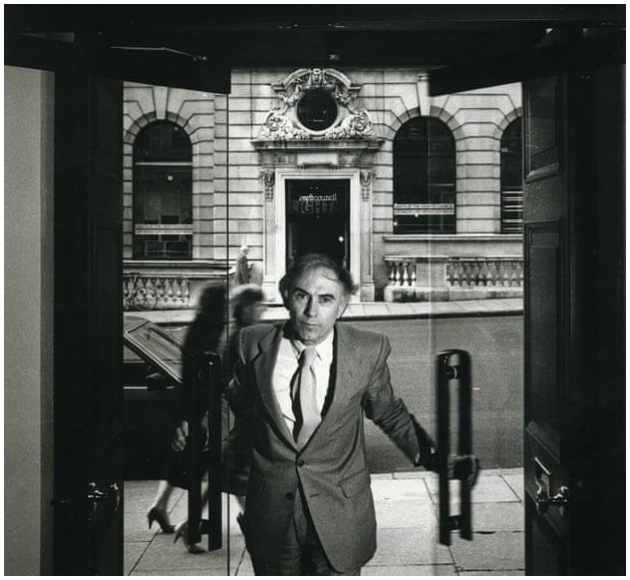

VICTOR MARGRIE CBE
– an appreciation

Christopher Frayling

5th October 2023

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WELCOME to this gathering to celebrate the life, the achievements and the vision of Victor Margrie, who died exactly a year ago on 5th October 2022—a celebration and a tribute rather than a memorial or a wake…

And a particular welcome to ten members of Victor's family including his daughters Jo, Kez and Miriam, and his wife Rosemary—who have joined us this afternoon.

With so many distinguished craft practitioners here in the room—lots of familiar faces—this will be a celebration, here at the Art Workers' Guild, of Victor's important achievements over 13 years as Secretary, then Director of the Crafts Advisory Committee which in turn matured into the Crafts Council—the 13 years between 1971 and 1984, when this new Council aimed to do for the crafts what the Arts Council had done for the arts, using different approaches and building on the tenacity, the vitality and the talent of the craftspeople themselves. Also a celebration of Victor's own teaching and practice—which we'll be talking about later (an almost complete set of his 3D Christmas cards—12 of them—made after he retired from the Council is on display next door).

For me, Victor's heyday was bookended by two very influential exhibitions—*The Craftsman's Art* at the V&A in 1973, 50 years ago—the Advisory Committee's first national collection—and *The Maker's Eye* at the Crafts Council's headquarters in Waterloo Place, in 1981. With apologies to Philip Larkin, I have to admit that 1973, that *annus mirabilis*, was rather late for me—I'd just started as a part-time tutor at the RCA—and the twin experiences of the College and the exhibition helped me to understand the crafts as a truly *contemporary* practice; to understand things which were made by *living* craftspeople, young craftspeople, rather than historical figures.

> '1973.
> Which was rather late for me.
> Sometime between *The Craftsman's Art*
> and the launch of the magazine…'

That's *Crafts* magazine, launched during the exhibition, so also 50 years old this year—and we're delighted that Marigold, its first editor, and John Hawkins, and Martina, its editor during the golden age, are all with us this afternoon.

Because it was in 1973, as Victor later put it, that the CAC first acquired its distinctive character, and began to generate a new confidence in the contemporary crafts, *the crafts of today in today's context*; the sense of a bright future rather than that of a nostalgic antiques arcadia. The CAC moved from the Haymarket (under the aegis of the Design Council) to Waterloo Place in that same year. The exhibition and the magazine represented the twin peaks of Victor's policy, just two years after he was first appointed when he'd only just assembled his small team around him: going out to the public on behalf of different generations of the crafts community—the exhibition; the demonstration and the makers tours—Cherry, who is here, was head of Regional Services from the mid-1970s—and working with the crafts community to support, inspire, debate, publicise and refresh it—the bimonthly magazine with its high editorial and production values; the setting-up grants for up-and-coming makers and bursaries for established ones. Plus starting to form a permanent craft collection from work commissioned for this exhibition, and an Index with a reference section for potential sponsors, collectors and connoisseurs. The Craft Shop at the V&A, in partnership with the British Crafts

Centre, opened the following year in August 1974. And all this in the era before cellphones, personal computers and social media; before 'lifestyle' pages in the newspapers, craft throwdowns on television and research assessment in universities; before art schools *became* universities; even VAT wasn't invented yet when Victor first started. Imagine that!

