

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN AUSTRALIAN CERAMICS?

PART 2: OUR SECTOR STRUCTURES AND SUPPORTS

by Anne Sherman

Like much of the visual arts, the Australian ceramics landscape operates under considerable strain. You probably don't need me to tell you that – you've likely felt it. But alongside this pressure, there's resilience – an environment adapting, shifting, and at times thriving, despite the odds.

This article is the second in a series investigating the Australian ceramics ecosystem, with the aim of building a shared foundation for understanding, collaboration, and change. The project culminates in a national survey and a facilitated workshop at WEDGE, the Australian Ceramics Triennale in October 2025, with a follow-up report in 2026. Your input will help to shape its course.

The ultimate goal of this project is to provide information and context that will support dialogue (maybe even debate!), education, and collaboration. I want to thank everyone who contributed their time and invaluable insights. Our field's resilience is an outcome of the unwavering efforts and dedication of individual actors and representative bodies alike. It's their spirit I keep close in undertaking this project.

Due to their ability to influence the operating environment of all actors in our field, this article focuses on the supporting institutions and organisations, including government, peak bodies, arts organisations, and educational institutions.

Like it or not, in a capitalist system like ours, one of the most valuable inputs is financial. Understanding the history of investments made in ceramics gives us greater insight into the opportunities and limitations of the field. Although early movements like the Craft Association of Australia network and the Crafts Council of Australia predated public funding¹, their efforts helped enshrine the arts and crafts in government funding in 1973 with the establishment of the Crafts Board within the recently established (1971) Australia Council (now Creative Australia).² The spirit of that time was encapsulated nicely by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, who helped create this legacy in the Australian Government and believed that all artistic work is necessary and, regardless of accomplishment, "a value worth encouraging."³ That legacy built the ecosystem we inhabit.



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1 **Sandy Lockwood**, *Unearthed IV*, 2022, Bluestone Collection; photo: Ruby Sinclair
2 **Holly Macdonald**, *Corner Block*, 2020, Bluestone Collection; photo: Ruby Sinclair

But the current landscape is vastly different. Organisations must navigate a fluctuating environment with minimal government oversight or investment. The Crafts Board no longer exists, and state-based organisations, currently represented by the loosely affiliated Australian Craft and Design Centres (ACDC), have largely been left to their own devices. Options for continuing education in the field have dwindled. The 2016 *Agenda for Australian Craft and Design*⁴ warned, “further reductions to dedicated public funding will result in unsustainable infrastructure support, and jeopardise the significant foundation and achievements of the past fifty years.” Meanwhile, in what one interviewee described as a “crisis of demographics”, we risk losing generational knowledge and lived experience of those who helped establish our field.

Seeing the arts as fundamentally valuable in society, regardless of output, has shifted now to our current primary paradigm of an independent, commercialised art and design sector. This shift pushes hard against the historical sentiment that any art practice is valuable and should be valued in and of itself. For arts workers, gig-economy conditions, low pay, and a significant gender pay gap persist, despite the commitments and efforts of national bodies that support artists and arts workers.⁵ Challenging times extend to our representative organisations as well. Not only are arts organisations charged to deliver core programs for their members, but they must also devise and deliver commercially successful programs while juggling burdensome funding applications and complex financial reporting requirements amidst increased politicisation and risk aversion in national cultural policy. In this context, it’s easy to understand why the field may feel fractured.

Researcher Madeleine Thornton-Smith suggests, “[Visual artists] are perceived as lacking solidarity and are not taken seriously enough as arts workers for union representation, yet we often lack the financial security to operate as self-sufficient ‘businesses’.” Perhaps this can be a moment for us to reevaluate and recommit. Long before governments stepped in, our field was defined by purpose, commitment and innovation. That spirit is alive and well, despite the challenging environment. Across Australia, I encountered excellent examples of formalised organisations and independent groups adapting to changed conditions and developing initiatives to address the challenges specific to our field.



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3 **Gerry Wedd**, *Mutiny*, 2013, Bluestone Collection; photo: Christopher Sanders

4 **Susan Robey**, *Splay*, 2010, Bluestone Collection; photo: Christopher Sanders

The Bluestone Collection demonstrates self-determination in how the field is perceived and documented. Founded and funded by a group of established craft practitioners and curators to promote contemporary Australian craft exhibition practice, the group has assembled two noteworthy collections of contemporary Australian craft. Both collections were donated to the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT). According to Elizabeth Mardsen, Manager of RMIT's Cultural Collections, "The Bluestone Collection offers an innovative and sustainable approach to contemporary collecting. By supporting artists representing a variety of mediums and techniques, this vibrant collection brings fresh insight into contemporary craft practice. We remain delighted and honoured that the collective chose RMIT as custodians, with the recent donation of *Bluestone 2* representing a deepening of the relationship between RMIT and this important collective."

