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Pottery as vessel or surface: a commentary on three Australian Indigenous pottery workshops

Penelope Collet

1. Introduction

- In this paper, I develop the argument that for two groups of Aboriginal potters, the clay vessel which was originally introduced quickly lost its purpose as a container and became, instead, a surface for painting. My discussion includes the Hermannsburg women's pottery group, Hermannsburg Potters, and the Tiwi Island potters at Tiwi Designs. Both are located in the Northern Territory. In the case of the Barambah pottery at Cherbourg in Queensland, pottery was discontinued. I trace the introduction of pottery to the first two groups and discuss how, over a fairly brief interval of time, the original purpose of the clay vessel was lost. I suggest some reasons why this may have been the case and why the artists, instead, drew on past traditions for the inspiration and creation of their works, or, without freedom to do this, as in the last example, lost momentum leading to the failure of the pottery. This paper draws on the limited literature available. There has been little scholarship in this specific field in the last decade.

2. Indigenous ceramics

- The Australian Aboriginal people on the northern coast had probably had some contact with the use and making of pottery through the Macassan trepang fishermen who visited that shore. Pottery has a long history in Indonesia. However, as semi-nomadic hunters and gatherers the Aborigines had no real use for pottery (McMeekin 1969). On the other hand, they valued clay highly for its ceremonial use in painting on bark, wood and rock faces, and body painting. They knew of its best sources in their country.

- 3 In the 20th century, a number of artistic initiatives were developed in remote and rural communities to provide occupation for their members with the possibility of increasing financial independence. The three I would like to discuss here are those of the Hermannsburg Mission, of the Bagot Reserve in Darwin, which led to the development of potteries on the Tiwi Islands to the north, and of Cherbourg in Queensland.
- 4 Ceramics as an art form is currently flourishing in two of these Aboriginal communities. I have discovered from my reading that the notion of the clay vessel, a domestic container, does not sit comfortably within these two relatively recently established ceramics traditions, one a women's tradition and the other a men's tradition, in these two remote communities. For these two communities the idea of a surface and form on which to sculpt and paint traditional stories became the driving force leading to their success. I also put forward some arguments as to why the third initiative failed.

2.1 The Hermannsburg Potters

- 5 Aboriginal pottery at Hermannsburg in the Central Desert has an artistic heritage that precedes Bagot and other initiatives. The Mission has a long history of providing creative activities for Aboriginal people in the region, as it was established in 1877 (West 1996). Grace Cochrane (1992) refers to attempts made by a German missionary to introduce pottery in the late 1930s. The Hermannsburg Mission was also the home of Albert Namatjira, known for his watercolour painting, so there has been a long tradition of Aboriginal artists using introduced techniques and media. In the early 1960s, an employee of the mission, V.A. Jaensch, thought of introducing figurine modelling to the men at the mission. After testing clays and building a kiln, the workshop was established but after about eighteen months, with the illness of Jaensch, the project ended.
- 6 One of the Indigenous students of Jaensch, Joseph Rontji, suggested in 1990 that pottery be reintroduced at Hermannsburg. Naomi Sharp was employed as teacher in the same year. Sharp initially travelled around the outstations to run workshops. Eventually she confined the classes to the better facilities at Hermannsburg. Because of the traditional gender divisions in the community and the discomfort experienced by the men in close proximity with women from outside their families and with a woman teacher, the group gradually became one of predominantly women (West 1996).
- 7 Sharp, despite her Western culture and training, rejected the prevailing Anglo/Japanese aesthetic and masculinist approach to pottery that had been part of the Cardew influence on Bagot and Tiwi, which I will discuss later. Drawing instead on the female traditions of North American Indian Pueblo pottery, she introduced the women to simple rounded, hand-built forms in terra cotta, which required a minimum of equipment and provided a suitable surface for decoration
... an approach to decoration sympathetic to the innovative graphic traditions of the region, namely the Hermannsburg School of watercolour landscape painting and Central Desert acrylics, both of which are familiar to the potters (Kean 1996, 7).
- 8 The work is made even more distinctive with modelled and applied decoration, continuing the tradition of earlier work in the 1960s. The Hermannsburg potters in the 1990s rejected demands for work of a "souvenir" nature, valuing their freedom as artists. The building of the pots from coils of red terra cotta clay, matching so closely in

colour the sand of the Central Desert, although purchased from a major centre, was important to the women in a tactile sense of being in touch with their country and the sacred earth. While Sharp (1996) encouraged a range of exotic sources for the women's imagery, including television and books, there seems to be a return to the two major creative influences of the region, in the works that I have seen. (For examples please see <http://www.hermannsburgpotters.com.au/>)

