

The Art of Melrose:

Art Pottery 1931-1942

The exhibition Melrose Art Pottery 1931-1942 is the story of the survival of Australian pottery during the worldwide Depression of the 1930s. Curator Gregory Hill provides this insight into one of the most popular potteries with today's collectors.



Above: Pair of green matt glazed frill neck lizard bookends, c.1932-1942, 14.7cm x 11cm x 8.6cm.

Right: Blue and yellow glazed vase with gum leaf modelling, c.1932-1942.

14.3cm x 14.8cm diam. **Below left:** Matt glazed red vase c.1932-1942, 27.6cm x 18.4cm diam.

Below right: Squat matt glazed red vase c.1931-1942, 16.6cm x 18.8cm diam.



Established in 1862, Hoffman Brick, Tile and Pottery Company was the largest business of its type in the southern hemisphere, supplying the building industry with bricks, pipes, roofing tiles and sanitary ware.

Not surprisingly, the Hoffman Company was also the largest employer in Brunswick, Victoria, and community life revolved around it. Households set their clocks by the company's 'start and knock off' sirens, and a holiday was organised once a year for which employees were taken to some exotic location at the expense of the company; cruises on the bay were a favourite. When the Depression hit, however, it wasn't the building products that kept the company afloat. Instead, a new range of merchandise ensured its survival – flower vases! This surprising choice of product allowed Hoffmans to keep functioning and retain key personnel until better times arrived.

Melrose Pottery flower vases today command the attention of a new generation of admirers, not because of their original domestic use but because of their form. The pottery was designed using images from a newly-found Australian identity and all manner of vessels, including vases, jugs and bowls were adorned with

Australian gum leaves, gumnuts and native animals. Ironically, many of the workmen responsible for Melrose ware were Englishmen, as England was still the primary source of trained potters for Australia – the huge pottery industries of the United Kingdom producing more tradesmen than they needed. They imparted a refined level of manufacture that became obvious in the quality of the Melrose range, elevating it to the best of its class in Australia in the 1930s.

The styling was largely inspired by the Modernist movement and the prevailing tastes were reflected in the Australian Arts & Crafts Societies. Several Australian-born generations were looking for a distinct Australian identity, moving away from the maternal associations of the 'mother country.' Perhaps these United Kingdom immigrants had a sharper eye for discerning what it was that best identified Australia, and thus reinforced their reasons for adopting a new country.

Sales of Melrose ware were largely directed at the housewife during the 1930s, as she controlled most matters to do with the domestic environment. The introduction of electrical appliances greatly reduced the amount of time spent on household chores, resulting in more leisure time and the cultivation of personal interests. Magazines such as *Australian Women's Weekly* (introduced by Frank Packer in 1933), *The Australian Home Beautiful* (introduced in 1925) and *Woman's World* (launched in the 1920s) reflected this social change and targeted the housewife's domestic interests. Articles and advertisements of pottery wares were initially centred around English styles, but slowly ranges of Australian pottery appeared and were accepted. Melrose ware





Above left: Brown glazed gum leaf modelled vase c.1932–1942, 23.6cm x 17.6cm diam. **Above right:** Double handled vase with tan and brown two-tone glazing and gum leaf modeling, c.1932–1942, 8.5cm x 23.5cm x 16.8cm.



Above right: Matt green glazed vase with fish decoration, c.1932–1942. 20.5cm x 14.7cm diam. **Above:** Novelty koala jug c.1932–1942, 14cm x 11.5cm x 9.2cm.

Hoffmans Pottery was the first brickmaking employer to agree to an eight-hour working day. It also implemented 'Smoke Free Mondays', in deference to the weekly washday...

became prominent along with Shelley, Beswick, Aynsley, Carlton ware, Royal Albert and others. Its variety of colours, distinctive shapes and designs, as well as its keen price, made it more than competitive.

It was Basil Rowley, a manager at the Hoffman works, who first introduced the idea of developing a new range of art pottery in 1931. He had a thorough knowledge of the pottery

industry, largely gained from his father's pottery works, Rowley, Samuel Hunt Limited in Swadlincote, England. Before working at Hoffmans Rowley had been a manager at Fowler's Pottery in Sydney, and the Calyx Porcelain Company in Perth.

The new artistic glazes commonly associated with the Melrose range today, and largely responsible for its success, mostly resulted from the close association between the Hoffman Pottery and the Pottery School at the Brunswick

Technical School across the road. Often the company gave scholarships and advice on pottery matters, and generally supported the school. However, between 1927 and 1930 it was felt that the school was not catering to the pottery industry's needs but to those of art students, and it was criticised for this. Yet on the verge of the Great Depression, Hoffman's Pottery was to be greatly indebted to the school. At that time household pottery was fairly unimaginative and very utilitarian. However, Mr Rowley 'made some sort of deal with Francis Manallack,' who was the senior instructor at the school, to supply the glazes for the Melrose range. These consisted of matt, satin and gloss finish glazes. The main colours in the matt and satin finishes were celadon green, an olive green, a royal blue, white, a chocolate brown and a pink. The main gloss finishes were a dark bottle green and a dark royal blue. Pots could be bought in one colour in a matt, satin or gloss finish, or in a combination of two colours, where usually the bottom half of the pot was dipped in the matt and the top half in the gloss, resulting in the drip or running glaze effect.

