

TRANSCRIPT for the podcast Object: stories of craft and design

Season 1: Episode 6 Living Treasure: Master of Australian Craft Les Blakebrough

Lisa Cahill: Do you remember your first job? Was it washing dishes, making coffee or stacking shelves?

Les Blakebrough: I found myself a job in a scene painting studio, just off Tottenham Court Road in London.

Lisa Cahill: For Les Blakebrough, his first job was kind of glamorous.

Les Blakebrough: Where they made the sort of flats and the backdrops for the London shows. I was always the colour boy and my job was to look after the colour palettes.

Lisa Cahill: He worked in Covent Garden, London's theatre district.

Les Blakebrough: It was a pretty electric place to be.

Les Blakebrough: There was always a string of interesting people that came by to see what was going on. Helpmann came, Fonteyne came.

Les Blakebrough: Fonteyne and Helpmann were the principal dancers. They were doing Swan Lake. Rings and rings and rings of balconies. But the stage itself was another thing altogether.

Lisa Cahill: That was Les' entre to the arts. Seventy years on, he's one of Australia's master ceramics artists.

[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 Series 1, you'll meet the master craftspeople we call Living Treasures.

What makes them a Living Treasure? What has driven them to a lifetime love of their craft?

Is it the material, the process, or both? How do they contribute and advocate for the arts?

And what's their advice for makers who follow in their footsteps?

Lisa Cahill: Let's meet Living Treasure: Master of Australian Craft, Les Blakebrough AM.

In a career spanning seven decades, Les Blakebrough has become one of Australia's most acclaimed and influential ceramic artists. The Australia Design Centre made Les Blakebrough the first Living Treasure: Master of Australian Craft in 2004.

In this episode, you'll hear about Les' experiments in the early days, why he went from ceramics maker to porcelain producer, and how Australia's first national craft association was founded.

The ceramics of Les Blakebrough range from earthy functional ware to more delicate forms, made with Southern Ice Porcelain - a material known as having 'the whiteness of snow and translucent of ice.'

In fact, he used Southern Ice Porcelain to make Tasmania's wedding gift to Mary Donaldson and Crown Prince Frederik of Denmark.

Les Blakebrough lives on Dharawal Country in the Illawarra region of NSW.

Lisa Cahill: Les, you spent your childhood and your dad was a cabinet maker, did making happen in your family?

Les Blakebrough: It was a business operation with my grandfather, who was a builder. My recollections of that workshop were with my father working, working in the machines and making mountains of wood chips, curled up timber. There used to be a great heap of it and you could get lost in it. I think I would have seen themselves as builders, rather than fine cabinet makers.

Lisa Cahill: And whereabouts in England was the childhood home, and the factory?

Les Blakebrough: In Essex, down at a place called Clacton-on-Sea.

Lisa Cahill: And you've found yourself by the sea again now?

Les Blakebrough: Yeah that's right, that's right.

Lisa Cahill: **Your journey to becoming a ceramics artist has not been a straightforward one but certainly an interesting one.**

Well, I've been in Australia for three, four, five years, having the rough edges knocked off in the bush and what have you. Learning a lot of bush skills, and then I eventually found my way to Sydney.

I needed to get serious with my life and that I was going to go to art school. I thought at the time initially that I wanted to be a painter and sadly, the thing was that I was, I was in love with the idea of being a painter. It didn't gel. Sometimes it did, but it was a difficult, sort of reluctant, funny kind of time.

Until I went to a party down in a house on Elizabeth Bay Road in Sydney. And I met a Dutch painter called Havekes, Gerard Havekes. He was working away at a large

sort of slab of clay. It was going to be the canvas for a sort of painting. I thought, Oh right, that's a sort of interesting idea.

And he suggested, "Go and introduce yourself to the ceramics department up in that institution that you're spending so much time in."

I put my head in the door and went in and met [Peter] Rushforth and [Mollie] Douglas. I managed to sort of persuade them to sort of take me on, mid year.

I shifted from painting to ceramics.

Lisa Cahill: Which is the East Sydney Technical College?

Les Blakebrough: This is all at East Sydney Tech, yeah.

Lisa Cahill: Which is now the National Art School.

Les Blakebrough: Yeah, that's right.

Lisa Cahill: What made you turn to ceramics?

Les Blakebrough: One of the attractive things about ceramics was you started to use your hands. And you could manipulate that material and sort of do things with it. And there was a kind of chemistry that was involved that Col Levy introduced me to.

And between us, we had a sort of collaboration going. We were desperately trying to make high temperature stoneware and porcelain. And Levy and I would do these experiments, trying to make reduced glazes.

The kilns weren't set up to do it. There'd be screams from the women when Levy and I would pelt naphthalene balls into the kiln. Sparks would fly and the yellow smoke billowed everywhere. It was toxic as all get out.