- 9 The first influence is the watercolour landscape painting that was commenced by Albert Namatjira. Namatjira had started painting while driving pack camels for artist Rex Batterbee in the 1930s. He adopted the Western technique because he was prevented by Aboriginal Law from painting in the traditional way. Sharp had a number of his descendents in her group and others remembered seeing him painting in the region. His work and that which followed on in his tradition by family members has come in for new critical review over the last two decades:

The recent re-assessment of this movement has emphasised that the landscapes were not mere copies of a somewhat outmoded European art form, but were in fact important statements about Arrernte spiritual links to country (West 1996, 9).

- 10 Aboriginal curator and art historian, Wally Caruana (1994, 106), explains that Namatjira was not guided in his choice of subjects by a Western picturesque view of the landscape. Instead he chose those landmarks because of their ancestral significance and his personal and spiritual relationship with country. He painted them free of any trace of colonisation, as they were in the Dreaming or the time of creation. According to the National Gallery of Victoria (n.d., n.p):

The Dreaming is the basis of Indigenous Australian belief systems and spirituality. The term Dreaming was first used by a white male anthropologist and is an inadequate word to describe the complex stories that account for the creation of the universe. Each language group has their own term that relates to ancestor creation, spirituality and life in the particular area, for example Wangarri in Arnhem Land, Tjukurrpa in Central Australia and Ngarrangkarni in East Kimberley.

- 11 The second artistic influence was that of the Central Desert acrylic painting. This painting developed in the 1970s with the introduction of canvas and acrylic paint to a people whose traditional painting surface was the earth or sand of the desert. When Geoffrey Bardon arrived at Papunya School in 1971 he encouraged the men in this newly established community to paint their traditional stories on the walls of the school. At Papunya, people from a number of different origins, *Arrernte*, *Anmatyerre*, *Luritja*, *Warlpiri* and *Pinturi*, were brought together by the government after being forcibly removed from their traditional countries. However, they shared the same Dreaming. The artists who completed the mural, *Honey Ant Dreaming*, in 1971 included Billy Stockman Tjapaltjarri, Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra, Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, Old Mick Tjackamarra and others unnamed. Unfortunately this mural was destroyed when painters came and repainted the school buildings, but it was an achievement that was to have a huge impact on the community and Bardon started providing the artists with a more suitable surface, canvas, and acrylic paint for their work (Caruana 1994, 107-109). This was the birth of the *Papunya-Tula* group of Aboriginal artists who are so widely celebrated throughout the world today. (See <http://www.papunyatula.com.au/>)
- 12 The original sand paintings comprised a smoothed and dampened surface on which small pinches of coloured ochres, charcoal and plant matter were "painted", hence leading to what are known as "dots" in the acrylic paintings. They were used to teach

and pass on knowledge about the painter's country and the ancestral spirits who created the land. Sacred sites were identified as well as geographical features such as waterholes and landmarks for travel through the country, campsites and places where food or bush tucker could be found. As such they formed aerial maps of the country but were much more than that. The paintings importantly referred to and told the Dreaming stories of the artists and were bound up in the sacred and ritual practices of the group. The use of these stories, symbols and paintings is closely regulated by Aboriginal Law, and when paintings are produced for the art market much of the sacred nature of the practice is omitted or obscured. In 1989, a group of six Aboriginal men created a major sand painting for the exhibition, *Magiciens de la terre*, at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. The artists, Paddy Jupurrula Nelson, Paddy Japaljarri Sims, Paddy Cookie Japaljarri Stewart, Neville Japangardi Poulson, Francis Jupurrula Kelly and Frank Bronson Jakamarra, made this work, *Yarla* (Yam Dreaming) measuring forty square metres, to be installed in the Halle de la Villette for a period of four months (Caruana 1994, 100-101).

