

Translators' Help a Jewelry Designer to Keep Creating

When Romilly Saumarez Smith lost her fine motor skills, she despaired. But then she remembered that even Michelangelo worked with collaborators.

By Rachel Garrahan

May 26, 2023



The jewelry designer Romilly Saumarez Smith. Credit...Kalpesh Lathigra for The New York Times

LONDON — On an upper floor in Romilly Saumarez Smith's 18th-century house in the Stepney neighborhood of east London is a small closet that the Smiths understand was used to powder the wigs of the home's original owners.

Now the 30-square-foot space is packed with a jeweler's bench and other equipment, racks full of tools, piles of notes and sketches, and the works-in-progress of her intricate, lyrical creations. But one recent afternoon, it was not Ms. Saumarez Smith but the jeweler Laura Ngyou, one of Ms. Saumarez Smith's assistants, who was working at the bench.

In 2002, Ms. Saumarez Smith, now 69, was diagnosed with a rare form of secondary progressive multiple sclerosis that has left her paralyzed from the neck down, although she can speak without aids and has retained some feeling. She initially carried on, she said in a recent interview at her home, but when her fine motor skills failed in 2007, she thought her career as a maker was over. A difficult few years followed, but then in 2010 she realized collaborations could enable her to continue bringing her creative imaginings to life.

All of Ms. Saumarez Smith's pieces, whether jewelry or objets d'art, are one-of-a-kind, revealing a different layer of detail every time they are examined. In the Best Ring, for example, a slice of dendritic agate was thinned to a half millimeter and backed with gold leaf, all the better to show the agate's natural curving pattern and the minute treelike shapes within that pattern. The overall effect was enhanced by a delicate frame of tiny pearls, diamonds and gold.





Work from Ms. Saumarez Smith's Old Masters collection. Kalpesh Lathigra for The New York Times

Ms. Saumarez Smith found herself falling in love instantly. "I loved the difference between working with paper and leather and working with metal. It's a much more forgiving material," she said.

The reduced scale of jewelry also appealed. "I've always been drawn to the miniature, all the way back to having a doll's house as a child, or to the small things on display in a museum," she said.

Her transition to jewelry coincided with the purchase of the Georgian home where she still lives with her husband, Charles Saumarez Smith, a former chief executive of the Royal Academy of Arts and a former director of both the National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery.

Ms. Saumarez Smith did not start out as a jeweler. She spent the first 25 years of her working life as a book binder, learning the craft at Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts, the London school now called Camberwell College of Arts, part of the University of the Arts London. She worked at the renowned Zaehnsdorf Bindery before setting out on her own, developing a reputation for her artisanal bindings and use of historic techniques.

Inspired by medieval bookbinding methods, she had started to incorporate metal bosses and decorations into her work when, in 1999, a friend invited her to join a jewelry class at the Waterloo, south London, campus of Morley College, an adult education institution.



The interior of one of the rooms in Ms. Saumarez Smith's 18th-century home. Kalpesh Lathigra for The New York Times

The house, which has four and a half floors and was built in 1742, proved to be an enormous, life-defining project — so much so that Ms. Saumarez Smith, who now can access only part of it, using an elevator, views it as another of her creations.

When they bought it from the Spitalfields Trust, a charity that protects historic buildings, it was a complete wreck. The roof and top floor were missing, thanks to wartime bomb damage, and the middle of the house had been ripped out for a drive-through auto-repair garage. It took five years of construction, all while juggling life with two young sons, to turn the large house into an elegant setting for the couple’s collection of antiques, books, and contemporary art and objects by the likes of Grayson Perry and Edmund de Waal.



An archive photo of Ms. Saumarez Smith's home. She and her husband bought the house from the Spitalfields Trust, a charity that protects historic buildings. Kalpesh Lathigra for The New York Times

When her illness forced her to give up making jewelry, Ms. Saumarez Smith said she initially struggled with the idea of having others execute her ideas, but she came to realize that it was what artists from Michelangelo to Damien Hirst, as well as many jewelers, have always done. And after she met Lucie Gledhill, who had recently graduated from the Royal College of Art, the two women decided to work together.

