

BSP40:
40 Years of the Bunbury Studio
Potters Group

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Co-curator

In the 1960s and 70s Australian pottery was in its 'heyday'. Many if not most Australians, preferred handmade pottery for everyday items such as mugs, spice jars, wine goblets, ramekins and the ubiquitous casserole. Elsewhere more decorative ware adorned mantelpieces and gardens. These were heady global 'counter-culture' influenced years which brought with them a craft revolution.

In the Southwest of WA, the Margaret River area was best known for craftspeople who were drawn to alternative lifestyles, but there were also potters working in and around the port city of Bunbury. The Bunbury Technical Education Department (known as the Tech College and later TAFE) offered a four-year Diploma in Ceramic Arts with a further two years of studio practice/specialisation. The course primarily attracted young women who often had young families and who were drawn to both the practical and creative qualities of pottery.

Murray Richardson from Busselton was the ceramics teacher, a self-taught potter with a background as an industrial chemist. This ensured that students were given a strong scientific grounding which prepared them well to be able to adapt available raw materials for making their pots and also made them resourceful when seeking out materials. At that time no clay specifically prepared for potters was available so they either bought brick makers clay, such as that produced by Brisbane and Wunderlich in Perth, or dug their own.

The preference of the time was for coarse textures and rustic and earthy qualities in both colouration and form, which fortunately suited the limited material faced by the emerging Bunbury potters. As with clay, glazes could not be bought and had to be formulated by the potters. Potters scavenged for materials such as tin dust around a former tin mine at Greenbushes or ilmenite spilled while loading ships on Bunbury's timber jetty. Bunbury's local basalt was also tested but the results were disappointing. Another limitation was the lack of books available to refer to. Only one book, *The Complete Book of Pottery Making* by US writer John B Kenny, published in 1954, was available for tips and techniques (a well-worn copy is still in the BSP library today).

Favoured locations for digging clay were the Fergusson Valley or the Donnybrook areas. A clay digging expedition was typically a social occasion combining the hard work of digging and loading with a picnic lunch. It was in this atmosphere of camaraderie that a group of graduates from the ceramics diploma course formed the Bunbury Ceramic Study Group in 1979. The formation of the group was an expression of their on-going enthusiasm for making pottery and for fostering a community of mutual support.

The original group was Lorna Anderson, Dot Oliver, Coral Wauchope, Colleen Dahlenburg, Jean Piper, Joy Scarlett, Rae

Vallie, Monda Ibbott, Jan James, Rita Botman and Mona White who were joined soon after by Davida Palmer, Carol Clancy, Val Melville, Alice Norton, Lorraine Park, Jan Raffaele, Dot Hepton, Del Melatesta, Doreen Mulcahy, Ingrid Pascoe and Gloria Smith.

The initial venue for the Technical College course was in the main building at the Bunbury Arts Centre (now Stirling Street Arts Centre) but this facility quickly became inadequate as the popularity of pottery in the mid to late 1970s grew. Around 1975 'pre-vocational' carpentry students from the Technical College built a stand-alone pottery studio (now the BSP studio) at the Arts Centre. Two large 'catenary arch' gas kilns were built by the pottery students in the kiln yard area beside the studio and a wide range of alternative firing techniques were attempted including pit, Raku, salt, sugar, soda and even cow dung firing.

The prevailing mood was one of discovery and excitement and the word most commonly used to describe the experience of being part of the group at that time is "fun". Several potters have referred to those days as "the best time of my life". The common experience of the diploma course and the possibilities that it opened up created a strong bond between the potters, which drove their many adventures and experiments. These were heady days when no obstacle seemed to daunt the group. Stories of exploding kilns and various gung-ho experiments are common but it was probably their training and the close, mutually supportive nature of the group that kept them safe. Potters who have joined the group more recently, who didn't experience this atmosphere of excitement and discovery, are often envious.

In common with many antipodean potters the Bunbury potters of the 1970s were inspired by the work of masters such as Shoji Hamada from Japan and Bernard Leach from England. They also knew about Australian producers such as Bendigo Pottery, and people like Bela Kotai and Joan Campbell in Perth whose work they discovered on frequent trips to visit galleries and studios. A number of potters also travelled to National Pottery conferences in Adelaide and Melbourne where they extended their knowledge and range of contacts.

