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Graduate student research panel – Interrogating Ceramic Histories

Australian Flora and Ceramic Decoration: from Nationalism to Environmentalism

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Slide 1 Title slide – Australian plant and title, name credits

The presence of Australian flora as a subject in ceramic imagery has blossomed and faded at various times since British colonisation and settlement. Flowers have been a natural subject for decoration in most ceramic traditions with a long established symbolism and language. Indeed, Australia has a vast wealth of distinct and unique plants to choose from, with nearly 20,000 species¹.

Pottery production however was transposed into Australia with British settlement, along with cultural traditions and aspirations derived from a fundamentally different physical environment. Little regard was given to the Indigenous knowledge of Australia's flora and environment. Potters, like other settlers, would reflect cultural perceptions of the land.

This paper is a brief investigation into the history of Australian flora and ceramic decoration with an emphasis on environmental history. I will outline my research area and use ceramic examples to describe the stages of settler society's relationship to the land.

Slide 2 Black She-oak

I am currently in my second year of a research degree in ceramics at the ANU. Through practice-led research I am investigating Australian flora in ceramic imagery

¹ W. L. Steffen and CSIRO (Australia), *Australia's Biodiversity and Climate Change* (Collingwood, Vic.: CSIRO Publishing, 2009). 10.

and form and the environmental complexities inherent in this subject at the start of the 21st century.

Botanical science is an important aspect of my study and I have established connections with plant research centres such as the National Herbarium and the Australian National Botanic Garden Seed Bank. Field trips to examine the plants and the environment in location and historical material such as botanical illustrations and plant collections also provide me with a rich resource. I have a background in science and botany and bring this perspective to my research.

Slide 3 Half a Dozen Flora of the Lower Goulburn River

According to the current science the environment is in crisis and this is proven in extinction rates and loss of biodiversity.² It is this I am aware of when I am observing the detail of a leaf or the form of a stem as I carve into the clay surface.

My passion is the texture and form of the plant [Slide 4 Canberra Bells](#)— and the experience of being in the bush, in wilderness. My intention through making is to express my fascination and awe of Australian plants and to grapple with the environmental issues impacting upon them. Environmentalism is a key aspect to my work - one that reflects current understanding and one that I see in other contemporary artists work.

However Australian flora in ceramic imagery has not always signified environmentalism and an aspect of my research has been to examine the history of its use.

I have found the relatively new field of environmental history a useful resource. For example Tim Bonyhady in his book, *The Colonial Earth* and Libby Robin in *How a Continent Created a Nation* have examined how humans have shaped the Australian environment and are shaped by it. As my research focus is on environmental and botanical science, I have approached the history of Australian flora in ceramic decoration from this perspective.

Slide 5 Kangaroo Mug

² W. L. Steffen and CSIRO (Australia), *Australia's Biodiversity and Climate Change* (Collingwood, Vic.: CSIRO Publishing, 2009).

This is the earliest example of Australian flora on a ceramic object and comes directly from James Cook's and Joseph Banks voyage on the Endeavour in 1770.³ This was the era of botanical exploration and scientific discovery and the expedition was as much about the discovery of new species as political and geographical gain.⁴ The Kangaroo Mug derives from pencil sketches by artist Sydney Parkinson, also on the Endeavour. This was the golden age of botanical and scientific illustration – necessary for documentation and classification. In fact the connection between botanical illustration and Australian flora in ceramic decoration is strong and I will show that it is evident throughout its history. Parkinson's sketches were used by George Stubbs in London that then became the basis for an engraving included in the *History of Quadrupeds* published in 1790.⁵ From here one of the Staffordshire potteries adapted the engraving into a transfer print for an earthenware mug. Britain had a rage for natural curiosities and Australian flora and fauna were enthusiastically received.

In the first eighty years or so of British settlement, potteries focused on building materials and utilitarian ware based on European folk pottery traditions. Settler society in the early nineteenth century saw the bush as a potentially hostile environment, which must be tamed into economic productivity. The focus was on opening up the land, food production and exploiting resources. Decorative motifs on pottery reflected this and included wheat, tulips, oak and grapes [Slide 6 Fern Motifs](#) Ferns appeared on pottery as you can see in these examples, probably influenced by fern fever, which had swept Britain from the mid nineteenth century and to some extent Australia. Whether the fern motif was based on endemic Australian ferns or a more generic British fern is unclear. Certainly Australia has some of the world's largest ferns such as *Dicksonia antarctica* in Fern Tree Gully in Victoria, which delighted tourists during this time, even as they were being felled.⁶

Slide 7 Wedgwood plates

³ John McPhee, "Ceramics in the Collection of Australian Decorative Arts in the Australian National Gallery," *Pottery in Australia* 21, no. 2 (1982). 4.

