# TRANSCRIPT

Series 2: Clay Connections

Episode 5: Museums and ceramics with Eva Czernis-Ryl

**Eva Czernis-Ryl:** Objects are amazingly rich documents of our lives. We call it interpretation, but it's really to reveal the voice of the makers and also the users.

[theme music]

**Lisa Cahill:** This is Object, a podcast about design and contemporary craft in Australia. I'm your host, Lisa Cahill from the Australian Design Centre.

In this series, you'll meet people from the most popular craft form - ceramics.

You’ll hear about making handmade pottery on a large scale…

How you teach ceramics. We’ll talk to writers and photographers of ceramics.

And we’ll go behind the scenes with curators and art dealers to hear about collecting.

**Lisa Cahill:** Eva Czernis-Ryl is an art and design historian and curator of Arts and Design at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney.

In this episode, you’ll hear about the special skills of a museum curator. What makes a work of ceramics suitable for a museum collection and…

The unique history of ceramics collected by the Powerhouse Museum. You’ll also hear from Vicki Grima on setting up a ‘living bequest’ fund for ceramics.

[music]

**Lisa Cahill:** Eva, you're an art and design historian, writer and curator at the Powerhouse Museum here in Sydney. I know that your interest is in all things craft, design, architecture, and the intersections of these disciplines and how we display artifacts in the exhibition context.

Most recently, you've created an enormous exhibition of ceramics at the Powerhouse Museum, including objects from the collection and new acquisitions. I'm going to ask you about the exhibition, *Clay Dynasty*, later in our conversation.

But first, I want to congratulate you on what must be the most comprehensive survey of ceramics we've seen in this country.

**Eva Czernis-Ryl:** Thank you so much.

**Lisa Cahill:** It's true, isn't it?

**Eva Czernis-Ryl:** Well, it is the first survey, *Clay Dynasty*. Actually I hesitate to call this survey. This is a collection based exhibition and basically focuses on the last five decades of studio ceramics in Australia, collection based. And we have an amazing collection naturally.

So I started working for the Powerhouse Museum in the mid eighties, having studied art history and curatorship in Poland, and I was one of the research assistants who were hired by the museum to develop the first exhibitions for the new Powerhouse Museum [in Ultimo, Sydney] that was to open in 1988. And then after that, I landed a job with the Powerhouse Museum as a curator before the doors had even opened.

At the Powerhouse Museum, ceramics have always been at the front and center of collecting right from the beginning when we were established in 1879 as a result of the *Sydney International Exhibition* here in Sydney.

The museum was collecting ceramics because of the economic value with industry and technological progress. So we were acquiring ceramics to Illustrate and to educate the local pottery industry, what you can make from clay.

**Lisa Cahill:** Mm.

**Eva Czernis-Ryl:** So in the same way, you know, there's economic botany when we are collecting timbers, and we were an experimental kind of research institution while we were making essential oils from Eucalyptus. In the same way we were collecting ceramics because we wanted to inspire the local industries to use local clay.

And as it happened, we were actually buying objects that were created in studios handmade by men and women.

**Lisa Cahill:** So very much in those days, and probably still today, a teaching collection.

**Eva Czernis-Ryl:** A teaching collection.

**Lisa Cahill:** As well as a collection of beauty and history and a living collection really.

What are the essential features of a museum curator?

**Eva Czernis-Ryl:** The first one that comes to my mind is curiosity. Then of course, it's useful to have some knowledge. And, then of course comes experience.

Curiosity, knowledge, being open and flexible. When you work in the museum, you work with objects, but objects are made by people. So, curiosity about not only about objects, how they were made, why they were made, but also about people behind them, And then I think about how the people who made those objects would like this object to be presented.

**Lisa Cahill:** Exactly, yes.

**Eva Czernis-Ryl:** So there's always the kind of, you know, curatorial eye and everybody has a different one.

And inevitably, even though you try as much as you can to be impartial, you always go for your instinct. And each group of objects or each part of the collection that is formed by a specific curator has this specific flavor, if you like, because this is inevitably inevitable that you respond to it in your personal way.

You're using your personal aesthetics in a way too.

But this is only part of it. Most of all, I'll be looking at what's in the collection and also often what, what I would like to show in the exhibition, what I would like to say in the exhibition.

So you have the long term vision, but you also have your specific immediate aims. Objects are amazingly rich documents of our lives.

**Lisa Cahill:** They're all about, events and stories and memories and nostalgia and all of those kinds of things, come into objects and, the way in which they're displayed in a museum context.

