

Craft Ink series

Meeting the outside eye: exhibitions, dialogues and training in Australia

Contemporary craft practice in Australia has been constantly refreshed and enriched by the ideas, skills and experiences of makers from all corners of the globe. Here, **Robert Bell** traces some of the history of this exchange and considers the impact of particular exhibitions and individuals on the local scene.

From their beginnings, Australia's settler cultures depended on the application of immigrant craft skills to give shape to all aspects of their material needs. Architects, builders, furniture-makers, jewellers, metalsmiths, potters, printers and textile-makers arrived to transform imported and Indigenous materials into objects that reflected the world left behind, while giving form to the materials of the environment and the aspirations of the society opening up before them. The possession of craft skills, while not a guarantee of success, was a valuable asset for an immigrant, and many capitalised on this by adapting their methods and stylistic repertoire to exploit the resources and reflect the aspirations of the societies that they were joining.

Of South Australia's many nineteenth-century German immigrant silversmiths, Johann Heinrich Steiner (in Australia from 1858 to 1884) and Jochim M. Wendt (arrived in Australia in 1854), were among the first to create the elaborate decorative silver objects with Australian floral and faunal motifs to celebrate the achievements of colonists. Arriving in Victoria in 1888, another German immigrant, the Prussian woodcarver, Robert Prenzel, found success for his furniture, with its Art Nouveau decoration of Australian flora and fauna corresponding with the prevailing nationalist mood of Federation. His influence in prosperous Melbourne was concurrent with that of the British artist and educator, James W. R. Linton, in Perth. Linton had arrived in Western Australia in 1896, and introduced the style of the British Arts and Crafts Movement to a burgeoning, goldrush-enriched Perth, applying it to motifs of the state's native wildflowers and woods on numerous decorative and functional objects.

Jump forward to the twentieth century, and we see more orchestrated waves of influence from abroad impacting on the local production of objects: in 'moderne' styles from the 1920s, organic and reductive modernism from the late 1940s, optimistic futurism and pop design from the 1960s, the crafts revival of the 1970s and on through the revivalism and anti-design postmodernism and green design movements of the 1980s and 1990s, to the idealism of twenty-first century's goals of global and sustainable design. Through the impact of media reports, exhibitions, importers and visiting designers and artists into Australia, and a flow of Australian designers and craft practitioners encountering these movements and new styles while abroad, the shape of local production has increased its diversity and now challenges stereotypes of 'Australian-ness'.

While overseas influences on architecture and industrial, interior, product, graphic, fashion and performance design can be identified and clearly seen in those aspects of our material culture, the nature of such influences on studio craft production is more complex and less easily defined.¹ Perhaps analogous with the individualism that characterises studio craft practice, the influence from abroad has often come through personal connections and networks. As rich and personally rewarding as these may have been, their impact on a wider constituency has also defined the

success of the crafts revival of the past 40 years. National, state and regional funding bodies, arts councils, craft organisations and art and design schools showed that, through grants and residencies, they could co-opt artists – visiting with exhibitions, on lecture tours, doing workshops or just passing through the region – into larger programs of support and promotion for the crafts. The initial expense of travelling to Australia has often worked to the advantage of all concerned: the visiting artist, writer, lecturer or educator, in extending a visit to several centres at little extra cost; local organisations, in maximising the impact of these necessarily short visits; and local artists and craft sector professionals, in making rich and longstanding personal networks with visitors, often resulting in exchange and return visits.

