# **TRANSCRIPT for the podcast Object: stories of craft and design**

# **Season 1: Episode 8: The origin and selection of Living Treasures: Master of Australian Craft**

**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. Welcome to the final episode of series 1.

**Lisa Cahill:**I hope you’ve enjoyed meeting seven of our Living Treasures: Masters of Australian Craft. In this bonus episode, you’ll meet one of the key people behind the original idea for living treasures - Brian Parkes.

**Lisa Cahill:**Brian is the CEO and Artistic Director of The Jam Factory, Adelaide’s leading craft and design centre, where he's been for over a decade. Before that, he was Associate Director of the Australian Design Centre.

**Lisa Cahill:**You’ll hear how the idea of recognising Australia’s master craftspeople became a reality. How, with so much talent in Australian contemporary craft, Living Treasures are selected. And you’ll hear about the two Living Treasures I didn’t get to talk with - Klaus Moje and Nick Mount. Brian Parkes lives and works on Kaurna Country in Adelaide.

**Lisa Cahill:**Okay, welcome Brian.

**Brian Parkes:** Hi Lisa, good to be here.

**Lisa Cahill:**So Brian, I thought we could start back at the beginning and find out from you, where the idea for the Living Treasures series came from?

**Brian Parkes:**It's a good backstory. Like so many good ideas, it builds on the foundations of so many other good ideas and people's contributions. The National Gallery of Australia put together a touring exhibition of the work of Susan Cohn. And it was an exhibition that was put together by the late Jim Logan, who was then the curator of decorative arts at the NGA in the mid-nineties.

**Brian Parkes:**And I'd had the kind of good fortune to work at the NGA at that time and got to know Jim and was involved in that project. It was the first time that a major institution had done a big touring exhibition of someone who came out of the crafts sector.

**Lisa Cahill:**And Susan is a contemporary jeweller.

**Brian Parkes:**That's right. And someone whose practice spans across kind of, you know, art and design very much through the prism of craft.

**Brian Parkes:**All the hallmarks of the Living Treasure series were borrowed from that exhibition, which Jim had always intended as an ongoing series of shows, celebrating the extraordinary wealth of talent in the kind of decorative arts scene in Australia.

**Brian Parkes:**And Jim sadly passed away from HIV/AIDS while that show was touring. The legacy of what has been at has been a pretty interesting ongoing series, it's nice to kind of acknowledge that. And that's not a story that we've really ever told or acknowledged properly. So, I think it's a nice place to have started.

**Lisa Cahill:**I think that's really interesting cause you know, I mean, ideas for exhibitions come from everywhere, don't they? And that's a really fantastic starting point for what has now become an amazing series of exhibitions. And one that I heard, you know, Jim would be really proud of.

**Brian Parkes:**Yeah. And so there was a point in time that made it appropriate for ADC to take the lead in that space.

**Brian Parkes:**And it was a time when the organisation had been perceived by many of its stakeholders as having kind of transgressed in some way, and having championed design at the expense of craft, which was never the intention and Steve Pozel, who was director at the time, and I both loved and love craft. And, but we saw opportunities that were similarly being played out in other organisations across the country.

**Brian Parkes:** It kind of stirred a bit of a hornet's nest. I guess the design interest that we had was always intended as an add-on, rather than a usurping of craft.

**Lisa Cahill:**I always think it's interesting when we have that contest of ideas around art, craft and design. Because the people in the Living Treasures series rise above that. They work in their practice, they employ craft skills. They employ a design mindset and they certainly employ an artistic mindset as well.

**Brian Parkes:**Which is why the Susan Cohn model was so interesting. You know, Anna Schwartz who represents con you know, we'd refer to Susan Kahn as an artist, um, when she's working with Alessi, all the media referred to her as a designer. She explicitly refers to herself as a craft person. And of course, underpinning all of that is the skill evolved as a jeweller.

**Brian Parkes:**One of the outcomes from that was the putting forward of this very necessary idea, that as a national leadership organisation, Object could celebrate the leading figures, the influential figures in craft in Australia. And do it in a similar format, a template to what we’d seen with the Susan Cohn show. So, the idea of a major publication and a national touring exhibition with some kind of public programs along the way, which is the template was born.

**Lisa Cahill:**So, coming back to the beginnings of this series, when you were doing the planning early on, how were the artists selected?

**Brian Parkes:**It's a good question, actually, because again, the strategy there was developed in line with this community unrest. So, we wanted it to be inclusive and consultative deliberately. We evolved a nominations process that enabled the organisations in the craft sector around the country, as well as individual practitioners to nominate. And so, there was a very deliberately open process and we appointed a kind of jury that was populated by the key figures kind of curatorially, academically, theoretically.

