Piecemeal, boat carved in English lime wood, with hanko ink and paint; fish pieces carved in mother-of-pearl, with ink, made in Adelaide in 1992. (boat 20 x 6 x 3; fish pieces 3 x 3 x 1.5cm)

Trained as a jeweller, Truman (b. 1957) studied further in Japan in ‘netsuke’ carving and inlay work. The materials and process are deeply satisfying for her, and are important in establishing a relationship with the viewer. This work is part of a series called Lifeboat, where the boats and fish are metaphors for issues to do with inner and outer lives, journeys, passengers, ambiguous narratives, individuals and society. Piecemeal explores the fragility of the spirit; the broken fish is to do with questions of immortality. Interview, Catherine Truman 1995.
Introduction: The Australian contemporary crafts movement's pursuit of art ideals

Truth or trap?
The contemporary crafts movement, sometimes called the crafts revival, was a phenomenon in the Western world, including Australia, from the 1940s.

Its roots were in both the philosophies of the British Arts and Crafts movement of the late 19th century that sought to unite art with craft skills in the production of beautiful and useful items for the domestic environment, and in the simultaneous expression of ideals of a new democracy through community life that included aspirations towards self-sufficiency through crafts production.

This movement developed in Australia through the further influence of the need for innovative 'making-do' with materials at hand during the economic depression of the 1930s and through the opportunities provided by rehabilitation training programs following World War II. It was encouraged by the progressive education policies from the 1920s to the 1940s that were to do with the development of the whole self, and the related model of expressive individualism in the United States from the 1940s.

The contemporary crafts movement also reflected post-war responses to ideals of economic and industrial 'progress', to domestic consumerism, to new industrial products and processes and to the development of Modernism in art, design and industry. It was very much involved with renewed assertions of national identity yet also reflected an interest in the social purpose, cultural meaning and skilled practices of traditional village crafts in the third world.

Almost from the outset, the movement comprised a number of groups who held different ideas about what the crafts, and a craft practice, might be. There was always a tension between a revival of the crafts and the changing ideals of both art and design.

The leaders of the 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. By the 1960s, through organised national bodies, the Australian movement started to develop an influential support structure for information, education and advocacy. It eventually involved thousands of practitioners (working in ceramics, textiles, jewellery, metalwork, glass, woodwork, furniture, leather and paper) who reflected and influenced many of the values and perceptions of contemporary social and cultural life. In the early 1970s it gained the support of government funding, began to further influence the inclusion of crafts courses in educational institutions and infiltrated and, to a certain extent, duplicated the emerging dealer gallery system of the art world.
From the 1950s the ideals and values associated with the development of an organised movement were generally agreed, initially, by practitioners in all media. The contemporary crafts movement’s early ideals and values placed an emphasis on the revival of traditions of skilfully making beautiful, utilitarian objects by hand from natural materials. Craftspeople were interested in independence and self-sufficiency, working in a studio or small workshop environment where they were in control of all the processes of their production yet within a framework of social responsibility and a sense of community. In many ways these aspirations have since been identified as an anachronistic, romantic ‘re-invention’ of tradition, but at that time they were certainly (and, for many, remain) central to a strong philosophy that ran counter to the perceived inhumanity of consumerism and industrial production.

From the late 1960s, however, an increasing number of Australian crafts practitioners started to abandon the early philosophies of the post-war movement. They started to pursue instead, the ideals followed by the fine arts at that time; the ideals of late Modernism. Co-ordinating, multi-crafts organisations had developed in Australia following models from overseas, especially from Britain (where organisations were developed to foster and promote British crafts and design after the war), and also from the United States. At that time it was possible for visual artists, particularly in New York, to become superstars: expressive individuals who were backed and promoted by an infrastructure of dealers, critics, and investors. Visual artists in Australia aspired to emulate or join the international ‘art world’: an art world of the ‘fine’ or ‘visual’ arts, its distinction well-reinforced through cultural institutions, which tended to consider little other than painting and sculpture as art.

Craftspeople in the United States were educated in universities, alongside visual artists and many of the designers and architects who had fled from Europe, and were active through their organisations and institutions in claiming a similar status as ‘expressive individuals’ in their own practice. Craftspeople in Australia had not had a strong institutional framework to endorse their alternative philosophical position to the visual arts infrastructure, and the various organisations and courses that were to provide an alternative influential framework for interior and industrial design were themselves simultaneously developing their own voices.

Thus many of the key lobbyists in the developing crafts organisations adopted the models and aspirations of modernist art. A form of ‘art-craft’ practice emerged, and the language of the fine arts was used to validate the work. There were two main characteristics of this shift: an emphasis on the crafts-person as an artist - an expressive individual who stood apart from markets and audiences (because that was what artists appeared to do); and an interest in making ‘non-functional’ objects (because they believed it brought their work closer to ‘art’). It was attractive to craftspeople to also be among...
those who were expressing their individual selves, through making expressive, non-functional ‘art-craft’ objects.

Then, in the 1970s, visual artists moved away from the prescriptive, formalist ideals of late Modernism and rejected not only an interest in materials, techniques and processes, but even rejected ‘the object’, in favour of minimal and conceptual art, and temporal ‘performance’ works where the idea was more important than the object. Many craftspeople chose to stay with the new-found freedom of expressive ‘non-functional’ form, while others pursued the new ‘conceptual’ direction. Following the lead of the visual artists of the time, this group denied many of the previously agreed central ideals of crafts practice: valuing skill in the use of hands and tools, taking pleasure in working with materials, seeing the validity of function as a purpose for production and acknowledging the legitimacy of working for a client. Either way, it was very challenging to be so liberated from what could be very conservative traditions. In doing so, while certainly changing and overturning conservative perceptions about what the crafts might be, they set in train the beginnings of a denial of their own social and technological histories and values. This pattern was largely to remain until the questioning of cultural hegemonies began to appear in the crafts in Australia in the mid-1980s.

There was also another strand: that of a connection with designing for industry. At first, craftspeople by and large rejected industrial associations, and, in any case, it was not common practice for industry in Australia to use local designers. Moreover, craft-based industries in ceramics, textiles and glass were declining in the 1960s. Nonetheless, at the same time that craftspeople looked to art as an ideal, there was a parallel interest in the role and status of the designer as an individual, as demonstrated through the special roles they played in the factories of Italy and Scandinavia, and the development of design as an organised professional occupation in Australia. In turn, artists and designers also influenced each other, so the crafts movement’s pursuit of art ideals also included a reassessment of the role and status of the designer.

The contemporary crafts movement was a phenomenon of contradictions: conservative yet radical; social yet individual; evangelistic yet therapeutic; specialist and separatist and yet seeking to join and share equal status with art. By the late 1970s the movement could be said to have succeeded, in many ways, in its aim to establish an equivalent status to the fine arts. Encouraged by the lobby of the crafts movement, educational institutions, government funding bodies and the marketplace simultaneously supported both the revival of ‘the crafts’ as well as their pursuit of both ‘craft as art’ and ‘craft as design’ ideals.

However, even though it did not represent the greater proportion of crafts practice, the ‘craft as art’ ideal became dominant. Validation for crafts practice was found more through the language and values of the fine arts, and less from its other contributing traditions. Institutions like art and design schools, the main art and design magazines, the history books, and the
lecturers at the time, tended to use art values and art language to describe whatever people were doing. Even specialist crafts journals, that published mainly technical issues and some issues of life style, tended to place greater value on objects they felt they could describe as 'art'.

The art world, however, rarely accepted the crafts as art no matter which way craftspeople approached their work. Indeed, a number of visual artists who were questioning the role of art in a changing society were to more successfully use crafts media and their histories to investigate the social and cultural meanings of crafts practices in relation to the artworld.

How and why did the shifts towards an art ideal occur? What were the effects of these changes in direction? How were the new values reinforced and challenged? Did the changes liberate the crafts or trap them in an inappropriate discourse? This thesis will review the historical background of this phenomenon, discuss the tensions that developed between different philosophies of crafts practice, account for the parallel relationship with design and industry; and, in particular, review the subsequent effect of the crafts movement’s pursuit of the ideals of the fine arts.

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. Despite the liberating challenges offered by the fine arts, the dependence of the crafts movement on the structures and values of the art world and the associated denial of some of the specific characteristics of crafts practice has, in many instances, also had a detrimental effect.

Uncritical adherence to the ‘truth’ of crafts processes has been a trap because it can lead to virtuosity for its own sake. However, the uncritical pursuit of art values has also been a trap: more often than not it has produced work that has been at odds with changing art values and therefore has not been accepted by the art world anyway. The pursuit of art ideals has resulted in a great deal of work in the last thirty years that has been so confused in its resolution of idea with form that it has not been successful as either art, craft or design.

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.

As well as addressing the main topic of the crafts movement’s pursuit of art ideals, the thesis will co-incidentally discuss the way that the art world itself failed to include the crafts movement in its records of Australian art or cultural history, and what this has meant to crafts ideals.
**Scope of research**

This thesis draws on the research for my published work, *The Crafts Movement in Australia: a History*, commissioned by the Crafts Board of the Australia Council in 1985 and published by the NSW University Press in 1992, as well as a number of conference papers and published articles discussing issues of crafts identity that came out of that research between 1991 and 1997 (see Bibliography). To develop the more focused topic of the thesis, new research was carried out between 1995 and 1998.