Exhibitions of contemporary work from abroad, whether touring or organised in this country by state and regional galleries or funding bodies such as the Australia Council, have been a point of first contact with new ideas for practitioners and the wider public. Examining Australian artists' statements about contemporary craft exhibitions from abroad that impacted on their practice, we can construct an (incomplete) list of such exhibitions of the past 30 years to reveal a diverse range of subjects: *Adventure in Swedish Glass* (1975); *Magdalena Abakanowicz: Soft forms and soft structures* (textiles, 1976); *Sodeisha: Avant-garde Japanese ceramics* (1979); *Peter and Ritzi Jacobi* (textiles, 1980); *Image and Idea* (British ceramics, 1980); *International Directions in Glass Art* (1982); *Hermann Jünger and Students* (jewellery, 1982); *International Miniature Textiles* (1981 and 1983); *Cross Currents* (jewellery, 1986); *Fabric and Form* (British textiles, 1984); *Contemporary European Jewellery from the Collection of the Schmuckmuseum Pforzheim* (1988); *Perth International Crafts Triennial: American figurative ceramics, Japanese fibreworks, European metal-jewellery and objects* (1989); *The Art of the Japanese Package* (1990); *Design Visions – Australian International Crafts Triennial: American metalwork, International directions in glass* (1992); *Italian Gold* (1995); *Nature as Object: Craft and design from Japan, Finland and Australia* (1998); *Chihuly: Masterworks in glass* (1999); *Design for Every Body* (Swedish design, 2000) and *Home Sweet Home* (British design, 2003).²

While public galleries initiated and bore the cost of these events, private sector commercial galleries showed relatively little work from overseas. This left the field open to promotional exhibitions of the work of prominent artists and designers associated with glass, furniture, jewellery, ceramic and textile companies with international marketing strategies (and budgets). That these companies are often Scandinavian indicates the continuing Australian aspiration to the design and manufacturing achievements of these Nordic nations.³

Being able to examine at close hand the work of influential artists was an important step for many Australian artists in their assessment of their own work and, for a number of them, it validated earlier choices they had made about the directions of their practice. From prior visits to artists abroad, some felt that an understanding that they had gained about works by their overseas colleagues gave them an opportunity to promote and discuss their works displayed in these exhibitions. As most of the exhibitions listed above also generated visits by associated artists and organisers, friendships were established or renewed at all levels and occasions, from public lectures, workshops and residencies to group excursions and private social events. As the curator and director of several of the exhibitions listed above, it was my brief to introduce the work of experienced overseas artists to Australian audiences, and to give them the opportunity to experience and evaluate Australian work in this international context. The networks resulting from these events now have lives of their own.⁴

Challenging ideas and views on the nature of craft practice in relation to the Australian environment also came through visits to Australia by commentators such as the British writers, Peter Fuller (in 1980) and Martina Margetts (in 1989). Each contributed to the growing Australian discourse on the changing definition of craft in cultural theory.⁵ Eminent practitioners came to Australia to speak at conferences for all craft practices, including the World Crafts Council Conference in Sydney in 1988, the recurrent conferences of Ausglass, the Jewellers' and Metalsmiths' Group of Australia, Fibre Forum and the National Ceramic Conference; and at recent events such as 'The Space Between' conference (on textiles, in Perth, 2004) and 'Designing Futures Forum' (on wood design and technology, in Perth, 2002).⁶ The networks formed as a result of these events, now greatly aided by wide access to electronic communication, have placed Australian practitioners into continuous and stimulating international dialogues about their own and their overseas colleagues' ideas, methods of working, promotional strategies and networks.

Individuals arrived in Australia for many reasons, mostly more complex and unplanned than straightforward immigration. Every field of Australian craft practice has felt the impact of the work and ideas of immigrants, some arriving to take up teaching positions, some staying on, or returning, from short residencies and others arriving with skills and the aspirations to apply them in the framework of a life and environment different to that they had left.

Tertiary education has provided many experienced craft practitioners from overseas with the opportunity to influence the development of craft training in extended periods of teaching or in permanent departmental positions. Among those whose students are themselves now leading practitioners are metalsmiths and jewellers, Helge Larsen (arrived from Denmark in 1961, taught at Sydney College of the Arts), Ragnar Hansen (arrived from Norway in 1972, taught at the Tasmanian State Institute of Technology and Canberra School of Art), Wolf Wennrich (arrived from Germany in 1953, taught at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology), Eugenie Keefer Bell (then Jeanne Keefer, arrived from the United States in 1981, taught jewellery and silversmithing at the University of Tasmania (TSIT) and Curtin University) and Johannes Kuhnen (arrived from Germany in 1981, taught at RMIT, now teaches at the ANU School of Art). Each introduced rigorous training methods and new approaches to design from European, Scandinavian and American perspectives and experiences, which re-shaped the field and the expectations of Australian metalworking and jewellery design.⁷

