

# INTRODUCTION

This is the story of a remarkably talented Irishman whose works are so distinctive they need no signature. Master craftsman, “repoussé” chaser Edmund Kavanagh’s art carries his inimitable style in every piece, a style he has been painstakingly and lovingly developing over the last fifty years. The skill of repoussé, which began in antiquity and flourished from medieval times to the middle of the twentieth century, is a metalworking technique in which soft precious metal is shaped by hammering from the underside. Chasing is done on the front of the piece to finish or refine the raised repoussé. It is tedious, laborious work that in the twenty-first century is considered a dying art. Edmund is among the handful of chasers around the world who continue to ply this ancient craft.

Edmund is the kind of man everyone would like to have as a friend. The old saying “he never met a stranger” suits him perfectly. He has a ready smile for every one he meets, and after a brief exchange of pleasantries there comes the feeling of convivial fellowship that is mostly reserved for long-established relationships. His good humor, charm and wonderful Irish wit are part of who he is, and this part of him he shares willingly with the world around him.

His talent as a master craftsman repoussé chaser has become well known in America and is legendary in England, Ireland and many countries where his works of art have traveled. Yet his fame never interferes with his outgoing personality, and his ability to make another person feel completely at ease. It’s a quality that is both laudable and enchanting.

The artist in him finds its greatest expression through his association with people from every walk of life. The effort and detail he perfects for a barely affordable gift for a newlywed or the expensive stately gift for the head of a country count equally to him. His work in repoussé over the years has been judged by some of the best in the business, and found exemplary. The standard he has set for himself is far greater than that set by many of his judges.

For every piece, whether large or small, a very accurate sketching of the design must be done first, which is then transferred to a sheet of silver or gold. The design is beat out from the reverse side with a hammer and tiny punches on metal kept supported over warm pitch. Any mistake either in the sketching—which can sometimes take days to perfect—or in the metal work means a huge waste of time and money.

Edmund’s natural talent as a design artist became evident in childhood. To the frustration of his parents and teachers, Edmund was wont to draw concentric circles and fanciful designs on scrap

paper rather than apply himself to more serious academics. At age fourteen his father introduced him to Mr. Herbert James, the Chief Executive Officer of the John Smith and Sons Silversmith Company in Dublin. Mr. James was most impressed with Edmund's drawings and immediately put him under the wing of the firm's best artist, Mr. James Brock. Under Brock's tutelage, Edmund was apprenticed for two years, and with discipline and hard work his skill began to blossom.

His budding career was interrupted by a bout of tuberculosis. At sixteen he was confined to hospital for more than two years before returning to his beloved "pitch, hammer and punches." His passion for chasing has continued steadily from that time forward to encompass a lifetime.

Gunning and Sons of Fleet Street, a well established firm with an outstanding reputation for quality, was another of Edmund's early employers. At eighteen, he was put beside a new master and mentor, Mr. Wallace, a man of much experience in the art of repoussé chasing. Edmund's skill grew, and was fine-tuned in his new position. Very early on he was tasked with working on complex pieces usually reserved for more experienced artists. His great love for his work spurred him on to ever more intricate and specialized accomplishments.

Much of Edmund's work, particularly in the early years, was done under the auspices of the companies that hired him. These companies naturally took full credit for each completed article. The name of the repoussé-chaser artist was seldom made known to the customer who received the art. But Edmund's style and workmanship matured rapidly. He eventually launched himself into private business. Through hard work, determination and a penchant for meticulous attention to detail, he produced work that became recognized and sought after. In 1967, at the height of his flourishing business in London, Edmund immigrated to America to fulfill a boyhood dream.

The prestigious New York City firm of David Webb gave him a wonderful beginning in America. A few years later, Edmund opened his own business in Westbury, Long Island. It became very successful, after some rocky times at the beginning.

