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How our world-class wonders are making their mark

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World-class wonders

They're made just down the road, but these highly-prized works are sold around the globe, gracing the covers of top style magazines and adorning the homes of royalty and the rich and famous. **Sally Pryor** speaks to the Canberra artists and designers who are making their mark

Canberra is often described as the kind of place that people eventually leave – if they're not ensconced in the public service, that is, or stuck deep in a comfort-zone rut that makes the rest of the world look scary.

But it's also a place that people come back to, by choice, or never leave in the first place. For certain creative types – artists, writers, poets, actors, designers – the air here seems to provide a sense of clarity, a space that's inspiring, rather than oppressive.

Why else would we have so many still here, beavering away in the suburbs, or in the lush rural surrounds? And they're not turning their gazes inward, either. Many are busy showing the rest of the world how it's done, right here in Capital Country. Far from being a treadmill for politicians and those who work for them, this much maligned – but ultimately gorgeous – planned city and its surrounds are churning out creativity in all corners.

And the domain of homewares – of the pricey, distinctive variety – is a case in point for this proposition.

A rural NSW property on the outskirts of Bowning on a rainy Sunday is not a scene that immediately conjures up images of British royalty. Until, that is, you enter the Peter Crisp Gallery, home and studio of the internationally renowned glass artist. As the rain soaks the well-tended, tree-lined gardens outside – a popular site for weddings and corporate events – his glittering tableware and masterful one-off pieces twinkle around the display space.

"Did you see Sarah Ferguson last week?" asks Crisp, leaning dejectedly across the table over tea and scones. But unlike everyone else in the Western world, he's not referring to the Duchess of York being caught out selling access to her royal ex-husband to a fake sheik. It's what she was doing as the deal was struck.

"She was ashing into one of my bowls!"

Indeed, a quick scan on the now-infamous footage on the internet shows a tipsy Fergie absent-mindedly flicking her cigarette ash into an elegant glass bowl, the type of which Crisp admirers will be familiar with.

But this is the realm in which Crisp has had a presence for many years. Among the pieces on show in the gallery is a boxed set of dazzling tableware, inlaid with gold and platinum beside a framed photograph of Prince Charles and Camilla, accepting the tableware – of which there are only four sets in existence – from Crisp as a gift from the Royal Australian Armoured Corps. His work adorns the tables of celebrities, royal palaces and diplomatic

homes, and is shown in public galleries and private collections across the globe.

But while Fergie is busy on the other side of the world, Crisp is hard at work in his studio, dreaming up new designs for his luxury glassware, and creating slumped glass pieces that often seem to defy the laws of gravity. And he has no thoughts of leaving the property on which he grew up, preferring instead to stay and expand his collection.

"It's important, first and foremost, to be seen as an artist in glass," he says, and until the late 1980s, this was the case, as he visited dozens of galleries and exhibited in Europe and the US. But in the late '80s, his bank manager told him that he could not rely on commissions, and he switched his focus to retailers, and exhibiting at trade shows. Until the onset of the global financial crisis, he was turning over up to 10,000 pieces of tableware a year, which are sold all over the place, and usually for a fortune.

He has since used the slight dip in business to focus on his art, and participate more in international events.

Last month, he was the feature artist for the Bombay Sapphire Gin annual promotional campaign in Rome, creating the world's first jewel-encrusted glass chalice to be sold at auction to raise money for cancer research. The fancy glass was the same height as the distinctive blue gin bottle, adorned with 22 carat gold, platinum and more than 200 blue sapphires, worth \$25,000 all up – it eventually sold at auction for 13,000 euros (a slightly disappointing result, he says, although it was purchased by a very rich Italian woman who obviously has some good taste). He has since become inspired to start making wearable glass art incorporating semi-precious stones.

Crisp is someone who is unequivocal about the amount of work he puts into his art, and that his high profile as an artist is deserved. But he is also disciplined, and pushes himself as hard as he can.

"It's hard because you're your own worst critic," he says. "I don't want to use the word 'proud', because it took a lot of work. My greatest satisfaction is bringing people together. As I grow older, it's great to be a catalyst for other people's creativity."

In the meantime, the Queen can enjoy taking tea off Crisp tableware – the rest of us should be so lucky. But at least his gallery, and the genesis of his creativity, is so close by, with Crisp himself there to greet you as you come in from the rain.

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Peter Crisp: "It's hard because you're your own worst critic."
Photo: Kate Leith

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From glitzy tableware fit for Buckingham Palace to sleek, functional vessels for the hip and funky, there seems to be a world between Crisp's glassware and the work of Fink & Co. But it's only just down the road, really, in Queanbeyan.

Robert Foster doesn't really mind being known as the guy who makes the distinctive metal water jugs – those, by the way, sold in high-end homewares stores and galley shops all over the country. But in fact, he is a prolific artist who was well-known for his gold and silversmithing, both here and in Europe, well before he decided to try his hand at homewares in the early 1990s. Hailing from Bendigo, Foster arrived in Canberra in the 1980s to study at the Canberra School of Art.

The jug, originally a commission for a Canberra restaurant in 1993, is instantly recognisable as an Australian design, but most people would be surprised to learn that it was dreamed up and produced, and continues to be produced, from Foster's scruffy, unassuming studio in Queanbeyan. There, Foster and his small team, which includes his wife Gretel running the business side of things, produce a range of vessels, including the famous jug, as well as bowls, cups, vases and jewellery.

Fink designs also pop up in places you wouldn't expect – the curtain panels at Hotel Realm in Barton and the menu holders at the Hilton in the Maldives.

