

Rex Silver, Designer-Manager: The Silver Studio and Questions of Authorship

Event: Behind the Scenes: The hidden mechanisms of design and architectural culture

Date: 10th and 11th June 2015

Venue: University for the Creative Arts, Canterbury

Speaker: Zoë Hendon, Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture, Middlesex University

Abstract

What does it mean to be the 'author' of a design? Common sense tells us that if something is made by human hand then there must be someone, ideally a named individual, to whom the item can be attributed. But commercial realities and design processes sometimes mean that 'authorship' is a problematic concept, with the finished product being the result of a complex interaction between client and designer, not to mention the numerous further interventions in the manufacturing process.

This paper will draw on archive evidence from the Silver Studio collection to propose that Silver Studio designs were never simply the work of one individual but were rather the product of complex negotiations between clients and designers, mediated by Rex Silver. The Silver Studio produced designs for mass-market wallpapers and textiles, and between around 1900 and 1960, Rex's role was to act as an intermediary between his clients (representatives of manufacturing companies) and his employees, ensuring that the latter were briefed to meet the requirements of the former. We can gain an insight into these negotiations through detailed diaries and other records kept by Rex's secretaries, who themselves played an important but frequently-overlooked role in the working of the business. The paper will also draw on evidence of correspondence between Rex and his clients, to show how he worked to maintain these working relationships, some of which evolved into genuine friendships over the course of his working life.

Consideration of the Silver Studio collection necessarily requires a re-consideration of practices of biography within design history, and the purpose of this paper is not to attempt to raise Rex Silver to 'hero' status, but rather to draw attention to the inadequacy of this model of historical explanation.

Good morning, I'm Zoë Hendon and I'm Head of Collections at the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture, Middlesex University. The focus of my PhD is on the Silver Studio since it became a Collection, ie since it ceased to be a business and the remaining contents were given to Hornsey College of Arts in 1967. However, I'm finding that the question of what the Silver Studio was while it was a business has to be addressed somehow, since it presents us with challenging questions about notions of authorship and attribution within Design History, and reveals some of the hidden mechanisms of the design process.

In this paper I'm going to start by giving a brief background to the Silver Studio as a working business. I'll then go on to make two main points: firstly, I'll look in detail at the process by which one specific design came into being. And secondly, I'm going to consider the status of one of the Silver Studio diaries both as *evidence of the design process* and as *an integral part of the design process*.

So to start: the Silver Studio was a design practice, based in Hammersmith, West London. It was opened by Arthur Silver in 1880, and by the 1890s he had established the Studio as a leading supplier of designs for wallpapers and textiles. Arthur Silver was a designer himself, and he also employed a small number of designers who worked with him, either directly or on a freelance basis (Turner 1980; Hoskins & Hendon 2008). After Arthur's death in 1896, the running of the Studio was taken over by his eldest son Rex, who ran it until his own death in 1965.

The Studio was not a producer of the finished wallpapers and textiles, but instead sold their designs to manufacturers and retailers, who would put them into production. Clients for printed textile designs included Stead McAlpin and GP&J Baker as well as Liberty & Co, and designs for woven textiles were sold to a number of companies in Britain and also in France, Belgium and the United States. Over the course of its long history the Studio employed a number of designers on both a salaried and freelance basis. However, designs were sold to manufacturers who produced them under their own brands, so that the names of individual designers are not well known.

As long ago as the late 1980s, writers such as John Walker and Judy Attfield were drawing attention to the fact that an approach to design history framed around individual designers was not particularly helpful (Walker 1989). This is partly because to focus on biographical details of an individual obscures the many other factors – clients, colleagues, economic context etc – which influence their work; and also because such an approach locates creative genius/creative innovation as the province of the single individual rather than acknowledging the importance of collaboration or cross-fertilisation of ideas.

Despite this, an approach to design history based on individuals is hard to shake off, and Rex Silver's role as head of the Studio is my starting point here. As I said, Silver Studio designers were not credited by their clients, but sometimes they were credited to Rex as head of the Silver Studio in contemporary publications. For example, a book called *British textile Designers of today*, published in 1939 by HG Hayes Marshall attributed three designs to Rex (Marshall 1939), despite evidence which suggests that they were in fact by other members of the Studio team. Rex's main role was to act as designer-manager, commissioning other designers to do the work, and negotiating with clients about what they wanted.