The contemporary crafts movement has sometimes been accounted for in decorative arts histories as the ‘crafts revival’, by, for example, Philippe Garner (1980) and Peter Dormer (eg. 1990), and by Edward Lucie-Smith as a second Arts and Crafts movement (1981), but there has been no comprehensive documentation of its history and significance in any of the countries outside Australia where it occurred. The American Crafts Museum has now embarked on a 10-year multi-volume project, with three titles published by 1996, and the Crafts Council of Great Britain (now of England) has similarly been working on the documentation of its history.

Bernard Smith, in his 1975 article ‘Art, Craft and the Community’, reprinted in *Death of the Artist as Hero* in 1988, appears to be the only art historian who has referred to the Australian crafts movement in the broad context of art practice, although Margaret Lord briefly acknowledged the growing role of what was then known as the Craft Association of Australia in her book, *An Interior Decorator’s World* in 1969, and John McPhee provided a ‘first’ overview (in an art book) of the decorative arts in collections in Leon Paroission’s *Australian Art Review* in 1983. The movement does not feature in Australian general social histories (like Donald Horne’s *Australian People*), or histories that account for other diverse art practices (like Paul Taylor’s *Anything Goes: Art in Australia 1970-1980*). Some crafts practitioners are referred to in art histories but only where their primary practice is painting or sculpture (like Arthur Boyd and John Perceval in Geoffrey Serle’s *From the Desert the Prophets Come*).

From the early 1980s publications with a sociological approach (like Janet Wolff’s *Aesthetics and the Sociology of Art*, Howard Becker’s *Art Worlds*, Roszika Parker’s *The Subversive Stitch*, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock’s *Old Mistresses*, Peter Dormer’s *Meaning of Modern Design*, Adrian Forty’s *Objects of Desire* and Penny Sparke’s *Design in Context*) offered a way of understanding cultural marginalisation, and a way of reassessing aspects of crafts practice not valued by the art world. Brian Stoddart, in *Saturday Afternoon Fever: Sport in the Australian Culture*, provided a fascinating parallel for the visual arts and crafts with his account of the economic, social and political contrasts between sport and games in Australia. However, nothing could be found during the primary research period between 1986 and 1992 that offered a similar analysis of Australian crafts practice. Most of the small number of specific publications on aspects of crafts practice in Australia by the 1990s had focused on a description of practitioners and
their work rather than a discussion of the significance of their contribution in a broader cultural context.

*The Crafts Movement in Australia: a History* (1992) brought together within a broad Australian cultural history, documentation and analysis of the movement, its precursors and its overseas counterparts. It attempted to address the movement's significance as a cultural phenomenon and provide an explanation for its marginalisation in Australian cultural history. The research drew on interviews, and personal and institutional archives as well as a number of significant recent specific histories, for example, Peter Timms’s *Australian Studio Pottery and China Painting 1900-1950*, Jenny Zimmer’s *Stained Glass in Australia*, Caroline Miley’s *Beautiful and Useful: the Arts and Crafts Movement in Tasmania*, Glenn Cooke and Deborah Edwards’s *L.J. Harvey and his School*, and Anne Gray’s *Line, Light and Shadow: James W R Linton*, all published in 1986.

By the time *The Crafts Movement in Australia: a History* was published, articles had started to appear that addressed some of the theoretical issues explored in the book (for example, by Jenny Zimmer, Anne Brennan, Nola Anderson, Sue Rowley, Robert Nelson and Peter Timms). Conferences now included papers on theoretical issues, for example *The Social Context of the Crafts* by Craft Australia in 1988, *Interventions*, on crafts and curatorship, by the University of Wollongong in 1992, and most specialist crafts conferences. Journals such as *Object*, *Craft Victoria*, *CraftWest* and *Art Monthly Australia* now specifically addressed issues of identity and value in the crafts. Some collections of essays were also published, like Noris Ioannou’s *The Culture Brokers* (1989) and *Craft in Society, an Anthology of Perspectives* (1992), and Bob Thompson’s *Forceps of Language* (1992). Other publications, like Jenny Isaacs’s *The Gentle Arts*, documented specific aspects of the crafts, in this case domestic crafts, but did not address the cultural significance of the crafts movement itself. Overseas, the British *Crafts* magazine and *American Craft* were among those that provided some useful comment on these issues while tending to celebrate ‘craft-as-art’.

By the late 1980s changes in the economic climate, and changes in taste and values, had affected both the ideals and provisions for both funding and education in the visual arts and crafts. A number of reports and surveys, by, for example, the Australia Council, documented the changing pattern and expectations of arts practice, including the crafts, and speculated on its future.

**Terminology:**
Throughout the period under discussion, the meanings of many of the terms used have changed. I have chosen to use certain words, at different times, in the following ways:
Craft:
In my view, this word should be used either as an approach towards a way of working (something is well-crafted), or the description of a type of working practice (weaving is a craft; weaving and pottery are crafts). I have not used it as a category of objects (making art or craft): I have preferred to talk about 'the crafts' or 'crafts practice' rather than 'craft'. This issue is discussed further in Chapter 6, 'A new pursuit?'

Craftspeople:
Since the word 'craftsman' was abandoned as an exclusive term, many alternatives have been used, such as 'craftworkers', 'crafts practitioners' and 'craftspeople'. When speaking about the broad field I have tended to use the latter two, depending on the context: 'crafts practitioner' implies a slightly wider interpretation of the range of activities need to carry out the work or professional practice of being a craftsperson, and is compatible with the commonly used term 'art practitioner'. Many crafts practitioners prefer to describe themselves very specifically, for example as potters and jewellers. Some choose the word 'artist' (as in glass artist), and others choose the term 'designer' (as in textile designer). Some see their practice more as 'designer-makers'. I have used these terms where I know them to be appropriate to the context and to the people concerned.

Art:
This term is most commonly identified as the practice of painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking, and also for the objects made as a result of the practice. In recent years, in order to be more inclusive of diverse practices, the terms 'art practice', 'art work', or simply, 'work', are more commonly used by artists themselves. Thus, sometimes, in certain contexts, I have also used these terms for the works made by craftspeople: this depends on the way people identify themselves, the way others identify them, or where a discussion may need a very broad inclusive term. 'Sculpture' is a particularly value-laden term, and in relation to crafts practice I have preferred to use the term 'sculptural form' which provides a physical description with less evaluative judgement.

Artist:
As above. There is no 'correct' term. For some time many art practitioners have been unhappy with the connotations that surround the term 'artist', and have chosen a range of alternatives, for example, cultural worker, cultural producer, art practitioner, artworker. I have tended to use 'artist' or 'art practitioner', depending on the context, to be most broadly inclusive of a range of practices, sometimes including craftspeople, and sometimes including writers and performers.
**Fine arts/ Visual arts:**
‘Fine arts’ is a term that has academic associations with painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking, and generally refers to objects that are non-utilitarian. It therefore excludes works historically categorised as the decorative arts, applied arts, useful arts or the crafts. I have used all these terms in contexts where the narrative required a comparison to be made, usually in a historical context. The term ‘visual arts’ is sometimes interchangeable with the ‘fine arts’, but I have used it where a more specific or more colloquial meaning was needed, often as a direct comparison with the crafts or design, pertinent to the topic of this thesis. I have also used ‘visual arts’ when making a comparison with other art forms, for example, the performing arts, or when it has been commonly used by others (e.g. the Visual Arts Board).

**Applied arts, decorative arts, useful arts:**
These terms have been used over time by historians, museums and educational institutions, and all have slightly different meanings. All generally refer to objects that are not the ‘fine arts’, that is, they are functional or decorative objects not necessarily classed as sculpture. I have used them where the context has been appropriate to the time or the institution. ‘Decorative arts’ is the term most currently used, for example, in museums that have historical as well as contemporary holdings, and is often now combined with ‘design’ as in ‘decorative arts and design’ to allow a broader interpretation of the collections. Sometimes the term ‘contemporary applied arts’ is now used. ‘The crafts’ in the museum context is too narrow a term to replace these words; it represents a part of the overall holdings, and also overlaps with other holdings, for example, domestic crafts. Some art museums use the term ‘crafts and design’.

**Design:**
This term is generally used to mean, firstly, the process of planning something that is going to be made (I am designing it), and secondly, the way the object looks and functions (it is a good design). It is used by those craftspeople who have a greater interest in making useful objects than in making art, although they would still want to be identified as creative individuals and would expect the terms ‘designer’ and ‘artist’ to have equal status. ‘Design’ carries implications that the object may be executed by someone other than the designer, although a ‘designer-maker’ is one who is able to carry out both functions, even though some work might be carried out elsewhere.

**Art world/Craft world:**
The term ‘art world’ is most commonly used to describe the wide infrastructure that supports ‘visual arts’ or ‘fine arts’ practice. However, because of current institutional structures, it is now sometimes used to describe everyone working in the visual arts and crafts world (for example in
relation to the constituency of the Visual Arts/Craft Board). Sometimes the
term ‘art world’ is used to encompass all the arts, including performing and
literary arts, for example, when lobbying at election time. In recent years the
term ‘art industry’ has sometimes been used instead, in this context, to reflect
efforts by artists and their infrastructures across all fields to be seen as a
legitimate part of the work force. In the specific context of this thesis, I have
mostly used the term ‘art world’ as a means of distinguishing the ‘fine arts’ or
‘visual arts’ from other visual practices such as ‘the crafts’, and the specific
ideology and infrastructure of the ‘craft world’.