From 1975 Australian and International master potters were invited, and were happy, to come to Bunbury to demonstrate their craft. These included Bela Kotai and Joan Campbell and also Jeff Mincham, Les Blakeborough Greg Daly, Greg Crowe, Bryan Trueman, Rosemary Whittaker, Victor Greenaway, Pip Drysdale, Jenny Dawson, Stewart Scambler, Robyn Lees, Vipoo Srivilasa and Fleur Schell. More locally the group visited Steve Freedman at his Belvedere studio on the Leschenault Peninsula.

By the 1980s the Ceramic Arts Diploma course was no longer available as TAFE became more vocationally focussed and pottery was now an 'elective' unit within a more generalised arts program. Pottery was also being taught at Bunbury's ECU campus by the flamboyant Geoff Lummis, but there was

apparently little interaction with the Ceramic Study Group potters. The group was unaffected by the growing turmoil of the form vs function/art vs craft debate taking place in the art world elsewhere or the arrival of 'deconstruction' and other art theory influences.

Into the 1980s as new materials and resources, such as commercial glazes, specialist pottery clays, pottery books and magazines (especially Australian and New Zealand Potter) became more readily available the potters gained new skills and experimented with new techniques. A wider range of work was now being made as the potters tried out new glazes such as crystal and maiolica while refining old favourites like copper red. New stains enabled potters to produce bright colours which shifted the work away from the organic sensibility of earlier years. Although there was a much greater diversity of finishes and effects the core training of the group ensured that strong, well-crafted forms continued to characterise the work of this period.

Functional domestic ware continued to be the main output of the group and as Australian lifestyles and tastes changed the potters responded, making items such as salad and pasta bowls before they were commercially available. Broadly it was the experience of the potters that country people preferred practical domestic ware while visitors from the city were more interested in sculptural work and abstract forms. Several members of the group were however becoming interested in making figurative work

Exhibition opportunities grew in importance and in 1984 the group held an exhibition titled 'Salute to Bacchus' at the Leschenault winery near Capel. In 1987 the group's first annual 'All of a Kind' exhibition was held in the old City of Bunbury building. Typical of craft exhibitions of the day, pots were exhibited on doors raised up on bricks, hessian was draped generously and hay bales and a farm cart were added to create a rustic ambience. Annual exhibitions have continued to provide a showcase for the group ever since.

Fortunately for the purposes of this exhibition and the history of pottery in Bunbury BSP member Lorna Anderson and Arts Centre coordinator Lindsay Stout began acquiring good examples of work by Bunbury potters and visiting tutors. This important collection was transferred to Bunbury's new public art gallery soon after it opened in 1987.

The number of craft shops and outlets had also grown into the 1980s and potters were often involved in these enterprises. Jan James, who had earlier bought Bunbury Craft and Art Supplies, collaborated with Colleen Dahlenberg to establish 'Port Pottery', a production pottery at the port end of Victoria Street. 'Earth and Fire' at the Stratham roadhouse was set up and operated by several founding members of the group as a retail outlet aimed at

travellers heading South. There was also a shop in Brunswick established by Linda Warburton and later taken over by Davida Palmer.

These enterprises enabled potters to earn income and increased opportunities for individual potters to exhibit and sell work. This, however inevitably began to affect the tight sense of community within the group and by the late 1980s potters began to increasingly to see themselves as individual 'creatives' in a marketplace.

In the late 1980s concern about the loss of group cohesion was the catalyst for a project to create a ceramic mural for the Western end of the Stirling Street Arts Centre building. Funded by a Bicentennial Grant, the project succeeded in galvanising the group into working long hours to plan, make and install the mural which was one of Bunbury's first public art projects and is still in place. The group was awarded a Silver Medal by The Australian Womens' Weekly for their efforts.

The name of the group was changed to Bunbury Studio Potters in 1992 and the group became an incorporated association in 1997. This formalisation reflected changing times which brought with them a swathe of new regulations and concerns about risk and duty-of-care. New tighter regulations around gas plumbing eventually saw the end of volunteer built and maintained gas kilns. Similar regulations had the same restricting effect on alternative firing kilns and techniques. Those firings continued but only on private property. Health Department inspectors began visiting pottery studios to test glazes for food safety. The experimental nature of the group was considerably curtailed by these restrictions.

At the same time the 1990s saw the first waves of cheap, colourful imported domestic ware coming into Australia. This had a profound effect on demand for pottery which quickly became seen as dated. Everything now had to be shiny and new. Ironically there seemed to be less concern about the materials used to make these imported wares for public use.

