



like a lizard drinking

an australian pottery idiom

Robert Bell reminds us of a time when animals were
kings of the ceramic jungle

The old Australian saying 'flat out like a lizard drinking' neatly sums up the energetic and prolific production of local potters during the mid-twentieth century. This period was one in which potters worked almost exclusively in earthenware, had a passion for decoration and were uninhibited in their use of vibrant glazes. They found themselves working in a context where historical events, such as Federation and the subsequent growth

of Australian Arts and Crafts societies, had shaped a national interest in the country's unique flora and fauna. Asian art, in particular the image of the dragon, was also a source of inspiration for Australian potters as was the use of mythical animal imagery in the late nineteenth century Arts and Crafts Movement and Art Nouveau styles. Combining all these influences, Australian potters in the first half of the twentieth

Marguerite Mahood,
Scythian potpourri, 1945
Glazed earthenware,
30.3 x 12.5 x 10.9 cm,
National Gallery of Australia.



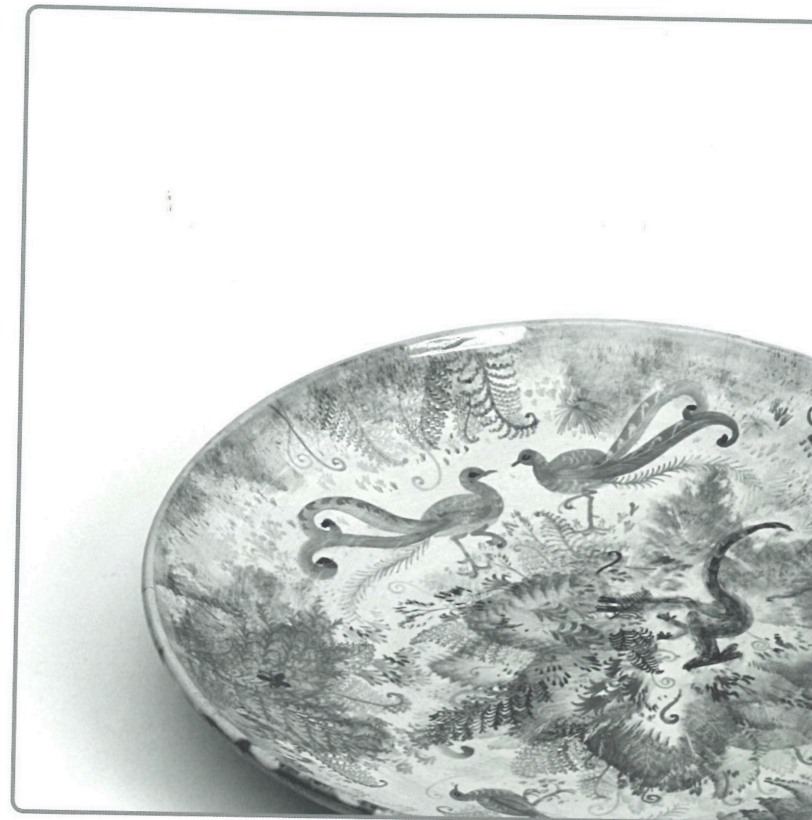
Klytie Pate, Vase, 1937, glazed earthenware, 16.2 x 16.7 cm, National Gallery of Australia.

century took great pleasure in creating sculptural animals (sometimes hybrids) whose new habitat was the humble pot.

Frogs and lizards, depicted in rich coloured glazes, were favourite subjects and appeared on a number of decorative and functional objects, such as on Marguerite Mahood's *Potpourri* vase of 1945. These themes can also be seen in Klytie Pate's Vase, which depicts a writhing dragon with prominent carved scales and claws. The effect is one of fluid beauty, compared to the aggressive ferocity of the reptiles depicted on John Castle-Harris' works. From the rim of his imposing

bowl, large dragon-like lizards are so engaged in savage combat that at any moment the supporting structure seems likely to collapse. Castle-Harris was a skilful modeller of animals and his work offered a rare alternate choice to the imported European decorative ceramics available in Australia at the time.

In Melbourne, two very different 'schools' of pottery existed: those potters associated with the Boyd family and the Arthur Merric Boyd Pottery in Murrumbidgee and those who trained at the Melbourne Technical College. The former looked toward the earthy handmade elements found in the English Arts and Crafts Movement, while the



Arthur Merric Boyd—Pottery, Neil Douglas—decorator, John Perceval—potter, Plate with kangaroos, lyrebirds and ferns, 1951, underglaze-painted earthenware, 6.7 x 45.4 cm, National Gallery of Australia. Reproduced with the permission of Bundanon Trust and Neil Douglas.

latter was drawn more to the exoticism and refinement found in Asian ceramics and European styles such as Art Nouveau and Art Deco. The work of these camps ranged in subject matter from gnarled gum trees on pots through to exquisitely carved vases capped with hybrid lizards. Neil Douglas became a partner of the Arthur Merric Boyd Pottery in 1950 and decorated much of its production with images of native animals cavorting in the Australian landscape, reflecting his strong interest in environmental conservation.

In the 1930s, small manufacturers of bricks and industrial ceramics, such as the Hoffman Brick

Company, had expanded their product lines to include moulded 'art pottery', with Australian flora and fauna modelled in the fashionable art deco and 'moderne' styles of the period. Hoffman's *Cicada* box typifies the stylish local product that began to displace imported wares on the mantelpieces of Australian bungalows of the 1930s and 40s. British ceramic manufacturers had provided a strong influence on local production with lines such as the streamlined animal figures modelled by sculptor John Skeaping for Wedgwood in the late 1920s and the stylised animals in the ranges designed by Eric Ravilious for the same firm in the 1940s.



Hoffmann Brick Company, *Mel-rose Australian Ware Cicada box*, c.1935, glazed earthenware, 7.7 x 15.9 x 9.2 cm, National Gallery of Australia.

In Western Australia in the early 1950s, the large commercial manufacturer, Brisbane and Wunderlich introduced its *Wembley Ware* line of decorative ceramics crawling with a menagerie of modelled native birds, crustaceans and marsupials. This range brought affordable 'Australianised' versions of popular decorative wares to an eager national market and, in doing so, provided employment for many immigrant decorators and modellers. Smaller commercial potteries flourished in most Australian cities during the 1950s, their output reflecting influences from both contemporary studio and industrial pottery. This availability of commercial products fuelled an interest in pottery classes and ceramic groups

and societies, members of which produced some of the most exuberant and uninhibited decorative animal figures of the period.

These aspects of Australian mid-twentieth century ceramics are on display at the National Gallery of Australia in its exhibition, *Like a Lizard Drinking*, curated by Robert Reason, 2001 Decorative Arts and Design Intern (and now Associate Curator European and Australian Decorative Arts at the Art Gallery of South Australia).

Robert Bell is Senior Curator Decorative Arts and Design at the National Gallery of Australia.