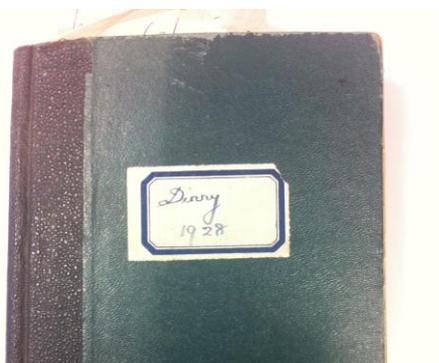
Throughout the twentieth century, Rex employed a number of designers on both a salaried and freelance basis. Their role was to work to his instruction – clearly they were valued for their skills of draughtsmanship and technical ability, but being a designer was very much not about personal self-expression. The Studio's male employees worked in the Studio itself – names such as Frank Price, Edwin Parker and Herbert Crofts re-occur frequently in the records. The Studio's female employees were required to work from home, and conducted business largely by post. The benefit of this to us is that details of design discussions survives in the form of correspondence between Rex and his female designer in a way that it has not for male designers (Protheroe 2013).



Silver Studio design for a dress silk, by Edwin Parker, 1927 (SD2250)

The Studio's records show which designers were paid for the completion of which designs; for example, this textile design was by Edwin Parker, in 1927. We often know a designer's name, so they are not strictly speaking 'anonymous', though we rarely know much more about them than just their names. The point is more that knowing a designer's name and being able to connect a specific design with a named individual is not very helpful in understanding the way the Silver Studio worked.

Rex Silver's relationship with his employees has been discussed elsewhere (Protheroe 2013; Turner 1980) so the main focus of this paper is going to be on the other side of the equation, namely the Studio's work of maintaining cordial relationships with its clients, the representatives of manufacturing firms. And my starting point for thinking about this was this Studio diary, from 1928, maintained by Rex's secretaries, Miss Cook and Miss Varney.



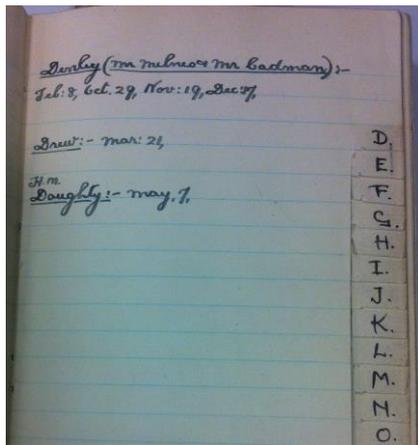
Silver Studio diary, 1928

This diary functioned as a kind of daily log book of the comings and goings of the Studio. It can be read in parallel with other evidence such as correspondence, sales ledgers and photographic records, all of which provide a picture of a company which had to work hard to keep track of its assets, ie its designs, and to record who had seen what, what their reactions were, what instructions needed to be conveyed to designers, and ultimately who should be paid for what.

According to this diary, the Silver Studio had contact with over 60 individuals in the first half of 1928 alone. These were all clients, but in some cases these were the owners of partners of textile firms, in other cases they were buyers working for specific firms such as Liberty or Turnbull and Stockdale, or agents buying designs on behalf of a number of companies. In the same six months, at least 18 separate firms are mentioned, many several times, including such magnificent names as the Heckmondwike Manufacturing Co, Titus Blatter of New York, Sixteen and Cassey and Bernascone. Each had their areas of specialisation, eg Bernascone mainly produced silk for ties, whereas other companies might specialise in printed crepes or chenilles or whatever.

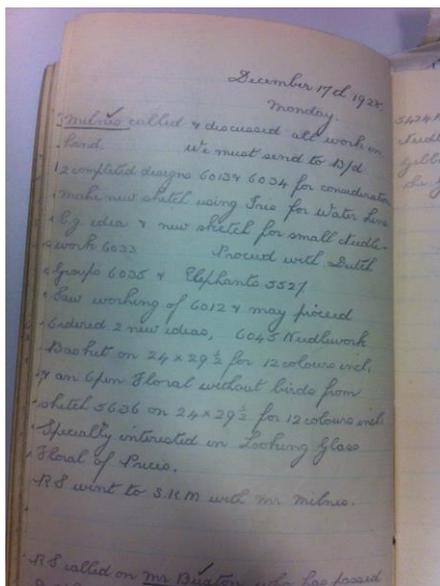
To start with the diary then: it was a kind of daily record of comings and goings, visits by clients and records of what they had seen, what they were interested in, which designs they wanted worked up and which they would 'pass' for production. It provides an insight into the design process, since clients generally saw miniatures or sketches first as a starting point for discussion, then would agree to have them 'worked up' according to their more specific instructions.