**Lisa Cahill:**What was the criteria, nominating the artists for that initial list?

**Brian Parkes:**There was a 30-year practice requirement. There was a need for them not to have been recognised in a similar way. Which precluded Susan Cohn and it precluded Frank Bauer but probably not very many others, cause what we were trying to do is add to the body of knowledge, not replicate.

**Brian Parkes:**Perhaps the biggest umbrella criterion was that the person needed to be a leading practitioner in their field whose influence had been significant.

**Steve Pozel**: We had lots of exhibitions of forty, fifty, one hundred people, but we didn't have very many solo exhibitions.

**Lisa Cahill:**Steve Pozel was the former CEO and Creative Director of the Australian Design Centre, formerly known as Object. He’s now an Innovation Strategist and facilitator in mindful leadership.

**Steve Pozel:**And so I said, what if we took that? And we don't just do one show, but we take it and we start traveling across the country. And so it's one artist each couple of years that allows us to really into, you know, engage with audiences to say here's somebody we think is a real treasure of Australia who is doing a master of their work.

**Steve Pozel:**I think we put the resources that a museum might have, and we didn't have, we really had to hustle to put resources to, to make this happen because no museum was doing a show of this sort of, I think. level this commitment

**Steve Pozel:**We took the show from the cross to centres across the country. And we moved it not only to them, but we moved it to major museums, like the Melbourne museum and the major gallery in Dubbo and over to the West Coast.

**Steve Pozel:**So, I think it was the breadth. All of a sudden, you know, the biggest impact was a breadth of audience and a diversity of audience that hadn’t really been able to take in such a big body of work on such a regular basis, the monograph, I mean, I think beautiful. But possibly what even became, I think a more impactful piece was when we started doing interviews and recordings and videos of the artists and that started out of course, through online distribution that allowed us to gain an expanded audience.

**Steve Pozel:**I think that this was not just one organisation's project, it really was a collaboration with many centres across the country. What I see is that it actually established new ways of working with bigger institutions, smaller ones.  As a sector we developed, through such a program and it was of course made up of many people.

**Steve Pozel:**We had people contributing writing from all across the country. We had advisors from all across the country. Really, although the show focused on an individual, it was very much about, the community as a whole, that would be able to bring one exhibition like this into a realisation.

**Lisa Cahill:**The project has involved the artists, of course, but many other school people have also played a big part in that you've mentioned some of those people already, who were involved in the initial selection process in injuries over the past 15 years. Those people include curators, writers, producers, designers. Can you talk about how, as a curator, you navigate the many roles that help bring a project to fruition?

**Brian Parkes:**Yeah, it's interesting that the curatorial role has evolved over the years so much. In those early two thousands there were a lot of conversations amongst curators in our field about this change in role. This increasing need to be more of a project manager, than the kind of traditional institutional curatorial role of connoisseurship and scholarship. Particularly in the small to medium type organisations sector, the curator position became the key project managers of increasingly complex projects.

**Lisa Cahill:**Very much so. That role is seeing it through from the very beginning…

**Brian Parkes:**That’s right.

**Lisa Cahill:** … the idea, through to the execution and presentation.

**Brian Parkes:**Which personally, I found incredibly exhilarating and I think it was a great privilege. We kind of made stuff up as we went, right. And we needed to find a way to fund this.

**Brian Parkes:**In the end we found terrific support over the years of the Visions program, but the Les Blakebrough show was effectively unfunded. And we'd made a very loud song and dance about doing this thing and we had to pull it off one way or another.

**Brian Parkes:**So, as you said, there are a whole lot of people involved, but the curatorial position was really about kind of identifying those people getting them on board, trying to do deals with them to kind of do it as… to make it look like it was being done by the national gallery on a tenth of the budget.

**Lisa Cahill:**And joining all the dots.

**Brian Parkes:**And joining all the dots, that’s right. So much of it was smoke and mirrors, you know, compared to the thing that we modelled it off, you know. The nimbleness of a small organisation in doing that stuff has been the key absolute factor to the success of this program.

**Lisa Cahill:**So, Les was number one.

**Brian Parkes:**He was a very conscious and deliberate choice as the first of the Living Treasures. He'd been the founding director of the Crafts Board on the Australia Council. But was also, and always, and even still now continues to innovate. That was a really important thing. We didn't want the Living Treasures thing to be a kind of mausoleum to something past, we wanted it to celebrate the influence of these people, but to acknowledge the ongoing innovation and contribution. And the idea that they're *Living* Treasures was, was really important, this idea of ongoing contribution.