Format of thesis:
The format of the thesis is as follows:

Chapter 1: Context of research: conflicting philosophies
This chapter will provide examples of the changing philosophies of the
contemporary crafts movement in Australia in its shift from ‘traditional’
values in the 1950s towards art - and design - ideals from the 1960s. It will
contrast those views with recent critical responses to some of the
contemporary craftwork that has resulted from these ideals, and identify the
issues raised as the subject of the thesis, to be discussed in subsequent
chapters. It will also summarise the current context for research and writing
on this subject, and raise as a matter of concern the inadequate inclusion of
decorative arts histories in art history/theory courses.

Chapter 2: Between ‘beautiful and useful’ and ‘form follows function’: art,
craft and design ideals to the 1960s
This chapter will briefly identify the history of the separation of ‘art’ from
‘craft’, then consider the background of the early ideals of the contemporary
crafts movement. The movement’s sources will be found in the educational
and cultural philosophies of both the Arts and Crafts movement of the 19th
century (as beautiful and useful) and the development of Modernism (as form
follows function) in the early 20th century. In the context of post-war
responses to Modernism, the chapter will look particularly at the development
of crafts communities and specialist crafts groups that were an expression of a
shared philosophy and identity where most were interested in making
beautiful and useful utilitarian items in the context of a supportive community.

Chapter 3: The crafts as art: a shift in ideology, 1960s and 1970s
This chapter will look at the ways in which the contemporary crafts movement
in Australia responded to social changes, and to both contemporary art and
design in the 1960s and 1970s. It will show the development within the
movement of different ideas about what the crafts and crafts practice might
be, and focus on those who began to pursue the ideal of ‘craft as art’. It will
identify the main source of the change in ideals as the organised international
crafts network centred particularly in the United States, and will discuss the
ways in which some practitioners sought to pursue art ideals, in the context of changing values in the art world itself.

Chapter 4: Finding a place: education, money and the marketplace, 1970s
This chapter will survey the responses of educational institutions, funding bodies and the marketplace to the wide range of the crafts movement's ideals and activities in the 1970s, and to the public support it enjoyed. It will show that the crafts were supported as a separate valid force, but that this support occurred within the expectations and constraints of the art and design worlds of which the movement sought to be part. The crafts movement's particular pursuit of art ideals was acknowledged and even fostered by the infrastructure of the visual arts, but 'art-craft' practice was rarely accepted by the art world.

Chapter 5: Finding a voice: questioning art ideals, 1980s and 1990s
This chapter will discuss some of the factors, in a different social and political climate, that prompted a number of crafts practitioners and writers to begin to question their dependence on the values and structures of the art world. It will consider the moves to revalue traditional ideals and affiliations through the observations of contemporary cultural theory, through new interpretations of an artist's role, and through the changes in priorities of education, funding and the marketplace. It will also document some of the ways practitioners made changes to the ways in which they worked in response to a broader view of how their work might be considered and valued.

Chapter 6: Conclusions
This chapter will review a number of themes within the thesis, regarding the character and effect of the crafts movement's pursuit of art ideals. It will summarise the nature of the postwar crafts revival as the contemporary crafts movement, within the context of a social history of the relationships between art, craft, design and industry. It will then look at two particular issues that provoked craftspeople to be interested in art ideals: the development of the perception of the artist as an individual; and the way our society has constructed hierarchies of value around the different practices of art and the crafts as they have been distinguished through certain media, forms and functions. Finally, it will survey some comments on the future of crafts practice.
Plate 3: Gerry Wedd
(see page 183) Love Trophy 1, terracotta urn thrown by Mark Heidenreich, decorated by Gerry Wedd with coloured slips and applied decoration, made in Adelaide in 1993. (183 x 54cm)

Gerry Wedd (b. 1957) makes jewellery as well as ceramics, and he designs textiles for the surf fashion label, Mambo, using themes that combine high and popular culture. His Love Trophies were designed as funerary urns for 'romantic love', based on ancient Greek red and black wares, whose narratives 'ensure that myths remain intact'. The reverse of the urn shows a lighthouse with a stream of light in the shape of a tie: 'a bit of a joke about the phallocentricity of public monuments as well as being a well-worn symbol of hope'. The cartoons are 'garlanded with roses, thorns and skulls in a kind of Mexican melodrama style' with Shakespeare's words 'Of his bones were coral made...' and the popular song Song to the Siren. Interview, Gerry Wedd 1993.
Chapter 1:  
Context of research: conflicting philosophies  

This chapter will provide examples of the changing philosophies of the contemporary crafts movement in Australia in its shift from 'traditional' values in the 1950s towards art- and design- ideals from the 1960s. It will contrast those views with recent critical responses to some of the contemporary craftwork that has resulted from these ideals, and identify the issues raised as the subject of the thesis, to be discussed in subsequent chapters.

It will also summarise the current context for research and writing on this subject, and raise as a matter of concern the inadequate inclusion of decorative arts histories in art history/theory courses.

The pursuit of art ideals  
Checking the field  
In the immediate post-war years there was very little writing on the crafts at all. Some of the key publications were magazines like Australian Home Beautiful and Australian Women's Weekly that offered articles on craftspeople, designers, architects and the popular taste of the time. These publications provide some of the most important records of people and their work and of the ways in which audiences viewed them. For example, writing about the ceramic work of Harold Hughan, Arthur Boyd, John Perceval and others in the Australian Home Beautiful in August 1953, the reporter perceptively observed that of the various potters visited, 'some of those hand-signed pieces you buy today may be the Royal Doulton and Wedgwood of Australia in another fifty years'. The Australian Women's Weekly documented the impact of modernist architects and designers through 'ideal homes' exhibitions, where handmade ceramics, furniture and textiles were often displayed in that context. In the absence of arts pages in many newspapers until well into the 1970s, much of the reporting on crafts practice was included in the social pages where crafts exhibitions and those who had attended them, were discussed as interesting events.

The need for information, and the need to make contact with others, was behind the formation of the first specialist journals such as Pottery in Australia and the Australian Handweaver and Spinner from the 1950s. For the most part, writing in these publications provided necessary information about supplies, techniques and events. At a philosophical level, writing reflected a shared belief in crafts practice as a way of life that made strong links to the

1For example, like Allan Lowe's pots, the screenprinted textiles of Frances Burke Fabrics and Annan Fabrics and the furniture of Fred Ward in the 1940s and 1950s.
values of previous times and to contemporary societies that still practised traditional crafts as part of their cultural life.

Perhaps the most important of these influences on Australian writing came from England, through Bernard Leach’s *A Potter’s Book* in 1940, summarising his synthesis of personal experience of Chinese, Japanese, English and European pottery that had led to his own practice and philosophy, along with detailed technical advice and information.² *It should be made clear*, he said, in his introductory chapter ‘Towards a Standard’:

...that the work of the individual potter or potter-artist, who performs all or nearly all the processes of production with his own hands, belongs to one aesthetic category, and the finished result of the operations of industrialised manufacture, or mass-production, to another quite different category. In the work of the potter-artist, who throws his own pots, there is a unity of design and execution, a co-operation of hand and undivided personality, for designer and craftsman are one, that has no counterpart in the designer for mass-production...

He clearly differentiated between ‘the intuitive and humanistic’ qualities of the hand-made, and the ‘rational and abstract’ characteristics of design for industrial manufacture, saying that ‘each method has its own aesthetic significance’, and that examples of both could be good or bad. Furthermore, although he claimed that ‘as soon as the craftsman becomes individual and detached from his tradition he stands on the same footing as the artist’, he also believed that the works made should serve a useful function as well as being beautiful: ‘it is unfortunate that as a consequence of its divorce from life, the “applied” no less than the “fine” art of our time...suffers from excessive self-consciousness...a very different thing from the unconscious, inherent, personal and race character which has distinguished all the great periods of creative art.’³ In the issue of individuality, Leach was, as later, were many of his followers, somewhat caught between East and West. His colleague and fellow-philosopher, Japanese intellectual, Soetsu Yanagi, advocated not only that pots be simple and unassuming, but also that their production be ‘non-individualistic’ in the tradition of anonymous folk-crafts.⁴

John Houston’s collection of essays *Craft Classics since the 1940s* (1988) brought together an important anthology of similar and subsequent points of view by British writers. ‘War-time scarcity and intensity’, said Houston, ‘promoted the postwar appetite for the arts and crafts as healing forces in the

²Almost every potter who set up a studio, built a kiln, or prepared materials in Australia from the 1950s to the 1970s acknowledges Leach’s writing, diagrams and notes as a guide. For example, West Australian potter, Eileen Keys, taught herself to throw pots from Leach’s book, but found later, that, without demonstration as a guide, she was turning the wheel the wrong way.

³Bernard Leach *A Potter’s Book* (1940) Chapter I

⁴Soetsu Yanagi’s ‘re-invention’ of this tradition has been challenged by a number of writers, most significantly by Yuko Kikuchi in ‘The myth of Yanagi’s originality: the formation of Mingei theory in its social and historical context’ *Journal of Design History* 7/4 (1994)247
new world of peace. The "creative" crafts - the inventive, expressive works of the artist-craftsmen and women - benefited from the romantic glow of the fading traditional crafts. In Australia examples of related ideals can be found in journals such as *Pottery in Australia* from 1964, *Craft Australia* from 1971 and the few early publications like *Australian Pottery* by Kenneth Hood and Wanda Garnsey (1972).

