

# crafts mastermind: jane burns

WORDS BY GRACE COCHRANE PHOTO: ANDY STEVENS

**Jane Burns has the experience of a lifetime, the persistence of an enthusiastic terrier and the memory of a multi-gigabyte hard drive. Her focus is an unfaltering commitment to craftspeople and their work, which she developed nearly 40 years ago. She came to the crafts from a background familiar with the arts, and employment in welfare management, organising conferences on hospital planning and two years doing 'mad jobs' in Italy.**

From 1971 to 1992, Jane was the founding director of the Crafts Council of Australia (later Craft Australia), formed in the heady years of the early 1970s, when not only the Australia Council (with a Crafts Board until 1987) was formed, but also funding bodies in each state. Alongside the growing numbers of specialist crafts groups, the network of state craft associations (later councils) and their national body became central to the professional development of those in the strong crafts movement.

*I've never really set out to do anything. It has always been to do with just falling into things serendipitously. Those involved in setting up the Crafts Council were so sure of what they wanted and I saw it as my opportunity to interpret their goals – they wanted a higher profile, education, information and access for audiences through publications and exhibitions.<sup>1</sup>*

The positive government support for such a professional movement, within a time of vast cultural change, had huge repercussions. Jane was involved in the first bids for government funding for the crafts, Australia's involvement in the World Crafts Council and its Asian Zone office, and the first national conferences and Crafts Expos. She got to know everyone.

Within her office, Jane made a submission to the Australian Government's *Crafts Enquiry* of 1973, and oversaw the publication of the journal, *Craft Australia*, and the production of a biographical register, films, audiovisual material and publications through the Resource Centre. There were joint committees with the



Crafts Board for films, education, exhibitions and international visitors. And she was directly involved in the management of Australian representation in international events such as in Faenza (ceramics), Lausanne and Lodz (textiles) and Pforzheim (jewellery), as well as SOFA in the United States.

With nationally-drawn board presidents and board members over the years, Jane set up an office in King Street, Sydney, and moved it to different locations in George Street in the Rocks, each time developing its scope, role and relationships. And every time those of us who were part of the story along the way, flounder as we try to recall details, it is Jane who remembers every person, every issue associated with each event, every connection that was made and practically every conversation.

At the same time she has contributed her experience to other organisations. She has been on many related boards such as the Arts Law Centre, the National Association for the Visual Arts, the National Arts Industry Training Council and the Australian Academy of Design, as well as the Sturt craft centre and the Australian Costume and Textile Society. Still not flagging, since 2006 she has been an active member of the UNSW Animal Ethics Committee, the Ranamok Prize for Contemporary Glass and the National Council of the Independent Scholars Association of Australia.

Her experience and, in particular, her 'corporate memory', have always been invaluable. From 1992 to 1996, through a consultancy with the Visual Arts/Craft Board, she worked to develop a higher profile for the visual arts and crafts. And between 1994 and 2005, she set up and managed the itineraries for large groups of collectors from the American Craft Museum in New York, the Renwick Museum in Washington, the Oakland Museum in California and the Mint Museum in North Carolina.

Not surprisingly, in 1988 Jane was made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for services to the crafts, and received the 1992 Emeritus Medal from the Visual Arts/Craft Board. In that year she was also made an Honorary Member of the World Crafts Council.

Loyal, energetic and passionate for the causes she believes in, why has she stayed with this particular field for so long? 'A lot of it is the people', she says, 'and a lot is to do with not giving up on a job only partly done.'<sup>2</sup> ◉

*Grace Cochrane is an independent curator and writer in Sydney.*

Notes

- 1 From a conversation with the author, 2009.
- 2 Ibid.