoy and copy free of charge<sup>5</sup>. The museum eventually moved to Meersbrook, a short distance from the Sheffield School of Art.

Schools of art around the country were under the purview of the South Kensington Museum (renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1899), which aimed to reform and organise national training in the arts, crafts and design to improve manufactured products<sup>6</sup>. Thus, as a student of the Sheffield School of Art (fig. 3), Ramsden had access to the museum's collections and was encouraged to learn by looking and drawing pieces from the collection. Ramsden and Carr were among those receiving financial aid in order to visit the South Kensington Museum over the summer holidays to view the collection and attend lectures<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Marcus Waithe (2022)

<sup>4</sup> Ashton, H. (2018), loc. 134

<sup>5</sup> Waithe, M. (2022)

<sup>6</sup> Ashton, H. (2018), loc. 115

<sup>7</sup> Ashton, H. (2018), loc. 133



Figure 3. Sheffield School of Art, original building on Arundel Street.<sup>8</sup>

Records from the School of Art indicate that Ramsden and Carr spent approximately ten years studying at the school, first as part-time students until they were awarded full four-year scholarships by the Sheffield Corporation in 1894 and 1893 respectively<sup>9</sup>. By 1891, at age 17, Omar Ramsden was already qualified to give instruction as an assistant teacher at a Board School associated with the Sheffield School of Art<sup>10</sup>, and attained many national awards and prizes from local manufacturers, the school, and even the Queen's prize for exceptional ability in 1896<sup>11</sup>.

Once they had completed their studies in 1897, Ramsden and Carr set up a studio in London in February 1898, located in the Stamford Bridge Studios on 16 Wandon Road near Chelsea Station on the West London line<sup>12</sup>. It is here that they created their first important commission from Henry Fitzalan-Howard (1847-1917), the 15th Duke of Norfolk. This was to be the Sheffield city mace (fig. 4), in which Omar Ramsden's designs had won first prize during the 1897 open competition. Due to the rough nature of the studios, Alwyn Carr's brother, Arthur, writes that 'the two young collaborators...stood in theatre queues with their overcoat pockets bulging with the precious but unfinished...masterpiece in silver they were engaged upon at the moment'<sup>13</sup>. The Sheffield mace was eventually presented to the public on the 9th October 1899, although not without its difficulties, and received great acclaim and widespread press coverage<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Wilson, T. (2014)

<sup>9</sup> The British Museum (2022)

<sup>10</sup> Ashton, H. (2018), loc. 157

<sup>11</sup> Ashton, H. (2018), loc. 627

<sup>12</sup> The British Museum (2022)

<sup>13</sup> Ashton, H. (2018), loc. 788

<sup>14</sup> The Sheffield Daily Telegraph (1899)



Figure 4. The Sheffield City Council regalia – mace, Lord Mayor's chain of office and ceremonial robes, Sheffield City Archives and Local Studies Library<sup>15</sup>.

The success of the Sheffield mace was an excellent start to the business, establishing first-rate references and useful connections. One of which was Mr. William St John Hope (1854-1919), a notable antiquarian, who is thought to have influenced Ramsden's interest in historical silver and facilitated an introduction to Mr. William Walter Watts (1862-1948), the First Keeper of Metalwork at the Victoria & Albert Museum<sup>16</sup>. Eventually, Ramsden and Carr relocated to Albert Studios in Battersea in 1901, and then again to St. Dunstan's Studio in Seymour Place (now Seymour Walk) by 1903<sup>17</sup>. In the same year, Ramsden was invited to join the Art Workers Guild, a prestigious and exclusive by-invitation only organisation established in 1884 by young architects and designers in the fine and applied arts, eventually becoming the heart of the Arts and Craft movement<sup>18</sup>. The guild is responsible for setting up the Arts and Craft Exhibition Society in 1887, of which Omar Ramsden was president from 1929-37<sup>19</sup>.