The volume and variety of Edmund's work is incredible, as the photographs in this book show. He has handcrafted chalices; candelabrams, menorahs and customized pieces as well as hundreds of original jewelry designs. He has gained fame for numerous reproductions of priceless museum pieces. The Salvador Dali Heart, with its 18-carat background and seventy-two rubies set in the center, is just one outstanding example.

During his busy and productive lifetime, Edmund has been commissioned to design, render or refurbish numerous prominent sports trophies. The unique pieces he has worked on include the Greyhound Derby Cup, the Henley Regatta Trophy, fifteen U.S. football Super Bowl trophies, and two reproductions of the U.S. Amateur Golf Trophy: one for the United States Golf Association, and one for Jack Nicklaus.

His name is well known among the United States military bandmasters, both academies and the active duty services. He has designed and crafted numerous Maces, Baldrices and Tabards for the Marines, the Coast Guard, the Army, the Air Force, the Merchant Marine and other military bands.

Of the hundreds of chalices, tea services, maces, and trophies that have passed through his competent hands, his flagship piece is the 18-carat gold rose bowl for the 50th wedding anniversary for President and Mrs. Dwight D. Eisenhower. In 1965 Aspreys of London called Edmund to be part of the team to work on the project. His job was to do the repoussé chasing. Famed designer Porteous Wood and master goldsmith David Birch completed the team. These three were chosen to handle the principal designs for the 18-carat gold bowl. It is an impressive piece, unique in

design and decoration. The cover, heavily decorated, yet delicate-looking, is intricately fashioned. It is divided into six sections, three of them depicting State flowers important to the President. One panel depicts the wild rose of Kansas, the second the lupine of Utah, and the third the columbine of Colorado. The gold cover between the flowers is pierced, leaving openings for rose stems to be poked into water in the bowl below. All the homes the Eisenhowers lived in around the world are raised around the cover's perimeter, ending with the White House.

Edmund spent many loving hours fashioning this stately and beautiful piece. For him the task was made more pleasurable because of his great admiration for the recipient. General Eisenhower's fame as Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces in WWII was legendary in England and Ireland. Edmund had followed this great man's career, and knew him as a genuine war hero who had helped free millions of Europeans from the tyrannies of Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. Edmund had loved the United States and all things American since his youth. To work on this piece for such a famous and beloved man was indeed an honor.

Over the years, Edmund has received commendations and honors from many sources. But none has meant as much to him as the letter President Eisenhower graciously penned on receiving the golden rose bowl, thanking him for his part in its production.

Edmund credits many master craftsmen along the way with helping him develop his own particular style. Of them all, the one who stands out for him is Anthon Rubesch, the Hungarian immigrant to England whose talent and generous spirit guided Edmund through some of the best and worst moments of his career.

The technique of repoussé is very old. Its antiquity dates back long before the Greeks were masters of their archipelago. Many of the very early pieces were done in copper or bronze. The magnificent gold work found in the tomb of King Tutankhamen of Egypt, and the bronze Greek armor plates from the 3rd century BC are among the world's most famous pieces. Benvenuto Cellini produced exemplary repoussé art during the Italian Renaissance. Not many people know that the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor, a gift to America from France in 1886, is also a work of repoussé.

The cherished art of repoussé, favored by royalty and prized by collectors, is slowly dying for want of artists willing to spend a lifetime perfecting their art for uncertain rewards. The sacrifices and dedication needed to produce one masterpiece can be overwhelming to the uninitiated. In our day, machine stamping and mass-produced inferior metal pieces have almost completely taken the place of the time-consuming, painstakingly hand crafted silver and gold work of earlier centuries. Unless a revival begins soon, the timeless art could be lost in our generation.

This book was written in part to preserve the past for future generations. It offers a glimpse of the beauty and elegance of the fine art of repoussé chasing, and the skill of one man's life's rendering of the ancient art. It also portrays the unique life and character of the artist, who has left the world a legacy of special significance.

—*Joyce Brogdon, October 2006*