We can also realise benefits by building coalitions and reaching outside our ecosystem. The Ceramic Arts Association of Western Australia (CAAWA) is collaborating with the Indian Ocean Craft Triennial (IOTA) to strengthen connections between Western Australia and peers in the Indian Ocean Region. Western Australian representatives attended the Indian Ceramic Triennale (ICT) in 2024 to further this aim. These relationships establish new learning pathways, exposure to diverse practices, and cultural exchange, whilst strengthening Australia's position internationally. Their work is proving fruitful, having initiated a residency exchange, with more to come!

In our current environment, there is a constant push to prioritise commercialised arts practice, arguably at the expense of art, artist and society. However, alternative models such as co-operatives and social enterprises, or resource-sharing models such as mutual aid, mentorship, and volunteerism, may help alleviate some of the pressures of the profit-driven motives imposed by capitalism. Guildhouse in Tarntanya (Adelaide), South Australia, employs a social enterprise model, connecting South Australian artists, designers, and craftspeople with custom public, commercial, and private art opportunities.⁶ The fees collected by the organisation help fund the organisation's programs whilst also providing paid work and professional development for artists. According to Director Beth Neate, "Guildhouse creates professional pathways for a diverse range

of practitioners ... working to ensure that public art reflects the depth and breadth of our creative community." Central Craft in Mparntwe (Alice Springs) operates with the ethos of a 'collective', building towards a reliance on volunteer work to increase the centre's sustainability, and building capacity across the community and the studio. In the words of one member, "Volunteering and putting back into the studio gives me a real sense of belonging to it. It makes me feel welcome and has also allowed me to learn so much from experienced potters."

Collectors' organisations also contain valuable knowledge and their support for our field may be under-recognised or under-utilised. Established membership organisations, such as The Ceramics and Glass Circle of Australia, grapple with the aforementioned "crisis of demographics," with the average membership age being around 60 years. Demonstrating their commitment to the future of the field, they have recently established an annual \$2500 scholarship awarded to a third-year student in ceramics or glass.

It may be valuable to consider how persistent framing between 'commercial' and purely 'artistic' practices, alongside art/craft/design divides, help or hinder us. Arguably, the structural division between 'academic' study at university and 'industry' education at TAFE has exacerbated these perceived divisions. However, Flinders University's Bachelor of Creative Arts has partnered with TAFE South Australia to deliver a dual-award – the Advanced Diploma of Visual Arts, minimising the divisions and resulting in a more comprehensive education that adds value to both TAFE South Australia, Flinders University, and students. The program exemplifies how an ecosystem approach can produce practical solutions to modern challenges.

The original question that motivated my project was *why does a growing public interest in ceramics seem to sit alongside declining structural support?* I believe, in short, that organisations that have historically supported the field are adapting to a new operating environment. The examples above demonstrate different ways to navigate current environments. With this research, I hope to provide context, information, ideas, and inspiration. But these are just words on a page. Our sector organisations and institutions exist as a scaffolding of support, but they rely on meaningful engagement and input from actors in the system. Regardless of how we define our practice, our strength is in recognising our shared interests and building collective solidarity and action. While a functioning ecosystem is rarely cohesive, it should be vibrant, with diverse stakeholders working to balance resources across the system and produce meaningful outcomes for artists and society.

I've seen a range of Australian not-for-profit organisations and peak bodies apply impact-focused frameworks and methodologies⁷ to demonstrate the value of their activities and strengthen decision-making and governance practices. Consistent among these frameworks is the participation of the intended beneficiaries, an understanding of what change needs to occur to achieve success, and repeatable and comparable evaluation processes. While these frameworks may not be appropriate for all organisations, they can be powerful tools to establish a vision of success, produce a set of shared priorities and goals, and demonstrate the value of our work to broader society and funders.

This article is not an endpoint. Undoubtedly, many examples of innovative initiatives exist amongst our ranks that can point to future possibilities. The remaining stages of this project will investigate further insights and examples from across the ecosystem through a national survey, which we hope you'll contribute to. We will also facilitate a workshop at WEDGE to develop opportunities and actions to strengthen the field. We will report back to you on our activities in 2026.

1 Grace Cochrane, *The Crafts Movement in Australia: A History*, NSW University Press, 1992, p.113

2 Ibid, pp.250-251

3 Gough Whitlam, 1979, quoted in Germaine Greer *The Obstacle Race*, New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux 1979

4 visualarts.net.au/media/uploads/files/NCI_Report.pdf

5 Creative Australia, NAVA, Creative Workplaces, SaCSA and others

6 guildhouse.org.au/guildhouse-professional-services

7 For example see: United Nations Development Group, *Theory of Change*, 2017, unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/UNDG-UNDAF-Companion-Pieces-7-Theory-of-Change.pdf; Lottery West, *Community Impact Planner*, 2025, tool.communityimpacthub.wa.gov.au/theory-of-change The Social Value Network, *A Guide to Social Return on Investment*, 2012, socialvalueint.org/guide-to-sroi

annesherman.com

1 Ceramics Collectors Society display case at the Australian Antique & Art Dealers Association fair, Sydney, 2024

2 Speaker presenting at a meeting of the Ceramic Collectors Society

Photos: Paul Simadas