Crafts 'criticism' from within the Australian crafts movement in the 1960s and into the 1970s usually took the form of description of objects and techniques, and of measurement of technical and aesthetic judgment based on agreed standards, such as the 'pour-test' for teapots and the 'inspect-the-back' test for textile works. Sometimes it offered a broad statement of agreed value that was accepted uncritically. For example, in a review of the new edition of Japanese philosopher Soetsu Yanagi's famous book *The Unknown Craftsman*, Peter Timms drew attention in 1991 to our unquestioning acceptance of shared truths a few decades ago, and pointed out the confident assumptions on which the book is built, where Yanagi takes 'highly abstract and subjective concepts such as “beauty”, “freedom”, “truth” and “feeling” and treats them as objective principles'.

There were few exhibition catalogues or publications on Australian crafts until the mid-1970s, and the essays in those that were published generally provided a historical and descriptive background to the exhibition or a statement about a general working philosophy. Behind the continual call for 'critical' writing from this time was also a confusion with the practice of writing as a promotional activity. This kind of writing extolled not only the work that was produced, but also the values associated with a particular way of life, or 'lifestyle'. In 1973, for example, attention was drawn to the fact that ceramist Marea Gazzard used no cosmetics, and wore 'mostly foreign clothes' - Finnish, Indian, batik - and though not 'fashionable, she has the rarer quality of style'.

When they did write about it, art critics treated contemporary studio crafts practice as a new activity that was compatible with the spirit of the time, but there was some confusion about how it should be identified. Some discussed exemplary functional work along with paintings and sculpture, often as 'art in its own right'. And while there was a move amongst some reviewers towards accepting non-functional craftworks as 'art', others insisted that, because function was necessary in the crafts, new work that followed the form of 'art-craft' could clearly not be considered art at all.

It seemed to be writers in architecture and design magazines, like architect Tom Heath who reviewed crafts exhibitions like the annual events at the Sturt workshops in Mittagong, and exhibitions at Sydney galleries, who were more...
workshops in Mittagong, and exhibitions at Sydney galleries, who were more inclined to discuss crafts practice in terms of its broader material and cultural history. For example, in reviewing the ceramic works by visiting potter Takeichi Kawai at the Hungry Horse Art Gallery, and John Chappell and Les Blakebrough at the Macquarie Galleries in 1964, Heath drew on Oriental ceramic and architectural history, his research into earlier influences of these on the West, and his knowledge of technical innovation in relation to design philosophy and the importance of ceremony, in order to critically comment on and compare these groups of work. Along these lines, also available in Australia in the 1960s were the British journal *Studio International*, which provided examples of Scandinavian, European and British design and some examples of studio crafts, and the later *Form + Function* from Finland.

Australian art and design journals of the time included *Art and Australia*, *Architecture in Australia* and *Design Australia*. From 1971 *Craft Australia*, the journal of the newly formed Crafts Council of Australia, established just before the British *Crafts* magazine was first published, provided the first national magazine for the crafts. It drew on the models of all these sources and combined many of the existing forms of documentation and opinion. The editorial in its first issue stated that it was:

...dedicated to the fostering of the highest standards in the crafts. It will carry news and photographs of Australian crafts and craftsmen, and will feature international craft events...Everywhere in Australia people are finding that they need to make things themselves, with their own hands. They and the objects they make are part of a spontaneous and international movement to find individual satisfaction and fulfillment, and to improve the quality of life.

Reflecting the aims of the Council itself, the journal aimed to ‘stimulate and guide, to communicate and to inform, to educate and encourage all those...who strive towards higher standards in the crafts. The professional craftsman, the student, the therapist, the amateur and the creative user of leisure time can all meet on common ground in *Craft Australia*.’

*The start of the chase*

The ‘spontaneous and international movement’, and crafts writing about it, had been especially influenced by the American journal *Craft Horizons*, established in the late 1940s and operating eventually, from 1959, as the magazine of the American Craftsmen’s Council. *Craft Horizons* provided photographs and information of objects and events and was a key forum for philosophical ideas about the contemporary crafts, especially from 1964, through its international mail-out to members of the newly-formed World Crafts Council. It provided a rich resource from which to invite visitors to Australia in the 1970s and its editor, Rose Slivka, was also invited by the

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8 Tom Heath 'Japanese Pottery and Australia' *Architecture in Australia* June 1964 89-91
9 Joy Warren *Craft Australia* 1/1 mid 1971 1-2
Crafts Board to Australia in 1973 to advise on the development of crafts writing and crafts journals, and on publications policy.

Rose Slivka had close associations with American visual artists and critics and with art departments in American universities, and was well aware of the modernist art ideals of the time. These included, in relation to the crafts movement, firstly, the idea of the 'inherent' aesthetic or autonomy of the craft object (the idea that an object existed on its own, outside its history, society or market) and secondly, its function as the personal expression of the maker as an individual (also outside a historical or market context). The idea of autonomous objects - with little function other than as the free expression of their makers - provided an argument for craftspeople to be perceived in the same way as painters and sculptors, and therefore receive similar status as individuals in the art world.

Rose Slivka’s writing, supporting the ideals of both craft-as-art and of the crafts as an expression of traditional, community values, reflected the contradictions of the 'crafts revival' and the re-invention of craft traditions at the time, from the particular point of view of conditions in the United States. Here, in a wealthy, industrialised country, all crafts traditions could be freely drawn on because people were 'not unified by blood or national origin - everyone is from some place else', and its craftspeople had 'never produced for a ruling hierarchy.' The 'craftsman of the modern world', Slivka observed:

...has created an entirely unprecedented situation - a prolific and vigorous handcraft culture within the structure of industrial power. He is the paradoxical expression of an abundant society’s resistance to the homogenising pressures exerted by mass production, and of its drive to humanize and individualize, accelerated and matured through the internationalizing forces of mass communication.

In 1968 the World Crafts Council published *The Crafts of the Modern World*, a survey of the crafts of about seventy countries with an introduction by Rose Slivka, who at that stage had been editor of *Craft Horizons* for about thirteen years. The purpose of the book, as identified in the preface by its benefactor, Aileen O. Webb, was to help celebrate the 'creative spirit of man, expressed in a thousand different ways, that pushes him forward and ...[that] makes craftsmanship so important in the present industrial sweep of our society...'. In discussing the eclectic freedom of contemporary crafts opportunities, Slivka also referred to the romantic ideology of nineteenth century utopian

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10 See Chapter 2. Modernism was the term for a series of art movements from the late 19th century that broke away from historical and romantic themes and styles, in favour of subjects of the present and the everyday; artists wanted to be 'avant-garde', and leave tradition behind. They drew on a wide range of other sources for their ideas, and broke accepted 'rules'. Late Modernism focused on a formalist view of reducing works to their essential qualities of form, colour and composition.
12 Aileen O. Webb in Rose Slivka (1968) ibid 10-11
communities and showed a conscious acknowledgement to the social values of the traditional crafts practised in third world countries. She identified the ways in which makers drew on their own histories and the histories of the media in which they worked in order to make contemporary meanings, and identified the changing role of craftspeople in new social and cultural contexts. 'In his struggle to make ethical connections with his object,' she said:

...the craftsman of our time is making new demands on his knowledge, cultural sources, sensibilities, and experience. He is trying to create not necessarily new objects but new attitudes towards objects, to reinvest the object with its original intrinsic reality, value, power.\(^{13}\)

Slivka's acknowledgement of historical precedents and values was at odds with avant-garde notions of Modernism in the visual arts in the 1960s. However, her friends included Harold Rosenberg (who had championed Abstract Expressionism), and she was well-acquainted with critics like Clement Greenberg who now advocated the 'autonomy' of an art work and its reduction to essential formalist qualities. She therefore tended to express her conclusions within the language and values of the New York art world of the time - using patriarchal terminology as everyone did at that time. In writing about 'the persistent object that demands to be made', she provided expression for arguments that have been used consistently by makers and writers since that time. 'The contemporary craftsman', she said, 'is less directly designing for function...as he is obsessed by the nature of his materials, the interaction of the materials and himself, and the degree to which he can reach object-ness.' This language, now in the form of terms like 'my work speaks for itself', and 'this is my personal art', has remained, for many, part of uncritical popular belief in the crafts since that time.

Rose Slivka's concerns to identify craft objects as independent artworks with an equal status to the fine arts were shared with many other craftspeople at the time. Writing in 1963, Nicholas Vergette, a British potter who had worked in the United States, similarly discussed the pleasure of working with his materials, in language that reinforced the autonomy of the artist as someone who did not now necessarily consider an audience: 'gradually the concept becomes subordinated to the evidence of physical sensations where one's intuitions and animal perceptions take over,' he said:

I do not believe any other considerations are important. The state of being, the state of mind is the end itself. Art is the end itself. It is an exalted state of being in which any other consideration, such as function, social significance, historical precedent, and traditional values are irrelevant and inhibiting.\(^{14}\)

This was a significant shift for the crafts: away from social function and purpose, and towards personal expression. It was quite different from Bernard Leach's meaning of 'intuitive' as both a way of working instinctively from a

\(^{13}\)Rose Slivka ibid 12-13

\(^{14}\)Nicholas Vergette *Pottery in Australia* 2/2 1963 26
sound knowledge of materials, forms and functional histories towards making a useful object; and as a way of assessing a work through its ‘mood’ or ‘nature’ according to that knowledge: ‘Judgement in art cannot be other than intuitive and founded on sense experience’, he had said in 1940, ‘...no process of reasoning can be a substitute for or widen the range of our intuitive knowledge’.15

Running with hares and hounds
While serial production was a large part of the life and work of the craftspeople of the 1960s and 1970s, practitioners tended to make a distinction between ‘bread-and-butter’ lines and their ‘personal work’, ‘conceptual pieces’ or ‘exhibition work’. To cater for the new attitudes to the crafts from the late 1960s, new words appeared in the crafts world, such as ‘conceptual’, ‘non-functional’, ‘one-off’ and ‘wall hanging’, while extended identifications such as ‘artist-craftsman’, ‘artist-potter’ and ‘textile-artist’ were introduced.