**Brian Parkes:**I went to art school in Hobart and Les taught me to throw pots in 1988. These stars aligned and I had this opportunity to work with someone who had been a mentor, in a different capacity as a professional colleague, as a curator.

**Brian Parkes:**Ultimately, what I saw as the opportunity in the Living Treasures series, was to become a kind of translator. The story is the story. How do you package it for an audience to digest in different ways, depending on whether they're deep craft enthusiasts, or if they're a casual observer?

**Brian Parkes:**You need to understand the story to do that. So, the opportunity to translate was much easier in that first instance because there was a pre-existing relationship.

**Lisa Cahill:**I think that's the essence, isn't it, that trusted relationship. Whether that’s a new relationship or one that's developed over one in this case, many years, I think that's the key to a successful outcome.

**Brian Parkes:**And it provided a template for how we would approach the subsequent shows. Another thing we learnt in that show… There was a lot of pragmatism around, okay, how do we, how do we make a touring exhibition work in a way that's going to be incredibly useful and easy for those touring venues around the country who may have varying levels of experience? Or staff resources or comfort around breakable objects, all that sort of stuff.

**Brian Parkes:**We had to design an exhibition that would easily pack, fit into one truck. And we had bugger all money. Again, the jack-of-all-trades curator in the small-to-medium sector - I designed the exhibition. And it was IKEA trestle legs with MDF kind of box tops that had a particular kind of colour hue that we worked with Les on. And a series of quite neat little boxes that would hang on the wall to kind of frame objects, but that would concertina into one another to pack into a truck that all came apart.

**Brian Parkes:**So it was all about space efficiency and, but it looked pretty flash, right? It was done on a shoestring, but looked pretty flash.

**Lisa Cahill:**So there's that exhibition, the first exhibition, the Les Blakebrough exhibition, its success must have triggered something with the Visions program because you know, the series from then till now has primarily been funded by the Australian government, through its Visions Australia touring program.

**Lisa Cahill:**To date, I think we’ve had over $1.5 million in funding for the series and Visions Australia funds tours mostly to regional areas. Why do you think that is an important feature of this particular program?

**Brian Parkes:**Audiences love these shows, and touring venues in the regions love these shows because their audiences love them. The kinds of touring exhibitions that have gone into regional galleries - there had not been craft-based shows and they certainly hadn't been solo exhibitions of craft-based practitioners at all.

**Bridget Guthrie:**So the value that the Living Treasures exhibition brings to a gallery like ours is the fact that it actually provides essential access.

**Lisa Cahill:**Bridget Guthrie is the director of Tamworth Regional Gallery in NSW.

**Bridget Guthrie:**So it's about essential access to quality, really significant artists' work. So for example, Lola Greeno, First Nations artist. To be able to have her work in our gallery and showcase that to other First Nations artists that are living regionally is fantastic. And then we had some of our first nations community come in and particularly some of the local weavers and they were really inspired by seeing those works. So there was that exchange of ideas that occurred as part of that process.

**Bridget Guthrie:**The conversations that provide the exchange of ideas and information is essential.  So sometimes, an exhibition gallery, as you know, can be that safe place for unsafe discussions.  And particularly like some of the works that Lola had done, um, obviously, you know, talking to that difficult past and that colonial history there.

**Bridget Guthrie:**And another one that comes to mind for me is Liz Williamson, like bringing that exhibition to Tamworth was an amazing way for our textile artists to then respond to that, being inspired and have that essential access to significant work.

**Bridget Guthrie:**You do have a number of state and national institutions that have someone like the Australian Design Centre that, with that focus on craft as well, is a great fit for us, and we might couple them. Sometimes we have something from our own collection, so you can bounce off between the two

**Bridget Guthrie:**We normally have a regional pull of an hour to a two-hour radius. But sometimes with these exhibitions, they can travel up to as far as three hours, say from Port Macquarie on the coast, or even Dubbo down south inland.

**Bridget Guthrie:**So the benefits for the Australian Design Centre On Tour is really important for our region, and it is part of a cultural tourism package as well that we provide to visitors to our city.

**Lisa Cahill:**And I think that was particularly ground-breaking for the sector to produce an exhibition of this calibre and this type… The management of those tours but the relationships that first exhibition built with the regional gallery venues, which is so instrumental to the success of the program.

**Brian Parkes:**One of the things that was really important early on was to understand the needs of the regional venues.