In ceramics, long-term teaching positions have been held by Les Blakebrough (arrived from England in 1948, taught at Sturt Workshops and the University of Tasmania School of Art),⁸ Alex Leckie (arrived from Scotland in 1955, taught at South Australian School of Art), Carl McConnell (arrived from the United States in 1948, taught at the Central Technical College, Brisbane), Mitsuo Shoji (arrived from Japan in 1978, teaches at Sydney College of the Arts), Gudrun Klix (arrived from the United States in 1981, taught at University of Tasmania School of Art, now teaches at Sydney College of the Arts) and Kevin White (arrived from Britain in 1985, teaches at RMIT University). While each brought strong European and Asian ceramic traditions to their teaching practice, their own work has developed an Australian accent in ways that they perhaps could not have predicted.⁹ Shoji, for instance, has said that the scale and diversity of narrative in his current work would not have been possible had he remained working within the traditions of the ceramic field in Japan.¹⁰

While Australia has a long history of glass production, the development of studio glass facilities resulted from the Crafts Board of the Australia Council programs to stimulate the field.¹¹ It invited Richard Marquis to work here, training a number of

artists.¹² In 1982, the Canberra School of Art inaugurated its Glass Workshop, headed by Klaus Moje (arrived from Germany in 1982, taught at CSA until 1992). Moje's leadership and his influence on a newer generation of Australian glass artists still resonates, as does that of his successor, Stephen Procter (arrived from Britain in 1992, taught at CSA until his death in 2001). Both linked their formidable international practices to the Australian context, and developed work with strong Australian themes. In Melbourne, Klaus Zimmer (arrived from Germany in 1952, taught at Caulfield Technical College, later the Chisholm Institute of Technology) brought his printmaker's sensibility to the production and aesthetic of architectural stained glass, while facilitating the exchange of ideas between European and Australian artists working in this medium. In Adelaide, Sam Herman (American, arrived from England in 1975, left in 1980) established the Glass Workshop at the Jam Factory, building its production facility and establishing a local market for its art glass. Stanislav Melis (arrived from Czechoslovakia in 1968, Head of Glass Workshop at the Jam Factory Craft Centre) followed him, bringing a strong European connection to the Centre.¹³

The adaptation of traditions and the importation of skills have characterised Australian textile arts since European settlement. With a wide practitioner base that quickly absorbed new techniques, the need for professional training and the development of critical theory for the field saw the establishment of training courses led by artists such as Jutta Feddersen (arrived from Germany in 1957, taught at the University of Newcastle), Valerie Kirk (arrived from Scotland in 1979, teaches at ANU School of Art), Jennifer Robertson (arrived from England in 1986, teaches at ANU School of Art), David Green (arrived from England in 1978, taught at RMIT and Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga) and Rinske Car-Driesens (arrived from The Netherlands in 1970, teaches at Edith Cowan University in Perth). Covering a wide range of textile and fibre art practices, each has brought a unique personal perspective and strong technical achievements to the field.

Design with wood and the intelligent exploitation of Australia's unique timbers links contemporary practice to the past and the future. In Hobart, Australia's first art school wood design course was given shape and direction by John Smith (arrived from England in 1970, teaches at the University of Tasmania School of Art). His Design in Wood course set a clear pathway for Tasmania's fine wood industry that made it a leader in creative resource use in Australia. George Ingham (arrived from England in 1982, taught at CSA until his death in 2001) established the CSA's Wood Design Workshop, and developed a disciplined program that has produced a new generation of designers at ease with the notion of production.

