

Contemporary CLASSICS

Kath Libbert has been providing a showcase for jewellery designers at home and across the globe. **Sally Clifford** chats to her about her work

Kath Libbert has always had an eye for design. Growing up in London, Kath recalls being absorbed by her mum's striking and contemporary interior style. "Things sink into you without you knowing," says Kath.

While Kath always harboured her mum's design eye, she never pursued it as a profession until she decided, once and for all, to leave her psychology role within the NHS and develop her namesake jewellery gallery – Kath Libbert – within the confines of Sir Titus Salt's landmark mill in the world heritage site of Saltaire.

"Even when I went down the psychology route I think this other part of me has always been there that is drawn to interesting and unusual designs," says Kath.

"I like beautiful things. I like things that give me visual pleasure and I think jewellery is quite unique in that because you have it on your body, so if you look at your hand and you have something that is quite lovely and it

reminds you of who has given it to you or the reason you had it given I think it is a bit special."

Kath, who lives surrounded by beautiful scenery in the Yorkshire Dales, says while psychology may seem a contrasting career, there are distinct similarities, particularly through commission work.

She explains working on specific pieces they get to know the individuals they are working with and they get to share and be part of their stories. "You get to know people, you get to know the stories and I think it is very personal," says Kath.

She says often people have inherited a piece they want to alter and they talk about the emotional attachment. Referring to her colleague, jewellery designer, Sally Cox, from Bingley, she says Sally has refashioned a few cygnet rings for female customers.

"She has had a few people bring old cygnet rings which many people have been left or given but they aren't something a woman is

likely to wear so what she has been doing is cutting them at the back and hammering them into a long piece of gold so the wider bit has disappeared," explains Kath.

The finished piece becomes a coil of gold, similar to a Russian wedding ring. "It becomes a lovely, completely different ring," says Kath.

"It is a transformation, almost like magic, that is the sort of emotional thing because it means you are connected to the person the ring belonged to originally."

One of the most unusual commission pieces the team has worked on was a piece of lava from an Icelandic volcano brought in by a customer who wanted to encapsulate it into a piece of jewellery for her charm bracelet as a keepsake.

Kath is renowned for providing a platform to showcase the skill and precision of the jewellers whose pieces catch her eye and her latest exhibition 'A Marriage Made in Yorkshire' focuses on talent close to home including her part-time gallery assistants, Bex Bardon; Sally Cox; Emily Knight and Cathy Sutherland, who are all talented jewellers.

Indicative of the calibre of Kath's talented team, silversmith Sally was recently selected for Goldsmiths Fair, a prestigious annual silverware and jewellery fair at Goldsmiths Hall, London.

Sally's collection for 'A Marriage Made in Yorkshire' features her functional tableware and demonstrates her skill at collaborating classical elements with a contemporary twist.



Kath Libbert and team

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Brooch by Emily Knight



Stack rings by Pamela Dickinson

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Bex, from Elland, incorporates rough cut rubies and tourmalines into her collection also using recycled silver and gold.

Inspired by the 'Masterpieces of Chinese Painting' exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Emily, from Settle, has created a unique wedding corsage - enamelled floral brooches embellished with 18ct yellow gold, while Cathy's delicate collection of silver and gold bridal jewellery is inspired by the Calla Lily.

Fellow Yorkshire jewellers, Pamela Dickinson, Chris Philipson, Adele Taylor, Chris Boland, Anthony Blakeney and Angela Knipe are also contributing their talents to the exhibition alongside renowned jewellers Malcolm Morris, creator of the tiaras worn by the actress Gwyneth Paltrow in Shakespeare in Love, and Mirri Damer, who recently made wedding rings for the actress Dawn French.

The talent encapsulated within the gallery is, according to Kath, completely unique compared to the high street. "We are about people sitting at their work benches and making unique designs," she explains.

"We are now one of the strongest collections of contemporary jewellery in Britain."

As well as showcasing 'homegrown talent' Kath is also keen to introduce the talented jewellers she meets on her UK and European travels to a wider audience.

"I am looking for things which strike me as extraordinary and special," says Kath.

'Czech it out' - an exhibition held at the gallery in 2004 - drew on Kath's Czech Jewish ancestry and featured 13 designers from the Czech Republic whose sculptural pieces were created from diverse materials

such as bone, string, glass, credit cards and fishing bait as well as the precious metals and garnets traditionally used in Czech jewellery.

She was also involved in an exchange initiative with a gallery in Barcelona in 2002 which saw six British jewellers showcase their work over there and six Spanish jewellers coming over to Britain. "I like these projects which make us really different. We want people to be excited and engaged," says Kath.



Silver locket by Cathy Sutherland

'A Marriage Made in Yorkshire' runs until July 13 at Kath Libbert Jewellery Gallery, 2nd floor, Salts Mill, Saltaire. Opens daily from 10am until 5.30pm Monday to Friday and from 10am until 6pm at weekends. Phone 01274 599790 or visit kathlibbertjewellery.co.uk

Silver and gold plated salt bowl and spoon by Sally Cox



Rings by Malcolm Morris