

Mid-century Modern

A U S T R A L I A N P O T T E R Y A T B E M B O K A

FEATURES OF MODERNIST CERAMICS

- Natural shapes
- Simplicity of design
- Bright colours
- Abstract decoration
- Diversity
- Playfulness
- Eclecticism

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1956 ARTS FESTIVAL

Functional stoneware and the philosophies of Bernard Leach dominated most of the decade", wrote Frances Morgan of the 1960s in Pottery in Australia, 40/3, Sep 2001. This may have been true of Sydney, but Melbourne remained an important centre for earthenware until the late 1960s.

Practitioners bridging the war included John Barnard Knight, who ran the ceramics classes at Melbourne Technical College and produced a domestic line under the label 'Janet Gray', Klytie Pate, Eric Juckert and Allan Lowe.

An Arts Festival was held in conjunction with the Melbourne Olympic Games in 1956. Of the twelve ceramic artists from Victoria repre-

sented at the exhibition, only Harold Hughan was an exponent of stoneware at that time, while NSW was repre-



Reg Preston (1917-2000). Bowl. Oct 1956

sented by Ivan Englund, Mollie Douglas, Ivan McMeekin and Peter Rushforth, all converts to Leach's philosophies.

Earthenware lends itself to the brighter colours of commercial glazes and to industrial methods of production. These are features of what is

now called mid-century modernism - developments in architecture and design in Europe from around 1933 to 1965 that found fertile ground in post-war Melbourne. In housing, it resulted in buildings with open floor plans and large areas of glass; in interior decoration, in clean, unembellished lines and neutral or primary colours.

By 1956, the year of the Melbourne Olympic Games, the great mass of new housing was lighter and simpler, and furnishing these homes with functional and decorative ware provided a ready market for semi-commercial and commercial potteries, assisted by post-war barriers to imported ceramics.

THE BOYD FAMILY

The Boyd family was influential in setting new more modernist tastes, with the Arthur Merric Boyd Pottery at Murrumbidgee producing simple, brightly-coloured wares from 1944-1958. Arthur's brother Guy left a similar legacy in Sydney with the Martin Boyd

Pottery, which he set up while studying sculpture at the East Sydney Technical College, before returning to Melbourne in 1951 and setting up his own Guy Boyd Pottery there.



Arthur Boyd (1920-1999) and John Perceval (1923-2000). Four ramekins. 1950s

SYDNEY POTTERIES



Martin Boyd Pottery (1948-1963).
Demitass cups and saucers

In Sydney, the Martin Boyd Pottery went on to become a beacon of modernism, with large Sydney companies like Bakewells, Delamere, Florenz, Kalmar, MCP and Pates producing more florid and embellished designs. The work of smaller ventures like the Fisher Studio also stand out. John Fisher had emigrated from Czechoslovakia in 1950 and clearly knew something of the 'keramik der 50er Jahre' being made in Europe after the war.

In the early 1960s, the German company Carstens licenced the Sydney

Braemore Pottery to produce a line of modernist vases under the name Braemore-Carstens.

In a second wave of emigration to Sydney in the late 1960s, Vladimir Tichy from Czechoslovakia joined forces with Rudolf Dybka from Austria to make brightly coloured earthenware, murals and ceramic sculptures at Studio Dybka Tichy in Paramatta. Jo Sartori, the studio manager, says that the orange and red glazes developed there were new to Australia and very difficult to control.

"Hand-thrown and modernist in style, Dyson Studio Pottery and Martin Boyd Pottery were both represented in the 1956 Arts Festival"

MELBOURNE POTTERIES



Dyson Studio. Two bowls. 1950s

In Melbourne, there were fewer commercial potteries producing ceramics in the post-war period than in Syd-

ney. Premier Potteries Preston (Remued), itself a fairly small operation, closed at the end of 1955. This left room for smaller semi-commercial operations.

June Dyson, who studied pottery under Klytie Pate at the Melbourne Technical College was one of the most successful, setting up a studio at Black Rock in 1945 and

expanding to Gembrook in 1958. Hand-thrown and modernist in style, Dyson Studio Pottery and Martin Boyd Pottery were both represented in the 1956 Arts Festival. Henning Rathjen, another Melbourne Technical College student, established himself in Caulfield in 1947 where he made modernist slipcast ware in black or neutral colours.

'THE GREEN WEDGE'

On the outskirts of Melbourne, Eltham and Warrandyte fostered new communities of artists and studio potters. Tom Sanders, like his friend Guy Boyd returning to Melbourne after studying sculpture in Sydney, could not make enough named ash-trays to supply demand. In 1958 at Warrandyte a group of potters looking for ways of

exhibiting and selling their wares opened the Potters' Cottage.

The founding members were Artur Halpern, Reg Preston, Phyl Dunn, Gus McLaren and Charles Wilton. Sylvia Halpern, Kate Janeba and Elsa Ardern joined the group in 1961 and Peter Laycock, from nearby Dunmoochin in Cottles Bridge, in 1969.

It wasn't until the late 1960s that production by the group changed from earthenware to stoneware.

