Obituary

Richard Edgcumbe (1951–2026)

A gifted curator who specialised in jewellery, Richard Edgcumbe pursued a successful career at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and notably published on gold chasing in the eighteenth century.

by **JUDY RUDOE**

RICHARD EDGCUMBE, WHO DIED aged seventy-four in London on 26th May, was the model of what a curator should be. As the first Genevieve Davies Senior Curator of jewellery at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (V&A), which he joined in 1985, he became an authority in the field. A first-rate scholar with clarity of written and spoken thought combined with connoisseurship in the traditional sense of profound observation and understanding of objects, his opinion was sought and respected internationally. He was adept at fundraising and nurturing donors over decades, and was renowned as a sensitive manager, mentor and troubleshooter.

Edgcumbe was born in London in 1951. After reading history at Cambridge, he took the diploma in art gallery and museum studies at the University of Manchester. He then went on to gain a DPhil at Oxford on gold chasing, the first non-fine art subject to be accepted, from 1974 to 1980. Thanks to a French government scholarship in 1989, Richard next spent several months in Paris, working with Daniel Alcouffe at the Musée du Louvre and at the Bibliothèque nationale, enabling him to work up his thesis as a book, *The Art of the Gold Chaser in Eighteenth-Century London*, which was published in 2000 and enjoyed glowing reviews. It was the first monograph on a then little-studied trade – modelling metal from the front with hammer and punches to create a relief design – which was used on watch cases, gold boxes and sword hilts at a time when London watchmaking had an international reputation. Richard learnt the art of chasing himself in order to fully understand it. By studying a multitude of documents ranging from rate books to insurance records, he revealed the lives and work of the chasers who commanded such high respect from their contemporaries that they began to sign their work. He made an esoteric subject both accessible and compelling. The same rigour permeates all his writing. For the V&A's *Rococo: Art and Design in Hogarth's England* exhibition in 1984, he contributed the sections on chasing and enamel painting to the catalogue. They were entirely his own concept and confirmed the centrality of the artists involved to the cultural life of London.

Richard began his museum career as an assistant curator at Peterborough Museum and Art Gallery from 1982 to 1984; he went on to become the registrar at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, until March 1985, when he joined the V&A, to which he devoted the rest of his career, up to his retirement in July 2021. In 1987 he encouraged the V&A's purchase of a rare French illuminated manuscript of 1839–42 made for a supporter of the deposed Bourbon monarchy with elaborate gem-set gilded covers by the Paris jewellery house of Mellerio. His triumph at the museum was the William and Judith Bollinger Jewellery Gallery. This was completely redesigned in 2004–08, its first renewal since the late 1970s. He secured its funding and ensured its success with a new upper-level display and informative additions on the processes of making jewellery. He was notably pleased to be able to add to the new displays the Castellani micromosaic pendant (Fig.1), as part of a magnificent group of jewels by Castellani and Giuliano initially lent and later given by the American Friends of the V&A through the generosity of Judith H. Siegel. The micromosaic with Christ blessing was inspired by the twelfth-century mosaic in the apse of S. Clemente, Rome; the recreation of medieval mosaic in miniature was an important part of Castellani's œuvre that the V&A could not up until then represent. In 2014 the magnificent portrait of the Marchioness of Londonderry bedecked in jewels for the coronation of William IV in 1821 was lent through the generosity of the Bollinger family and displayed at the entrance to the gallery. By the time the gallery underwent a subsequent refurbishment in 2019 the Bollingers had presented Queen Victoria's sapphire and diamond coronet of 1840. A further tribute to Richard in the year of his retirement was the anonymous loan of a copy of the 1842 portrait of Victoria by Franz Xaver Winterhalter in which she wears the coronet. The painting has now been offered as a donation in his memory. Richard wrote a first article on the coronet in 2022. Not content with leaving any stone unturned, he pursued information about its commission in the Royal Archives, Windsor, confirming that it was supplied by Kitching & Abud, to whom until then it could only be attributed, while demonstrating the intricacies of the London jewellery trade from first-hand evidence. This research was the basis of his final article, published in early 2026, just months before his death.



