

THE KILN - A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

My parents and I arrived in Australia in 1940 when I was two years old. In 1944 they both took up appointments in Melbourne schools as teachers. The need to supplement their teacher salaries in order to better secure the family's future in our newly adopted country motivated their purchase of an electric kiln. At the time it was an expensive financial commitment; however, with the cooperation of the manufacturer, Major Electric Furnaces, they were able to pay it off in instalments.

We were living in a two-roomed flat situated at the top of the hill in Acland Street, St Kilda. Detached from the main apartment block, our second floor dwelling overlooked an exceptionally beautiful garden - a large expanse of green lawn dominated by a great old mulberry tree and bordered by English flower beds. Underneath our flat was a row of garages and in one of these the new kiln was installed.

My parents immediately began to experiment with colours and glazes on hand-built pottery and decorative ware. I watched them apply the new pigments to the biscuitware and we all quickly learnt the reactions of the various colours and glazes to the firing process. Emerald green gave a brilliant smooth finish and, by contrast, matt blue inevitably rejected the transparent glaze over. My father became expert at loading the kiln and, during the firings, he often took me down to watch the temperature cones bend over as their melting point was reached.

My favourite piece from those early firings was a small figure in a blue singlet modeled by my mother. It somehow symbolised the dolls I had craved but never possessed. I badly wanted my parents to keep this piece, but like everything else produced from those first firings, it was taken down to the local florist to be offered for sale. Some months later our finances improved and, as the little blue figure was still in the shop window, I persuaded my parents to buy it back. Delighted, I was allowed to carry it home and then, just at the foot of our stairway, it somehow slipped out of my hands, fell on the brick path and broke. My father tried to console me by telling me it could be mended in the next firing but the two cracks have remained to this day.

As the handbuilt ware my parents were making was slow to produce and difficult to market, my father soon set about acquiring a potter's wheel. The kick-wheel was built to his design and specifications by Frank Duldig. Although my father had never previously thrown pots, his many years of experience in handling clay enabled him to master this new skill very quickly.

The wheel was housed in our small kitchen. This now served not only as the place where my mother prepared the food and we dined, but also as the 'studio' in which the pots were turned, finished, decorated and glazed. (Needless to say lead-based glazes were avoided).

My parents sought new outlets for the pottery in the city shops and very soon 'Light and Shade' (Royal Arcade), the 'Primrose Pottery Shop' (Lt. Collins Street) and 'Chez Nous' (Howey Place) were among the regular customers. Hundreds of coffee sets, ramekins, ashtrays and decorative ware went from the kitchen of our little flat to these exclusive boutiques.

The success of this "sideline" left little time for other activities. Spare hours, evenings, weekends and holidays were taken up in getting the orders out on time. More than once my father drove up and back from Wye River (near Lorne) in the middle of our two week summer holiday, in order to load a kiln, run a firing and deliver an order.

In 1948 we purchased our first car, a black two door Morris 8 sedan and now the garage had to accommodate a car as well as a kiln. Space was at a premium and we had to find a new home. A house in Filbert Street, Caulfield was bought, but had to be resold when Caulfield City Council refused a permit for the kiln.

In 1950 we bought again, this time in Glen Iris. The house had a large double garage, ideal for a studio, but once again we could not get a permit for the kiln on the premises. Not to be thwarted my parents decided to build a separate studio in the nearby developing Gardiner shopping centre. The studio, at 258 Burke Road, was completed in 1951 and the kiln installed soon after.

The deliveries to the city shops continued unabated for a number of years. In addition, the extra space now available gave my father the incentive to explore new techniques and methods. He pioneered and perfected a technique for executing ceramic reliefs which he used widely, not only to decorate internal walls, but also for the facades of public buildings. The largest and most prominent of these commissions, "Progress of Man", was for the facade of 505 St Kilda Road. Its dimensions, (20' x 14' and 20' x 3'), were too large to allow it to be laid out on the floor of the studio and so it had to be completed in sections. My father view it fully assembled for the first time when it was finally erected on site in 1960.

We moved from Glen Iris to Malvern in 1954 and coinciding with my mother's retirement from teaching in 1963, my parents decided it would be more convenient to have a studio at home. For once, no municipal opposition was encountered, a new studio was built and the kiln transferred for the last time.

Although my father turned his last pots in 1961, the kiln remained constantly in use for the firing of reliefs, maquettes, portraits and other handbuilt pieces. Only those sculptures which were too large to fit were taken elsewhere to be fired.

After my mother passed away in 1975, my father turned more and more to clay for his sculptural expression. He found it in the bush, on the beaches or even by roadside construction sites. Each clay had its individual colour and texture. He prepared the clay himself; his creative mind and nimble figures shaped and modeled the forms but he depended on the kiln to finish his work. Often he was so full of eager anticipation to see the results of a firing that he would take the pieces out of the kiln while they were still quite hot. Then his eyes would light up with pleasure at the transformation the kiln had wrought, and with the realisation that the job was done and the permanence of the work assured.