Some of the developments caused considerable confusion in both the crafts and art worlds. For example, critical response, by leading art writers of the day, to the 1973 Clay + Fibre exhibition presented by ceramist Marea Gazzard and weaver Mona Hessing, who exhibited very large handbuilt vessel forms and ‘off-loom’ woven hangings at the National Gallery of Victoria, exemplifies the dilemma of identity between art, design and the crafts at that time. (See Plate 4: following page)

Patrick McCaughey described Gazzard and Hessing as superstars of Australian craft, who ‘explode the familiar perimeters of the crafts...they declare a new imaginative status for their objects...the exhibition is splendid, if for no other reason that it should unsettle and mystify the categorisers and the puritans.’ Alan McCulloch added:

The suicidal trend in painting and sculpture has provided an excellent opportunity for a takeover of art by the crafts...The former humble cottage crafts have swiftly occupied the abandoned fields creating new art forms for themselves and a new status...the inventiveness and command of scale and the energetic and imaginative use of materials by these two fine artists should be a warning as well as an object lesson to all sculptors.

However, the more sceptical Donald Brook asked:

What is an idling craft to do? The popular modern answer, encouraged by the loosening-up of the concept of art, is that it shall become an art, and there are obvious - even crude - gestures in this direction...they are not craft in the simple and important sense of being useful things well-made, and neither are they art in the sense of belonging formally, historically or conceptually to a

15 Bernard Leach A Potters Book (1940) Chapter 1
coherent family...so...they are essentially conversation pieces for cultivated middleclass households.\textsuperscript{16}

In jewellery, the language of the fine arts shifted the significance of the work from the satisfaction of the client to the intent of the maker, sometimes, along with the shifting ideals of art in the 1970s, as ‘social comment’. Ralph Turner wrote from England in 1976 that:

\ldots the jeweller’s art should be a communicative one: his art is entirely mobile, its being comes from and is about the human body...real creative jewelry should be capable of drawing people closer together. This type of jewelry should not be worn as a status symbol, its intentions are not to draw attention to social position - indeed the contrary would apply - but rather to attempt to show the outside world the personality of the maker.

He claimed that jewellery had often been used merely for its sensual appeal, but that recent years had included ‘intellectual content, thus raising the subject to a higher level’.\textsuperscript{17}

But did the crafts, in fact, need the fine arts? From the start, not all practitioners were convinced about the dependence of the craft world on the ‘fine’ arts for status, or for its realistic future. In 1973, for example, furniture designer John Smith was saying:

On the one hand we have the traditionalist craftsman producing hand-made utilitarian ware, hoping to bring the creative experience to all men, struggling to survive under the weight of competition from industry, and trying to breathe new life into a dead concept, that was mis-guided even in Morris’ day. On the other hand we have the brave new superstars leaving behind utilitarian functionalism, and surging forth into the realm of art, using craft techniques to make “fine art” visual statements...Craft will not effectively reach the masses until it can offer another ingredient more recognisably lucrative to them than cultural benefit: that is, financial benefit.\textsuperscript{18}

This in fact, had been Mrs Webb’s conclusion in her published survey of world crafts in 1968, and she had seen a solution in the international promotion of awareness of universal crafts values through a wide range of crafts practice.

John Smith’s proposed solution was through design, as a fully controlled production exercise, working to different markets. But not everyone in the crafts world was clear what ‘design’ was, and an early challenge came from controversial visiting writer Donald Willcox, also in 1973:

There appears to be a consensus...that what Australian craftsmen most need right now...is a rush of information on the subject of design. The idea of

\textsuperscript{10}Patrick McCaughey Age 31 July 1973; Alan McCulloch Sydney Morning Herald 1 August 1973; Donald Brook Nation Review 2 Aug 1973
\textsuperscript{17}Ralph Turner Contemporary Jewelry, a Critical Assessment 1945-1975 catalogue (1976) 70, 72
\textsuperscript{18}John Smith Craft Australia 3/2 Dec 1973/Jan 1974 15
Plate 4: Marea Gazzard and Mona Hessing: *Clay + Fibre* 1973
(see page 18) In this exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, Marea Gazzard (b.1928) exhibited large handbuilt vessel forms with Mona Hessing’s (b.1933) woven hangings.

Responses exemplify the dilemma of identity between art, design and the crafts. For example, Alan McCulloch said: ‘The suicidal trend in painting and sculpture has provided an excellent opportunity for a takeover of art by the crafts...The former humble cottage crafts have swiftly occupied the abandoned fields creating new art forms for themselves and a new status...the inventiveness and command of scale and the energetic and imaginative use of materials by these two fine artists should be a warning as well as an object lesson to all sculptors.’ Alan McCulloch *Sydney Morning Herald* 1 August 1973.
course being that information on the subject of design will somehow mysteriously or even magically upgrade the quality of Australian crafts.\textsuperscript{19}

John Smith was, as were Marea Gazzard and Mona Hessing from their different perspective, committed to the ideals of the contemporary crafts movement. They were all active in the developing national and international organisational networks, and they were knowledgable of, and skilled in, the traditions and processes associated with the materials and forms they used. They were also well-acquainted with the current ideals and practices of design and industry, architecture and art and sought, as craftspersons with quite different personal practices, to have their work take its place as ‘the crafts’ equally within the spheres of art and design.

A view that provided an historical context to the ambiguity of the time came with the British Council’s contemporary ceramics exhibition, Image and Idea, in 1980, selected by John Houston, who accompanied the exhibition to Australia. On the one hand, in line with the prevailing ideal of craft-as-individual-expression, and the specific selection of works for the exhibition, he said: ‘The title is meant to suggest a conscious manipulation of material that is wholly at the service of the maker’s imagination’. But in an essay that carefully traced the historical philosophical and practical separation of art from craft over six hundred years, he concluded that:

...our modern reactions to the words \textit{craftsman} and \textit{artist} are the result of innumerable struggles about status and expression, marketing and sensibility...[where] these precedents are usually and confusingly expressed as opinions because the historical process which informed them has been discounted or forgotten.’ Freed by the modern disciplines of industrial and product design, the terms ‘artist’ and ‘craftsman’ were, he said, ‘able to find a new independence. The longterm effects of the Arts and Crafts Revival have been to re-unite imagination and skill in the single person of each craftsman. It is still too early to tell whether our ideals and expectations about the newest generations of artists and craftsmen will draw them closer together. But as members of both groups receive an education that does offer them increasingly similar options...and an identical academic status, some identity of purpose may be expected.’\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{Losing the scent}

Were Houston’s predictions fulfilled? Were imagination and skill reunited in each maker? Did the artworld accepted ‘art-craft’ as ‘art’? Did it need to?

The crafts, no matter what their intent, have barely been included in either Australian art or general Australian cultural histories. It has been difficult in recent years to maintain the crafts as a special teaching area in the secondary schools of the nineties, and financial cut-backs in universities have seen in

\textsuperscript{19}Donald Willcox \textit{Victorian Craft News} 37 Feb 1974

\textsuperscript{20}John Houston \textit{Image and Idea, Contemporary Ceramics from Britain} catalogue (1980) 5-9
many institutions the recent amalgamation of specific practices into broad
departments, for example, of two- and three-dimensional works. Here,
ceramics, glass, textile and jewellery courses have been either closed or
absorbed into sculpture or sometimes design departments, often with little
regard for maintaining connections with their wider histories and traditions.

Craftworks have rarely been included in major art exhibitions. Many people in
the art world are quite antagonistic towards the area: John Olsen, for example,
in a review of Bernard Smith’s *Death of the Artist as Hero* (where the crafts
were mentioned) said, ‘It is a policy of our present government to encourage
the craft scene as a social palliative...what must be faced is the decline of
aesthetic principle; nobody seems to know what excellence is any more.’
It
appeared that in abandoning many of the previously commonly agreed
strengths and qualities of working in the crafts, crafts practice had lost, in the
eyes of contemporary audiences at least, its historical and social connections,
and therefore its particular critical and intellectual framework.