⁴ Professor M. G. Pitman, "A Fine Field for Botanizing," in *XII International Botanical Congress* (State Library of NSW, Sydney: Library Council of NSW, 21 - 28 August, 1981). 3.

⁵ Margarete Lincoln, National Maritime Museum (Great Britain), and Endeavour II (Ship), *Science and Exploration in the Pacific : European Voyages to the Southern Oceans in the Eighteenth Century* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK ; Rochester, NY, USA: Boydell Press in association with the National Maritime Museum, 1998). 175.

⁶ Tim Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth* (Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah Press, 2000). 110.

Britain's industrial potteries had the technology and expertise to make refined decorative work and Australian flora appeared in Artwares and tableware from the 1880s. The Wedgewood *Australian flora* series was adapted from designs by Helena Forde, the naturalist and illustrator in 1882⁷.

Botanists and collectors were still discovering many new species, as they would continue to do even up to now. Publications illustrating the new flora material were popular particularly at this time. In 1885 Louis Bilton came to Sydney to make botanical drawings of Australian flora for the *Picturesque Atlas of Australasia*⁸. **Slide 8 Louis Bilton** While here he painted this plaque on a blank and eventually returned to England to work as a china painter for Doulton and Company in Staffordshire. **Slide 9 Albert Shuck** The intrepid flower hunter, Ellis Rowan had her paintings and illustrations sent to England and hand-painted onto porcelain by decorators in Worcester Pottery such this one by Albert Shuck⁹.

At the end of the nineteenth century Australia as a colony was now well established with years of prosperity from gold, sheep and cattle. According to Geoffrey Bolton, the now predominately colonial born began to value those aspects of the environment, which they saw as distinctly Australian.¹⁰ The Field Naturalist's Club of Victoria was established in 1880, the first national park, Royal National Park was declared in 1879 and legislation was passed to protect forests and fauna.¹¹ Art schools were formed influenced by the emphasis on naturalism in the Arts and Crafts movement and also by advocates for the use of Australian flora in the decorative arts such as Lucien Henry and Richard Baker.

The Centenary, the lead up to Federation and the debate over a national floral emblem galvanized Australian born to establish national symbols and identity, which were

⁷ Powerhouse Museum, Collection Statement of Significance.

<http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/?irn=7037>

⁸ Powerhouse Museum, Collection Statement of Significance.

<http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/?irn=173653&search=louis+bilton&images=&c=&s=>

⁹ Powerhouse Museum. Collection Database: Albert Shuck.

<http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database>

¹⁰ Geoffrey Curnow Bolton, *Spoils and Spoilers : A History of Australians Shaping Their Environment*, 2nd ed., Australian Experience. (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992). 99.

¹¹ Ibid. 105 – 107.

easily found in the distinctive flora and fauna. In 1907 Richard Baker, a trained botanist, initiated the permanent display, *Australian Flora Applied to Art* at the Technological Museum in Sydney.¹² **Slide 10 Lawrence Howie**
He published *The Waratah in Applied Art*' in 1915 and was passionate about the Waratah becoming the national floral emblem. He purchased this vase from Lawrence Howie in Adelaide to add to the collection.¹³ Baker also wrote about protecting the environment. He criticised the picking of wild waratahs in the Blue Mountains in the following article he wrote for the Sydney Morning Herald in 1912. "Flower-lovers on every side are expressing regret for the wholesale destruction of Waratahs recorded last week. ...For, where thousands of blooms are plucked, it is inevitable that there should be much breaking of wood, and the destruction of many young shoots."¹⁴

Slide 11 China painting

China painting became very popular in Australia from the 1880s particularly for middleclass women. It was compatible with female pursuits such as botanising, flower painting and gardening. Teachers such as Rosa Fiveash at the Art School in Adelaide, already a noted botanical illustrator, promoted the use of Australian flora from 1894.¹⁵ This period - through Federation, World War 1 and into the 1930s was the most prolific for the use of Australian flora in ceramic decoration and its use became associated with patriotism and nationalism. **Slide 12 Premier Pottery** The larger potteries produced vast quantities of gum leaf and gum nut decorated ware.

The studio pottery movement began in Australia from about 1917 with potters such as Merric Boyd in Victoria, **Slide 13 Merric Boyd** Gladys Reynell in South Australia exhibiting a modernist style, Flora Landells in Perth and Maude Poynter in Tasmania. All incorporated some Australian flora. Boyd had a particular gothic style with modeled flora such as in this piece.