**Eva Czernis-Ryl** Ceramics are one of the oldest forms of artistic expression. We know that. But in fact they are also one of the oldest human inventions, if you like. And they're tangible expressions of societies and cultures as we just said.

Let's say, let's focus for a moment about how incredibly old ceramics are. So ceramics originated before Neolithic Period, and one of the oldest, known figurines is this amazing [Venus of Dolní Věstonice](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venus_of_Doln%C3%AD_V%C4%9Bstonice) which is a region in Moravia, in today's Czech Republic.

Objects are such a rich source, I can't stop repeating it, of incredible knowledge about who we are, where we've been, where we are going.

We are talking about historical objects, but when you look at contemporary ceramics, the ceramics reveal not only about a particular individual who has made the object, but also about the context, you know, of our time.

Now we are going through this amazing revival of interest in ceramics. And this is a global phenomenon. So I don't think that ceramics are a phenomenon, if you like, that is going to pass. I think as they say, "Clay is here to stay."

# [music]

**Lisa Cahill:** Vicki Grima, OAM, was the editor of *The Journal of Australian Ceramics* and CEO of the [Australian Ceramics Association](https://australianceramics.com/association) from 2005 to February 2023. She’s also a practicing ceramic artist.

**Vicki Grima:** I've donated to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, a hundred thousand dollars in two lots of 50,000 with the aim for that money to be spent on collecting contemporary Australian ceramics.

What happened for me was that two things coincided.

I was looking at updating my Will and I'd been floundering around with it for a couple of years because I wanted to work out how to set up a donation to buy Australian ceramics and put it into a gallery.

In 2018, I was listening to this podcast, [Tales of a Red Clay Rambler](https://www.talesofaredclayrambler.com/), on which Glenn Barkley was speaking.

And out of the blue he said, “You know, if I had a hundred grand I could start a ceramics collection in one of these big institutions that's been basically ignoring ceramics for decades.”

My ears just pricked up, even though I certainly didn't have a hundred grand floating around. I just went, “That's so interesting that he has said that.”

I actually started thinking about it and I thought, “Just take one step.”

So I had a chat to Glenn and so we started the ball rolling. He had a chat with the Art Gallery of New South Wales. It chugged along. In May 2019 I went ahead and donated the first $50,000.

The only guidelines I would put on it was that all the ceramic work had to be made in Australia by Australian citizens or an Australian resident. I wanted the money to be used to buy several pieces rather than one piece. The example I gave was ten pieces by ten different artists rather than one piece by one artist, or five pieces by one artist.

And I also had a request that I be allowed to sit in on the discussions about what was bought. So it was made very clear to me that it wasn't my choice as to what to buy, but I wanted to know how they made that decision.

And that Glenn [Barkley] would take some steps to looking at what ceramics would be bought with a donation that would compliment the Art Gallery of New South Wales collection.

One of the pieces was [Yasmin Smith's *Bundle of Ntaria branches*](https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/95.2020/).

And so there were strong links to the Art Gallery of New South Wales collection, to works by an indigenous artist, [Jonathan Jones, called *untitled (illuminated tree)*](https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/358.2017/). If you see the work by Jonathan Jones, you'll see an immediate connection with the forms.

And there was another connection to [works by Noreen Hudson](https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/?q=Noreen+Hudson), another Indigenous artist who made work at Ntaria which is Hermannsburg, using local plant matters. So the links between what Yasmin was doing - she's taking casts of tree trunks that were out there, burning the ash to make the glazes, to make the ceramic work.

And then the fact that Noreen had made work using local plant matter in that same location. So there were those sorts of connections to the collection.

The reality is, you know, the money just wasn't lying there. I had to go and get it and find it and borrow it and do whatever. Our hope is that we can work out a way to keep that fund going with donations from other people.

But I ended up feeling that, it was quite a personal, commitment to, something I'd seen happening for a long time and that was the lack of Australian contemporary ceramics in places like the Art Gallery of New South Wales. And it just seemed also in traveling around the country, that lots of regional galleries had almost stopped buying contemporary craft.

And I thought it was worth finding that money to get it started so that I could actually enjoy it and see it. And I have, because, one of the big thrills I got just recently was the opening of the *Sydney Modern* and I went into one of the preview nights and turned a corner and there was Yasmin's work so beautifully displayed and I thought, there you go.

It's happened. Just such a thrill and makes me want to cry really. It's fantastic.

