Coming From Tradition

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Tradition and Craft are difficult to define. Today crafts people no longer play the essential role in the economy that they did prior to the introduction of mechanised manufacturing. Instead, the crafts have become the artistic endeavour of those wishing to bring forth their creativity to make personal things of beauty with their hands.

Consequently, there are less of us crafts people. For our subsistence, we are no longer servicing markets which are making broad everyday use of our output, but we are invading the niche markets that formerly were the province of specialty artists. In accepting this new orientation, there. have been a number of changes in the way we do things, and certainly a number of changes in the way we market our products and ourselves.   
Accordingly, there have also been changes in the way we train the next generation of crafts people, and in the next 15 minutes I will discuss some of those changes, and their relative merits and pitfalls.

In introducing the conversation about the current orientation of crafts people, I don’t want to start up the old art/craft debate. Nor do I wish to invalidate any artist who sets out to make a statement in any medium he or she chooses.

The difference for me is in the exploration of a hand-made object. For example, a vase can have the nobility of a great sculpture. I say can have, because obviously not all vases do. But equally, the vase which is not a sculpture. has an important role to play in our destiny. I say this because, the hand-made object is still our connection to the physical environment, an essential requirement for our well-being.

In our area of another of the great difficulties is coming to terms with the huge range of output. Let us compare ourselves with painters. In painting, for example, there is a body of work that might be termed ‘pot-boilers’, original paintings that are churned out 6 per day. At the other end of the range are those works which are an artist’s statement of their involvement in the culture of their time. Each of these have a market and serve a purpose. People buy to decorate their commercial premises and their homes. By and large, they have shown a preference to buy reproductions of a reasonable work of art when an original is out of their price range.

In Ceramics, the range is much larger. You begin with cottage industry, crafts people creating objects for every-day use. Further up the line, there is now a body of traditional ceramists who produce specialised objects, not principally for everyday use, but having some utility, and being an expression of their talents. And at the top end, there is a body of ceramists producing some great art. The distinction here appears to be the utility of the object produced, but it also determines the market at which the object is pitched, and the means by which it is marketed. Every-day use objects are often sold by the producer, direct to the public, at venues like community markets. The middle range is the province of the craft shop and gallery selling to the collector and art appreciator. The fine art is handled by the specialist negotiator dealing with institutions or special collectors. So over the full range, there are very different producers, sales people and buyers.

Let me describe where I fit into this industry. My father was a goldsmith, coming from a line of craftsmen, before he became an engineer and later an educator. Accordingly, my own work comes out of the craft tradition. As well, my parents were travellers, citizens of the world. I myself am a hybrid, new to this country. I say that, even though I came here as a young child, and have lived here more than 40 years. It's the place I call home, yet there is a memory of other cultures, some originating in my roots, and others from travel experiences. I have a link with the craft traditions of my birthplace Persia, through my father's work in documenting the crafts of the Middle East, and my own explorations in this region. Complementing this, are the European traditions of my German parents. And to round it all off, through my and travels I have assimilated the traditions of China and Japan.

I started making pots in the 1960's. I studied at East Sydney under Peter Rushforth, and worked at commercial potteries in the UK, as well as at Sturt Pottery at Nfittagong. For quite a few years I made my own work and sold it from my own studio in Paddington, in inner Sydney. I began teaching part-time. As the income from teaching increased, and was sufficient to manage the household, I was able to explore some aspects of pottery that I had been attracted to ever since my student days. The Japanese aesthetic in particular, and of course that meant wood-filing. It is a direction that I am still exploring today.

For me, making pots is a ritual. It is a celebration of our physical nature and a renewal of our energy. Making pots that challenge the user's preconceptions about the nature of beauty and use, the nature of art, is my personal goal. For me a pot really 'sings’ when there is a sense of mystery, when there is an understatement, when things are hinted at, alluded to, when it has its own ambiguity. When you want to contemplate it, are compelled to pick it up, look at it out of the comer of your eye as it were, keep coming back to it.

