

*After a preliminary chat...*

There are a million and one perceptions that I have because I was there and lived through it. The renaissance of the crafts movement (from the forties and fifties and then the nineteen sixties) had a revival in the seventies. There were the pent-up wishes people had to progress what they saw to be their professional life in the crafts and suddenly there was a light at the end of the tunnel. Suddenly with the election of the Whitlam Federal Government they were in an era where there was a wave of optimism.

Those who came to the fore in education reflected the people who came to Australia after the war with formal qualifications. They could take a lead in what was happening in the professional crafts movement. Of course there was a huge bulge of amateurs (we called that the 'big bulge') who worked from a different premise. They were starting out as hobbyists really, but of those, there were a high proportion capable of more. David Throsby (Professor of Economics, Macquarie University, engaged by Australia Council) began to put some figures underneath the theories. This is the early seventies and apart from ceramics and industrial textiles, there was little to non-existent formal education for crafts. Certainly there was none for glass (outside training for the industrial areas and there were people who came out of that industrial, scientific side of things – to become really important in the scheme of things). At that time it was like having a clean slate.

There were a lot of people who had been working in their own way. They were known to each other, but not generally known. When the Crafts Council started in 1972 the first thing to do was to put together a lot of people's memories as to who was doing what across Australia.

The Narek Gallery with Betty Beaver in Canberra and the Aladdin Gallery with Margaret Eady and Tom Bolster in Rushcutters Bay (Stephen Skillitzi had a one-person show there in the nineteen seventies), Algate in South Australia – they stood out like beacons. It was the Crafts Council's responsibility to bring all into a corporate memory and to build up a history of contemporary crafts in Australia, because there wasn't any solid documentation.

*Was the craft of that time concerned with the aesthetically pleasing object?*

Absolutely. A lot of people had come from Europe and Scandinavia and it was second nature for them to have beautifully designed chairs (not necessarily expensive ones). It was a surprise to furniture makers that they could stop making chairs based on famous English designs and actually design and make. There was an audience for it. There were a lot of architects who got involved in the nascent craft movement because, not only were they interested in good original design, but they also had a desire to do it themselves.

The well-established large organizations – the *Hand Weavers and Spinners Guild* and the *Embroiders Guild* were (to a major degree) based on the premise that you must have the technique. The technique was all-important. If you didn't have the technique, if you didn't know the terms and could use them in your work, then you might as well forget about it. The Europeans probably had exposure to craftspeople as part of their education, whereas in Australia if you were doing 'crafts' at school you were probably thought 'a bit thick'. It was not seen as serious.

When it comes to seeing how it all got off the ground, the people who had come together in the sixties all recognised they loved Marimekko fabrics and Scandinavian design. Any formal training most got outside Australia, but a lot had been so motivated they had learned themselves. They brought books. They took themselves off on short courses. They built up, by trial and error quite often, an expertise in their own area. Then like gravitated towards like.

When it got to the seventies what I was hearing them saying was, “We don’t want to separate ourselves from the ‘Big Bulge’” (they didn’t call it that until later). They saw the ‘Big Bulge’ as absolutely essential to what you call the ‘critical mass’. They always recognised in the hierarchy of the arts, there were those who were going to be at the top (the painters and sculptors). This was a spectrum from the professional painter (formally trained or not) who was one step ahead in access to the market. Painting galleries were everywhere. In the mind of the general public if you were an artist you were a painter. If you were a craftsperson (called craftsman in those days) then you were probably in the category the general public saw as ‘that’s what my grandmother does’. I’m ashamed to say it is not terribly different now days.

We set down at the very first meeting of the Crafts Council twenty-one (more or less) things we wanted to do. This was a wish list, and one wish was definitely to do with education. That was very important. Education was extremely important first for the individual person (a context in which to see their craft as a livelihood). If they were a school person who wanted to take their education further then our lobby had to push itself into the tertiary section. What we were trying to show was that as far as the crafts were concerned within the tertiary sector, you had to assume that the majority of people coming through our school system would be ill equipped to pick up whatever the tertiary system was going to give.

Also we wanted a vocabulary in art history that didn’t make the assumption that visual art history was only about painting and sculpture. This was lacking in the fine arts in institutions at that time. Therefore all the people who went on to become critics in journals and newspapers were largely ignorant and innocent of any sort of context in which they could place the works of those like Mona Hessing, Marea Gazzard or Les Blakebrough who stood up and were counted at the beginning.

Education was very important. The vocabulary was very important. That meant trying to establish organs that would actually get the information out to the general public. We wanted a journal. We wanted the opportunity for people to show their work in galleries, not in a craft show with ‘cork bricks and hessian’. We wanted to expunge that attitude of ‘my grandmother did it’ by presenting a really polished view of these works that were executed in the most professional way. We had to have that bridge that was going to say to the general public with this you are getting a whole lot of other things.