# [music]

**Lisa Cahill:** I wanted to ask you, Eva, what makes a work in your view, suitable for for a museum collection?

**Eva Czernis-Ryl:** In terms of museums and galleries, we have these days collection development policies. So you have specific criteria. But it's up to the curator.

How do you interpret it? So for example, you have a long term, you have your vision. So you keep watching, so to speak. You know what's happening around you, you read, you travel, you endeavor to know the field. But of course you can't see everything, especially now when there are so many approaches and so many artists working in the field.

Museum collections are vital organisms. They have this lively tendency towards uneven growth, if you like.

But also, for example, if you put on an exhibition, and *Clay Dynasty* was a great example, then you have a very good look at your collection.

Now you have this opportunity to revisit the area and perhaps acquire or even commission artists to compliment the collection or provide this kind of, as I mentioned before, historical continuing.

So you actually are able to document the industry if you have this ambition.

And as it happened, we've acquired 70 new objects for *Clay Dynasty* and many of them were new commissions from artists. And those commissions would be both by women and men ceramicists working across Australia from all the states.

When I look at the *Clay Dynasty* artists and objects that we have on display and we have 400 objects by 160 artists, you can realise what an amazing network, this community.

Actually, that's why we called it *Clay Dynasty*, because it's not only the network of potters who have worked for three generations, either continuous tradition or rejecting it, which I also see as a continuation, and you can see the rich range of designs and approaches.

**Lisa Cahill:** Which is fantastic because *Clay Dynasty* gives all of us an insight into the history of Australian ceramics. Let's ask you about one particular ceramic object that you own, in your collection...

**Eva Czernis-Ryl:** One object that I treasure and it's sitting on the shelf, on the bookshelf in my studio is a pot, a beautiful green pot by the great [Merran Esson](https://ceramic.school/merran-esson-a-life-in-clay/).

Merran Esson was Head of Ceramics at the National Art School for many years. She made pots often very large, my pot is small, that responded to the beauty of the Australian landscape. She is very well known for developing this rich green glaze, mud glaze, that in a way, reminds me of spring fields.

You know when you look at the fields from the airplane, the kind of birds eye view, and you see the rectangles, the squares of the fields that are green and you fly high above it and you see this beautiful patchwork below you.

And when I of the fields below you, and when I look at Merran's pot that I have, it's kind of not very organic, but it's also not geometric.

It's exactly how I remember for the first time when I flew over Australia how the Australian fields looked like, and in a way they're slightly different to what I would've seen when, if I would've been in Europe. This greenery, this rich green colour, which responds, or maybe I respond to it because this is such a different light in Australia than it is in Europe.

The striking colour. When I look at the striking colour, when I look at Merran Esson’s pot, when I perhaps write an article, a work at home from, you know, from the, on my computer and when the light through the window shines on this, I think how beautiful it is and, and how amazing it is.

It reminds me that I'm actually in Australia. It reminds me of Merran and about her amazing achievements as a teacher and to a couple of generations of students.

And I think about Merran, how warm and generous she was. And I'm also thinking, I remember, that I got this pot because Merran donated this particular piece to an exhibition that was to raise funds for bushfires in Australia.

So there's this context, rich context. You ask me about what the objects can tell you. And this particular object is not only telling me, it's only reminding me of a wonderful artist and, and human being, but also about Merran’s generosity and the circumstances in which I acquired the pot.

And I think about how it sits along the other pots by other people, and I can see the stories and how they relate to each other.

That somehow in a strange way, I am this Polish curator working in Australia now, and I'm surrounded really not by Polish pots, by Polish makers, but by Australian makers.

So when I look at all these pots. And they sit in a row and look at me. And I look at them and I feel I'm at home.

[music]

**Lisa Cahill:** That was Powerhouse Museum curator Eva Czernis-Ryl.

What I took from this conversation was the essential features of a museum curator … experience, knowledge and curiosity about people and the objects they make.

And that ceramics is one of the oldest of human expressions originating before the neolithic period and how ceramics tells us so much about who we are in the context of the times.

Both Eva and I definitely agree that clay is here to stay!

This is the final episode of Object in Series Two. If you haven’t already, go back and listen to Series One. You’ll meet Australia’s master craftspeople in jewelry, ceramics, metalwork and textiles. I hope you’ve enjoyed this series about ceramics. Stay tuned for Series 3.

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Object is produced by Jane Curtis, in collaboration with Lisa Cahill and Alix Fiveash. Sound Engineering is by John Jacobs. Thanks for listening.