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Hudson Roysher

A second notable Californian silversmith in the '50s and '60s was Hudson Roysher (1911-1993). Roysher was born to an artistic family in Cleveland: his mother was a weaver, his sister taught drawing and his brother-in-law taught lettering. He also demonstrated fine motor skills, building model planes and ships as a boy. When he started taking metalworking classes at the Cleveland School of Art in the early 1930s, he became so impatient with the pace of instruction that he quit the class and taught himself how to forge and raise. By 1933, before he graduated, he was winning prizes at the Cleveland Museum's annual May Show. While a few other American smiths taught themselves how to form metal, none achieved Roysher's command of the craft. He could forge a silver ladle out of a blank 8 inches long and 1 1/2 inches wide. The finished ladle was 14 inches long, and the bowl was more than four inches in diameter; everything was done with one hammer and an anvil. Some craftspeople who saw him do it didn't think it was possible.

Like many other art-school students in the 1930s, Roysher was trained to be a designer. He gravitated into the nascent field of industrial design, working for a company in Cleveland before starting the department of industrial design at the University of Illinois in 1937. For a time, he charted an irregular path between design and smithing, as a design teacher at University of Southern California, Chouinard and UCLA, and as a silversmith for Gump's in San Francisco. By 1954, he made his final choice: he settled on silversmithing, which he taught at California State College (now University) in Los Angeles.

Roysher found industrial design's emphasis on styling to be ultimately superficial. This, in fact, was the weakness of Modernism in America: its tendency to dress up otherwise ordinary objects with a snazzy exterior calculated to stimulate sales. Instead of urging a more restrained sense of design for mass-production, Roysher opted for a life of craft. And he gave that choice a deeper meaning: after 1955 or so, he devoted himself exclusively to ecclesiastical and ceremonial commissions. Expanding his range of materials to include wood, iron, leather and marble, he produced a series of beautiful silver objects and fittings for churches throughout Southern California.

The decision to turn against mass production ran against the grain of his Modernist design sensibility. An article he published in 1960, "The Ecclesiastic Metalsmith," offers some hints about his motives. First, he pointed out that churches will never be mass-produced. By analogy, he reasoned that the intimate experience of worship could not be satisfied by mass-produced liturgical objects. Through study of ritual and church traditions, a craftsman could make furnishings and fittings suited to the characteristics of a congregation. Furthermore, Roysher thought church commissions offered restrictions that might impose useful discipline on craftspeople in a time of runaway self-expression. He wrote,

However, [churchmen] are not about to turn the edifice into a gallery for the sole display of the artist's entirely individual and personal reactions, untrammelled by specific assignments or limitations. The designer-craftsman should be aware that his work will find itself in the sanctuary of a faith where it must be understood by many to be of the greatest use. ...if [the artist] is more interested in the plaudits of

a small coterie who enthusiastically follow the non-objective movement in the crafts, then perhaps, the liturgical field is not the place for him.”¹

One of Roysher's commissions was for the Saint Peter's Episcopal Church of San Pedro, California. Most of the parishioners came from fishing families, so he incorporated imagery from seafaring and fishing. His pulpit suggested the form of a crow's nest; the communion rail had a repeated anchor motif. An abstract image of three fish was mounted on the altar, and another fish motif floated on an iron grille in the belfry. As was customary for a silversmith, Roysher also made candlesticks, a tabernacle, a sanctuary lamp and other appointments. The ensemble adds both detail and meaning to the spare Modernist interior, connecting it to the lived experience of the worshippers who used it. Exactly as he proposed, Roysher put free expression aside, in the service of a greater, communal purpose.