I employ techniques based on practising and continuing to develop sound craftsmanship. In search of ultimate beauty, I simplify, to hone back to the essence. To make a good simple pot, one first needs to know all the complexities to be able to discard the superfluous. That all comes through the process of making. The adventure is in the pursuit. You don't have a fixed result in your mind, but you work through the process, exploring the material, exercising judgement all the way about the rightness and wrongness, letting your tell you if it's working, and through this process you discover. One thing leads to another that wasn't planned, and it's this discovery that is captivating, energising, and that sustains us. This is the art that has been around since man first raised a daubed finger to decorate the caves. And the common denominator here, is of something which we each wish to lock into our own in our own way.

It is from this understanding that we can declare that no artist or crafts person can work in an intellectual vacuum. At the National Art School we teach the students that they need to be informed about the present and the past. About tradition, and about how it is now. And about how great art has a power that can't be devoid of technique.

The National Art School is an Atelier based school, the master and apprenticeship system. hands-on teaching and a maximum of contact teaching hours. It is this feature that attracts students, the reputation of knowing that they will get lots and lots of tuition, to assimilate a broad range of techniques. It does not appear to be a feature that has been universally practised in art or craft training in recent times, in Australia, or internationally. In fact, the well-known Australian artist and critic Robert Hughes, in the introduction to his recent book "Nothing if Not Critical" makes reference to the directions that art education has pursued over the last generation. He laments that:

*"For nearly a quarter of a century, late modernist art teaching (especially in America) has increasingly succumbed to the fiction that the values of the so-called academy - meaning, in essence, the transmission of disciplined skills based on drawing from the live model and the natural motif- were hostile to "creativity"...(l)*

Quite an emotive statement, but very descriptive of the attitudes of the time. Open hostility to the development of disciplined skills, seen as a block to creativity. But why should that have come about just at this time? And what were the pressures in our culture which brought us to this conflict with tradition? Hughes goes on to explain:

*“…thanks to America's tedious obsession with the therapeutic, its art schools in the 1960's and 1970's tended to become creches, whose aim was less to transmit the difficult skills of painting and sculpture than to produce "fulfilled" personalities. "*

As the first generation of young adults emerged after world war 2, we set about to right all the wrongs that our parents had wrought on this planet. It was a time to believe that all the traditional values had failed, and that they must be questioned, and revised, or abandoned. It was a time when we were looking for alternatives, and the traditional was under suspicion as being the cause of the breakdown.

It was not just the world of art education that was caught in quest. It was evident in science, commerce, medicine, in every academic endeavour. It was considered important in the rebuilding of our self-esteem, that each student be encouraged to pursue personal fulfilment, and to strive to define what form that fulfilment was to take. In terns of developing the next generation of artists and crafts people, it meant that thinking deep thoughts about histories and strategies was rated as more noble than teaching handwork. In terms of direction, it produced an exaggerated drift towards emphasising the conceptual. In the field of Ceramics, our legacy of these times were the moves to dispense with teaching many basic skills.

The drift had considerable impact, and a whole generation of artists and crafts people have emerged from that education system and are now contributing as teachers to the next generation. The effects of that impact have produced considerable discussion, and of course it is not just a recent phenomenon. Marguerite Wildenhain was a potter and educator in pre-war Germany, and later lived and worked in the United States. She served her apprenticeship with the Bauhaus in Weimar, and taught at Colleges of Fine Art in Europe, and California. As far back as 1973, she wrote of the shortcomings that had evolved in art education in the post-war years:

*"With an art education that is neither sufficiently basic, nor competent in its techniques, we have fostered a generation of "Rock 'n Roll" craftsmen, who float in a sea of violent and misunderstood "self- expressionism disregarding all essential laws of human and artistic integrity. It is no wonder that, in this confusion of issues and responsibilities, the motto "anything that's new goes" has become the main theme of our young craftsmen, and the rigid conformity of our time. " (3)*