Lisa Cahill: You wouldn't get away with some of that experimentation these days though, National Art School, would you? [laughing]

Les Blakebrough: No way!

Lisa Cahill: I think there'd be more than screams that would be going on... [laughing]

[music]

Les Blakebrough: We were embarking on our stuff irrespective, almost, of what went on in the course. We were making earthenware and that was trying to be stoneware. Working with Levy who was always pretty inventive, it was a great introduction I must say.

I was intrigued, that was the thing about it. I got caught up in it because I was, I was fascinated by the process. And I couldn't get enough of it.

Lisa Cahill: After training at East Sydney Technical College Les, you were apprenticed to Ivan McMeekin at Sturt Pottery in Mittagong. And studied under Takeichi Kawai in Japan. And then you're approached to come back to teaching and academic in Tasmania?

Les Blakebrough: I'd taken time off from teaching. I think I might have been teaching one day a week but the rest of the time I was running my private studio. And the Head of the School Geoff Parr came to me and said, "Listen mate."

Lisa Cahill: This is at the University of Tasmania?

Les Blakebrough: Yeah, yeah. This was at the Centre for the Arts, by then.

He said, "Listen mate. I want you to come back. I want you to come back full time.

I said, "Geoff, why would I want to do that?"

He said, "Well." He said, "I *need* you to come back. I want somebody there that is going to light a fire under it."

[music]

Ben Richardson: I actually think that it was quite a unique time, because within the art academy, people who were teaching had often been workshop-trained.

Lisa Cahill: Ben Richardson makes ceramics in Tasmania. He was a student of Les', taught with him and was a co-researcher on Southern Ice Porcelain.

Ben Richardson: When the people like Les, heading programs, had been workshop-trained but were in a more, perhaps experimental or exploratory environment, and were also responsible for, not the training of a worker, which really the workshop is a lot about... It was the nurturing of a personal voice. Of a commitment to practice. And of learning from someone who had a really strong sense of form.

Ben Richardson: I was lucky to be around someone who had the commitment, but really, a good eye. Can really look at their work, and assess whether it's working, whether it's not, what could be changed, what could be better.

Les Blakebrough: It all transpired. I did go back and started working on research projects.

Lisa Cahill: And that was when you expanded your practice from working with porcelain as a maker, to researching and developing your own unique porcelain?

Les Blakebrough: Yeah, well, see, through the 1970s and 1980s, I always felt that the white clay that I'd been using, the commercial clays, they never quite came up to the mark.

I wanted a clay you could knead, to be possible to prepare for throwing. I wanted it to be able to throw well, and not be such a difficult material to handle. And I wanted it very white. I wanted it to be whiter than anything else. And gradually we got it there.

I wanted to give it a name that located it in the part of the world where we created it. And so it got to be called Southern Ice. And the damn stuff just took off.

All of a sudden there was an export market, in Britain, in France, in Germany. People started to sort of appreciate its qualities and couldn't get enough of it.

Grace Cochrane: What stands out to me about his work? The first thing is that it's just always a pleasure to look at and wonder about. I love it. I love looking at it.

Lisa Cahill: Grace Cochrane AM is a curator, writer and historian.

Grace Cochrane: The early works are often strong and substantial stoneware. And the later works are characterised by their lightness and strength and often translucency, using that Southern Ice Porcelain, where people love looking through them.

The local environment seems to be central to almost everything he does. And you'll see some works referring to the Derwent, which is Hobart's river. Forest floor. There's one series called 'In the long grass with Claudia Rose', his granddaughter, and you can see the long grass along the beach. There's fishnets, contour I think could be oceans or desert landscapes. And then there's the wonderful Fortescue Bay kelp series.

Those thematic things across all of this time are still evident in his work and that's what I find really impressive.

[music]

Lisa Cahill: And presumably, you're getting a delivery of Southern Ice, every time you want it?

Les Blakebrough: Yeah, I mean, it's dwindled down. I mean, it's my daughter Cybelle who is making use of it.

I've given up making, making stuff. I had a go at making some things a little while ago and I was so frustrated and upset. I couldn't really do what I used to do. I thought, this is silly. I'm making fake Blakebroughs.

I've got a sort of call it whole because this is, you know, it's mad, you know? I miss it a lot. It's what goes hand in hand with being bloody ninety-one.

Lisa Cahill: Yes, and happy birthday by the way. I believe it was your birthday this week.

Les Blakebrough: Yeah, yeah.

Lisa Cahill: Happy birthday!

Les Blakebrough: Yeah, well. Ninety-one.

[music]

Lisa Cahill: Throughout your career, you've been a visionary advocate for craft and you were a founding member of the now defunct Crafts Board of the Australia Council. What was that experience like and how do you think that time affected the crafts?

Les Blakebrough: There was quite a long time when I was a ceramicist and that was the beginning and end of it. But there got to be a time when I realised that the horizon needed to open up.