Among the 507 objects by 265 makers, *The Craftsman's Art* exhibition did include traditional rural crafts—I can just about remember a shepherd's crook was there, and some sheaves of barley rather improbably wafted in a wave motion by a hidden fan—and the Duke of Edinburgh was presented with a specially bound copy of *The Lord of the Rings* by Professor J.R.R. Tolkien himself. So old hobbits died hard. But it was the weaving of Ann Sutton and the workmanship in wood of David Pye; the vessels of Hans Coper and Lucie Rie; Michael Rowe's silver chest of drawers and Catherine Mannheim's necklace; it was these which stayed in my mind—partly because I would soon get to know most of these makers at the RCA.

Someone at the private view of *The Craftsman's Art* was famously overheard to mutter 'William Morris? Wasn't he that angry old fellow with muesli in his beard?' (apologies to all those names inscribed on the AWG Honours Board over there—but things were definitely on the move in 1973; and the ethical, homespun approach to the crafts was being seriously questioned).

That unfortunate remark about Morris—this was the printable version!—is a reminder that the 1970s and early 1980s were a period of unusually strong debate about that contested word 'crafts', and in particular about what exactly was meant by the term 'artist-craftspeople'—a debate which involved various shades of opinionatedness and which in those days took place without anonymity: in person, in signed articles, and occasionally in the papers. I can personally recall heated discussions on the V&A's Advisory Council, and later on its Trustees, with Terence Conran flying the flag for industrial design rather than the crafts—why wasn't there a *design* shop at the V&A, he said; wasn't industrial design what the V&A was founded for? In the *Crafts Conferences for Teachers*—another of Victor's innovations—there was sometimes angry debate about the importance of making versus problem-solving on paper in the Design and Technology curriculum. There was discussion between Mick Casson and other potters—and collectors—in meetings of the Crafts Study Centre in Bath about where the centre of gravity lay and where the edges—and why wasn't the Crafts Council supporting the Bernard Leach tradition, and quality tableware, rather than spending money on the more conceptual end of the crafts spectrum? Why did everyone, like Cinderella, want to go to the Ball, when there was so much work still to do in the kitchen? On the Crafts Council itself, there was the vexed question of whether or not it should have responsibility for the conservation and restoration of objects and buildings—which the government wanted, and which clearly wasn't working. And at the College, there was the question of whether the word 'crafts' should be abandoned from the Prospectus altogether—in favour of 'the applied arts', or, some dared to suggest, 'the decorative arts'. The thesis by Helen Snowdon—later to become Mrs Frayling—on *Craftsmanship in the Machine Environment* (1977–79) helpfully interviewed a lot of the participants in these debates, which are transcribed for the record—to go with the Crafts Council's own 'First Decade' research project. I can clearly remember all these discussions—and sometimes confrontations.

The point is that through it all, through all the noise, the heat and the light, Victor—dapper in his pale grey suits and tastefully patterned ties; impish in his manner as he worked all sorts of rooms—Victor somehow managed to steer a firm and committed course, with cannon to the left of him and cannon to the right of him, and at the end of the valley the Thatcher government in its first term making more and more demands on the Council—and increasingly employing the newly fashionable word 'accountability' as a stick to beat with. The Arts Council,

meanwhile, looked with increasing anxiety at its successful young cousin, as it grappled with the early days of conceptual, video and performance arts—while art critics (all but two of them if I remember rightly) studiously ignored craft exhibitions as if they'd never happened. Through all of this, Victor worked those rooms—like Charles Dickens's landlady Mrs Todgers in *Martin Chuzzlewit*—a favourite quotation—'with affection beaming in one eye, and calculation shining out of the other'. It fits perfectly.

One of the reasons Victor was so very effective was because he was himself a practitioner—then as now a rare thing for the head of a national arts organisation—which must have helped him command respect from the world of makers. It's no accident that the invitation to this afternoon's event says 'Victor Margrie CBE—Ceramicist and first Director of the Crafts Council', in that order. Ceramicist… and first Director. He'd studied at Hornsey School of Art—specialising in ceramics and exhibition display; he'd taught as a visitor at art schools (as they were then called) all over the place; and in the mid-1950s he'd set up his own ceramics workshop—at the outset making stoneware, then delicately carved porcelain bowls (we'll be looking at one, later on). In 1956—that's just four years after leaving Hornsey: those were the days!—he was appointed Head of Ceramics at Harrow School of Art, where he was eventually to set up—with Mick Casson—an influential two-year diploma course in studio pottery, with a strong emphasis on practical skills—the making of tableware and, crucially, an emphasis on understanding how to sustain and run a small workshop. (We'll be hearing later—from Walter Keeler, who was a student on this course—about what it was like.)