**Brian Parkes:**And what we found was that there was a great willingness and interest and desire to take these sorts of shows. And we realised that the relationships with these venues was going to be a pretty important thing.

**Brian Parkes:**We created a touring exhibitions coordinator role. Prior to that, most organisations across Australia in the small to medium sector had relied on what were previously called the NETS organisations to manage. So what would happen is a small to medium kind of sector organisation like Object, or like one of the contemporary art spaces would develop an exhibition and propose it to the NETS body in their state and NETS would tour it.

**Brian Parkes:**We found that to be a really inefficient model and we thought that there was another way of doing it again much, much more cost-effective and that enabled Object then as an organisation to have direct relationships with those venues that were taking it, which would allow this sort of feedback loop to kind of evolve and improve the touring product.

**Lisa Cahill:**And to build some expertise in touring into the organisation.

**Brian Parkes:**Correct, correct. And so creating that touring exhibitions coordinator role was the step change for Object [Australian Design Centre] from being another gallery that produced shows that other people toured, to being an organisation that toured. That was a profound change in terms of the organisation's understanding of itself and its national reach and remit, I think.

**Brian Parkes:**Sandra Brown who, who certainly coordinated the tour of the first four exhibitions, at least probably six of them. She understood the value of relationships. As the person who was lucky to work with Sandra, the kind of feedback from the venues about the genuineness of the relationship and the kind of willingness to kind of, you know, move mountains to help their needs.

**Brian Parkes:**So suddenly, you know, we were preferred content providers and that was a combination of having good shows and great service, old fashioned customer service, if you like. So thinking about those venues as a kind of client partner and being able to work with them.

**Lisa Cahill:**Completely. And they are the pillars and you know, you, Sandra, Steve, others, other people who really have blazed that for us as an organisation today and what makes ADC On Tour such a successful product for us as an organisation today. So thanks… [laughing]

**Brian Parkes:**The other thing that was really important about that was you don't just send the show to have in you, you send someone to kind of oversee the installation and to help unpack both metaphorically and literally, the exhibition for that venue. It builds emotional capital that is hard to put a value on.

**Brian Parkes:**But in retrospect you look at all the amazing outcomes and that was, I don't know what the numbers are up to, but the number of venues that ADC has worked with, with its ADC On Tour program is phenomenal.

**Lisa Cahill:**It really is, yeah. Also, it’s professional development. It’s professional development for the staff within our organisation, for our team. It’s also professional development for the regional gallery staff. Almost to the point where, there are many many staff around the country now with great expertise. You know we’re often maybe not spending as much time on the ground as we were, in the past, depending on the show. That means there is a growing network of expertise around the country.

**Brian Parkes:**I think you’re right.

**Lisa Cahill:**So the second in the series was Klaus Moje in 2006 eminent glass artist who sadly passed away in 2016, Klaus was hailed internationally as a founder of modern kiln class. That's clearly a leader in his field and an exceptional artist.

**Brian Parkes:**Can I ask you Brian, in building that relationship with the artists, the Living Treasures, you spend all the time with them, because we can't talk to Klaus in series… I'd love you to tell us a bit about your first meeting Klaus in his studio and maybe paint a bit of a picture as the type of environment that Klaus worked in?

**Brian Parkes:**Sure, by the time we got round to the Living Treasures show, Klaus had been retired from ANU for several years and had a very well established home studio down the South Coast. And he had a series of workshop sheds that were extraordinary environments to be in.

**Brian Parkes:**So you'd have these big storage units filled with sheet glass in various colours arranged kind of in a rainbow configuration. You walk into the space and there are clean spaces for cutting and laying out, and there are beautifully methodical, Germanic, organised, chromatic selections - vast selections - of very expensive material.

**Brian Parkes:**This is, someone who at the time, was arguably in the top handful of glass artists and remains one of the most reverent figures. So he had…

**Lisa Cahill:**In the world.

**Brian Parkes:**In the world, that’s right. As someone who's visited lots of artists, studios, artists at the top of their game, the spaces you know, feel complete in some way, you know, they know their practice. So intimately they've evolved their life around their practice.

**Lisa Cahill:**It's interesting, isn't it? You know, painter's studio is one thing, but I think a craft persons studio, particularly when we're talking about ceramics and glass and wood and you know, some of those, disciplines that involve so much equipment, and heavy equipment and kilns and all sorts of things, it's almost like a mini factory-like environment.

**Brian Parkes:**That’s right, that’s right.

**Lisa Cahill:**And you need space for that kind of work as well. Which the cities don’t often don’t lend themselves to, so much as a place down the coast or in the country.