At various times, the art world ‘adopted’ some aspect of the crafts and
assimilated it into the history and practices of art. Thus, the early ceramic
works of Australian artists Margaret Preston and Arthur Boyd are exhibited
alongside their paintings in art galleries (as are the ceramic works of Picasso)
where few other ceramic works are shown; and the painted, wooden *Red-Blue
chair* by Dutch designer Gerrit Rietveld in 1918, while significant for its
challenges to furniture design and construction, is discussed in fine arts
courses in relation to, for example, constructivist painting rather than
furniture. In writing about quilt making in 1973, Patricia Mainardi pointed out
that while the art world could be forced to include token artists from other
fields, it would ‘never allow them to expand the definitions of art, but will
include only those whose work can be used to rubber-stamp already
established white male styles.’ In this case, abstract pieced quilts made a
century earlier were discussed in relation to contemporary formalist painting.
‘Because our female ancestors’ pieced quilts bear a superficial resemblance to
the work of contemporary formalist artists such as Stella, Noland and
Newman,’ she said, ‘...modern male curators and critics are now capable of
“seeing” the art in them.’ One critic, for example, had described abstract
pieced quilts as strong, bold, vigorous and tough, with ‘op effects’, use of
‘color field’, and ‘mirroring’ contemporary painting trends; but dismissed
applique quilts as pretty, decorative, beautiful and elegant. Mainardi argued
that over four hundred years women had made every kind of art through their
quilts - reflecting personal, religious and political ideas, as well as abstract and
geometric forms.

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21 John Olsen in a review of Bernard Smith’s *The Death of the Artist as Hero* (1988),
Weekend Australian 27-28 February 1988
22 Patricia Mainardi ‘Quilts: the Great American Art’ The Feminist Art Journal 2 1 Winter
Similarly, the craft world ‘adopted’ visual artists using ‘crafts’ media in order to extend a public perception of the boundaries of what they were doing. Some examples include artist and designer Douglas Annand, who made large glass sculptures in Australia in the 1960s, and Magdalena Abakanowicz and Ewa Pachucka, Polish artists working with fibres to make large sculptural forms, in the 1970s. Sometimes, as with Jeff Koons in the United States in the 1990s, who employed artisans to make very large ‘kitsch’ painted porcelain works, they resented the incursion of artists into ‘their territory’, because they did not possess the skills and understandings of the materials and processes required to make their work.

Art ideals continue to be reinforced as an ideal for the crafts in a range of quite diverse publications. Robert Atkins’s *Art Speak: a Guide to Contemporary Ideas, Movements and Buzzwords* (1990), for example, is typical of a number of art dictionaries that include the crafts only through terms like ‘artists furniture’ and ‘ceramic sculpture’ - terms that refer to art in their intent. And in *Sight Lines*, her 1992 book on Australian women’s art and feminist perspectives, Sandy Kirby devotes a whole chapter to the crafts - but only refers to, and illustrates, works that look like art and address what she has selected as feminist art concerns. In both cases, other crafts practices and histories are excluded from the ‘art’ narrative; they are clearly not considered part of it.

**Questioning the catch**

In the end, for many craftspeople, the pursuit of art ideals did not seem to provide what had been expected. Tim Jacobs observed at the fourth National Ceramics Conference in 1985:

> In the face of so much activity, so much growth over the last 15 years, there is still a dearth of analytical debate. The activity even in its broadest terms, continues to fail to attract any significant intellectual attention on any level - aesthetic, sociological, political, economic, psychological or philosophical. Questions like “what are we making?” or “why are we making?” always finish up back in the too-hard basket. Without the kind of rigorous critical framework developed for music, theatre, literature and other forms of visual arts, this kind of object-making will always remain peripheral to the culture.\(^{23}\)

However, there had been a start. From the early 1980s crafts practitioners and writers in Australia began to question more seriously the values of the fine arts in relation to the crafts, particularly those of the 1970s that had denied so much of what had previously been important to the crafts. The questions raised by exposing hegemonies in the visual arts in the cultural theory courses of the 1980s brought to a head some of the conflicting ideals of the crafts in

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relation to art, design, industry the marketplace and society. Craftspeople started to reassess their role and identity in relation to these changes, and started to seek better ways to locate crafts practice within its own production traditions (that included its connections with art and design, as well as its own specific histories) in the contemporary cultural world. The issues that were discussed offered crafts practice a theoretical and historical rationale for addressing its own histories and language, and practitioners (in Australia at least) became more self-questioning, whether working as artists, as traditional studio crafts practitioners, or as designers for production.

In 1981, for example, criticising what she called the 'overdrawn difference between art and tradition in textile production made by Jack Lenor Larsen and Mildred Constantine, long-term United States exponents of the 'Art Fabric', Jenny Zimmer pointed out that:

...freedom from the loom and tapestry tradition does not necessarily presuppose greater freedom to choose an aesthetic over a utilitarian mode...it can and has produced senseless woven monsters...the medium must be pushed to the limits of contemporary expression and fully involve itself with contemporary conceptual and visual problems."\(^4\)

In a subsequent article in *Sydney Review*, 'Throwing the Baby out with the Bathwater', she argued for a need for proper analysis of form, function, ornament, style, media and techniques for practices where these aspects form part of their history. She was critical of those who denied these elements in their work and believed that reluctance to ascribe value to them was one of 'the most interesting aesthetic prejudices of our time'.\(^5\)

In jewellery, changes in fashion and the art world from the 1970s started to bring about a 'democratisation' of jewellery making, and a questioning of the value of precious materials and the associated status of the owner or wearer of jewellery. By implication, this involved a reassessment of the roles of the maker and user in perpetuating status distinctions according to either material, and therefore investment, values. It also encouraged, as Ralph Turner has argued earlier, the making of jewellery as a personal, expressive form of 'wearable sculpture'. But in Brisbane, in 1981, jeweller Elena Gee criticised the ideal where much work in galleries was useless from the public's point of view. She urged that if jewellers wanted to sell they had to consider the public, that it was too easy to make self-indulgent work and blame the public for not buying, and that it need not necessarily mean compromising the basic idea behind design.\(^6\)

\(^4\)Jenny Zimmer in *Wool and Beyond First Australian Fibre Conference* report Melbourne 1981 31
\(^6\)Elena Gee *JMGA (Jewellers & Metalsmith's Group of Australia)* newsletter 3 1981 29
By 1987, in the United States, Glenn Gordon was also observing that while making furniture could be a melancholy exercise in economic futility, he was not convinced about seeking shelter from the situation by selling itself and the world, on the idea of its being art and an endangered rarity. The supposition that furniture was sculpture, produced, in his view, work that was generally unconvincing as art, and pretentious as furniture. 'The problem is,' he said:

...that while we are plunged into the romance and the art of it, the furniture in the showrooms of Knoll, Stendig, Thonet, Atelier International, Casina etc. is still for the most part better designed, visually and functionally...Most art furniture languishes in galleries like over-ripe fruit in a bowl, overdone and too anxiously "original"...art furniture at its best is breathtaking...At worst it hyperventilates with the most desperate novelty...but if you are only out shopping for the Emperor's new clothes, naturally there is never a problem - you can always get a perfect fit.27

In 1990, Caroline Miley was able to observe, in Melbourne:

One of the most noticeable pieces of work in the Meat Market’s recent Easter exhibition was a hessian mat of depressed aspect. A piece of old tarpaulin, complete with rings, had had several layers of hessian and canvas loosely tacked to it, and laced across with thin strings to form a rectangle...The whole object displayed none of the qualities of virtuoso craftsmanship traditionally admired in conventional craft objects, and was presumably intended as a statement of negation of the necessity for such qualities...Very well: but what did it replace them with? Addressing purely formal qualities without emphasising craft techniques perhaps? The composition was dull and obvious, the surface disgusting, the colours and textures uninteresting. Perhaps it was a conceptual piece? If so, the concept was also both obvious and dull, and limply imitated concerns extensively worked through in fine art during the 1960s. It wasn't a craft object, and as a piece of art it was a failure... It was however, a good example or recent prevalent tendencies in craft exhibitions for displaying pieces of pseudo-art hanging on the walls.28

Peter Dormer complained from the United Kingdom in 1988 that 'a combination of postmodernist excess and ambition to be seen as an artist has tempted many a contemporary crafts person into some highly skilled work of exaggerated design, size and complexity and hugely inflated prices,' and blamed rich collectors for encouraging it.29 And Susanne Frantz, from her own considerable curatorial experience of that market in the United States, explained to glass artists in Australia in 1991 her concerns about 'the confusion among glass people about the purpose of their work and what it means to be an artist...a confusion about what you make and why you make it...I expect a lot from art', she said, and pointed out that in her opinion only a microscopic, almost invisible group working in studio glass, were making it.

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27Glenn Gordon American Crafts 47/1 Feb/Mar 1987 20
28Caroline Miley Craft Victoria 20/203 June/July 1990
29Peter Dormer 'The ideal world of Vermeer's little lacemaker' in John Thackara Design after Modernism (1988) 142
Chapter I: Context of research: conflicting philosophies

Art, in her view, should be a matter of private investigation in order to maintain an integrity that did not make it a commodity. But art had been turned into careers and businesses, centred round ‘art stars’. ‘The most glaring ways this situation manifests itself,’ she argued, in relation to contemporary glass practice, ‘is in the mistaking of decorative objects for art’.

