

Ringging

the changes

As consumers increasingly snub mass-produced goods for unique, handmade items, Scottish arts and craft seems to be staging a revival. Barry Didcock speaks to three young craft stars hoping to continue the renaissance ahead of Meet Your Maker, an exhibition putting their work in the spotlight

THERE is talk in some quarters of a Scottish craft renaissance. In others, of a fruitful alliance with the Slow Movement, which celebrates skill and tradition and asks for more time and consideration to be given to food, design, travel, even sex. What's certain is that the outlook is sunny for Scotland's makers of jewellery, ceramics, textiles and glass. The public, it seems, is growing weary of anonymous, poorly designed, mass-produced objects. Handmade and bespoke is where it's at now, and for both

established designers and young graduates, that can only be good news.

Meet Your Maker should cheer them even further. A group show at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, it brings together nine young stars of the contemporary craft scene and puts them and their work centre stage. Though this is by no means a distaff concern, all nine are women. But the more important thing they share is a belief in their art and a determination to see it evolve into something that blends the best of the past with the most exciting aspects of the present – and the future. Here we meet three of them.

LIBBY DAY

"If you tell someone you're a craftsperson, they imagine knitting or peg dollies," says 31-year-old Aberdonian Libby Day. "But there is a lot of very cutting-edge things going on. Craft in Scotland is very diverse."

Day's own background and practice is testament to that diversity. Her American engineer father came here to work in the oil industry before starting his own business. Her Scottish grandfather, meanwhile, kept a well-stocked toolshed. It's no surprise, then, that she preferred hanging around noisy workshops as a girl – or that one of her brothers ended up becoming an architect.

At 17, Day left school to join Top Shop as a window designer. She stayed in fashion, eventually moving to New York to work for Macy's, the celebrated department store which stands in the shadow of the Empire State Building. "Macy's was fantastic because we were making all our own props and designing the concepts for the store, which was a one-off," she says. "But it got to the point where it wasn't really creative enough for me. I worked with a lot of designed objects but I really wanted to go and design for myself."

So she did. She came home to Scotland, enrolled at Gray's School of Art in Aberdeen and graduated in 2008 with a first class degree in Three Dimensional Design. Today, she still lives and works in Aberdeen, and her designs cover everything from furniture to jewellery and even lights. Much of her inspiration comes from the relationship (and tension) between mankind and nature, so for the Meet Your Maker exhibition she has constructed ornate fruit bowls out of oxidised copper. Their form was suggested to her by photographs of trees.

Day is happy for people to call her a craftsperson as long as they're happy to accept that she spends as much time hunched over a laptop as she does a workbench. Like many young Scots working in the applied arts, she's more than happy to use software for cutting corners – or any other shape for that matter – where she can.

"I like to hand-finish the larger pieces because you get a better effect. But I do believe if there's a piece of technology that can do something for you, why suffer?" But, she adds: "I think understanding how something is made from a hands-on approach is really important."

For the end user, that hands-on element is all important too. It's a point that isn't lost on Libby Day. "I think there is more interest in traditional or unique things today because we live in such a mass-produced world," she says. "I can relate to that because of the work I've done previously. So I think people are willing to spend a little bit more to get something really well made – and which has a story to it."

STACEY BENTLEY

EXAMINE the work of Stacey Bentley and you can jettison every preconception about jewellery you've ever had. Using techniques learned from studying industrial processes, she makes jagged pieces – rings and



brooches for the most part – whose designs are inspired by the urban environment. It's not the sort of thing your grandmother would wear, though all credit to her if she did.

The 23-year-old from Batley, West Yorkshire, graduated from Edinburgh College of Art in 2009 with a first class honours degree in Jewellery and Silversmithing. She has also studied experimental enamel techniques at the Enamel Research Centre in England and won bursaries from both the Goldsmiths Company and the Guild of Enamellers. "The aesthetic is all about the textural feel of enamel," she explains. "The pieces look fragile but they're actually quite sturdy. I want people to touch them and pick them up and see how they feel in their hands."

Bentley had originally set out to become a painter but found herself increasingly drawn to building wire sculptures during a foundation year at Leeds College of Art. She was eventually prodded in the direction of jewellery by a tutor. It was a revelation. "I was interested in learning the techniques," she says, "but I was also interested in learning a trade. You can make a career out of jewellery whereas in painting and drawing it's a little more difficult."

Like all the other artists featured in Meet Your Maker, Bentley is glad of the exposure afforded by a show in a high-profile institution like the National Museum of Scotland. But even though she shares her colleagues' optimism for the future of the applied arts in Scotland, she still thinks there's some way to go before the country can support a community of makers.

"People here tend to shy away from the more out-there pieces of jewellery. They're quite conservative. But I recently exhibited in Holland and, while the work on show was really bizarre, it sold. Munich has a really good set-up for jewellery design as well."

So who is buying her work? "Well-off middle-aged women, basically, and

collectors," she says. "But I'm trying to make enamel more available to a younger audience. I've had a lot of good comments, but price is an issue".

EBBA REDMAN

AS a girl in Fife, Ebba Redman was taught to crochet by her mother. She made beaded necklaces and sold them at craft fairs. At home, the kitchen table was often cleared for messy papier-mâché projects. So obviously she grew up wanting to be a musician ... but by the time she was in her late teens, her artistic tendencies reasserted themselves. The Edinburgh-born 25-year-old studied at Dundee's Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design and graduated in 2009 with an honours degree in Jewellery and Metal Design. She now lives and works in Perth, where she runs the Tayberry Gallery with her partner.

Redman hasn't forgotten the homespun craft skills she learned in her childhood, however. Her own work – delicate silver brooches that almost look as if they have been crocheted – celebrates the sort of domestic skills we're often told are dying out in the 21st century. In fact these skills are thriving, says Redman. It's part of a larger youth movement which combines a renewed interest in traditional craft techniques with a desire to escape the tyranny of mass production and a growing awareness of ethical and environmental issues.

For proof, she points to the increasing number of jewellers using ethically sourced gold and silver as well as to groups like the Glasgow Craft Mafia and even Stitch'N'Bitch, a web-savvy organisation of knitting groups. Its members come together in pubs, or anywhere else that takes their fancy, to knit and blether.

"A lot of people my age are looking at these things, the traditional female craft skills,

and seeing how they can be reinvented," says Redman. "Our mothers thought, 'We're not going to be chained to our kitchens any more' and put down these skills because they associated them with being a housewife. But these days young people see that they're good techniques which can be employed for modern design."

So knitting, to take one example, is cool again. But its many young, new recruits occupy the beginners' end of the craft spectrum and that still poses problems for people like Redman. "On an amateur level it's fine but there needs to be reinvestment in these traditions at a professional level too," she says. "There needs to be people showing high-quality, professional work."

One way in which these professionals have sought to distance themselves from the air of amateurism that still clings to the word "craft" is by talking about "applied arts" instead. That's not a strategy Redman favours, however. "I'd see myself as a craftsperson," she says firmly. "I think the word needs to be re-embraced."

Meet Your Maker opens on Friday at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, and runs until March 14. To view more of the artists' work, go to www.heraldsotland.com





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Above: A handmade ring by Stacey Bentley, left. Bentley joins Libby Day, far left, Ebba Redman, right, and six other young craft stars for the Meet Your Maker exhibition

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