¹² Kevin Fahy, *Australian Art Pottery, 1900-1950* (Sydney: Casuarina Press, 2004). 13.

¹³ Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (Sydney N.S.W.), David Liddle, and Margaret Betteridge, *Australian Flora in Art : From the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1979). 9.

¹⁴ Richard Thomas Baker and Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (Sydney N.S.W.), *The Australian Flora in Applied Art* (Sydney: Department of Public Instruction, 1915). 52.

¹⁵ Avis Carol Smith, *Changing Fortunes: The History of China Painting in South Australia*, (University of Adelaide, 2008).

In 1926 legislation was finally passed to protect native plants as the great expansion of farming in the early part of the century was noticeably reducing wildflowers.¹⁶

In the post war period flora was present only as faint gestures in the stoneware, Leach aesthetic. [Slide 14 Neil Douglas](#)

An exception in this period was Neil Douglas, a partner in the Arthur Merric Boyd Pottery. He decorated ware with bush scenes such as this and was particularly interested in conservation.¹⁷ Klytie Pate made this striking piece in 1939. [Slide 15](#)

[Klytie Pate](#) Marina Shaw was very interested in Western Australian flora as shown in this work from the 1940s. [Slide 16 Marina Shaw](#)

The invention of the 'bush garden' in the late 1960s and 70s finally popularized the appreciation of growing Australian plants.¹⁸ Jock Marshall in 1966 published his book *The Great Extermination: a guide to Anglo-Australian Cupidity, Wickedness and Waste*. Environmental concern was becoming a more public issue and it was the beginning of the Landcare movement and the Greens as a political party.¹⁹

The development and popularity of ceramics since the 1960s and influences from a diversity of cultures here and overseas have expanded the range of styles and possibilities. [Slide 17 Indigenous Pottery](#) The establishment of potteries in Indigenous communities such as the Tiwi Islands, Ernabella and Hermannsburg have brought traditional Indigenous symbolism of flora into the ceramic domain, contributing their intimacy, knowledge and value of the natural environment.

Potters such as Jeff Mincham, Angela Valamanesh, Rolf Bartz and Bev Butler used Australian flora in their work with the revival of colour and decoration in the 1980s.

[Slide 18 Flora Tasmanica](#) Collaborations between botanical illustrators and ceramic artists still continue such as in *Flora Tasmanica* by Les Blakebrough and Lauren Black.

¹⁶ Bolton, *Spoils and Spoilers : A History of Australians Shaping Their Environment*.

¹⁷ Fahy, *Australian Art Pottery, 1900-1950*. 143.

¹⁸ Katie Holmes, Susan K. Martin, and Kylie Mirmohamadi, *Reading the Garden : The Settlement of Australia* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Publishing, 2008). 101.

¹⁹ The Greens. 'History'. <http://greens.org.au/history>

I would like to leave the shores of Australia and Britain briefly, to mention that the Eucalyptus has been used in ceramic decoration in Californian ceramics from early in the twentieth century. The Victorian Government botanist, Ferdinand von Mueller, passionate about the gum tree sent seeds to California 150 years ago. They have thrived there with the Blue Gum adapting particularly well to the coastal fogs.²⁰ So much so that many think it is a Californian native. With such exchange and adaptation of plants globally, this may pose confusion for the use of Australian flora as a signifier of national identity.

Now in contemporary ceramics, Australia's native flora is likely to be part of a conceptual approach to issues surrounding climate change and endangered ecosystems, such as in work by Julie Bartholomew, Shannon Garson and myself.

Slide 19 Mount Majura Seed Box

Australian flora in ceramic decoration has meant many things throughout settlement history. In the eighteenth century it was part of the British demand for natural curiosities from the colonies. In the late nineteenth century it signified a growing appreciation of the distinctly Australian flora and as part of defining an Australian identity. At Federation and during the early part of the twentieth century it symbolized patriotism and nationalism. [Slide 20 Mount Majura Seed Box detail](#) Studio potters have responded to the environment in a myriad of ways through the twentieth century and the perspective of Indigenous artists has been embraced. In the 21st century environmental issues are paramount and these no doubt will continue to become part of the expression of Australian flora in ceramic decoration.

Slide 21 Mount Majura She-oaks

The cultural intention that lies behind the use of Australian flora in ceramic decoration has changed, but the same passion and regard for the plants and the environment remains.

²⁰ Robert L Santos, *The Eucalyptus of California*, (California State University, Stanislaus, 1997).

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