This diary also functions as what we would now call a "customer relationship management system". As you'll see from this image, it was a plain notebook, but the first few pages were customised to create an alphabetised index of both individuals and the companies they worked for, which were then cross referenced. In this instance we have the Bradford-based textile firm of Denby (Robert Denby & Sons) listed here, showing the names of their buyers – Mr Milnes and Mr Cadman – in brackets.



This diary enables us to look in more detail at the Silver Studio’s relationship with this client, since it makes links between the other evidence available in the form of surviving correspondence, the Silver Studio photograph albums, and the textile collection.

Mr H Milnes, a partner in Denby and Son was one of the Silver Studio’s most frequent visitors in the late 1920s. As well as being a business associate of the Silver Studio, it seems possible that Mr Milne was also long standing family friend, since a personal letter from him to Rex dated 1914 also survives in the archive, in which he talks of family matters and finishes with “please remember me to your mother”.



December 17th 1928,
Monday
Milnes called and discussed all work in hand. We must send to B/D
2 completed designs 6013 & 6034 for consideration.
Make new sketch using Iris for Water Line
b.g. idea & new sketch for small Needlework 6033. Proceed with Dutch Groups 6035 & Elephants 5527.
Saw working of 6012 & may proceed.
Ordered 2 new ideas, 6045 Needlework Basket on 24 x 29 ½ for 12 colours inch, & and open floral without birds from sketch 5636 on 24 x 29 ½ for 12 colours inch.
Specially interested in Looking Glass Floral of Prices.
RS went to SKM with Mr Milnes

This diary entry from December 1928 is typical of the kind of thing that was recorded in this diary. It is firstly a record of what happened that day: “Milnes called in”. It partly functions as a ‘to do’ list – “We must send to BD [Bob, ie Robert Denby] 2 completed designs for consideration.” It functions as a record of agreement of the discussions held – “proceed with Dutch Groups 6035 and Elephants 5527”. It is a note of what Mr Milnes saw during his visit to the Studio that day “Saw working of 6012 and may proceed”, and what he wanted more of “ordered 2 new ideas” – as well as a note of what else he might be interested in ie “looking glass floral of Prices”, presumably referring to a design by Studio employee Frank Price.

But what is of real interest to me here is this line – “RS (ie Rex Silver) went to SKM, ie the South Kensington Museum (ie the V&A), with Mr Milnes.” [The SKM had been renamed the Victoria and Albert in 1899, but clearly by 1928 this name was still in colloquial use]. SO what we have here is a longstanding professional relationship, which was possibly also a friendship or more intimate family relationship, and which was sufficiently cordial to mean that Rex Silver and Mr Milnes could take time out to visit a museum together in order to gather design inspiration.

Mr Milnes and Rex Silver saw something on their visit to the museum (we don’t unfortunately know what), which they must have discussed and agreed to combine with an existing design idea, to create a new textile design. This was followed up by a letter from Denby and Son dated two days after, confirming some technical specifications:

“confirming Mr Milnes visit the other day, the Trellis embroidery design idea selected by Mr Silver and Mr Milnes in South Kensington Museum is to follow 2006 and to be of the same dimensions namely 16” high by 29 ½” wide, and to have 8 colours including the blotch”
(Silver Studio Archive correspondence SBR 18/1, letter dated 19.12.28)

The number 2006 must refer to an existing design or design reference owned by Denby, as it does not seem to relate to any Silver Studio records. A letter from the Silver Studio dated the same day (possibly crossing in the post) refers to:

“No6046A, a rough planning showing an adaptation of the design we saw at the Museum, which is just large enough to treat in exactly the same touch as

your old design No.2006. It would probably be difficult to work the design with the same breadth of touch if we make it smaller than this design suggests. The other trial attached to this, namely 6046B is a larger version of the idea but we think you will probably find this too large”
(SBR 18/1 – letter dated 19.12.28)

When the Silver Studio sold a design it left the premises, ie a design was a physical object, on paper, which became the property of the client once purchased. So the designs that remain in the Silver Studio Collection today are either design ideas that did not sell, or are preliminary sketches or workings of designs that were ultimately sold. In the case of this design, we don't have the original design, but we do have an example of the finished textile.



