

Craft Ink series

Handmade at the heart of things

*Within a framework of international tendencies, **Grace Cochrane** offers an in-depth perspective on the complexities and, at times, contentious shifts in the Australian craft-scape over the past four decades, most critically in the migration from craft–art to craft–design.*

Forty years ago, a small group of people formed the first of what became a group of organisations designed to act as a national and international professional voice for Australian craftspeople.¹ At that time colonial links with the United Kingdom were being modified by the post World War II influence of the United States and by European migration, and Australian society was to be further shaped by changing attitudes to Indigenous culture and a growing sense of identity within the Asia-Pacific region.

In the time since the Craft Association of Australia: New South Wales Branch was set up in 1964, the crafts have developed spectacularly through the work of countless practitioners and their effective networks and organisations. We are now seeing the mature work of many who started their practice in those postwar years and whose knowledge now draws on a lifetime's experience. Subsequent generations have been able to pursue their practice through a range of professional opportunities alongside the models of their predecessors. Studios, collectives and specialist organisations have been established, and travel and market opportunities developed in Australia and overseas. Publications have been produced, state and national conferences held, collections amassed, curators appointed, exhibitions developed and toured. Crafts practice has been encouraged through good schools with influential teachers. A significant offshoot has been the development of continuing international personal and institutional networks. Australia is definitely reaping the benefit of these four decades of endeavour now.

There are a number of changes taking place in Australia and worldwide, which affect perceptions of the value of the handmade object. One of the most significant of these has been the opportunity for global communication through on-line information systems. Digital technologies have also encouraged changes in the design process in all media.

A major concern is the way tertiary education institutions, including art and design schools, now have to find new ways of financing their programs. And students are changing their ideas about what they think they want to get out of them. Many are shifting towards new media areas that offer greater vocational opportunities. Some schools have dealt with this change by moving away from certain courses, such as those in the crafts, where the skills take a long time to learn, running costs are high, knowledge is developed over a lifetime and the eventual financial rewards might not be great. There are concerns here about the potential loss of knowledge and skills. Despite the acknowledged trend towards closures and amalgamations of courses and departments, there are some very strong schools and centres of excellence that are recognised internationally, and some argue that fewer programs across the country now do the work better. At the same time, alongside the declining opportunities for thorough practical experience at undergraduate level, there are now new opportunities for extended research through higher degrees. Despite these changes, it is reassuring that both old and new technologies often run in parallel with one another and students do move across them. Rapid prototyping takes place alongside slipcasting; laser-technology alongside hand-finishing; drawing beside digital design.

There are also changes in how our various audiences respond to handmade objects and the creative process. With the decline in teacher education in crafts fields in favour of syllabuses identified as art, design and technology, one could ask if one long-term effect could be a general public that may no longer recognise what the crafts, as we know them, represent. They see them happening less often. By catering so much to an increasingly academic and specialist student group and less, as a country, to the general education of a larger audience – the consumers,

parents and teachers earlier in the education chain – there may be a risk in losing important stakeholders.

What people do develop today are the skills of using very accessible do-it-yourself technology. The amateur as well as the professional can be an interactive independent user, researcher and designer. People are also placing their creative energies in many other areas: music, gardening, cooking and home renovation, encouraged by popular magazines and a range of do-it-yourself television celebrity shows. These pursuits also offer personal expression and enjoyment, entertainment and challenge.

In this context, it is clear that market taste is changing. The postwar crafts movement was itself part of an earlier groundswell inspired by a desire for changes in priorities in a way of living. People wanted closer contact with materials and processes, and the identification with human endeavour in the objects they used and had around them. From a certain point, makers also wanted the status of artists and, in this area, the international glass collectors' market has for some time been the benchmark to which everyone else aspires. It has kept prices high and the market buoyant, and has encouraged many innovations in scope and scale when, with some notable exceptions, the market in some other areas of 'one-off' works has declined.