1. Pendant, by Castellani. c.1855. Enamelled gold with coloured glass micromosaic, 8.2 by 5.7 by 1.4 cm. (Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

With dogged perseverance Richard advanced the provenance of the Drake Jewel, one of the V&A's most famous Elizabethan jewels, given by Elizabeth I to Sir Francis Drake in commemoration of his role in the defeat of the Spanish Armada, tracing its descent within the Drake family up to 1718. Much of his research and writing was added to the V&A's online database records.

Richard's expertise extended far beyond the V&A, however. He served as expert advisor on three Arts Council England committees that secured objects for the nation. He was a shrewd negotiator in all of them. For the Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art he reported on numerous cases, ensuring that as many objects as possible remained in the United Kingdom thanks to his masterly arguments, which were simply irrefutable, as they had to be to convince a demanding Committee. The summaries published in the Committee's Annual Report give only a glimpse of their brilliance. He served the same role with cases that came up under such initiatives as Acceptance in Lieu (AIL) and the Cultural Gifts Scheme (CGS). Some of these objects ended up in the V&A, such as the imposing Manchester tiara, made by Cartier, Paris, in 1903 for Consuelo, Dowager Duchess of Manchester, or the historic Castlereagh inkstand, made from the gold of melted-down snuff boxes, presented by the sovereigns of Europe to Viscount Castlereagh as Foreign Secretary on signing the treaties of 1814 and 1815 (both AIL), or the ravishing gold boxes from the collection of Kenneth Snowman, given by his son Nicholas in 2017 (CGS).

Richard served on the council of the Society of Jewellery Historians from 1985 until March 2026 and was its president from 2022 to 2024. He took an active part in running the society with tact, firmness and thought for others, especially in succession planning. He would secure the right person with his quiet yet irresistible powers of persuasion. He was also a member of the Furnishings Committee of the Church Building Council, for which he advised on the repair and identification of silver. He was made a freeman of the Goldsmiths' Company in 1990, becoming a liveryman in 2009, and served on its Collections Committee. In 2017 he received the company's Leopard Award for his support of jewellery in the arts.

Throughout his career, Richard encouraged younger colleagues, many of whom owe their success to him. He engaged with contemporary artists and students alike, and looked after volunteers, inspiring long and fruitful service from them. If an administrative task in his department needed doing, he did it, working on Saturdays and even Sunday afternoons, when he was invariably at his desk. His long hours were legendary. If he thought senior management was taking the wrong decisions, he would make his views known with impeccable reasoning. His dedication to the V&A, the attention he gave to public enquiries and his regular checking of the displays, especially the lighting, took much of the time that he might otherwise have spent on writing. He was in addition a diligent and helpful peer reviewer who improved numerous publications; his own published output was small but outstanding.

In all this, he remained the kindest, most modest and self-effacing of people, with a dry sense of humour that could be excruciatingly funny. A rare instance of him recorded on film survives: a short video on the V&A website about the sapphire coronet in which he demonstrates his perceptive eye, his eloquence and his ability to captivate his audience. As a colleague from abroad has put it, he was without pretension despite knowing his subject so well. He would often begin a conversation by saying, 'Of course, you know far more about this than I do', and then proceed to give a stream of information that was completely new to his interlocutor.

Richard was distantly related to Joshua Reynolds (1723–92), whose silk suit, woven with a 'faux ermine' effect, had been passed down in his family, in superb condition. Richard never spoke about it and quietly gave it to the V&A in 2021. In perhaps the most telling instance of his total lack of any desire for attention, the V&A's online catalogue entry notes that the suit was given in memory of John and Teryll Edgcumbe (his parents) – Richard's name as donor does not appear at all.

Richard is survived by his wife, Irena Czerniawska-Edgcumbe, his son Edward and his granddaughter Jean.

AMONG THIS MONTH'S CONTRIBUTORS

Lucile Beck is a research director at the Laboratoire de mesure du carbone 14.

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