



'When is a gun a gun?'

Hannah Kauffman, Deputy Registrar, V&A

On 6 May 2013, Texan law student Cody Wilson fired the world's first 3D-printed firearm, The Liberator. The invention of this so-called 'wiki weapon' triggered intense moral and political debate, not only about gun ownership, but also around new manufacturing technologies and the unregulated sharing of designs online. As part of the Museum's 'rapid response' collecting policy, the V&A immediately began exploring how to obtain a version of the gun. During the complex process of importing the gun from the US, the legal hurdles became as important to the story as the object itself.

Project details:

- Cody Wilson was breaking arms export control laws for making firearms accessible to non-license holders
- The pistol made out of ABS plastic (Lego bricks material) requires a 20-hour printing process in 15 individual pieces plus a standard metal nail for firing pin
- The pistol is single-use as the barrel cannot withstand the impact and is destroyed once a bullet is fired
- Legislation surrounding 3D guns wasn't clear as there are no predecessors

Collecting

- The Museum is interested in provenance and wanted to acquire something that had come from Wilson
- V&A competed against the National Rifle Association to acquire a set that documents the evolution of the Liberator
 - the first fired prototype
 - an unassembled set
 - a freshly printed and assembled version
 - magazines
 - CAD drawings that are still unlawful to release
- The gun was acquired with support from the Design Fund to Benefit the V&A with the condition that the object had to be on display in mid September; this only allowed for a 2-month lead-up

Shipping

The ex/import of the US fabricated guns took a year for final approval due to discrepancies between US and UK definition of a weapon.

- Export from the US
 - V&A needed to be declared as known shipper – entered into appeals process
 - The Liberator is classified as a Title II Weapon under the United State's National Firearms Act (NFA) which requires:
 - An export license from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF)
 - Reassurance that the V&A wouldn't re-sell or re-export the objects
- Import into UK
 - Several authorities were involved:
 - HMRC, NIRU
 - Department for Business & Innovation – customary import license for firearms from outside of the EU
 - London proof house – the assembled gun comes under Section 5 of the Firearms Act, which makes the Gun Barrel Proof Act applicable. It

requires the testing of mechanism with a charge of ammunition more powerful than the intended gun to ensure that it can house the pressure

- Reassurance had to be given that:
 - The object was for study and display purposes only
 - No third party transfer would be permissible

Exhibition

- Issue 1: Health and safety
 - Solution:
 - V&A already has a license to display firearms due to other objects in the collection
 - It is to be unpacked by a safety specialist and
 - displayed in cases under thick glazing

Transfer & Fabrication

The delays in shipping the US fabricated objects meant that they could not be displayed in time for the September show so a UK 3D printed version was fabricated

- Issue 1: The transfer of the design file is considered as export under the International Traffic in Arms Regulations
 - Solution:
 - UK based 3D printing company Digits2Widgets downloaded a copy of the design during the two days that the file was in the public domain
- Issue 2: Ethical and legal issues involved in weapon fabrication
 - Solution:
 - Care is taken to render the printed gun useless:
 - Material: some components in plastic, the frame, grip and barrel in plaster
 - Dimensions were changed so that parts couldn't be assembled into a gun

Loans

- The Digits2Wigits plastic/plaster version enabled loans to many countries as an object
 - for study purposes
 - not a weapon
 - HS Code used: Fine Art Sculpture
 - within Free Circulation for European loans as it is fabricated within the EU
- Loans include:
 - Jan 2016 - "This Time Tomorrow", World Economic Forum, Davos, Switzerland
 - Mar 2017 - "Printing the World", Centre Pompidou, Paris, France
 - Dec 2017 - "Values of Design", V&A Gallery, Shekou Design Society, Shenzhen, China