The board work that I worked on, was being able to fund people to extend their work.

One of those things was a loan scheme where we'd lend people money, and it would come back on a, interest free or very low interest free returns, you know, and paid back on a regular basis.

I mean, that was an initiative that we were able to take in Tasmania. We couldn't get that to fly in Sydney. The bureaucrats in Sydney didn't want to know. The idea of lending money and getting money back was just an anathema to them.

We'd been working away at setting up the craft associations around the country in a loose arrangement. But then also there had to be an organisation, which was Crafts Associates of Australia. We got ourselves an office at 35 King Street in Sydney and.. That's right, we bought a chair and a typewriter. It was pretty basic, but a lot of things followed from that.

Lisa Cahill: Fantastic, and you know, I don't .. I wouldn't be sitting here today at the Australian Design Centre if it wasn't for that initiative.

Anne Ferran: For me this has been a whole journey about ceramics, as well as everything else. Because I knew so little about ceramics when Les and I first met.

Lisa Cahill: Anne Ferran is one of Australia's leading photographic artists.

Anne Ferran: I met him in Hobart, and he, very sweetly, said, "Oh, come round to the studio." I never went. I wasn't that interested. But you know, you're with somebody for.... we've been together now fifteen years... and it's been amazing to understand a bit more about the way he works. And to watch him work.

I mean, when I first saw those things that he makes - they're so pristine looking. They look almost like the products of an immaculate conception. They spring into being, just being like that because they're so perfect, and so often exquisitely fine in their making.

But now I see what goes into that, and how exacting that process is. Everything he does is just so exacting.

And the other thing that's really impressed me, I guess, over the years is just to watch Les invent new forms and new ways of working. And I mean, you know, he's not even in his middle age anymore. He's an older person. And yet he still finds these new inspirations and makes things that he's never made before.

And some of them are, like he says, "fiendishly difficult". And it's true. I see what he's attempting and how often they come to grief, because they're just right at the limits of what is possible to do with that material, even though we all know it's very forgiving etcetera etcetera.

The obvious example would be those kelp bowls. Those kelp bowls that are created out of strips of clay that Les... first of all he makes in this, I have to say, laborious way. It means that they're very beautiful. Each one of those is very beautiful. And then he would be making these enormous bowls with these strips.

And the problems were, I think, to do with shrinkage and getting this thing that had so many joins and so many points where it had been made to come together, not to pull apart in the kiln. And I was always saying, "Can't you make a smaller one? It would be much easier?"

You know, just to support this thing when it was still...before it was .. all sorts of problems. And I saw so many come out of the kiln that were just torn apart. And yet some survived. And they are really beautiful and special.

It has been extremely interesting and enlightening, and now I'm collecting ceramics as well. And just very aware of what it means I guess.

Lisa Cahill: Les, let me ask you something about Living Treasures. Les you were the first Living Treasure, Master of Australian Craft. What did that mean to you?

Les Blakebrough: Oh, it was a huge boost. Yeah. I'm sort of eternally, eternally grateful to Brian Parkes. Brian somehow made it all happen, and somehow or other you re-emerge or they just, or somebody discovers you again. It was pretty special.

Les Blakebrough: There were several aspects to it that certainly changed my life. Not least of which was meeting Anne Ferran.

Lisa Cahill: That's amazing, that Living Treasures brought you and Anne together.

Les Blakebrough: At that stage, my partner Sal had died of ovarian cancer in Tasmania a year or two earlier. And I can remember, we had a big dinner at the Marigold restaurant, and my friend Jonathan came. He was from Hobart, and he invited Anne Ferran to come. And it provided that nucleus for that, for that relationship to start.

And it's been....it's been more than special. It's been magic.

Lisa Cahill: That was Les Blakebrough, looking back on over 70 years of practice.

One thing I value from talking to Les was his work with many others advocating for contemporary crafts in the 70s, 80s and 90s. They paved for the way for organisations like the Australian Design Centre to do the work we do today.

I was impressed with his forward thinking, in developing an Australian exportable porcelain that is still being made today.

Just published by Watermark Books is an autobiography, *Les Blakebrough: A Memoir*.

You can see images of Les' work on the Show Notes page of our website, including the dinner set he made for Mary and Fred of Denmark. Just go to australiandesigncentre.com/podcast

In the next episode of Object, you'll meet metalsmith Robert Baines.

Robert Baines: I was drawn to the colour of red, not because of its colour, but by the condition of red. Red does denote emotion and anger, and affection, love. Why confine your piece to the colour of the material that you're using?

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Object is a podcast by the Australian Design Centre.

The Gadigal people of the Eora Nation are the traditional custodians of this place we now call Sydney, where the Australian Design Centre is located, and where this podcast was made.

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Thank you for listening.