- 13 Within Aboriginal communities the right to use particular stories, symbols and techniques is limited to traditional custodians, and this understanding is evident among the women at the pottery. At Hermannsburg, as West explains:

[I]n a system in which access to knowledge is also regulated by a complex system of personal and political negotiation, not all the women are authorised to paint such ceremonially important themes in the same way. This is especially true of women whose mothers or fathers came from places other than the Hermannsburg region, such as Judith Inkamala (1996, 10).

- 14 Judith Inkamala says:

I don't do story pots, only animals, birds, bush tucker and landscapes. My grandmother didn't teach me. I'm not allowed to do it because other tribes might say 'this story belongs to me' and I might get in trouble (as cited in West 1996, 10).

- 15 Whereas Ida Enalanga has authority to paint the stories:

Sometimes I do Dreaming stories from mother's and father's side. I paint bush tuckers and sometime Dreaming. My Dreaming is the Snake and bush tuckers like Wild Onion and Honey Ants everyway (as cited in West 1996, 10).

- 16 The painting is done on bisque fired pots with coloured underglazes which closely resemble the natural colours of the landscape and the flora and fauna. When fired they achieve a great intensity of colour. Today there is a high demand for the works of these artists both internationally and in Australia. Their pottery has been acquired by major museums and has won important ceramic recognition.

2.2 The Tiwi Pottery

- 17 The Tiwi Islands also known as Melville and Bathurst Islands lie directly to the north of Darwin in the Arafura Sea. The pottery there was first established by Eddie Puruntatameri who had been involved in the Bagot Pottery started by Ivan McMeekin and Michael Cardew in Darwin in the 1960s. McMeekin wrote:

It was decided to set up a Pottery Training Unit and a Materials Processing Unit on Bagot Aboriginal Reserve, Darwin, and to establish teaching facilities for the training of pottery teachers at Kormilda College near Darwin, where much of the teacher training is carried on. Also to establish facilities at Bagot for Adult Education pottery classes for aborigines (1969, 19).

- 18 The aim was to provide full time training for Aboriginal people who hoped to become artist-potters. McMeekin had done the testing of local clay bodies and minerals at the University of New South Wales and furthermore had invited Michael Cardew to take part in the project. Cardew is well known for his work with African potters in Abuja, North Nigeria during World War Two. Cardew, who was sent by the British government to establish a local pottery industry, organised the potters with the aim to collaborate in a major pottery rather than work individually, and taught them more sophisticated techniques and production methods. He had three main principles underlying his philosophy of making pottery that he set out to instil in the potters: the notion of pottery “that lives and grows out of its own environment”; the value of sound technical information for the potter; and the value of sourcing materials locally (Collet 2001, 17).
- 19 When Cardew arrived in May 1968, he started training six men, including Eddie Puruntatameri from the Tiwi Islands. They produced wheel-thrown pots that were decorated with brushwork (initially Japanese-style in the Anglo-Japanese tradition) and fired in a stoneware kiln. A further program commenced training Indigenous teaching assistants drawn from Arnhem Land and the Centre. Cardew was assisted by past student, Alistair Hallum from New Zealand, and spent six months at Bagot. During this time it was evident that the students learnt the “practical potting skills quickly” and brought “sensitivity and well developed feeling for pattern to their work.” However, McMeekin, in an article (1969, 23) expressed some concern for the long-term survival of the pottery.
- 20 For a people in transition in the 1960s, the pottery at Bagot was seen as a means to introduce new techniques to the Aboriginal craftsmen and was based on the philosophy of the artist-craftsman rather than an industrial model. As McMeekin explains, not only would quality handmade pottery be produced for the community, but it would also provide the craftsmen with a medium of expression and fulfilment and a means to “find a satisfactory relationship with this wider community of some few million people of varied extraction that now inhabit Australia” (1969, 19).
- 21 While the pottery at Bagot appears to have survived until 1975, when it was destroyed by Cyclone Tracey, it was not rebuilt nor were its successes recorded in the literature. The original aim of training Indigenous potters who could return to their own communities and set up pottery workshops had failed. Cochrane suggests that the paternalism of the government in not allowing the potters the freedom to manage their affairs after they returned home was partly to blame (Cochrane 1992, 141-142).
- 22 The important outcome from the Bagot experience was the return of Eddie Puruntatameri to Bathurst Island where, assisted by art teacher Madelaine Clear and with the support of the Catholic Bishop of Darwin and grants from the Australian Council for the Arts and the Aboriginal Arts Board, he was able to establish The Tiwi Pottery.
- 23 The Tiwi Islands are cut off from Arnhem Land by dangerous waters and islanders have developed separate and distinctive traditional art forms, predominantly based on the *Pukumani* burial rites. These include the carving and painting by men of burial poles that are situated on tombs. The women produce panniers or baskets, *jimwalini*, made with bark and painted with abstract designs in ochre that are also placed on the tombs but upside-down signifying that the deceased no longer need food or water. By the 1970s the men were carving wooden figures based on the Creation Story of *Purukuparli*