So, when Victor was interviewed for the post of Secretary of the newly created Crafts Advisory Committee—in autumn 1971—with a glowing reference from Lucie Rie—he combined long experience of making, administrative and teaching skills, feet on the ground and that impish, persuasive, ambassadorial streak. Sir Paul Reilly, the then-Director of the Design Council, was on paper Chief Executive of the CAC for Victor's first seven years in post—as Victor put it, 'he kept a fatherly eye on things'—and in the closing pages of his autobiography *An Eye on Design*, Paul Reilly recalled interviewing Victor for the job: in 1975, the budget for the Committee was a mere £50,000 a year—£45,000 for England and Wales; £5,000 for Scotland—so the candidate would be expected somehow to find the most benefit for the least cost, partnering with the Regional Arts Associations at home and the British Council abroad, in order to 'take the show on the road'—something the Design Council didn't do any more. There was no coherent structure to the Committee, and as yet no firm policy, so the candidate would have to be unusually well-organised and possessed of a persuasive vision. The government wasn't even sure at that stage whether the CAC should merely be an advisory body, or whether it should be executive; a key decision which would have to be made, and which was bound to be expensive. The candidate had as far as possible to bring both the crafts community—and the collecting community—to bring those different worlds with him or her. Where this was concerned, Paul Reilly wrote 'Victor Margrie was a fine studio potter, whose work [would be] collected by the V&A', which was a great start. Lord Eccles, who as Minister was also on the appointments committee and who was a vocal champion/collector of the crafts, provided another great start, a potential key to the success of the enterprise. And the candidate would have to know his or her way around art schools—where a new generation of bright young graduates—in what was then called ceramics and glass, textiles, metalwork and jewellery, and furniture—was beginning to make its presence felt, as their equivalents had been doing on the West Coast of America. Many of the opportunities funded by the Committee, said Reilly, would be a bit like Christening gifts—given not for merit, yet, but in hope. For what we are *about* to receive. So the successful candidate would certainly need a thick skin, if controversial decisions went wrong as they were bound to do.

Well, Victor Margrie ticked all these boxes—concluded Paul Reilly—and turned out to be an inspired appointment, one of the few things (on a gloomy last page of his autobiography) that gave him real hope for the future, and one of the uncontroversial successes of his time at the Design Council.

A quick glance at some of the grants given to young craftspeople in those first few years reveals how farsighted those Christening gifts could be:

1971–72	Jacqui Poncelet
1972–73	Michael Rowe
1973–74	Glenys Barton
	Alison Britton
	Caroline Broadhead
	Brian Clarke
	Elizabeth Fritsch
	Susannah Heron
	David Poston
	Martin Smith

(Most of them here with us this afternoon.)

1973–74 turned out to be a bumper year—by which time the grant to the CAC had already risen six-fold, to £300,000.

And, where bursaries to more established craftspeople were concerned:

1977–78	Richard La Trobe-Bateman
	Ann Sutton
	Ashley Cartwright

Plus there were by then numerous grants for special projects, exhibitions, catalogues, films, workshops, demonstrations, conferences and training programmes.

The result, in the fullness of time, was nothing less than a redefinition of the popular image of the crafts—what's known in the sciences as 'a paradigm shift'. Here are a couple of lists—which some of you will have encountered before—compiled with a lot of help from Marigold, who first created a version of them in an internal discussion paper for the Crafts Council.

If you'd asked someone in the know for a definition of 'the crafts' in the 1960s or early 1970s, chances are the reply would have gone something like this:

> Crafts must be made of natural materials, preferably in beige;
> Crafts must be functional;
> Crafts must be the work of one person, perhaps featuring visible thumbprints or surface imperfections to prove it;
> Crafts must be the embodiment of a traditional design;
> Crafts must be in the 'artisan' rather than the 'fine art' tradition;
> Crafts must be rural products;
> Crafts must be untouched by fashion (which, it was automatically assumed, meant 'badly made fashion');
> Crafts must be easily understood;
> Crafts must last, like a brogue shoe or a fine tweed;
> The heavy-duty crafts must be made by men; the lighter-duty ones by women;
> Above all, the crafts must provide a *solace*, in a rapidly changing world of mass-production and mass-consumption—a residue of their ritual function.

