

National Cultural Policy Submission

Bluestone Collective

Submitted: On behalf of a not-for-profit arts organisation

What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you? Feel free to respond to any or all pillars:

The challenges and opportunities presented in this submission have been identified by the Bluestone Collection, which was founded in 2010 by a group of makers and craft supporters to build a collection that promotes contemporary Australian craft exhibition practice. The Bluestone Collection is an incorporated association rather than an investment collection. As its constitution states, its intention and purpose are to donate the works to a suitable institution once the collection has reached maturity.

As members of the craft community, our aim is to encourage a high standard of exhibition work within Victoria and raise the profile of contemporary craft in this state.

Since 2010, the members of the Bluestone Collection who are also established craft practitioners and curators, have surveyed important craft exhibitions, and acquired work that reflects innovation, diversity, skill, and imagination. Bluestone also prioritises the acquisition of work made by First Nations people and established practitioners who are under recognised.

In 2020 the Bluestone's first collection of contemporary craft, that reflected the aesthetic, material, and conceptual currents of the previous decade, was donated to the RMIT University Art Collection. In their letter of acceptance, they emphasised the quality of Bluestone's ceramics, fibre, and gold and silversmithing and the importance of the collection as 'an important tool for student engagement ". Another 10 year-round of collecting has begun that will be ready for donation in 2030 or earlier.

Please tell us how each of the 5 pillars are important to you and your practice and why. Feel free to respond to any or all that are applicable to you:

First Nations

The Bluestone Collection encourages First Nation artists' exhibition activity by collecting works from galleries that specialise or whose remit is to support and promote First Nation artists. So far, the collection has acquired works from shows such as 'Baluk Artists and Reflecting Self and 'Recognizing Country' at Flinders Lane Gallery in February 2020. The latter was one of few recent exhibitions in a private gallery, in Victoria. that focussed specifically on the craft work of indigenous artists and provided the Bluestone collection with a welcome opportunity to acquire works by multiple artists.

As various forms of traditional indigenous craft are now merging or being reinterpreted through non-traditional forms of craft, a strong advocacy and training program is required to foster and widely disseminate the work of First Nation craftspeople. Furthermore, this type of intervention will offer the public opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of the history, material and techniques employed in the indigenous craft sector.

Research is central to these activities to underpin and inform education and engagement in school, universities, and galleries.

Recommendations:

- *Increased funding for cross-cultural programs that support craft-specific knowledge sharing by makers, teacher and researchers and increased funding for training and advocacy of traditional crafts.*

A Place for Every Story

The stories that are told through Australian craft capture our cultural experience and perspectives of people and places. Through materials such as clay, fibre, textiles, precious metals and plastics, these artworks connect us to our pre-colonial, colonial, modern and present-day history. Many pieces from the Bluestone Collection tell stories through a social lens (Gerry Wedd, Vipoo Srivilasa, Anna Davern, Lisa Waup, Nanette Shaw, Gilian Garve and Roseanne Bartley) and record events that portray the urban and the regional cultural milieu.

While several state and national institutions such as the National Gallery of Australia, the Gallery of NSW, the Australian Design Centre and AGSA (Art Gallery of South Australia) regularly exhibit craft, it is mostly left to individuals to self-fund the creation of new work. Institutions such as Craft Victoria and The Australian Tapestry Workshop struggle with insufficient funding for both their operating and program costs so opportunities to commission new work are limited or impossible.

Currently, there are no craft focussed national prizes and very few state-based awards. Those that do exist, draw large crowds, and attract sustained interest because the creative works offer new way of understanding and thinking about the Australian story. These opportunities are few and far between.

Recommendation:

- *Increase recognition and support for centres of excellence in Australian craft. For example, institutions such as Craft Victoria need additional funding to rent better located premises to increase access for the public.*
- *Develop strategies to assist craft focus organisations to promote, sell and exhibit in major cities and country centres.*
- *Establish more prizes both national and state based, for each field of craft that tell Australian stories.*

The Centrality of the Artist

A thriving craft sector relies on support for the way craft is practiced and shared at all levels and engagement and not solely by professional craftspeople who exhibit, or sell commercially. Craft making is a communal activity which happens in community arts contexts and informally in groups. Craft is also made by individuals in the home and is an important part of the gift economy.