and *Bima* in the tradition of the burial poles. With the focus on carving less emphasis was placed upon painting as the primary art form although painting on bark became popular in the 1960s (Caruana 1994, 85-88).

- 24 When Clear arrived at Tiwi Design she encouraged the carving of animals in wood by local artists, which developed into wood block printing and then the better-known silk screen printing of fabrics at the centre (See <http://www.tiwidesigns.com/>). John Bosco Tipiloura, who had also trained at Bagot, joined the pottery and with the ongoing expertise and assistance of the University of New South Wales staff the pottery became an artistic and commercial success for a brief period from the late 1970s to the early 1980s (Cochrane 1992).
- 25 Important exhibitions of the Tiwi Island Pottery were held at Aladdin Gallery in February 1977, and at the Potters Gallery in March 1980, in Sydney. According to Cochrane, “[t]he forms of the pots very much reflected the original Cardew-McMeekin training, but Tiwi decoration replaced Japanese brushwork”. She continues “[t]he Tiwi potters painted selected parts of their stories on the pots and, like those screen printing, added figurative images of the land and the sea life around them” (1992, 141).
- 26 Eddie Puruntatameri left the pottery in 1982 and moved to Melville Island where he established Pirlangimpi Pottery in 1985. The Tiwi Pottery went through a quiet period during which the manager of Tiwi Designs brought about some significant changes. He purchased clay rather than having it dug locally and replaced the wood-fired kiln with one fired by gas. By putting emphasis on the decoration of the works rather than the technical aspects of clay and pot production, a small team led by Jock Puautijimi started work again in 1991 (Cochrane 1992, 141).
- 27 The work took on the sculptural aspects of the traditional burial poles and previously developed woodcarvings and told selected aspects of Dreaming stories. Large slabs of earthenware clay were trodden out on the studio floor, cut to shape and joined with bridges of clay to create the forms. They were sculpted and finished carefully to represent ancestral beings and to tell the creation stories that had been passed down to the artists. Decoration included the traditional form of crosshatching or *rarrk* seen in other art in this region (National Gallery of Victoria 2002). Despite some support from teachers such as Madelaine Clear, this became predominantly a male pottery following the initial training at the Bagot Reserve under the direction of McMeekin and Cardew. However the Anglo-Japanese techniques and practices promoted there were not sustained.

2.3 Barambah Pottery

- 28 Also based on the example of Cardew’s work in Abuja, Africa, the Barambah Pottery was established in Cherbourg in 1969. Excessive control by government departments and their views about what kind of pottery was suitable for the tourist trade undermined initial attempts of introducing a small-scale industry to utilise the local resources and provide employment for local people. Kevin Grealy, who started as an instructor at the Barambah Pottery in 1974, reflected several years later that:

I fear that the schemes to introduce pottery to Aboriginal communities in Queensland have failed because partially in that [sic] they have tried artificially to make pottery a part of traditional culture, rather than allowing it to exist as a possible medium for the transition from the traditional to the contemporary (Grealy, 1977, 3-7).