Frantz’s point was that ‘everyone working in studio glass has to face [the fact] that they are makers of luxury goods which can only be purchased by people with disposable income’. In her view craft making, design and decorative art making have their own integrity and are not corruptible by money because they are meant to be useful and to please a wide audience: they are made ‘to work, to please and they are made to sell’. She blamed the confusion of identity, to a large extent, on the American education system (reinforced by the support of collectors), that had resulted in:

...thousands of hard-working people busily expressing themselves by making personal shrines, fetishes and tortured forms while all the while longing to be sculptors...[with a] smaller even more industrious group of highly skilled artisans who have found their niche in obsessive technique and innovative technology that they too believe constitutes art.30

Writing in 1990, Nola Anderson argued that the ‘American’ studio glass-blowing technology and philosophy that developed in the sixties and was imported to Australia in the seventies, had also imported its own historical narrative. She pointed out that in emphasising expressive individual ‘art’, it had effectively displaced, from a narrative of Australian glass history, the histories of previous Australian industrial and architectural glass practices, and influences from elsewhere in the world like Scandinavia.31

Similarly, it could also be argued that the ideals of American expressionist ceramic artists of the 1960s, like Peter Voulkos and Paul Soldner (who had combined expressionism with the Zen approach to ceramics of philosopher Soetsu Yanagi and potter Shoji Hamada, that they had experienced through potter Bernard Leach’s visit to the United States with Hamada and Yanagi in 1952), had not only entered the language and aspirations of Australian studio potters, but also completed the undermining of existing semi-commercial pottery as a preferred direction.32

30Susanne Frantz ‘Internationalism in Glass: too much common ground’, Ausglass magazine, post-conference edition 1991 73,74. Frantz was speaking from her experience as curator of 20th Century Glass, Corning Museum of Glass.


32Researcher Dorothy Johnston in NSW has identified at least 100 small semi-commercial potteries using semi-industrial processes, in Sydney alone in the 1940s and 1950s. These were ignored by the studio crafts movement, which did not favour semi-industrial...
Anne Brennan was typical of many asking for a new way of thinking. 'In the light of Matthew Kangas' enthusiastic assurances that ceramic sculpture has now been received into the realms of Fine Art,' she said, in her review of the exhibition, American Figurative Ceramics, in Australia in 1990:

...the most obvious problem for ceramic sculpture is that a lot of its rhetoric stems from subversive strategies which have subsequently become conventions. Some [ceramic] artists appear not to have been able to make the leap from the burning deck in time, and as a result, their work suffers something of a credibility gap.33

Of the three strands of American ceramic practice he had identified as functional ware, art pottery and figurative ceramics, Kangas had claimed that the latter had become 'the single most important and successful "cross-over" medium for the entire American craft movement.' In his essay he carefully placed images of the works in the exhibition between photographic examples of historical ceramic figures and quotations by, or references to, famous European Realist, Surrealist and Expressionist artists. He had argued of the contemporary works that: 'Taking their rightful place in art galleries beside painters or bronze sculptors...they have been the joint beneficiaries of a twin heritage: crafts and the fine arts.'34

But as Brennan observed, while many works were successful, others were not. She suggested that Robert Arneson was one of the mature artists who had 'neither been able to find a new and relevant context for the language he has established, or alternatively been able to divest himself of it and create a new one.' Meanwhile, amongst the younger artists who were still working from and consolidating 'the technical agenda from their older colleagues, what seems to be missing from their work is a discourse about ceramics - not in a purely referential sense, but as a way of exploring the history and social connotations of the medium for new meanings. The worst thing is,' she concluded, 'that in some cases, the work seems to have little to do with sculpture, either.'35

Exposing the trap

The views of these writers represented a critical shift from an enthusiastic pursuit of art ideals. Why were they not responding positively to so much of what was presented as craft-as-art? And why were art critics themselves reluctant to approach crafts practice in their work?

In 1985, writing from Toronto, art critic John Bentley Mays explained his reasons for not writing about the crafts. ‘A spectre haunts the crafts world of... processes, and most closed by the late 1960s because of both a change in taste and the lifting of import restrictions.

33 Anne Brennan *Broadsheet* 19 I March 1990 12-13
35 Anne Brennan (1990) op cit
America,' he said, '...the spectre of art...For the most part it appears, artisans are inclined to think that such a blessing is a good thing.' They identify press coverage as '...an important step to validation, exposure and recognition, and they want it regularly.' However, he also pointed out that to his knowledge:

...American craft-as-art has never undergone critical pitched battles comparable to the ones painting and sculpture have endured in the last 100 years...Right from the postwar days, when it decided to hanker after art's prestige and language and high profile, craft-as-art has been smiled on by sunny days...But in a crafts community apparently bewitched by the prospect of certification as art, what power is protecting crafts from becoming merely the fiefdom of these forces, or of any art critic or curator, however reactionary, who will confer the validation artisans appear to want?

'The quest for certification', he went on, 'has undammed a sea of incredibly vulgar, imitative "clay art" and "fiber art" - a flow that continues to the present day, unchecked by a craft press that is too cozy with the people it should be criticizing, and far too enchanted with the goal of validation to say much about emperors and new clothes.' He hoped for a fresh appreciation of the work of the potter, weaver and jeweller:

...who must be exempted from everything I have said about the practitioners of craft-as-art. The quality of mercy in great pottery and weaving is much needed in a visual culture which, under the steady bombardment of television and advertising, has become hugely wordy, demanding and obsessive, and saturated with insatiable desires. The artisan's commitment to the physical stuff of his craft is his only hope for salvation in the brushfires of fashion and the artworld's endless poodle parade.

Mays suggested that art critics would never give the crafts, or craft-as-art, as he had experienced it, as much attention as they wanted, not because the area was necessarily inferior to art, but because they believed it was not art. Craftspeople, 'like novelists and composers and physicists, belong to other tribes of creative discourse, with peculiar languages, technical strategies, codes and histories.'36 It seemed that, in his view at least, in pursuing art ideals, craftspeople had abandoned these important aspects of their own circumstances. However, for those who wanted equal status and validation, those aspects were clearly not able to compete with the powerful infrastructure underpinning art ideals.

What was the barrier to the provision of critical cultural histories that might be more inclusive of those 'other tribes' of parallel practices like the crafts? Were the crafts really too insignificant to be noticed or too boring to be considered? Were they still marginalised institutionally as the work of women artists had been, and therefore still capable of retrieval? Or had they tried too hard to be included as art and, as a consequence, lost a recognisable connection with other aspects of their histories? Where was the trap?

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36 John Bentley Mays 'Comment' American Craft Oct/Nov 1985
By the late 1980s those who knew most about the wide histories of the crafts were usually practitioners themselves and practitioner-lecturers in crafts and design workshop/studios in art and design schools, but there were limitations to what they could provide to students as part of their teaching program. Those teaching in the core history and theory areas in art schools had generally come from university fine arts departments, where very little or no decorative arts history was offered, so they in turn were able to offer little in their own courses. There were important exceptions, where some art schools provided the same history/theory course for all students, and included crafts and design histories, as well as art history, in their programs. But in most cases, those teaching a broader program that included crafts and design histories were doing so because of a particular personal interest or experience; it was not part of their training at university.  

At this time there were probably fifteen curators of decorative arts, crafts and design in Australian art museums, some of whom wrote about contemporary crafts practice from time to time. About half were trained originally in art schools (not always as craftspeople), while the balance had initially studied in Australian universities in either fine arts history, history, or a related area such as archaeology or anthropology with an approach to their area through the notion of objects as ‘material culture’. One or two curators held further degrees in decorative arts studies through overseas institutions.

The institutions in which they worked held different views of how their collections should be funded, displayed, published and discussed, of how the decorative arts collection should relate to other collections, and where the specific collections of studio crafts fitted in to the whole. Most decorative arts collections like those in art museums in Canberra, Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne and Brisbane (which included works from the period of the contemporary crafts movement) were attached to fine arts collections; some like those in Hobart and Darwin remained in art galleries attached to natural history museums; while the decorative arts and design holdings in the Museum of Applied Arts and Science’s Powerhouse Museum in Sydney were linked to both social history, and science and technology collections. While the protagonists of the crafts movement tended to see the crafts as the subject of discrete collections (and indeed many regional galleries in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States have collections that could be described as ‘crafts’ time-capsules), curators were more likely to consider

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37 For example, Julie Ewington’s interest in jewellery and textiles; Jenny Zimmer’s interest in stained glass; Nola Anderson’s interest in glass; Peter Timms’s interest in ceramics; Geoffrey Edwards’s interest in glass.

38 In a few instances small collections were housed in adjacent natural and social history museums, for example, the collections of Linton metalwork in the Museum of Western Australia, and Queensland industrial ceramics in the Queensland Museum.

39 Such as in Bath in England (archives of pioneer studio craftspeople); Paisley (ceramics) in Scotland; perhaps Wagga Wagga (glass) in Australia, and ceramics in some regional
Chapter 1: Context of research: conflicting philosophies

‘studio crafts’ as part of a continuum of the decorative arts and design - whether hand or machine made - in the context of the other holdings in their collections.

It was increasingly recognised, through museum studies research both in the museums themselves and in the museum studies courses that emerged in the late 1980s, that different juxtapositions and contexts condition the interpretation of objects. Thus, it was seen as important, by those in the field, that there be specialist training in the history and theory of decorative arts and design offered alongside fine art history and theory and histories of material culture, and that these histories should draw on other disciplines in order to interpret them. By the mid-1990s there were increasing numbers of graduates from museum studies courses, but most focused on either fine art or design (if they came from fine arts courses) or social history (from history, archaeology and anthropology courses). Very few had found undergraduate opportunities in the decorative arts - or its sub-group, the contemporary studio crafts.