All the well-known Melrose pieces date from this period. Edwin (Ted) Kaye was

The Hoffman brickworks was originally one of a large number of brickworks and potteries in the south Brunswick area.

The clay holes that served the industry are now filled, but to the north of the surviving buildings, where Gilpin Park is now situated, was a large clay pit that reached a depth of 150 feet and at its peak produced 2,000 tons of brick material per week...

employed as the modeller and he designed most of the range. Thomas (Tom) Stevenson made the block moulds, with Nick Greer, his apprentice, making the working moulds; Sam Heath doing the casting, with Percy Heafield (jnr) glazing the enamel wares; and Jack Plever glazing ordinary Melrose ware. This situation continued until the Second World War.

Ted Kaye (1882–1957), an Englishman, first appears in the Hoffman company's Wages Books in December 1932, filling the position of Modeller. The modeller was often called an artist in the pottery industry and was similar to a sculptor in the art world - the difference being that commercial interests always dictated his work. The modeller's idea of relevance to a theme within a range of pottery, or his preferred quality of work, could be overridden, dismissed or altered. He was a hired gun for the company.

Kaye gained the position of modeller through W.B. Rowley, with whom he had been friends at school in England. Somehow they had met in Melbourne, and as Ted was out of work, the topic of employment arose. The Depression was



Ted Kaye, modeller for Melrose ware, seen here in military uniform in 1942.

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Right: Blue glazed double handled opossum bowl c.1932–1942. 10.8cm x 34.5cm x 23.2 cm
Below: Vivid red, orange and yellow glazed gum leaf vase c.1932–1942. 16cm x 17.8cm diam.



in the emerging studio pottery movement, amongst them Merric Boyd, William Rickets and Allan Lowe.

The exhibition and accompanying catalogue for *Melrose Art Pottery 1931-1942* are the culmination of thirty-five years of primary research by the curator, Gregory Hill, and rely heavily on interviews held in the mid-1980s with many Hoffman employees. The text is full of the personal observations of these elderly potters telling their tales of events seventy-five years ago. Their reminiscences revolve around issues of rivalry, diffidence, bigotry, camaraderie and humour, all pertaining to their working environment. It is timely that this material is appearing now, given the angst caused by developers of the Hoffman company site in Dawson Street and the uncertain future of the kilns located there.

Melrose Art Pottery provides a fascinating insight into the social history of the Depression and the range of vases Hoffman produced under the name of Melrose ware. There are 120 pieces in the exhibition, from private and public collections, with many of the works from private collections having not been displayed publicly before. Great efforts have been made to find examples of all the important decorated pieces. No exhibition before has been dedicated to this theme or been able to display such a complete range of Melrose Ware.

The accompanying catalogue contains 100 pages of newly researched information, with full colour photographs of all 130 pieces in the exhibition, including the only known surviving Melrose catalogue, complete with illustrations.

deepening, and the likelihood of him getting employment was remote.

The only guidance Rowley gave to Ted concerning the new Melrose range was that he 'had to do Australian as it was a good seller.' Judith Kaye (his daughter) informs us that, 'One of the first pieces to be completed was the frill-necked lizard bookends, and after that they put gum leaves on everything.'

Ted grew to love the modelling, and would often make things in idle moments purely for his own pleasure. One such item was a bust of Captain Cook, which he 'knocked up' during the day and then 'knocked down' and returned to the clay bin. Unbeknown to Ted, somebody had seen the bust and sought him out the next day to purchase it, by which time, unfortunately, it had been returned to its natural state.

Artists were often found at the Hoffman Pottery during this period, seeking knowledge of the practical issues associated with pottery manufacture. Rowley encouraged this, as he hoped to use their talents in pottery design, some of which were incorporated into the Melrose range. Later, some of the artists became important players

Exhibition tour date for *Melrose Art Pottery 1931-1942*

La Trobe Regional Gallery (138 Commercial Rd., Morwell), February 11 to April 12. Tel 03 5128 5700. **Bundoora Homestead Art Centre** (7-27 Snake Gully Drive, Bundoora, Melbourne) April 20 to July 1. Tel: 03 9496 1060. **Geelong Art Gallery** (Little Malop St. Geelong) July 7 to October 7. Tel: 03 5229 3645. **National Museum of Australian Pottery** (76 Albury St. Holbrook, NSW) November 3 to February 17, 2013. Tel: 02 6036 3464.