During World War I (1914-1918), Alwyn Carr enlisted and joined up with the Artist's Rifles (R.A.S.C), a popular volunteer regiment formed by art student Edward Starling (n.d) in 1859. Carr was granted a commission in the R.A.S.C in 1915 and left for France, eventually returning in 1918 as an honorary captain when he was shot and invalidated out on the 15th July<sup>20</sup>. However, in the time he was away, Ramsden became increasingly familiar with the Downs Butcher family – consisting of Charles (c.1867-1927) and his wife, Anne (born Annie Emily Berriff, 1871-1950), their

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<sup>15</sup> Picture Sheffield (2022)

<sup>16</sup> Ashton, H. (2018), loc. 859

<sup>17</sup> The British Museum (2022)

<sup>18</sup> The Art Workers' Guild (2022)

<sup>19</sup> Ashton, H. (2018), loc. 1038

<sup>20</sup> Ashton, H. (2018), loc. 1415-1500

children Gerald (1903-85) and Joan (n.d.), and governess Jeanne Étève (n.d.) – who entered their lives in 1911 when Anne first commissioned work from the firm, and soon became part of the St. Dunstan's household in 1916 despite their home in Cottesmore Garden less than a mile away. When Charles Downs Butcher passed away in 1927, he left his widow and children destitute, and Omar Ramsden married his widow Anne Butcher Downs six weeks later on the 3rd September 1927<sup>21</sup>.

Helen Ashton writes that the Downs Butcher family's residency at St. Dunstan's Studio was not to Carr's liking, and ultimately led to his leaving and a formal dissolution of his partnership with Ramsden. Another source writes that this was due to Anne Butcher Downs' influence on Ramsden, their living quarters as well as the business<sup>22</sup>. The accuracy of this statement is questionable although the fact that Mrs. Ramsden was able to continue management of the business after Omar Ramsden's passing in 1939 suggests that she was actively involved in the business.



Figure 5. The Chancellor's Mace held by Esquire Bedell David Eames, University of London<sup>23</sup>.

Other notable works by Ramsden include the Chancellor's Mace (fig. 5) at the University of London. It was made in 1901 by Ramsden and Carr, and presented to the University by Sir Henry Roscoe (1833-1915), who was Vice-Chancellor at the university from 1896 to 1902. Another notable piece is the Westminster Cathedral Monstrance (fig. 6) in 1907; both Ramsden and Carr were staunch Roman Catholics, and the designs for this piece was retained by Carr after the dissolution of their partnership. Ramsden's most important royal commissions came in 1923, a claret jug as a wedding gift to the future King George VI and Queen Elizabeth from the Royal Academy, and in 1926, which was to design and make a large silver alms dish as a gift from King George V to the new Cathedral of St John the Divine in New York.

Ramsden is known for his hand-beaten silver, works inspired by historic silver, and incorporation of various materials such as wood (fig. 7). Ramsden's works are also

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<sup>21</sup> Ashton, H. (2018), loc. 1951

<sup>22</sup> Edinburgh Silver (2022)

<sup>23</sup> University of London (2022)

marked with the sentence ‘*Omar Ramsden me fecit*’ (Omar Ramsden made me), or ‘*Omar Ramsden et Alwyn Carr me fecit*’ (Omar Ramsden and Alwyn Carr made me) during their partnership. This is unusual for craftsmen at the time and is unique to Ramsden as the practice originates from the Classical era. ‘Talking’ or ‘speaking’ objects are objects with inscriptions composed in the first person so that the object is addressing the reader. One of the earliest examples is the Praeneste *fibula* (or brooch of Praeneste), dating to the 7th century BC of the Orientalising period. The inscription is written in Old Latin, ‘MANIOS MED FHEFHAKED NVMASIOI’, which translates to ‘*Manius me fecit Numerio*’ or Manius made me for Numasius<sup>24</sup>. In addition to commissions and pre-made pieces, Ramsden also created various war memorials across the country and many of his works remain highly collectible, featured in museum all around the world.



Figure 6. The Art Nouveau monstrance in Westminster Cathedral, photo taken in 1914, Historic England Archive<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> National Roman Museum (2019)

<sup>25</sup> Historic England (2022)



Figure 7. A Pair of English Arts and Craft Silver-Mounted Wood Wine Coasters, Maker: Omar Ramsden, London, 1935, Sotheby's 2020<sup>26</sup>.