That also comes back to the interesting juxtaposition with architecture as a profession and the arts as a profession and the crossovers that occurred. Architects have no difficulty establishing their credentials (they are architects after all). That those people came with a credibility was very important. Ian Sprague, a famous Australian potter (an architect in the Bernard Leech tradition) established his own shop in Melbourne where he not only showed his own work. Articles that were too big for Craft Australia would be whipped into Architecture Australia. You got a reading audience there that would probably not pick up Craft Australia.

*There was an attempt to shift perceptions and create a culture?*

Absolutely! Also a great friend (with access) to all these people was Douglas Annand. He was a designer who was a household name and architects were inclined to commission him. He happened upon glass. Suddenly he wanted to use this medium in every possible way. It was absolutely fascinating for him. So at the beginning of all this [taps the early seventies craft report] he had completed a very big commission in a building in Sydney (a complete glass wall). It was always known as the Douglas Annand building. In 1974 (eighteen months after the Crafts Council began) the World Craft Council had a biennial international exhibition and conference. We were invited to take an exhibition of work to that conference in Canada. Glass was almost an unknown quantity then. Douglas Annand with a young designer John Reid produced the catalogue/book, which accompanied the exhibition.

We were involved in a revolution to change perceptions. That revolution was being carried out by a handful of people trying to shift that 'monument to tradition' in Canberra represented by people like Sir William Dargie [Commonwealth Art Advisory Board]. Talk about Australian culture in Canberra those days and eyes would glaze over. We wrote and sent out lots of letters to craft contacts and back came all these works. Ken Hood and Dennis Colsey made selections and that was the exhibition (which was shown at the AGNSW before it went to Canada).

Then Gough Whitlam came in and said here's fourteen million dollars Australia Council. That was an enormous increase from the usual four million.

*With this eruption of support, studio glass emerged in Australia at the right time?*

Yes. Dick Richards (at that time a curator at the South Australian Art Gallery and a close friend of the then Premier, Don Dunstan) had always desired to see manufactured glassware in Australian made by Australians. He got Don Dunstan's ear saying this was an opportunity to get in on this revolution. He looked across the board and saw glass was nowhere in existence and said, "establish the first glass workshop in Australia". He said this workshop will make huge returns because everybody will be buying it. This idea became the *JamFactory* in Adelaide.

It was almost axiomatic that the people making the decisions would go to the very top (to talk to the best craftspeople) and at that level those people were really more interested in individual design than in replicating a million and one copies. So who did they appoint to lead the hot glass workshop at the *JamFactory*? – Sam Herman. They wanted Sam Herman to teach people how to produce factory production pieces!

*Glass was surfing a wave?*

It was. So then back to that thing of how to show people what we're talking about? Dick Richards and Ken Hood (a member of the first Crafts Board) have in their minds an understanding of what this is all about – so bring in an exhibition. The first exhibition to come was American. At that stage the American Crafts Council had an amazing gallery in New York (Museum of Contemporary Crafts with Paul Smith as the Director). The gallery that is there now (Museum of Art and Design) is its end point. Ken Hood goes over and says to Paul Smith, "What we need is a representative exhibition of glass". When we were coming home from the Canadian exhibition, Mary White, myself

and Ken Hood went off to this warehouse and saw an array of marvellous glass works (that was when the Dale Chilhuly's pieces were little lamp worked figures). There was another famous exhibition that came out here later called International Directions in Glass Art (curated by Michael Essen and Robert Bell) that actually allowed people the opportunity to understand the varieties of hot and cold glass. (People then thought glass meant stained glass.)

Because there was so little money in the beginning, our strength was in networking. I started going to the World Craft Council meetings (it was quite remarkable who you might sit beside) in 1974. My last one was 1988. That's how Klaus Moje came to Australia. Robert Bell (Senior curator NGA) as a young designer over in Western Australia use to save up his pennies and as an individual go off to these meetings wherever they were. Helen Aitken-Kuhnen (workshop Bilk) met her husband Johannes Kuhnen (now running the Jewellery school at Canberra School of Art) at the 1980 meeting in Austria.

*This was an injection of European craft tradition?*

That's right. The World Crafts Council was a marvellous way to get international information. *Form Function Finland*, the German Craft magazine, the *American Craft* magazine (all examples of journals we read then). This was the only way to exchange information until we at the Crafts Council of Australia made application to the Crafts Board of the Australia Council and said we would like to bring four people a year from Europe or America to Australia to undertake workshops, lectures, do a high profile tour of the whole of Australia – you couldn't just limit it to Tasmania. At this time a lot of very important people came out and gave workshops. They became catalysts for all sorts of things happening. The woodcrafts in Australia grew because of bringing out John Makepeace. Peter Collingwood, a very famous weaver, came out from England. Richard Marquis from the USA followed. We just wrote and said we can offer you an airfare, accommodation for one month in Australia in which you are going to travel around giving workshops, public lectures and generally be a flag carrier. We were able to hang a lot of things on that.