Across Australia TAFE and art schools, including those in Bunbury, were reducing or abandoning pottery courses and facilities and with interest in the 'hand-made' at an all-time low, retail craft outlets were also closing. With no tertiary course to prepare and encourage new members the group had to require new members to complete introductory training to ensure they had the necessary base-level knowledge and skills to begin working in the studio.

Arts organisations such a Stirling Street Arts Centre (the parent organisation managing the Centre) also had increased liability and administrative issues to deal with they and became more formal business entities with a greater emphasis on earned income to match government funding. This, in-turn, put

increasing pressure on member craft groups to offer more classes and courses to demonstrate 'measurable community access'. Significant volunteer effort was required for this and it challenged the way craft groups worked as well as their *raison d'être*.

In common with other craft groups the Bunbury Studio Potters experienced falling participation and membership numbers through the 1990s and into the 2000s. While the studio remained a haven for the reduced number of potters who continued to make work, interest in workshops by visiting potters tapered off and energies went in to attempts to attract new participants. Classes ranging from 'have-a-go' and 'pop-up' demonstrations through to 'master-classes' were tried but failed to generate the kind of sustained commitment necessary to become a proficient potter. Ironically there were now more opportunities for more people to sample and access pottery and a greater range of materials available than ever before.

The nature of the work being produced by members during this period was a continuation of the wide variety of techniques and forms that marked the booming 1980s with some bravura examples being made by senior figures remaining with the group. Davida Palmer, Dot Oliver and Dot Hepton persevered through the 1990s and into the 2000s, working in the studio teaching and assisting members and doing all of the class teaching required but by 2010 only Davida was maintaining this role out of a sheer stubborn determination to keep the group going.

In recent years there has been something of a revival of interest in 'authentic' hand crafted objects but, in a globalised economy and digital world of instant access to information and short attention spans, it is no 'craft revolution' this time. As soon as hand crafted pottery hit the pages of lifestyle and gourmet magazines and online advertising, commercial producers and chain stores began to produce lookalike, mass-produced and cheaper lines. Those who truly value the work of artisan makers must have more than a fleeting interest, as well as the means to buy, and the knowledge to find the best examples.

For the BSP there was modest increase in new membership between 2000 and 2015. These potters are mostly mature women and the group struggles to attract a significant number of younger people who, in a 'time-poor', 'working-families' world simply can't make the external commitment needed. The work coming out of the studio during this period is characterised by narrative and fantasy objects and figures and the influence of diverse cultural backgrounds. This drives an emphasis on finish and surface qualities, even novelty effects. Simple practical objects are still being made but much less often and the selection of work in the contemporary section of this exhibition is almost all hand built and very varied in terms of technique, finish and concept.

The BSP studio is a well-equipped and agreeable place to work with like-minded makers but increasing numbers of members have their own studios elsewhere and may only come in to have work fired, participate in meetings or just have a chat. The solidarity and shared creative enthusiasm of the group is not what it once was and there seems to be less interest among the potters in pushing their limits as makers. Recently however, small groups of BSP potters have begun working together on more experimental projects which is surely a good sign for the future.

One thing however seems certain to this writer, the extraordinary medium known as pottery, or ceramics, will endure because of the 'magic' involved in bringing together earth, water and fire. Master Potters will continue to emerge even without the benefit of specialised tertiary training. Community studios such as BSP must also find ways to continue because their value is too great to be lost and the heritage they have created, as demonstrated by this exhibition is part of our cultural identity.

Julian Bowron
Co-curator BSP40: Forty Years of the Bunbury Studio Potters
Group exhibition

Writers note:

I am very grateful for the time and memories of various BSP stalwarts which have informed my research for this essay. My co-curator for this exhibition Davida Palmer has been a primary source of information and has generously guided me through the project. The past is, however, always subject to differing recollections. I have tried my best to navigate this but I will inevitably be wrong in some people's understanding and for that I apologise and I welcome further information. I am also indebted to BSP member Robyn Weidenbruch for her fastidious work in collating and documenting the BSP archive which has made my task so much easier. One further significant observation is that most potters have kept very little of their work, which has been challenging for a project such as this but we are hopeful that the exhibition will lead to the discovery of additional important objects which can be recorded and added to the history of BSP.