The maintenance and development of this creative ecosystem is dependent on innovation and renewal which is usually sparked by professional artists and presented in galleries and documented for access online. Additionally creative works that are acquired by collecting institutions and then exhibited, provide opportunities to appreciate new trends and place contemporary works within the context of earlier innovations. This cycle not only supports the artist but has flow-on effects for the large and extended community of makers.

As a country Australia has achieved a reputation for excellence in contemporary arts/crafts however support for the individual artist, both established and emerging has diminished. The de-funding of art and crafts organizations and the reduction of formal craft teaching positions has reduced opportunities for artists to gain income and experience in allied art-related positions.

Artists and craftspeople need professional development opportunities afforded to other professions, to extend their practice. The smaller markets in Australia and the lack of sponsorship to reach audiences overseas is constraining the career of Australian artists and craft practitioners. Consequently, it is very difficult to earn a living wage.

The creative and innovative potential of students requires nurturing and support in the early stages of their education. In an environment where universities and other training institutions are shifting the emphasis of craft courses towards the commercial, the social and cultural role of craft is being neglected.

Recommendations:

- *Shift the balance from operational to program funding to support research and creative production by creatives.*
- *Provide support for best practitioners to share knowledge and technical information to the future generation of makers.*
- *Support the development of opportunities, beyond the university sector, to generate practice-based research.*

Strong Institutions

Structural support for the field of contemporary craft has been slipping for decades, exacerbated by historical moves within the Australia Council to emphasise art rather than craft.

Originally two separate entities, the Visual Arts and Crafts Boards were merged in the 1980s, and then decade or so later, became the Visual Arts Board. Since the defunding of Craft Australia in 2011, despite a 40-year history, the country has no national agency supporting and advocating for craft. This is a very poor state of affair considering that excellence in craft and craft-related activity has the potential to interact and integrate very successfully with industry and production and promote innovation and excellence.

More recently, despite being celebrated in diverse public and private exhibition contexts, craft is being bundled with design and marginalised. Currently there is a noticeable drift towards marketing focussed design expositions because it attracts better industry sponsorship and private funding. Craft is rarely included.

Craft education is also declining despite the recent boom of craft related activities at a popular/grass-roots level. Consequently, the framework that supports craft practices is precarious and increasingly reliant on a piecemeal and deskilled training workforce. Unless craft specific education is strengthened, the field of craft may become second-rate, stagnant, and outdated and stymie its continuing capacity for excellence, creativity, and innovation.

Recommendation:

- *Ensure a well-trained, professional educators are working in education and other craft institutions.*
- *Provide support for institutions to commission and carry out adventurous and innovative research and culturally specific/relevant artworks, curatorial activities, and exhibitions.*

Reaching the Audience

The Bluestone Collection believes that there are many innovative models of philanthropic activity that support creative production and increased audience reach.

Members of the Bluestone Collection regularly exhibit the works in the collection or lend to institutions. The aim of this activity is to reach larger audiences but also to encourage individuals and groups to collect craft.

The Bluestone Collection advocates for the private collection of craft objects through talks offered by its members (for example *Collecting Clay* by Jane Sawyer at the 2022 Ceramic Triennale NT).

Recommendations:

- *Encourage innovation in philanthropic activity that supports contemporary craft.*
- *Encourage dialogue about the importance of the connection between private collecting and public institutions in the promotion of craft.*
- *Encourage exhibition opportunities for private collections in state and national institutions.*
- *Increased support for the development of triennials and festivals that include all crafts - textiles, glass, gold and silversmithing, furniture design and metal-smithing.*

Are there any other things that you would like to see in a National Cultural Policy?

As a result of the paucities outlined in this submission, specialist skills are in danger of being lost and artistic excellence undermined due to the accumulated effects of the long-term neglect of the craft sector. This isn't good enough for a nation with unique cultural roots and a previously commendable track record for supporting craft. However, with careful tending, strong advocacy and sustained support, the complexity and diversity of Australian stories will continue to be told through craft mediums.

The Bluestone Collection recommends on a policy level that:

- *Craft practice is reinstated and identified as a distinct and separate field to art and design.*

The Bluestone Collection recommends on a practical level that:

- *Cultural institutions that already collect contemporary craft be financially supported to expand and exhibit their collections over the next 10 years.*
- *Cultural institutions are encouraged and provided with discrete funding to commission and exhibit new craft-based works.*
- *Cultural institutions are encouraged to partner with private individuals and organizations to promote critical dialogue about private collection practice.*
- *The creative industry should be aligned with the sports industry where prize winners are not required to pay tax on awards.*