**Brian Parkes:**And it's interesting too. I mean, you know, the Crafts Movement has, you know, in certainly the way it kind of played out in the sixties, seventies, early eighties was it was as much a kind of lifestyle movement as it was a creative movement.

**Lisa Cahill:**So then of course the series moved from Klaus Moje to Marian Hosking in 2007, Liz Williamson in 2008. And then in 2009 Jeff Mincham and then in 2010 Robert Baines. So you left ADC for Adelaide, where you continued to run the JamFactory today.  I think you had some involvement from afar in the next Living Treasure that followed Robert Baines, Nick Mount, a South Australian glass artist. So, you know, we're moving back to glass in a very different way…

**Brian Parkes:**Indeed.

**Lisa Cahill:**… to the Klaus Moje exhibition. Can you tell us about Nick, because I know you know him and his work well?

**Brian Parkes:**And in terms of the glass art movement in Australia, in many ways Klaus and Nick are the kind of bookends. You've got kiln-formed glass and its related spin-offs, and hot glass, glass blowing and glass studio and its offshoots. Nick is from that latter camp. Within the glass fraternity, there are interesting competitive tensions, if you like, between those two modes of practice. In a nice and healthy way.

**Brian Parkes:**They're very definitely different fields of endeavour. One is a precise and singular activity, the kind of kiln-forming and fusing kind of stuff. And the hot glass is a kind of, um, theatrical Teamsport and, um, you can't blow glass on your own.

**Lisa Cahill:**We've all been watching Blown Away on Netflix, so….

**Brian Parkes:**Indeed, indeed. It's big, it's become bigger than ever.

**Brian Parkes:**And Nick has been a great advocate, a great survivor, and an exceptional technician, whose influence has been phenomenal. Not just in Australia, but globally. So, he was a right and proper second glass Living Treasure.

**Brian Parkes:**Nick is a classic larrikin in lots of ways and he loves an underdog and Nick is wary and apprehensive of institutions and is a great advocate for the worker. And his dedication to constant refinement of his craft. And we still see Nick blow glass every week in our studio and influence and inform and mentor, formally and informally, generations of others.

**Lisa Cahill:**So do you think looking back over 15 years that this format is still important today and why?

**Brian Parkes:**Obviously I have a prejudicial view, but back to somewhere where we started, the audiences love them. Right. And you know, any of us who run things. We at JamFactory loved to take the Living Treasures exhibitions, because they're great exhibitions that our audiences love. While ever that’s the case, it will continue to be an important and valuable program.

**Lisa Cahill:**To see a body of work, an artist's body of work, on such a scale in these exhibitions, I think really helps audiences to understand what goes into that life of practice, much more so than seeing a piece in a group exhibition.

**Brian Parkes:**That's right. And you know, in almost every other context of encountering these people's work, it is in the kind of representative piece in a state collection or the piece in a group show somewhere. Or maybe if you're lucky to see some new work in a commercial gallery context, but they're very different, very different scenarios.

**Brian Parkes:**By trying to tell the story of someone's practice or the preoccupations that drive them, you know, you can, you can add all these layers. Whether it's the beautiful films that you guys do these days that accompany each of the shows, whether it's the books, uh, whether it's, some of the stories will come out through this podcast series, it's those layers that make it feel so worthwhile.

**Lisa Cahill**: That was Brian Parkes, former Associate Director of the Australian Design Centre in conversation with me, Lisa Cahill.

**Lisa Cahill**: We owe a lot to Brian, Steve Pozel and many others on the ADC team over the years who have contributed to the success of Living Treasures. In recent years it’s been my privilege to continue this work and next year we begin work on what will be the tenth exhibition in the series.

**Lisa Cahill**: This is the final episode of Object season 1, but we’ll be back with a second season next year. I’d like to thank you all for listening, and to everyone who’s left us a review, or a comment on Instagram or Facebook, giving us their feedback about this podcast. We really do appreciate it and it means so much, to us and the artists, that you’re listening and responding to what you’ve heard.

**Lisa Cahill**: If you’re enjoying Object, hit that Subscribe button. You’ll get all future seasons and episodes of Object: stories of design and craft, delivered straight to your podcast app.

**Lisa Cahill**:  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. We’d like to thank the Australia Council for the Arts for funding support for this podcast. You can follow the Australian Design Centre on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Object is produced by Jane Curtis in collaboration with Lisa Cahill and Alix Fiveash. Sound engineering by John Jacobs.