There was definitely a change. It covers all those things we've been talking about – exhibitions, people of credibility criticising work they have seen around, people coming into the education system, who were valued as senior lecturers, professors and who brought other people in as part-time teachers. I think of somebody like Jenny Zimmer (her husband Klaus Zimmer was an established stained glass artist). This was when Leonard French had done the ceiling in the National Gallery of Victoria. This was so exciting and the National Gallery of Victoria appeared to be famous for nothing else. There was a lot of 'me-tooism' going on after that. Churches were suddenly having stained glass walls of chunks of coloured glass and the big windows in the National Library in Canberra. It was an explosion of interest in stained glass. Whereas Klaus Zimmer was retiring in nature, Jenny was in the public press (unusual). She started teaching in the tertiary system and was brought in to give her professional view of the aesthetics of what she was seeing, and she wrote about it.

That was giving it a language. There was a lot of opportunity to for people to crit. on people's work, but we discovered in *Craft Australia* (our journal) that if you asked a practitioner, to review an exhibition and write about it, they would be loath to say anything nasty, or even slightly critical, because this was a very small population of people and they had to live in that small population. That's why bringing in an outsider

was much easier to do. They you could say what they thought. Then people would be able to comment, because there was no skin off anybody's nose and everybody was learning from the experience.

In a funny way (in my opinion) what it did however, was put a 'chip-on-the-shoulder', a "hump! We can do that". A reason to try harder, but also to ask, why aren't I being given the opportunity to do that – but then if given the opportunity, they wouldn't take it. Also there was the whole thing about pricing. Pricing became a real problem because I can actually remember the first output of the JamFactory. That was production work (meant as an example of a handmade ceramic mug vs. a plastic cup) and it was only one step beyond mass-produced. You could say, here's a 'Sam Herman piece' (goodness knows how much that would sell for) and then you have Sam Herman making these glasses, an edition of Sam Herman's work, but they were viewed absolutely differently. Nobody thought enough how that would effect people's perception.

Eva Pachuka (the fibre artist about to be shown at the National Gallery next week) came from Poland and after a long story went to live in Tasmania. Eva had a horror of seeing young boys and girls with not enough to do. That made her think what we should do is set up a cottage industry and also try to get people understand the beauty of owning a handmade thing. She thought this would go hand-in-hand because, if they were intimately involved in a cottage industry, they would themselves understand what went into producing the works. Typically she just did it. She did it because she came from a Polish background where this was all second nature to her.

The people in Tasmania with whom she was dealing in trying to set this up were absolutely suspicious of her motives. They couldn't believe that what she was trying to do was completely altruistic. Her thing was, that until the general audience in Australia was surrounded by things beautifully designed and well made, they would never make that financial commitment to own. They would never see there was a difference between the way 'grandmother does it as a hobby' and these crafts.

This was about growing aesthetic perception. The idea of the general public owning that ethos so to speak, to see that Australia wasn't all about sport and mateship and beer and 'gung-ho-ness'. That it is about the beauty of the world around us, including the made objects.

It's really interesting, when Sebastian Smee was the critic on the Australian and *Transformations* was a very big exhibition at the National Gallery (three or four years ago), he reviewed it in the most scathing and outrageous manner saying the whole thing was tasteless. I got really angry. When you think a lot of readers only read John McDonald and Sebastian Smee (up until 2008). (Actually John McDonald thought the exhibition was marvellous and gave it two large pages of fulsome praise.) I wrote Sebastian Smee saying that it seemed to me that he had no context in which to make these judgements. "You personally seemed to have been entirely out of your comfort zone, so what you have done is rather irrelevantly written an essay on taste, which has nothing to do with this exhibition".

He was sent signals to the general reader that are very damaging in the long term. In my sense, it was his responsibility to equip himself to make a judgement that was relevant. In his defence he actually wrote back saying I was quite right, he was out of his depth. I wrote back saying why don't you read [this whole list of things] so you will

understand the context in which this work has appeared and the international context in which the Australian work can be viewed.

That's another whole area. Australia suddenly burst onto the international scene as if it had been a closed shop. Nobody had any perception that anything worthwhile was happening down here (back in the seventies and the eighties). Glass in particular (in practical terms because ceramics had become so expensive for collectors in the United States, in England and Europe) in the nineteen eighties when it started to come forward, the difference between the price of ceramics and the price of glass was just chalk and cheese. You could collect a lot of glass if you were just beginning as a collector whereas the major ceramicists were way out of your price range. I bought a whole lot of American collectors (45) out here in 1992. The Renwick collectors brought glass here because they had seen it in the journals. They had seen it at the major international shows (that's a whole other area). They were wealthy enough to take themselves to all these places and buy the work on the spot. Not only was the Australian work exciting and extraordinarily interesting, but the price was within the range of those who wanted to build up collections from nothing in a hurry. What has happened from 2007 or 2006 is that ceramics has reached a plateau and glass has just gone up in price to the extent that the opportunity for people to buy and collect in glass is miles less than it ever was.