Silver Studio textile, designed by Herbert Crofts, 1929 (ST260)

This was the textile derived from Silver Studio design no 6046, produced by Denby and Sons (Silver Studio textile, ST260). It is recorded in the daybook as having been designed by Herbert Crofts, one of the Silver Studio's employees, in 1929. So the short answer to the question "who designed this?" would be Herbert Crofts, since he drew the design on paper and is recorded as having been paid for the work. But as we have seen, it resulted from an idea embodied in an historic embroidery at the V&A seen by Rex Silver and Mr Milnes; combined with an existing idea that the client already had; produced after various discussions about size, scale, number of colours and so on; and ultimately signed off by Robert Denby as head of the client firm. So as I hope I've demonstrated, the notion of design-authorship within the Silver Studio is

not straightforward. It's not exactly wrong to attribute this design to Herbert Crofts, but nor is it very helpful.

To conclude, I'd like to make a slightly different and wider point about the status of this diary – and indeed the correspondence – as evidence. The obvious way to 'read' this diary is to see it as purely a faithful record of the Silver Studio's activities. We can imagine we are looking *through* this diary, to see the 'real' work of the Studio. But I want to make the point that the very act of writing this diary, of keeping these detailed records, was a fundamentally important – yet simultaneously invisible – part of the design process.

As we have seen, the diary records visits – both arranged and unannounced – of numerous representatives, and keeping track of all of them was clearly a large part of the work of the secretaries, Miss Cook and Miss Varney. They would have been the people primarily responsible for basic hospitality; for making clients welcome, remembering their names and affiliations and so on. This 'emotional labour' can be seen as a kind of invisible part of the design process –hence the need for this diary notebook with alphabetized index.

Secondly, the secretaries needed to keep track of which client had seen which designs and whether they had taken them away with them; and in which case whether they would need to be billed for them or asked to return them. The diligent keeping of these records would have been a vital element of the Studio's commercial success, simply in terms of maintaining the correct flow of payments in and out. Again, this is a frequently-overlooked aspect of the design process.

As we've seen the diary also records which designs were seen by whom and their reactions – indicates that designs frequently seen first as 'miniatures', then worked and reworked numerous times before 'approval' –so there would have been another kind of emotional labour in attempting to work out how to please the client, judge what to show them that might be of interest, and remember what they had already seen. From the evidence of the diary it is not always clear if Rex was solely

responsible for this, or whether one or both of the secretaries deputised for him in the carrying out of this function, not just in the recording of it. So, the point I am making is to propose that we should read this diary as *an integral part* of the design process. The Silver Studio was dealing with multiple designs for multiple clients and numerous designers at any one time, and it would have been a huge job of to keep it all straight. I'm proposing that we should read this diary as having a kind of 'agency' in the design process, and that the work of the secretaries, Miss Varney and Miss Cook, was not simply to *record* the activities of the Studio in a neutral way, but that it constituted an important and integral part of the efficient running of the Studio and as such was vital to its continued success; making this diary one of the hidden mechanisms of the history of design.

REFERENCES

Archival sources at the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture

Silver Studio diary, 1928

Silver Studio Archive correspondence SBR 18/1, letter dated 19.12.28

Silver Studio textile, designed by Herbert Crofts, 1929 (ST260)

Silver Studio design for a dress silk, by Edwin Parker, 1927 (SD2250)

Secondary Sources

Hoskins, L. & Hendon, Z., 2008. Silver Studio Designated Collection.

<http://eprints.mdx.ac.uk/3103>

Marshall, H.G.H., 1939. *British textiles designers today: with introduction and chapters on the designer and design, notes on colour, definitions and descriptions, methods of manufacture, yarns*, Leigh-on-Sea: F. Lewis.

Protheroe, K., 2013. *Bloom and Blotch (unpublished PhD)*. Kingston University

Turner, M., 1980. *A London Design Studio 1880-1963: The Silver Studio Collection*, London: Lund Humphries for Middlesex Polytechnic.

Walker, J.A., 1989. *Design History and the History of Design*, London: Pluto Press.