This brief overview of some of the formal influences on Australian craft practice from abroad should not obscure the parallel impact on local practice by individuals working outside formal education. Those who have received acclaim for their innovative work in Australia include ceramicists such as Diogenes Farri (Chile), Maria Teresa Kuczynska (Poland), Shunichi Inoue, Hiroe Swen and Shigeo Shiga (Japan), Won Seok Kim (Korea), Penny Smith (England), Eileen Keys (New Zealand), Ah Xian (China), Derek Smith (England) and Jenny Orchard (Zimbabwe); jewellers and metalsmiths, Viliama Grakalic (Croatia), Pierre Cavalan (France), Yuri Kawanabe and Mari Funaki (Japan), Susan Wraight (England) and Hendrik Forster and Frank Bauer (Germany); glass artists, Anne Dybka (England), Göran Wärf (Sweden), Alistair Gordon (Scotland), Meza Rijdsdijk (The Netherlands), Gerhard Emmerichs (Germany) and Jane Bruce (USA); textile artists and designers, Ewa Pachuka (Poland), Catherine K (France), Sara Lindsay (England), Solvig Baas-Becking (The Netherlands) and Keiko Amenomori-Schmeisser and Akira Isogawa (Japan); and furniture designers and makers, Charles and Roy Catt (England), Schulim Krimper (Austria), Khai Liew (Malaysia) and Peter Adams (USA).¹⁴

As dedicated studio artists and designers, they have changed the face of Australian practice through their example and their willingness to let their Australian experiences shape their practices and define their commitment to their adopted environment. In different ways, each has examined their background, life experiences, training and expectations, and interrogated them in the light of a different cultural context. In doing so, they reveal and celebrate new aspects of what it means to be Australian.

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Endnotes

1. For an account of the parallel and connected development of Australian design, see Michael Bogle, *Design in Australia 1880–1970*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1998.
2. For an extensive listing of craft exhibitions held in Australia during the 1990s, see Bob Thompson (ed.), *Craft Exhibitions in Australia: A survey of public venues and craft exhibitions*, Craft Australia, Sydney, 1997, pp. 49–107.
3. This is the subject of the author's current PhD research at the Australian National University.
4. The author was the curator for the exhibitions, *Perth International Crafts Triennial*; *Design Visions: Australian International Crafts Triennial*; and *Nature as Object: Craft and design from Japan, Finland and Australia*, while Curator of Craft and Design at the Art Gallery of Western Australia from 1978 to 2000.
5. For an indication of Fuller's view that the relationship between craft and the environment is mediated by histories and traditions, see Peter Fuller, 'Art and Industry', in *Images of God*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1985.
6. See *Shifting Foundations: The collected papers of the Designing Futures Forum*, Craftwest, Perth, 2002.
7. For a detailed account of the development of contemporary jewellery in Australia, see Patricia Anderson, *Contemporary Jewellery: The Australian experience 1977–1987*, Millennium Books, Sydney, 1988.
8. For an account of Blakebrough's considerable influence on Australian ceramics, see Jonathon Holmes, *Les Blakebrough: Potter*, Bay Books, Sydney, 1989.
9. For an account of the development of contemporary Australian ceramics to 1988, see Janet Mansfield, *A Collector's Guide to Modern Australian Ceramics*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1988.
10. See Robert Bell, 'Mitsuo Shoji', in *Impulse and Form: Object makers and the Australian experience*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, 1985, p. 36.
11. This included the Crafts Board's initiative and funding for the Art Gallery of Western Australia to develop the 1982 exhibition, *International Directions in Glass Art*, selected by the artist, Michael Esson, and curated by the author.
12. Richard Marquis worked in Australia from 1973 to 1974 and taught at the Tasmanian College of Advanced Education in 1976.
13. For a detailed account of the development of contemporary glass in Australia, see Noris Ioannou, *Australian Studio Glass: The movement, its makes and their art*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1995.
14. For a detailed account of the role of immigrant artists on the development of Australian craft to 1992, see Grace Cochrane, *The Crafts Movement in Australia: A history*, New South Wales University Press, Sydney, 1992.

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