Arthur and Sylvia Halpern had ventured early in the post-war years into commercial methods of production with their SYLHA range and continued making work under this label until 1975.



Prototype jug or the SYLHA range. 1950s

MARKET OPPORTUNITIES



Ellis Ceramics. Ashtray. 1950s-1960s



Gunda. Vase. 1950s-1960s

Into this mix came two significant new potteries. Dasa and Milda Kratochvil, emigrants from Czechoslovakia. They headed for Melbourne in 1951 as soon as they had completed their obligatory two years of work experience in NSW, and set up a backyard pottery in Abbotsford in 1953.

Three years later, Gundars Lasis, a young Latvian migrant, set up the Gunda pottery in the backyard of his parent's home in Camberwell. Both potteries found a ready market for work featuring traditional and mod-

ernist European influences as well as adapting their designs eclectically to their new country.

In Adelaide another Latvian emigrant, Maigonis Daga, produced work from 1956-1966 in a similar style to Gunda, so much so that for a time it was thought the two studios were related. Instead, it was an interesting example of two fellow countrymen sharing the same West German influences.

Gunda remained the work of largely one person. Ellis went on to become

a commercial enterprise, moving to factory premises, employing a larger number of people, including visual arts students, looking outside Australia for new markets, but still maintaining tight control over design.

By contrast, the 1960s saw the emergence of large commercial potteries run by businessmen with no technical skills themselves, an employing largely women. These included the Ray Cook and Raynham potteries and Hanstan.

“Both Ellis and Gunda found a ready market in Melbourne for work featuring traditional and modernist European influences”

IDEA OF A NATIONAL IDIOM

In the guide to the 1956 Arts Festival Harold Hughan speculated that “the post-war influx to this country of large numbers of former European nationals with their own cultures, many of them fine craftsmen in their own media, will doubtless have its influence and make its own contributions to what in time may become a national idiom”

(The Arts Festival of the Olympic Games Melbourne, 1956, p.37). It is clearer now that the shift in style after the war was part of a more general trend towards modernism reflected in the work of a younger generation of Australians selling their work in the same progressive market place as migrant craftsmen and women. Perhaps the clos-

est to a national idiom can be found in work decorated with Aboriginal designs and themes.



Carl Cooper. Dish. 1960

**A U S T R A L I A N
P O T T E R Y A T
B E M B O K A**

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Over the last ten years, we have been adding to our own collection of contemporary Australian ceramics by buying work on the secondary market. The result is an eclectic mix of exhibition pieces and production ware made in the last half century, displayed in a contemporary house and gallery setting with mountain views. All the pieces are for sale from the gallery or online.

E L L I S C E R A M I C S / V E R O N I C A M O R I A R T Y



"The mainstay of the Ellis Ceramics pottery was a line called "Harvestware"- attractive and distinctive grey-green glazed slip-cast terracotta tablewares that featured a decorative technique known as "sgraffito" where designs were hand-etched into the surface to reveal the clay underneath.

Another popular range of tablewares featured, primarily, a bright orange or yellow glaze set off by a heavily textured black glaze with a lava-like surface. Not only did numerous galleries and department stores, including the Myer chain, take up Ellis Ceramics, but they received contracts for their pottery from America and Japan.

By the mid 1960s the pottery had expanded to produce a wide range of homewares with over three hundred different numbered designs, as well as a range of human and animal figures.

It's difficult for the 21st century viewer to fully appreciate the impact these figures would have had on the

Australian public of the immediate post World War II period. We've seen it all before, but the viewer of the 1950s hadn't. The cynical amongst us might now regard the figures as kitsch, but take that step back and what appears to be an inherent lack of artistic talent and sophistication is exactly the opposite: boldness and courage in taking up new styles. Australia in the 1950s might have been old fashioned and mono-cultural, but Ellis figures and homewares were anything but, a shock to the system that, surprisingly, sold incredibly well.

What made Ellis Ceramics so distinctive? The Kratochvils drew much of their inspiration from two apparently diametrically opposed influences: traditional and modernist art, but surprisingly, these managed to work together in harmony, not conflict, to create something genuinely new and unique.

The legacy of European folk art is most clear in Ellis animal figures: naive to the point of abstraction with their surfaces decorated with simple repeated geometric patterns, not through lack of talent, but in a deliberate attempt to echo a familiar folk tradition. Miloslav's training as a marionette maker is also evident in the simplicity, yet potency and charm of the modelling of these simple figures.

Ironically the Bauhaus movement of art and design, characterised by geo-

metric forms and clean, even severe lines, also influenced Ellis Ceramics. The movement sought to create economically 'viable' designs, suitable to be used in everyday living and able to be mass-produced. European pottery of the period 1950s -1970s bore the stamp of this bold optimistic and futuristic style in its bright colours and exciting lines and the Kratochvils drew on this lineage. They took it further, however, and adapted it to reflect their time in their new country.

Many people are starting to again appreciate the beauty of Ellis ceramics - not just as part of the craze for all things "Retro", but as genuinely beautiful artwork. "

Extract from an article published by Veronica Moriarty in 2009.