If you look at Australia as a case in point, when Klaus Moje came to Australia in the nineteen eighties (that was when glass was established in Canberra [also mentions Adelaide and Sydney which were already operating]) suddenly you had an intake of young artists who could go into the tertiary system and come out with a name. You had a whole raft of people, some of who already had experience – Giles Bettison and Richard Whiteley. (This is long after Stephen Skillitzi. Stephen Skillitzi is an island all by himself. With people like Maureen [Cahill] and Cedar Prest – they're a whole other study). The people who come out after the nineteen eighties have taken off, have the opportunity to work under a Klaus, or whatever. The exhibition at Sabbia at the moment is Maureen Williams (fantastic works). There were a whole lot of people there the other night – Richard Whiteley, Clare Belfrage made the speech, a lot of people from Canberra. We were talking about prices and they were actually decrying the fact that now it is very difficult to sell, whereas once you just had to produce the work and (claps her hands) it went before you knew what had happened. Now the Australians actually match the prices that were happening in America.

When the Renwick group came in 1992 those American buyers were used to paying certain prices in America. They weren't offering an unreasonable price, but some Australians had no perception about how much they should be charging and there wasn't a culture of actually talking about it here. Also there wasn't a culture of learning, that is, I'm going to explain to you what I'm doing. There was more a culture of 'the galleries are so important', 'will I ever get an exhibition at a major gallery?' The individual artists (this is still to a certain extent the case) would not think to negotiate with the gallery director about the commission %. They would ask, "What do you think I should charge for it?" The idea of them having a good discussion about how they are going to price their work is a new development.

It is very interesting. I had someone staying here who was having an exhibition at Rex Irwin and Rex Irwin (being in the fine art market, use to pricing and whatnot) is the most cooperative and collaborative person, not frightening at all. This person was diffident about saying, "I think those prices are a bit high". Then what happened when

the work all sold without a backward glance the exhibition becomes the benchmark and some of the peers look across and say, if 'X' is making that, then my work has got to be worth this. Quite often it jumps up without the opportunity for solid discussion.

In today's context if somebody like Klaus (now Klaus has a huge amount of experience behind him and is internationally very well known) sets high prices, people come out of his school and look at Klaus's work and think, well if he is charging that, it must be the benchmark. That skewed stuff a lot. You are talking about chalk and cheese. You have to build up your credibility to be in that top echelon. The contemporary crafts movement isn't sophisticated enough to have a comfortable gallery/artist relationship. When you see people like Stuart Pervis dealing with Arthur Boyd for years and years, with a very diffident Arthur Boyd being bolstered by Stuart Pervis, that's a really nice relationship.

In the days when Macquarie Galleries was one of the few mainstream visual arts galleries showing the work of potters and glass artists and whatnot, there was a terror that if the artist spoke up and did something wrong (or didn't sell well enough) that they would lose their place in the sun – and so it proved actually. Sometimes the gallery wanted to take a commission that the artist thought was unreasonable, I can remember on a number of occasions saying, the director is a very reasonable person, you just need to say what you think. They would say, that's all very well for you, but I wouldn't dream of saying those things. At the opening the other night, Clare Belfrage said something that I've said often at exhibitions, which is that the exhibiting time is an incredibly fragile, nervous making time for the artist and the audience has to react to that sympathetically by giving them feedback by buying the work, or actually talking to the artist.

In Australia our audiences are only starting to get more comfortable doing that. The artists themselves are getting to be more comfortable in speaking. I've actually been to exhibitions where there has been a mixture of very well established and not so well established. The very well established because they feel comfortable in their own skin they can stand up and talk about their work. The young and not so young ones coming out of the art schools at the moment are not encouraged to have that dialogue and therefore they mumble something that is inexplicably unilluminating – or they just won't speak at all.

*How important are words around a work – be they by artist, gallery director or critic?*

Absolutely essential. The maker, the artist needs feedback from people they see as objective, as having authority, that have the organ to take it beyond a private conversation. The artist is in an isolated position. In art school there is the rough and tumble of student on student, teacher on student and then the wider body at student exhibitions. Then you take them out of that and put them in the real situation of their studio – that is their livelihood and every contact they make is really important and has to push them onto further steps.

*So the artist needs to be told the story, not just the audience?*

Absolutely. They have to feel comfortable, to understand the reason for making something which is fairly inexplicable in real terms. The general audience asks, "Is that a vase, will I put a flower in there?" They look for a purpose because that is the natural thing to do.