



A Concurrence of Potters, Landscape and Passion

Potters Cottage

A Tribute Exhibition by Grace Cochran

Article by Robyn Phelan

THE WHERE AND WHY OF WARRANDYTE?

The suburb of Warrandyte nestles in the outer, northeasterly fringe of Melbourne, Australia originally occupied by clans of the Wurunjeri people of the Kulin nation, it is a gently hilled place, covered with eucalypts. The Yarra River meanders through here on its way to the city of Melbourne. It remains the nearest State Park haven for walkers



and picnickers from the city.

Close by the Yarra, a group of people drew together to establish a humble venture called Potters Cottage that was to become a prominent feature of the Australian ceramics world from 1958 until 2004. This article highlights the exhibition *Potters Cottage: a Tribute*, curated by Grace Cochran. It celebrates the ambitions of the founding group of potters and reflects on the social and artistic history that surrounded their Potters Cottage.

Warrandyte has a typical history for the South-East of Australia; the Aboriginal people were dispossessed from their lands by the arrival of European pastoralists in the mid 19th century and the environment was destroyed by hard-hooved, grazing cattle. The discovery of gold in 1851 and the resulting boom and bust trajectory caused populations to fluctuate leaving derelict mining cottages and quarries full of



clay deposits. For those who choose to live in this bush seclusion, the constant threat of bushfire continues to this day.

By the early 20th century, waves of artistic people were drawn to Warrandyte and the nearby environs for the inherent sense of freedom and privacy. There was a blossoming of artist groups at this time many of whom converged on this area. Known as the Heidelberg School painters, Tom Roberts and Frederick McCubbin made artist camps in the semi-rural idyll neighbouring Warrandyte, painting compositions about Australia's long past pioneering days. Post WWII, Penleigh Boyd, Leonard French, Danila Vassilieff and Connie Smith were to live and paint locally. Sculptor Inge King settled in the hills and writers Adrian Lawler and Alan Marshall joined the gathering. Modernist architect Robin Boyd designed many local homes. Importantly, the 1940s and 1950s also saw the arrival of the founding members of Potters Cottage.

In 1945, for instance, Reg Preston set up home and studio to make functional pottery. Phyl Dunn was apprenticed to Preston, then after further ceramics training in London returned to Warrandyte, marrying him in 1958. Elsa Ardern and her husband Cyril, who painted, were attracted to the affordable land to establish a home and a studio each. Kate Janeba and her architect husband Fritz Janeba had already settled there in 1941. Another architect John Hipwell was to follow in 1946 with his wife Betty. In 1955 Charles Wilton chose Warrandyte for his pottery and Gus and Betty McLaren moved from inner city Melbourne and built a new home and studio.

Facing page, top: Reg Preston. Vases. 1971. Stoneware, with (left to right) ash, tenmoku and white ash glazes. 46 x 25; 35 x 15; 10.5 x 6.5 cm. Collection of Alexandra Copeland. Photo by Jeremy Dillon.

Facing page, below: Elsa Ardern, Phyl Dunn and Artur Halpern photographed in Reg Preston and Phyl Dunn's studio for a Potter's Cottage brochure. 1960s. Photo attributed to Wim Kerhof.

Above: Elsa Ardern. Bowl. Late 1950s.

Earthenware, Dorset clay and Kangaroo Ground clay, interior sang de boeuf glaze; exterior local ash glaze. 13 x 21cm. Collection of Gray Ardern. Photo by Grace Cochranel

Below: Betty and John Hipwell standing in the ashes of their first Hipwell-designed house in Research Road, Warrandyte, after bushfire in 1962.

The Halperns, Artur and Sylvia, managed their pottery production between Warrandyte and Huntingdale in 1958, before Sylvia set up her own studio. A pottery community was beginning to take shape.

The 1950s signaled the beginnings of the studio pottery era in Australia. Potter Harold Hughan held the first major exhibition of stoneware ceramics in the prestigious Georges Department store in Melbourne. This would shape a





Above: Phyl Dunn. *Coffee-set (Coffee Pot, Jug, Sugar Bowl, Six Cups and Saucers)*. c 1965. Earthenware, interior tin glaze with oxide colourant; exterior iron and manganese-based 'Rockingham' glaze. Jug 24 cm/h. Collection of Alexandra Copeland. Photo by Jeremy Dillon.

broader public's taste for handmade, local pottery and the Warrandyte potters were eager to make a living from independent, studio produced domestic ceramics. At that time sales were made to outlets in Melbourne, a 30 kilometre drive away and no mean feat on rural roads at this time.

POTTERY AS LIFESTYLE: POTTERS COTTAGE 1958-2004

The proximity of like-minded people was the catalyst not only for creative collaboration but also a cooperative way to ease the burden of selling work. After successful Christmas sales at Reg Preston's studio, a decision was reached to create a sales outlet for the 'founders'. Preston, Phyl Dunn, Charles Wilton, Gus McLaren and Artur Halpern chipped in £20 capital and rented John Hipwell's vacant miner's house, Moonlight Cottage, renaming it Potters Cottage. By 1958, these 'neighbours' had formed the Warrandyte Group and had established a place in which to sell their work. The first President was John Hipwell. His daughter Alexandra Copeland recalls, "One major aspect was that it started in an idealistic way, as a cooperative – they had different abilities but they were egalitarian. All were equal, all respected one another; even when not speaking, they still turned up to meetings. Upheavals blew over. They were just a group of people making it work."

