Truth or Trap:
the Australian contemporary crafts movement's
pursuit of art ideals

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Abstract

The contemporary crafts movement was a phenomenon in the Western world, including Australia, from the 1940s.

Its roots were in the philosophies of the British Arts and Crafts movement of the late 19th century, and in the simultaneous expression of ideals of a new democracy through community life that included aspirations towards self-sufficiency through crafts production. It was encouraged by progressive education policies from the 1920s and the related model of expressive individualism in the United States from the 1940s. It also reflected post-war responses to ideals of economic 'progress', to domestic consumerism, to new industrial products and processes and to the development of Modernism in art, design and industry.

The leaders of the contemporary crafts movement used the terms 'the crafts' or 'craft' as an umbrella for a wide range of practices under which to present a perception of cohesive identity and political force. In the early 1970s the movement gained the support of government funding, influenced the inclusion of crafts courses in educational institutions and developed a wide popular marketplace.

The contemporary crafts movement's early ideals and values placed an emphasis on the revival or re-invention of traditions of skilfully making beautiful, utilitarian objects by hand from natural materials. From the late 1960s, however, in seeking the status of art and artists, an increasing number of craftspeople started to pursue instead, the ideals followed by the fine arts at that time, ideals that themselves shifted during the 1970s and were contrary to crafts traditions.

This thesis will review the historical background of the Australian contemporary crafts movement's pursuit of art ideals, discuss the tensions that developed between different philosophies of crafts practice and account for the parallel relationship with design and industry. In particular, it will review the subsequent effect of the crafts movement's pursuit of art ideals.

While the influence of art ideals clearly served to successfully challenge conservative aspects of crafts traditions, I will argue that the pursuit of these ideals also contributed to a loss of identity in crafts practice, a loss that has been under review from the mid-1980s.

I will argue that craftspeople should have confidence in acknowledging and valuing the wider histories and traditions that underlie their contemporary practice, including, but not without critical appraisal of, the influence of contemporary art values.
Acknowledgements

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Very warm thanks must still go to all those who were involved in the original research project, and I gratefully acknowledge their contribution to my book *The Crafts Movement in Australia: a History* (1992).

I am also grateful to the Powerhouse Museum for granting study leave that enabled a number of brief periods of continued effort in the development of the thesis.
Plate 1: Stephen Bowers

(see page 196) Cockylorum 1,2,3, detail of porcelain plate decorated with painted, splashed and airbrushed underglaze slips under a clear glaze, made in Adelaide in 1991. (12 x 62cm)

The title of this work refers to a well-known children's chasing game. Painstakingly painting and drawing over a white slip or on a light-bodied clay Stephen Bowers (b.1952) manages to condense the roughly two-thousand-year history of porcelain decoration, tin-glaze, lustred maiolica and china-painting onto contemporary works that also say something particular about his view of Australia.
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