**In the collection**

Liang Yi Museum is home to 4 works made by Omar Ramsden, all of which are indicative of the silversmith's iconic design style that has led to his position as a leading designer and maker of silver. Figure 8 is a treasury inkstand made for the Alliance Assurance which now forms part of the RSA Insurance Group. The cover is engraved with the company's badge and motto which reads '1824 Multi Societate Tutiores 1924' to commemorate their centenary. The base is inscribed with Omar Ramsden's identifying inscription '*Omar Ramsden me fecit in urbe Londinii MCMXXIV*' which translates to 'Omar Ramsden made me in the City of London 1924'.

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<sup>26</sup> Sotheby's (2020)



Figure 8. A George V Treasury Inkstand, Maker: Omar Ramsden, London, 1924, Length 24cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.

Similarly, figure 9 is a silver cigarette box featuring two badges belonging to the Prince of Wales' North Staffordshire Regiment and the Queen's 22nd London Regiment. Between the two badges are banners inscribed with 'Pristinae Virtutis Memor', which is Latin for 'mindful of former valour', and is one of the mottos of the Queen's Regiment. Along the sides of the box, an inscription reads 'I was wrought for Major K.E.B. Mackenzie-Kennedy, M.C. by command of the officers of the 22nd London Regiment (The Queen's) October 1926'. Major K.E.B. Mackenzie-Kennedy (1886-1954) was a veteran of the Great War and awarded a military cross. The interior of the box is lined with cedar to maintain a level of humidity suitable for tobacco.



Figure 9. A George V Cigarette Box, Maker: Omar Ramsden, London, 1926, Materials: silver and cedar wood, Length 20cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.

This silver mounted powder box (fig. 10) is mainly made of turned ebony with limited silver mountings. Along the sides, the silver mounts are engraved with the name 'Marie' and an inscription stating 'I was wrought for Marie Buchanan by desire of Hilda Saunders Dec 22 1922'. The silver mounts on the lid are engraved with the Buchanan (Carbeth, Scotland) family crest which consist of an insignia of an arm holding a sword and the motto '*Audacia et Industria*'.



Figure 10. A Silver-Mounted Powder Box, Maker: Omar Ramsden, London, 1922, Materials: ebony and silver, Height 8.5cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.

Last but not least, a silver-mounted mazer bowl made from maple wood, a ‘signature’ Ramsden piece<sup>27</sup>. Mazer bowls are shallow drinking bowls widely used in meals and religious ceremonies during the Middle Ages (c. 5th century – c.15th century)<sup>28</sup>. Ramsden interest in the mazer bowl is attributed to William St John Hope and he first began producing mazer bowls in the 1920s, spending a significant time researching them in order to revive the skills of making them. This mazer bowl sits on a spreading foot with rope-twist rims, engraved with the Latin inscription ‘*Animus Laetus Bene Afficit Vultum*’ which comes from the Book of Proverbs 15:13, meaning ‘a merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance’. The text is written in the Celtic-inspired stylised font Ramsden is known for. Another inscription on the base reads ‘I was wrought for Geoffrey Stephenson in the year of our Lord MCMXXII’, along with Ramsden’s maker’s inscription. The Goldsmiths’ Hall in London commissioned a signature mazer bowl (fig. 12) from Ramsden in 1932, featuring the company’s heraldic charges, and is the only piece by Ramsden in their collection.

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<sup>27</sup> Mark Littler (2022)

<sup>28</sup> Roberts, D. (2021)



Figure 11. An Arts and Crafts Silver-Mounted Mazer Bowl, Maker: Omar Ramsden, London, 1922, Materials: silver and maple wood, Diameter 13.3cm, Liang Yi Museum.



Figure 12. Mazer Bowl, Maker: Omar Ramsden, London, 1932, Materials: maple wood and silver-gilt, Diameter: 33.5cm, The Goldsmiths' Company Collection.

Ramsden's designs are simple and heavily influenced by historic silver, creating timeless iconic pieces. The hand-beaten silver brings the designs to life, consistent with the Arts and Craft philosophy that hand wrought works create a 'humanising' relationship between the craftsman and the crafted object. Although Omar Ramsden passed away in 1939, he remains a figure of interest to designers, scholars, collectors and silversmiths alike.

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