- 29 Despite Grealy's resistance to government departments he despaired that, "[t]he whims of a largely foreign tourist market should determine for a group of Aboriginal potters what their work should look like". However, he commented on how he was heartened by the Tiwi Pottery experience on Bathurst Island (1977, 7).
- 30 The role of paternalism in limiting the control of the pottery by the Aboriginal artist-potters at Cherbourg must have been an influential factor in its eventual decline. Paternalism was expressed to a greater degree, by governmental agencies that promoted their own agenda, such as tourism in Queensland, and to a lesser degree by the white Australian instructors who felt that they could contribute to the improvement of the lives of those with whom they worked. Grealy (1977, 7) was sensitive to this latter effect:

I went to Cherbourg with typical white Australian ethnocentricity, to give of what knowledge and experience might be useful or wanted. I came away much richer than did any of the people with whom I worked and lived [...] I am heartened by [...] the developments at Bathurst Island. I hope that one day, soon, enlightened people will allow the freedom necessary for Barambah potters to find their place.

3. Conclusions

- 31 Whether for female or male traditions, the imposition of high level technology-based ceramic practices was not successful in the Aboriginal potteries discussed above. Naomi Sharp's wise consideration of the value of women's traditions in pottery ensured an immediate success among the women potters at Hermannsburg. By encouraging hand built spherical forms, requiring low temperature firings, in a robust clay that closely resembled the surrounding country, she ensured the women could gain success from pottery. The varied painting and modelling traditions already in place contributed to the women's move towards a focus on decoration rather than on the hand built pot as a vessel.
- 32 At Bagot, while there is evidence that the men became competent in wheel thrown, brush decorated and stoneware fired pottery, this approach appeared to have hindered the establishment of potteries elsewhere. As with the Barambah Pottery it seemed that government paternalism which attempted to manage the potters and what they should produce also undermined their development.
- 33 When the Tiwi Pottery finally achieved success in the 1990s, the work had become sculptural, drawing on local traditions and beliefs, and built in earthenware clay, to be fired at a lower temperature. With the burden of sourcing and preparing local materials removed and less emphasis on technical requirements, potters could spend their time on making and decorating forms that evolved from artistic, ancestral and spiritual traditions.
- 34 It would appear in the two cases discussed here where pottery lasted as an art form, that pottery or ceramic as a vessel or container was not a great success. For these internationally known artists from Hermannsburg, it is the surface of the clay, the extension of the sacred earth on which they had previously painted their stories, that is their prime concern. For the Tiwi Island artists, it is the traditional art form of wood carving painted with the local ochres, which inspired their move to clay as a medium for sculptural representations of selected aspects of their Dreaming stories. It is interesting to speculate what might have become of the Barambah Pottery if potters

had been allowed to develop their own aesthetics in the new medium based on their own creative traditions rather than having a western-style aesthetic imposed upon them. As with the other Arts in Australia such as poetry, dance, film and music, it has been the opportunity for Aboriginal people to speak for themselves through their art that has allowed those Arts and artists to flourish.

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ABSTRACTS

Ceramics as functional vessel, introduced into Australian Aboriginal communities in the second half of the twentieth century, has not endured in the examples of potteries provided here. In two of the examples, while the Indigenous potters commenced making 'vessels', the emphasis for

these artists soon became the surface, an extension of the earth, on which and through which traditional stories could be told. In the third example the pottery unfortunately failed, as paternalist management dictated a Western view of what the potters should produce.

Dans la céramique contemporaine des Aborigènes d'Australie, en revanche, la céramique ne fonctionne pas comme récipient. Dans deux des exemples étudiés ici, si les potiers Aborigènes ont bien commencé en fabriquant des vases, ils se sont vite intéressés à la céramique en tant que surface, extension de la terre, nouveau moyen de raconter leurs histoires. En ce qui concerne un troisième exemple, la poterie n'a pas réussi à durer dans le temps sans doute à cause de l'imposition des idées Occidentales et paternalistes.

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Mots-clés: art des aborigènes d'Australie, céramique contemporaine, temps du rêve, Hermannsburg, îles Tiwi, Cherbourg

Keywords: Australian aboriginal art, contemporary ceramics, dreaming, Hermannsburg, Tiwi islands, Barambah pottery, Cherbourg

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