The frustration that is evident here is just one example of this lament. and it has been getting increasingly louder in recent years. I don't see the Rock 'n Roll culture as quite the same evil influence, though, as that quote seems to suggest. Or even that self-fulfilment is some evil way of avoiding the exercise of a discipline. I think there is another side of the

coin to be examined, and that we may be able to see some similarities in the evolution of

contemporary music and our profession. In fact, let's have a look at how the presentation of contemporary music illustrates what I am talking about. The performance begins with the band emerging on stage, pretending to be in early recovery from a bout of toxic delirium. However, some way into the show you notice that every note seems to work, and you realise that within that carefree mayhem is cunningly concealed some sound musical background. And if you had been there the previous day, watching the two pantechnicons of electronics being unloaded and carefully deployed, you may have also got the sense of basics there, that the 'roadies' were not just removalists, but sound engineers, with an in the basics of presenting sound to an audience. Nor is it a coincidence that the most successful contemporary musicians have come from a background where they have been exposed to the broad artistic principles of music. It is not a coincidence that those people choose support teams with appropriate training in the basics of sound presentation.

We can learn from the achievements of the music industry. It has had similar cultural pressures. At a when recording and distribution of music has become so automated, there are still many performers, bands and support people. We know why the glamour groups succeed, multi-million dollar that are based commercial viability of their Even the best Ceramic artists can't raise this sort of sponsorship.

But the reason why the 'cottage industry in music succeeds, why people go along to listen to Pub bands, is because they produce good music. Simple as that. Good music produced using techniques, enhanced a little by electronic technology.

Where this links up with Ceramics, and training of artists and crafts people, is in three ways. Firstly, let's look at the cottage industry that may be the crafts person's first venture. Or perhaps the first of a studio artist. These will succeed when the person produces a sound product that has credibility in the market place. Like the pub band, technology can only help a little. It is the traditional techniques that have to be learnt in order to produce the basic product.

Secondly, the which are available to crafts people in the techniques must respond to the needs of their student. Sure, everybody must have the opportunity to express themselves, and part of the training must be to develop that which brings forth expression. However, it is a welcome sign of the more rationalist times that have arrived in the last couple of years, that students are now demanding more of the "skills to go", which they can apply to make a living. This is a good opportunity to place the conceptual on the back burner for the part, and on developing basic skills by teaching techniques.

And thirdly, there is the responsibility to those who have made a commitment to a

lifestyle. In the sixties, when I began my career as a pottery student, I went into it for a quality of life, having made a decision to be an artist. It was a huge commitment, which was later to become an enormous fulfilment. I set out to become a potter. Along the way, I have discovered a lifestyle and a way of being. Yes, there was fulfilment. Yes, I did develop as an artist and a human being. The best explanation of how it came about, is through sharing, of myself with my colleagues and students, and of course they in turn with me. There is very little that I can say that I sat down and learnt, yet I did spend a lot of time siting, and listening, and talking.

Of course I also spent a lot of time getting on with the job and making pots, and enjoying the experience, and getting better at it. After a while, I could make pots where I was no longer focusing on having them draw external approval. Instead, they needed to satisfy my own sense of craftsmanship and aesthetics. At that point I realised that I had achieved a breakthrough.

Lloyd Rees probably summed it up when he said:

*"I always try to look upon art as a of life and I find working to a theory always holds the seeds of decay.... Good art should be done for its own sake, without worrying if it is going to survive or not.... If in the process you have got down to something basic - something that vibrates, as it were - within that frame it will go on vibrating, and this may live on into the future. " (4)*

Our teaching, and that running through the National Art School is based on process. we're not so much interested in product, in the students making the teacher look good - we don’t say to the student, 'go into the studio with that end result in mind', but 'go into the studio to WORK.' The joy of an artist is to work. The end result is the end result, but unless you're thoroughly immersed in it, then you're in the wrong place. are compelled by what they are doing, it's their way of being, their dialogue with the material.

So, I am going to suggest that we need to revitalise the teaching of our crafts. And that the course we should plot must include taking the best of what has come out of these last 30 years in our recent history and build on it. An enormous amount has happened in this time. Technology has made outstanding advances, and we have many new materials. There is a huge bibliography of research and development that has been done, from which we can draw inspiration. There are new industrial technologies available for supporting and

managing our production. But we will be powerless to exploit these new resources unless

we understand the basics of our craft. So as our first priority, we need to restore the teaching of the basic skills and that have been diffused over recent years.