Most of those writing reviews, catalogue essays, histories and journal articles were similarly drawn from other areas. As art history-trained Julie Ewington observed at Artists Week in Adelaide in 1991: ‘the only approach at the moment is a multi-disciplinary 'material culture' one’. ‘Craft is not monolithic’, agreed Diana Wood Conroy, a weaver and art lecturer from a background in archaeology, in 1994: '[it is] not one philosophy but many, and its material histories are the histories of our civilization.' In 1996, jeweller and writer Anne Brennan confirmed her similar view:

I have become sensitive to the meanings inherent in process and object, and deeply suspicious of the dichotomisation of hand and mind which often accompanies attempts to discuss the processes. I [have] realised, too, that in the practice of some craftspeople dedicated to the notion of production, I was seeing some of the most interesting discourses emerging; discourses which were moving away from the 'experimental' visual arts model, and alluding to other cultural models, other histories, which also have relevance to craft practice.

In the same year, writing in American Ceramics, Maria Porges lamented:

gallery collections. Such collections are active for the duration of particular staff interest or funding opportunity.


This topic is included in museum studies courses such as at Sydney University, Deakin University, James Cook University, University of New South Wales, University of Western Sydney. It has also been debated at annual conferences of the national organisation Museums Australia, and state museums conferences.

Julie Ewington, comment from the floor, Artists Week, Adelaide 1990

Diana Wood Conroy 'Curating Textiles: tradition as transgression' Object 4 1994/95 23

Anne Brennan ‘Symmetry’ review Object 4 1994/95 10-12
If I have any criticism [of the level of writing on ceramics] it's when writers emulate the worst, most pompous art-historical type of writing, or rely on a limited vocabulary of vaguely descriptive terms. If I see the word 'luscious' one more time I'll...I'll want to write an essay on what bad pornography and bad criticism have in common...a reliance on tired vocabulary to create a predictable outcome.45

The main stumbling block during this time appeared to be the lack of coverage given in the Australian university fine arts departments to the study of the history and theory that might be associated with any area other than what was understood as 'fine art'. A search made in 1990 through all the higher education handbooks to see what was offering in Australian university art history, fine art history or visual art history courses, showed that apart from art history/theory courses in art schools, and one applied arts history and five museum studies courses, art history or fine art history was offered in about ten universities.46

These courses emphasised the history of European art, with most, but not all, offering some aspects of Australian art history. There were some courses in American art and architecture; a few isolated courses in Asian and Pacific art; one in ethnography and one in archaeology. Almost without exception, studies in art history centred round painting, sculpture and architecture. Some separately identified photography, printmaking and film-studies. The two offering courses on design seemed to emphasise the development of industrial design in relation to advertising and mass-media, and, in fact, one of those courses wasn't operating at all. The term 'decorative arts' appeared twice: once in a course on colonial Australian art to 1880, and the other in a course on Greek art from 500-50 BC. Some elements like mosaics and stained glass windows occurred in ancient architectural studies. The word 'crafts' appeared nowhere. Neither did the words jewellery, ceramics, metalwork, glass or textiles, although one course mentioned dress, in relation to European art history.

There were no recommended texts on the decorative arts (or the crafts), except one or two related to architecture or design theory. It was as if painting, sculpture and architecture were the only visual cultural activities that had ever occurred, because they were the only ones reinforced. Nor did there seem to be much encouragement through philosophical and sociological approaches to our material culture, for students in their search for topics for study in the decorative arts: this area did not seem to provide the opinion of people like

45Maria Porges, cited in John Teschendorff 'Is there a Future for Clay' conference paper, 8th National Ceramics Conference, Canberra, 1996
46See Grace Cochrane, paper to Adelaide artist's week, 'Imperial Culture Centres: Closer to Home' SA Crafts 2/1990 4
Janet Wolff who were saying that the issues of omission were for sociological rather than aesthetic reasons. 47

There were a few notable and isolated exceptions within universities, where lecturers in art history involved themselves in ‘crafts’ debate through arts journals, and encouraged postgraduate research on crafts or broader decorative arts and design topics. But the university ‘art history’ education system clearly perpetuated and compounded the problems of omission and marginalisation, because it was the graduates of these courses who generally became writers, critics, curators and historians and teachers in the broad arts and design field. So long as the Australian institutions with responsibility for developing courses in historical and theoretical studies in the arts left out significant areas of cultural practice, there could never be enough trained people to help effect a change in the art schools, the newspapers, the history books and the museums, and by implication and example through their products the whole public perception about what ‘the arts’ might be.

In choosing the ‘Social Context of the Crafts: Theory and Practice in the Late 20th Century’ as the topic for the World Crafts Council conference in Sydney in 1988, the Crafts Council of Australia hoped to air some of these issues. Craft Australia and the journals of the state Crafts Councils, particularly of Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales, tried at various times to identify and include the sort of writing that might be needed, and a number of arts journals or newspapers, like Artlink, Art Monthly Australia, Agenda, Broadsheet, Praxis M, the Adelaide Review and the Sydney Review provided opportunity for debate. Now and again, conference reports provided some of the most provocative, albeit elusive, documentation of contemporary thought and opinion about such issues. In her report to the Visual Arts/Crafts Board on publications in 1988, Margriet Bonnin commented on the lack of such critical and theoretical writing for crafts practice, and the board made increased attempts from that time to stimulate writing projects.

By the mid-1990s there were signs that, even in the visual or fine arts, the dependence on (often literary) theory by the visual arts from the 1980s had tended to push aside ‘art history’. In criticising art teaching in the 1990s, Pat Hoffie argued that: ‘It is now possible for art students to complete three years of undergraduate study without any unified view of Western art history, and without a knowledge of any theory related to art practice.’ 48 Peter Timms also argued for the need for art histories to be taught alongside theory. In 1996 he pointed out that the importance Western societies had placed on individualism had contributed to the devaluation of traditions as guiding principles in our lives: ‘Ceremony, duty and respect do not sit very well with the idea of individual freedom and self-expression,’ he said:

48 Pat Hoffie Art Monthly Australia May 1996 89 4-6
The result is not an enriching dialectic about the fullness of the void, but a rather lazy acceptance that history doesn’t matter. This is one of the reasons that connoisseurship has been so devalued and scholarly study of historical periods so marginalised. Hence tertiary art schools will have theory departments but no history departments and artists grow to maturity without any interest in the development of their own discipline.

Thus, it appeared to remain the task of lecturers in some art schools, who were trying to cater for student practitioners, to try to find appropriate historical and theoretical material to inform crafts and design practices. By the mid-1990s postgraduate historical and theoretical studies in the crafts were still focused here, in studio-oriented history/theory courses, rather than in fine arts history departments. The theses and catalogue essays from both these students and their lecturers further contributed to a growing body of informed and influential writing. A number of craftspeople, already knowing the history of their own practice, also involved themselves in writing, and an equally small number of other writers applied themselves to useful cultural analysis of what was going on.

But, in comparison with, for example, the visual arts, literature and film, there was still only a handful of people who could bring crafts practice, with its own social, cultural, economic and technological background, into any significant, broad, inclusive, cultural, historical or theoretical debate.

Conclusion:

The contemporary crafts movement enthusiastically pursued art ideals from the late 1960s, strongly influenced by the postwar art world, especially that centred in the United States. However, in seeking validation by the art world, the movement’s largely uncritical pursuit of art ideals alienated it from the visual arts, an area characterised by swift critical change.

The institutions that reinforce the hierarchies and values of the visual arts world, like university fine arts departments, have rarely included the crafts movement and crafts ideals in their cultural histories. The crafts have been mostly assimilated into the history of art where artists or designers have used ‘crafts’ materials or forms, or where crafts processes and functions have been seen to have an affinity with a political position in the fine arts, such as by the women’s art movement and the community arts movement.

From the early 1980s some practitioners and writers started to question the pursuit of art ideals and tried to recover a wider knowledge and acceptance of broader crafts histories and values. But the hierarchical distinctions in the visual arts, and the desire of some craftspeople to overcome them, was not a recent phenomenon that could be easily changed.

The source of the distinctions between the fine arts, crafts and design, and of the crafts movement's aspirations towards the status of the fine arts in the 1970s, can be found in the changing relationships between art, craft, design, industry and society over many centuries. Especially influential were the varied responses to industrialisation in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. This background will be discussed in Chapter 2.
Plate 5: Valerie Kirk
(see page 154) Tapestry, *Pineforest Quilt - Applied, Used, Discarded*, woven in mixed yarns on a cotton weft in Canberra in 1994. (150 x 90cm)

'The image in the tapestry...has been developed from drawings of the pineforest plantations and areas of native vegetation...I am intrigued by the farming/forestry/building creeping up the hillsides around Canberra. It gives a sense of being part of ongoing pioneering... processes... The overall format is that of a quilt, playing on the idea of the quilt/forest as a covering and looking at women in the domestic environment reshaping fabrics to provide a cover.' Valerie Kirk, artist's statement 1994.

This tapestry brings together a collection of traditions. Trained in Scotland, Valerie Kirk (b1957) settled in Australia in 1987. Remembering a family quilt of Scottish tweed suiting samples, Kirk has integrated into her environmental drawings, motifs from two early quilts in the Powerhouse Museum's collection. The *Medallion Quilt*, (here with a pine-cone replacing the unusual central shield), was made by Mrs 'Grannie' Brown, from Bowning, NSW in about 1895. The other, with its pattern of triangles, is a 'Wagga' quilt of woollen suiting samples made by Caroline West, in Trundle, NSW in about 1930.