And it did work. A new, larger property was sourced on Jumping Creek Road and all founding potters mortgaged their homes to purchase six acres of land and an old farmhouse. With increasing business acumen, the potters formed a proprietary limited company and invited locals Sylvia Halpern, Elsa Ardern and Kate Kaneba to join. John Hipwell

designed an extension with two gallery spaces (one for permanent exhibition of the foundation potters' work and one for exhibitions, coffee lounge, kitchen and storeroom. Betty Hipwell proved to be a superb public relations officer having the major state newspaper *The Age* and the Victorian Tourist Development Authority hungry for any content and images she could provide. Jo Lawrence was employed as gallery manager with up to 70 potters supplying the gallery by the 1980s.

In the 1960s and 1970s Australia was becoming a wealthier nation. Most families owned a car and day trips to the countryside were a regular pastime. A wider familiarity with alternative lifestyles and a growing appreciation of crafts made the timing ripe to further develop what Potters Cottage offered as a destination activity. Mrs Tonkin became famous for her Devonshire teas and hot soup sold from the café and served in the potters' wares as a simple expansion of services in 1962. An indigenous Australian plant nursery was set up adjacent to the Cottage and by 1967 an additional building was leased as a studio for teaching. The founding members were tutors who instructed on a week turnaround so that students were in constant stimulation from a range of professional practitioners. Major workshops were organised including Peter Rushforth (New South Wales), Les Blakebrough (Tasmania), Joan Campbell (Western Australia) and Paul Soldner (US). Students were able to sell work at the Potters Cottage and often became teachers at the school themselves. Potters School continued to provide classes to adults and children until 2003 and its legacy is felt amongst many potters and ceramists working today.

In 1970, John Hipwell designed a further addition to the building that became the popular Potters



Kate Janeba. *Cups and Saucers*. 1950s–1962. 14 cm/ea. Earthenware, thrown with coloured glazes. Collection of Warrandyte Historical Society. Gift of Jo Laurence. Photo by Jeremy Dillon.

Restaurant. Initially a financial burden, the Potters group stepped up to manage, cook and take turns 'hosting' evenings. The appeal for diners included 'hotpots' and hearty French Provençale dishes served on handmade pottery on sale in the Potters Gallery. By 1996, the Restaurant developed from humble 'can-do' beginnings to achieving chef's hat listings in *The Age Good Food Guide* and became a venue for some of Melbourne's most talented and revered jazz performers.

Exhibitions in the gallery at the Potters Cottage turned over at a cracking pace. Members of the foundation group would have regular solo exhibitions as they developed new work and potters from further afield would be invited to exhibit as well. Curated exhibitions in the early 1960s entitled, *Women Potters of Australia* and *20 Potters* were important survey shows. Anniversary exhibitions were regular features indicating the pride and longevity of this community of potters. The popular *Founders Anniversary Exhibitions* were initially held annually and then five-yearly between 1983 and 1993. 1968 was the 10th anniversary exhibition followed by a 20th anniversary in 1978 and so on in 1988 and 1998. Coinciding with the exhibition program was the Potters Cottage Prize. Long before social networking, news in the 1960s was spread about the Prize via the newly formed Melbourne Ceramics Group and the new magazine *Pottery in Australia* published its details. Preston also sent personally addressed letters to potters to encourage them to participate. Deputy Director of the National Gallery of Victoria, Kenneth Hood, was a regular judge and the winner received a substantial financial prize. Exhibitors were regularly acquired into public and private collections. Eleven Potters Cottages Prizes occurred between 1965 and

1985.

As well as employing a gallery manager, the founding directors asked John and Margaret James to take on further responsibility as Cottage managers and the couple eventually purchased the Potters Cottage outright in 1982 as the original group wanted less involvement with the management of the Cottage. By 2002, Potters Cottage ceased to be a going concern and is currently being run as a function centre. A final exhibition at the Cottage called *Connections* was held in 2003 celebrating 45 years of Potters Cottage and was curated by long standing manager Jo Lawrence.

THE FOUNDERS – THEIR WORK – AND A TRIBUTE

The local council for Warrandyte is the City of Manningham, which generously decided that the opening exhibition for their new gallery space would be a tribute to the 48 years of Potters Cottage history. Grace Cochrane had an amazing wealth of archived material, collected by many who had worked at Potters Cottage as well as descendants of the original founding group, who by 2012 had now passed away. She also undertook contemporary research and carried out many interviews. A wonderful part of the tribute was the range of public programs. These included a Potters Devonshire Tea, a Friday evening at the Potters Restaurant with jazz performance and wine by the pottery mug and a floor talk. Cochrane says of the response to the exhibition: "The idea of such an exhibition, especially for such a prestigious occasion, caused a great deal of excitement. People loved Potters Cottage for many reasons. All those I visited and talked to were enthusiastic and helpful



and the process of finding works for the exhibition and unravelling the stories, was rewarding. On the opening night everyone in the audience seemed to be talking about their warm memories of people, pots, celebrations in the restaurant, experiences in the school and involvement in the gallery. For the floor talk the following week, I asked about a dozen of the key people to briefly tell us two things – something serious and something funny – about their time at Potters Cottage. These personal stories provided even more insights to this amazing place.

