

Empty Vessels

Selections from the Margaret Lawrence Ceramics Collection

The Collector

Write by Tina Lee, Artist and Guest Curator

Margaret Lawrence Gallery

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I first met Margaret Lawrence in 2004 whilst undertaking a Master of Fine Arts in Ceramic Research at the University of Melbourne, Victorian College of the Arts. I had the privilege of spending time in her company, discussing her life, her art and her ceramic collection. By this time, Margaret had moved into a nursing home, leaving the ceramics collection packed in boxes in her flat. I subsequently spent many months cataloguing her collection in her modest South Yarra residence — a process which provided an invaluable insight into her life and collection. Every spare inch of wall space in every room (except the toilet) was covered in shelves that accommodated the collection. There was little room for anything else. The atmosphere in Margaret's flat was overwhelming — a pre-1960s humble interior containing few items other than ceramics — a threadbare 1930's club lounge and a single original hair and cotton mattress in the bedroom. A nostalgic and perhaps slightly eccentric backdrop to Margaret's life, the only sign of the more modern 20th century was the remaining TV.

Margaret was artistic herself but having tried her hand at painting with 'little success' (in her words), she completed a short course in ceramics and developed an interest in collecting because she felt her attempts to master the craft inadequate. She had a general interest in history and art and visited art galleries frequently. Margaret was passionate about mosaics and in addition to creating her own designs for personal pleasure, she was commissioned to produce a mosaic for the St Kilda Library.

Compiling a ceramics collection gave her an artistic outlet for a field about which she was passionate, enthusiastic and excited. Armed with an appreciation for studio ceramics she began purchasing what she could afford. She started her ceramic collection with the purchase of a ceramic vase decorated with grapes and vine leaves by William Merric Boyd from an exhibition held in the basement of the Melbourne Town Hall in 1945. Although Margaret had purchased 43 ceramic pieces between 1945-1997, the bulk of her collection was formed after this period. By the time of her death in 2005, she had acquired over 600 studio ceramic pieces. Clearly Margaret had a desire to leave a legacy that would exist beyond her passing, an idea that evolved as she aged.

Margaret could be described as a bargain collector — symptomatic perhaps of a generation that lived through The Great Depression. Her notes were filled with quotes like '*incredible price*' and '*beautiful work*', relating to a set of five pieces purchased for '*ONLY*' \$245.00. Margaret was an exceedingly private person — only a handful of artists had the opportunity of meeting her when she occasionally visited them in their studios. It was not uncommon for her to barter with the artist in order to drive the price down! She was known by gallery owners to collect small works from exhibitions that could be accommodated in her flat, choosing pieces she could fit into her handbag and carry home on public transport.

Margaret's collection recreated the traditional base of the artistic sensibilities of her period, and covers primarily functional pieces including jugs, urns, cylinders, amphorae, cups, ovoids, platters, vases, cups, teapots, bowls, etc. There are only a handful of sculptural works by artists such as Stanislaw Halpern,

Alan Watt, Victoria Howlett, Deborah Halpern, Jenny Orchard, Stefan Szonyi and Julie Bartholomew. There are however, artists such as David Ray, Gerry Wedd, Vipoo Srivilasa and Janet Kourakis who are represented in the collection and although their works are vessel based, they contains refreshing sculptural qualities.

Margaret's creative side had also given her an appreciation of the individual development of particular artists and in many instances she went on buying pieces by both students and artists as their studio practice evolved over time. The collection contains multiple works by by Sony Manning, Les Blakebrough, Barbara Swarbrick, Klytie Pate, Reg Preston, Alistair Whyte, Sandra Black and Milton Moon.

Although many of the artists in Margaret's collection were from interstate, the collection was primarily composed from within Victoria. For example, a Melbourne exhibition of pots and sculptures by the Hermannsburg Potters from the Northern Territory gave her the opportunity to add works to which she would not ordinarily be exposed to her collection. The acquisition of the Hermannsburg Potters, has added an important dimension to the collection in the representation of indigenous Australian ceramics.

Her spirited sense of humour is reflected in the acquisition of whimsical works by David Ray, Robyn Lees, Stephan Szonyi, Debra Halpern, Vipoo Srivilasa and Janet Kourakis. Her complete devotion to the Carlton Football Club and her love of the colour blue are best portrayed in the teapot titled '*Carlton Blue*'. Commissioned by Margaret and produced by Gerry Wedd, this personalized work is included in the current display. Many other artists whose works form the Margaret Lawrence Ceramic Collection were unaware of her, or her collection. The foundation set up to manage her affairs continues to maintain both this fine collection and the Margaret Lawrence Gallery.

As a collector, Margaret was discerning — her acquisitions reflect her interest in the diverse styles and tastes of Australian studio ceramics. Her collection, gifted to the Victorian College of the Arts in 2006, is one of the largest private collections of studio ceramics in Australia. Many of Margaret's personal favourites are exhibited here for the first time along with the initial piece that started this comprehensive collection.

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