If you'd asked fifteen years later, in the mid-1980s, the more up-to-date reply would probably have gone something like this:

> Crafts can be made with synthetic materials, in all colours of the rainbow;
> Crafts can be non-functional, and may even conform to the American Customs and Excise definition of 'art'—that it must be 'totally useless';
> Crafts can be made in limited production;
> Crafts can be designed by one person and made by another;
> Crafts can also provide designed prototypes for industry—or they can be exhibited in art galleries;
> Crafts can be made in towns, and usually are;
> Crafts can be high fashion, and *still* be well made, although they needn't be;
> Crafts can use ideas borrowed from the fine arts of painting and sculpture;
> Crafts can be transient, or can be lasting—it's up to them;
> Crafts can be small 'p' political—making statements about gender, misogyny ad politics—a tendency which has since been called 'crafticism';
> All crafts are open to all people of all genders—and often are;
> Above all, the role of the crafts is to provide a *challenge*, sometimes by means of an ironic statement about traditional notions of 'the crafts'; and often an intellectual conceptual as well as a visual challenge.

Perhaps one could add that crafts can shed the 'cultural cringe factor'—the upward cadence in the voice when talking about them—the 'deficit mindset'—because they have come to play a key part, an unrepentant part, in visual culture… for all to see.

To put this another way—here's a short extract from the Foreword to the catalogue of an exhibition 'Contemporary British Crafts' at the National Museums of Modern Art in Kyoto and Tokyo, organised by the Crafts Council and the British Council in Victor's last year at the Council. Thank you, Mary Restieaux, for drawing my attention to this:

> 'In the past, we have associated British craftwork with placidity, wholeness and closeness to nature achieved through a very long tradition of craftsmanship. But the creative activity in this field in Britain in the past 20 years has been closely associated with contemporary ideas of art and design, and this has resulted in an explosion of new artistic activity.
>
> The use of new materials and techniques in craftwork, to enhance artistic expression, has become a universal phenomenon, and this movement [in Britain] has often coincided with the dimming of ethnic [and ritual] traditions. But the works on display here, though they represent each craftsman's individual creativity, at the same time we can see that they also have something in common and that is a British sense of beauty.'

This craft renaissance—this shift in perception with its accompanying sense of excitement—owed so much to Victor Margrie—and to the team he chose to work closely with him: the late Ralph Turner (head of exhibitions 1974–89), Marigold, Martina, Cherry—at the Crafts Council. Eight years after *The Craftsman's Art*, the exhibition *The Maker's Eye*—this time in Waterloo Place—distilled this remarkable moment of transformation into an inclusive show which instead of relying on a single curator (as *The Craftsman's Art* had done) sensibly invited 14 craftspeople varying in age from 27 to 80 (Michael Cardew) to 'define the idea of craft in terms of his or her personal experience'. (Ralph Turner did the actual inviting.) It was a little too early in 1981 for a consensus to have emerged in the crafts community—if indeed that would have been a positive thing in such a dynamic area of activity. The veteran craftspeople tended to choose objects from the past, some from the Morris and Leach traditions. The younger generation tended to go for punk, postmodernism and more transgressive work dating from the early 1970s onwards.

Three years later, Victor resigned from the Council—to 'return to his own work' and contribute in writing to numerous exhibitions.

So… where this afternoon's event is concerned, warm thanks to the Art Workers' Guild and especially to its current Master Fred Baier for supplying this venue.

Warm thanks, too, to the organisers—especially Alison, Marigold, Cherry, Martina, Mary La Trobe-Bateman (who compiled the excellent slideshow), Mary Restieaux and Barley Roscoe. Respect.

Thank you all for coming this afternoon, braving the train strikes, Transport for London and diversions.

But above all thanks to Victor, the one person all of us have in common.

To adapt Shakespeare's *Dream*, and in a spirit of celebration:

> 'Give us your hands, if we be friends;
> For Victor doth restore amends.'

What happens next is that in a moment I'm going to invite Caroline Broadhead, Jacqui Poncelet and Richard La Trobe-Bateman to join me on the podium—as your panel. We'll be joined by Walter Keeler on Zoom—who unfortunately can't be with us in person, for family reasons.

Then, after the panel discussion, we'll open this up to everyone here—several people have asked to say something about Victor. And after *that*, we'll break for tea at 4.00pm.

I mentioned Victor's own work as a practitioner. This afternoon, we have in the room one of his white ceramic bowls, which Kez will show us; an improbable wrought-iron poker dating from 1976, which Cherry will show—and explain; a small teapot, made very early on, which Walter Keeler has provided and Marigold will show us; and one of Victor's early paintings—dating from just after his Hornsey days—which Rosemary has brought along and Jo will show us.

Thank you.