In Australia, however, there has been a quite distinct recent market shift from 'craft-art' to 'craft-design', reinforced by newspapers and journals and also by institutions interested in expanding audiences. One of the characteristics of this shift is the strong government support for design as a way of boosting local industry, especially through Queensland's Creative Industries program and Victoria's Design Initiative. Institutionally, design as a cultural activity is competitive at this level: around the country events like Designing Futures (Western Australia), Young Designers Month (Tasmania) and Sydney Design Week (New South Wales) are regular events. Well-designed objects are valued for their functions in everyday life, and many craftspeople now design for all or part production of their work to be done elsewhere, or are commissioned, on occasion, by industry. But – perhaps with the exception of fashion design, where construction is exposed and the 'look' of handmade decoration is valued – in recent years this audience has generally sought a minimal look that may not necessarily be handmade. Not everyone can distinguish, or value, the difference.

In the last two decades, museums and galleries have changed forever their relationships with audiences and the ways in which they offer exhibitions and related programs. While specific exhibitions are developed in a range of contexts in crafts organisations and art and design schools, in some state galleries and art museums the crafts and decorative arts area is being absorbed into the broad art collection. This can be positive, in that the crafts are integrated physically and conceptually into broader perceptions, but it can also lead to a loss of specific identity and interpretation. At the same time, despite the fact that 'design', as we understand it today, is a contemporary term for both a process of working something out and a kind of product made for a client, there are pressures in some places to use it to identify all forms of production, including what have, in the past, been known as decorative arts or applied arts – and the crafts, contemporary and historical.

During recent decades, the crafts have often been defined by their popular amateur practice while aspiring to be part of an art world that has, in turn, tended to dismiss what they represent: an interaction with materials and processes in the pursuit of ideas. Aspirations towards 'art' over time have affected a parallel relationship with design and production. Current dilemmas surrounding changes in perception are reflected, not without controversy, in changes in terminology used to describe the field, including 'crafts and design', 'contemporary applied art', 'contemporary art objects', 'arts and design', and 'sculpture-objects-fine-art'. These efforts could perhaps be described as a 're-branding' to ensure a continuing ideological and economic place in people's minds and in the marketplace. Yet, at the same time, respect for crafts values continues to be discussed not only in related creative areas like filmmaking, painting, writing and music but also, for example, in policy development and speechwriting. It is in these fields that the word, as an approach to a field of knowledge and a way of working, is most positively used. A crafts approach implies knowing how to do something very well.

Along those lines, in 2003 the British *Crafts* magazine asked nine people from around the world to assess the history and future of the crafts.² There were many similarities in their comments, despite their different circumstances. Most talked about new technologies and changing priorities in education, and the effect these have on audience understanding. Most noted the shift from art–craft to craft–design in some form, and consider the possibilities for re-orienting the handmade in the context of contemporary interiors and lifestyles. They all talked about the difficulty of finding definitive terminology when the crafts field is so broad in its approach to making. Some discussed the crafts occupying the space between art and design; others talked about it now being embedded in both. More recently there was a forecast that the ‘new design’ will be characterised by a ‘romantic’ return to the values of the handmade.

Around Australia a number of initiatives are taking place that explore these changing relationships, and many are reflected in this publication. One is the Powerhouse Museum’s exhibition and seminar proposal for an Australia Council-funded initiative for late 2006. It is hoped that other organisations will develop related programs at the same time that can together make a useful whole. Currently entitled *Crafts Interface: Between art, design and industry*, the intent is to engage with the popular perception of design, but consider works and working relationships that place at their core the values and understandings of the handmade. I hope it will challenge audiences to recognise what I believe is significant in a crafts approach to designing and making.

The text of this essay has been drawn from a number of papers including: ‘What do they want? What do they need? What do they get?’, *Deskilling/reskilling, Old skills/new skills* ACUADS Conference, Brisbane, October 2002; ‘Collecting Connections’, *Working the Surface* Ceramics Conference, Orange, November 2002, published as ‘Taking care of our histories’, *Pottery in Australia*, Vol 43, No 1, 2003; ‘Australia’, in *Crafts*, No. 181, March/April 2003; ‘Southern exposure: New Zealand in focus’, New Zealand Glass Artists’ Conference, Wanganui, January 2004; ‘Australian perspective’, at *Collect*: Craft Curators Symposium, London, February 2004.

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End Notes

1. Potters, spinners, weavers and embroiderers established specialist organisations earlier, but the new group, which eventually encouraged a similar Craft Association in every state and a national organisation, Craft Australia, was also multi-crafts in its scope. (See Grace Cochrane, *The Crafts Movement in Australia: A history*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1992, pp. 113–118, 126–127, 256–278.)
2. *Crafts*, No. 181, March/April 2003.

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