The tribute exhibition was spread across two large galleries. The first room was filled with archive photos and documents, including a display about John and Betty Hipwell, while the second held a survey of work by the eight founding members. Cochrane's installation featured each individual potter and was densely packed with work often spanning four decades of making. I fancy that this dense display mimicked a retail feel of the old Cottage where visitors were greeted with shelves heaving with earthy, robust ceramics. As well, the introductory gallery included small displays of the work of four contemporary potters; Alexandra Copeland, Greg Daly, John Dermer and Deborah Halpern, who also explained how Potters Cottage had influenced them.

Projected on the wall of the major gallery was a sequence of photographs compiled from a range of archival collections. As well, John Hipwell's son,

John, was a budding filmmaker in the establishment days of Potters Cottage and had recorded many of its major events, which he compiled as a DVD for screening in the archive gallery. This included a fascinating Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) documentary from 1958.

Perhaps the most well known and regarded of these potters is Reg Preston, an early adopter of Bernard Leach's Anglo-Japanese approach to studio potting through his successful use of local clay, mineral and ash. Preston was generous with his ceramic knowledge and encouraging to the many students who passed through his studio and classes. His work shows proficiency in throwing and on the glazed surface; they also have a statuesque quality that reflects his initial devotion to sculpting. The work representing Phyl Dunn's career clearly articulates her passion for tableware. There is an eloquent stillness and beauty to Dunn's forms where decoration is integral. Preston and Dunn are the only two potters represented in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria. As the *Potters Cottage: A Tribute Exhibition* drew to an end, a retrospective exhibition of studio ceramics at the NGV entitled *Thrown* opened in late November 2012. Interestingly the works were part of a bequest from past staff member, Kenneth Hood, a connoisseur of ceramics and, as mentioned earlier, a regular judge for the Potters Cottage Prize. It was enlightening to see Preston's work presented alongside his peers, both



national and international. Dunn's work, while part of the collection, was not included in that exhibition. As a point of comparison the Manningham Council's Tribute exhibition had put on public display many potters I was yet to experience before but who are nevertheless a significant part of a vigorous, small-scale manufacturing heritage for Victoria.

The remaining work on display by Potters Cottage founders was a delightful experience. Gus McClaren's early career as a cartoonist and film animator adds a comedic wackiness to his ceramic sculpture. Developing his proficiency in the ceramics process alongside Preston, McLaren also supplied Potters Cottage retail and restaurant with tableware and its feature pendant lighting. Charles Wilton established a studio at Warrandyte after many years gaining industrial ceramics knowledge from a range of large commercial manufacturers in Melbourne and independent business ventures. His work is explicitly functional and unpretentious making them affordable and popular with visitors to Potters Cottage.

Artur Halpern brought his modernist European aesthetic to his production work Sylha, a combination of his and his wife Sylvia's name. The crisp lines of his moulded functional ceramics were a distinct contrast to Sylvia Halpern's whimsical work. Elsa Ardern developed her ceramics knowledge and skills amongst her neighbouring peers in Warrandyte and developed an extensive knowledge of local clay-types, wood-ashes and raku-firing which is evident in the simplicity of her forms with a richness of natural surface colour. Kate Janeba

Facing page: Sylvia Halpern. Face-pot. 2000s. Low-fired stoneware, hand-formed, white satin earthenware glaze, with oxides. 4 x 30 cm.

Collection of Deborah Halpern. Photo by Grace Cochrane.

Above: Gus McLaren. Man with Moustache. c 1980. Earthenware, hand-formed, with painted glaze colours. 30 x 33 cm. Collection of the McLaren family. Photo by Jeremy Dillon.

arrived in Warrandyte via training as a potter in Vienna. There is lightness to Janeba's work in comparison with the other potters, primarily through the lack of iron in her clay body and also through the influences of the Wiener Werkstätte aesthetic of her homeland.

Not unlike a time capsule being opened and put on display, the exhibition *Potters Cottage: A Tribute* was a selection of objects and stories from an era that significantly influenced so many people involved with clay. Over a similar time frame history tells of the many differing ways people come together: the unconventional bohemians, those with socialist values, refugees from Europe, people living in communes or desiring alternative lifestyles and more recently tree-changers. The Potters Cottage community lived and worked in an outer urban area where the rural value of working towards a common outcome to achieve success is customary. With an overarching passion for pottery, Potters Cottage thrived for four decades, an extraordinary length of time in a country with such a young clay manufacturing history.

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