The task of providing teachers who can teach these skills and techniques is not as difficult as it may seem. The strategy must be to NOT staff our colleges with staff, who can only pass on their particular speciality, but to make use of the practising art and crafts community as casual teachers. There are two very great benefits which arise from

this. Firstly, some of the best are those who are succeeding commercially with their work, and who would not be available as teachers anyway. They appreciate the opportunity to contribute on a casual basis, and usually have some speciality that they are noted for that they can bring to the teaching. Quite often, the teaching of that speciality encourages the teacher to do even more research and development.

The second major benefit is for the student. A great part of the development of every artist is the evolution of their own understanding of the medium that they are working in, and the ways in which they can express themselves in that medium. When they have contact with many different teachers, each with their own perspective, they are getting an education which opens up for them the same medium in each of those perspectives. This is a powerful stimulant for their personal growth. It's a bit like gaining an appreciation of many different religions. Each one proposes one perspective of the world, and addresses the purpose of our existence, and the path to our personal fulfilment. When you have the opportunity of gaining many different perspectives, you get a much better understanding of the entire being. You can then meet challenges by borrowing from the perspective that seems best for the occasion.

Then we need to address the issues of technology. When we speak about traditions, we are automatically seen to be denouncing mechanisation and technology. It's as if we were proposing a return to some bygone age of rural bliss where we should all spend most

of our lives digging clay or chopping wood. Nothing need be further from the truth.

Teaching traditional techniques is not about martyrdom to some menial task. It is about communicating and developing the skills of the craft. At East Sydney we have gas and electric kilns, but can still demonstrate the special difference that a wood-fired kiln produces. I do not propose to throw away my electric pug-mill, or to make my students go back to axes when we now have a hydraulic log-splitter. I have no problem with using mechanisation or electronics when it enables us to devote more of our time to the essence of our craft. In fact, the availability of that technology is a tremendous aid in allowing the courses to be as comprehensive as they are.

Finally, we do need to address the question of what graduates we are producing from our courses, and why. It may seem irrelevant to the artist in us, but it is relevant to the community which funds art teaching, and which will be the future consumer of our students' output. We have already seen the decline in Australian manufacturing industry over the last 30 years. That industry is now realising that its decline has been due to the more competitive products being produced in other parts of our region. It is responding to the challenge by concentrating its efforts to improve the Australian product by training and

quality improvement. I can see a similar future for Ceramics. We must improve the training of our crafts people and show them how to improve the quality of their output through application of traditional techniques. Whether they strive for acceptance in a market place, or have to an object which satisfies their desire for that aesthetic they will reap the benefits of being able to produce a quality product.

The last words on this topic I leave to Marguerite Wildenhain:

*"If one has imagination and talent and has the understanding of both the requirements of one's craft and also of the intellectual and artistic needs of our time, whatever comes from such an artist's hand will be valid, not only for us now, but also for the future, because these objects will have enduring human value. Let us then - and I mean every single one of us who is dedicated to the crafts – let us stress unrelentingly, in our lives, in our work, in our teaching, what is really essential to the development of a craftsman! Let us not compromise with general taste and fads, nor with publicity, monetary success and prizes! Our total lives and our work will then add up to the honestly creative expression of our generation and will become the solid foundation of the style of tomorrow". (5)*

References:

(1) Hughes, Robert - "Nothing, if Not Critical"

(2) Hughes, Robert - "Nothing, if Not Critical"

(3) Wildenhain, Marguerite – “The Invisible Core, A Potters Life and Thoughts”, Pacific Books 1973.

(4) Lloyd Rees, on Milton Moon, Pottery in Australia vol 24 no 4, December 1985.

(5) Wildenhain, Marguerite - "The Invisible Core, A Potters Life and Thoughts”, Pacific Books 1973.