Ms. Gledhill, who now has her own jewelry line, said she had to learn what she called the “unique language” of Ms. Saumarez Smith’s work — and later began using the term “translator” for the job. “I tried as faithfully as I could to make *as* Romilly, not *for* Romilly,” she wrote in an email. “Initially I started by directly copying some of Romilly’s pieces. I also carefully unpacked all of her tools, studying them as a way to get closer to Romilly’s making hands, such as looking at the wear on the hammer.”

Given Ms. Saumarez Smith’s equally intimate relationship with her own home, it proved a useful environment for communicating her aesthetic and creative approach, both to Ms. Gledhill and to the assistants who have followed. “I always knew that they needed to work in the house because the house was the basis of me,” Ms. Saumarez Smith said.

Ms. Gledhill agreed. “Not only does the house become a creative context, a frame for her jewelry, but it also helps to create the intimacy which is so necessary for the work,” she wrote. “Throughout a making day, we are constantly referring to Romilly because her jewelry is so process- and material-led.”



Carola Solcia, one of Ms. Saumarez Smith's "translators." Kalpesh Lathigra for The New York Times

Every morning, Ms. Saumarez Smith and one of her three current translators spend an hour talking through projects. She communicates through a series of terms they have adopted — such as “unicorns,” to describe tiny pieces of gold or silver that form a ball when heated; a number of the balls then are fused to form a line. The translators draw what they think she means and she then reviews the sketches, making suggestions. “The more I work with the jewelers, the easier it becomes,” Ms. Saumarez Smith wrote in a later email. “I think there is a magic in it as well, and I certainly feel that the pieces that emerge are my work, made by me.”

A lifelong love of wordplay means all her creations are named. Treehandles is a continuing series that uses the handles of antique cutlery to suggest the trunks of trees, with webs of silver, gold, vintage coral or other materials for branches. Most have been sold, but one large example has pride of place above the fireplace in Ms. Saumarez Smith’s bedroom, its branches casting beguiling shadows against the wall.

The Newfoundland collection incorporated eBay finds, from rusty old thimbles to ancient coins. “Romilly has the most amazing vision,” Ms. Gledhill said. “She sees things in things that no one else would see. She brings out beauty and potential from the strangest places.”



“I think my absolute saving grace has been the fact that I’m creative,” Ms. Saumarez Smith said. Kalpesh Lathigra for The New York Times

Ms. Saumarez Smith’s jewelry sells for 250 pounds to as much as £8,250 (\$311 to \$10,290). Most is sold from her website or by appointment at her home, although she also exhibits at galleries and plans to show at the second week of Goldsmiths’ Fair, scheduled from Oct. 3-8 at Goldsmiths’ Hall in London.

One of Ms. Saumarez Smith’s most recent projects is Old Masters, inspired by a bag of mismatched and misshapen nails removed from the frames of some 16th and 17th century paintings during restoration. They were the gift of Sandra Romito, a friend who works in the Old Masters department at Christie’s in London, and have been reimaged as two series of miniature objects.

Nails taken from religious paintings were topped with ecclesiastical symbols, such as an angel’s golden halo or a tiny pearl to represent the cloud that lifted the Virgin Mary into heaven. And nails once used in landscape paintings were adorned with minuscule metal trees bearing even tinier bead fruits and clusters of horsehair to suggest animals in the landscape.

For Ms. Ngyou, such idiosyncratic imaginings have enriched her own jewelry practice. “She has taught me to be braver with the way I work, in terms of experimentation and in taking more risks, design-wise,” she said.

As for Ms. Saumarez Smith, the frustrations that come with physical challenges are mitigated by the richness of her own imagination: “I think my absolute saving grace has been the fact that I’m creative.”

A version of this article appears in print on , Section S, Page 11 in The New York Times International Edition