Many of the objects are both vivid with colour and functional in a most satisfying way – the aluminium jug will not only stand out on your table, but it pours like a dream and keeps the liquid within nice and cool.

"I don't really like the word organic, but I guess there's always something quirky and innovative about it," he says. "One of the reasons I started Fink, and I suppose you could attach this to its aesthetic, is that I've always aimed to try and steer clear of things that were circular or had a circular cross-section. So everything's wonky, it's asymmetrical... The popular word in the design industry now is bespoke, and we were kind of doing bespoke before bespoke was around."

The steady popularity of the Fink range has also given Foster the freedom to work on his own pieces, and he stages two or three exhibitions every year.



Robert Foster, left, and Brian Tunks.
Photos: Graham Tidy and Andrew Campbell

And, much like a haute-couture designer, he views the Fink range as representative of his one-off work.

"Fink was really set up to on one hand play a part in the Australian design industry, to allow average people to be able to afford a product which had something special about it," he says. "My one-off work sells for thousands of dollars, so people can't really afford it even though they love it. So the idea with Fink is to still have that same integrity in the aesthetic, but to be able to manufacture it at a level which is accessible to people."

Each piece, he says, has an intrinsic value – unique but practical – that ensures it will never become

another piece of clutter. So with his works showing all over the world – his jugs have long been sold as a staple item at the Museum of Contemporary Art in New York – has he ever felt the siren call of the outside world?

Although he has been tempted to leave Canberra more than once, its bush-in-the-city aesthetic has a strong influence on his own work, and having grown up in the country, he has never been drawn to big cities. A stint in Italy further convinced him that the drama of Europe was not for him.

In fact, he says, it was an early offer to do work for Italian design factory Alessi that gave him the idea of

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simply producing tableware himself. "I didn't really want to move overseas - I thought it was more interesting to do something here and try and survive here," he says. "Some people would probably say that was silly, and I've had a couple of opportunities to design things for Alessi and I haven't really pursued it as vigorously as some would probably think I should've. . . . In some ways it's better to try and be in an environment that you enjoy and take your product to the world . . . and we've proven that that's possible."

Over at Pialligo, Brian Tunks, with his massively successful Bison Homewares, is another story

altogether. In fact, he's convinced that it's his story, at least for his long-term Canberra supporters, that draws people to his products.

"They love the fact that somebody who's come from outside the industry is succeeding where the rest of them have shut down and are sourcing products out of China," he says, with evident satisfaction.

"I'm dysfunctional in terms of the industry! I'm not trained as a potter, I'm not trained in ceramics - I was an ancient historian, but . . . I've applied these things laterally to my own knowledge base and built that and taught myself the skills that I need and built a really great team around me."

The result is a range of beautifully coloured, handmade ceramic pieces that are simplicity itself - clean, pure and based on one of the oldest arts - putting colour on stone.

Tunks came up with the idea after training in classics, ancient history and archaeology at the Australian National University. He had also spent time in Scandinavia, but it was while working on ancient Greco-Roman excavations in the Middle East that he fell in love with ceramics. When digging up all kinds of ancient vessels and pottery shards, he realised what an enduring symbol they were of modern civilisation - and how long they lasted.

Bison pieces - bowls, plates, latte mugs and vases - are both stunningly modern and based on ancient forms that ensure they'll go with all the stuff you already have in your collection. That, says Tunks, is the main idea behind Bison - that you can buy something that will last, and which can instantly be placed in terms of its origin.

It's also made from Australian stoneware clay, and each piece can be handled by up to 60 pairs of hands before it hits the shelves.

"It's massively labour-intensive. It's not like there's a conveyor belt where bowls are just sat in the middle and they're run down and sprayed by a robot - this is done by people," he says.

The work has paid off - the business has outgrown

its Canberra studio at Pialligo, and Tunks has opened stores in Sydney and Melbourne. Bison is regularly featured in style magazines, has an online store and is on the verge of setting up shop in Japan. The company also does large-scale commissions for hotels, private houses overseas and upscale weddings.

But, like Crisp and Foster, he has no plans to pack up and head off into the world, at least not yet. Canberra, he says, has shown enormous loyalty to his vision right from the start, and as long as that support is here, so will he.

It's never been about money, just money for me, it's always been about creating something that's enduring.

"It's grown to a point where I've had numerous offers to take the entire business offshore, and I've made the decision not to at this point. We're getting so much support locally," he says.

"I feel very drawn to the fact that we need to

view ourselves as part of a much, much larger community, a community where your design is influenced from a global perspective, from a historical perspective, and from a socially conscionable perspective, where you look at the environmental impact of what you're making, the legacy of what you leave. It's never been about money, just money for me, it's always been about creating something that's enduring, both as a company and as a product."

This is why he sounds more enthralled by the thought of families using Bison homewares on the dinner table each night, with each child having their own special colour, than he does about the house in Montana in the US that he's producing a range for.

People, he says, look for simple fulfilment through colour and simple forms. And through this, his aesthetic is a selfish one; he prefers to design things that please him with their low-maintenance look and the way they match other things in the average cupboard, from modern designs to family heirlooms.

"I think that the approach is very much, to me, about security. We live in uncertain times and people have really been drawn to the fact that they can hang onto our stuff for generations if they want to."



Woman is rarely wicked, but when she is, she is worse than a man.

Italian proverb

Detective Book: The Ray Off, 1949 (Courtesy 49th Street Editions)

FEMME FATALE - THE FEMALE CRIMINAL

Wicked women, seductive sinners, vicious vixens - female criminals have been portrayed in all these ways in popular culture. But how does the stereotype stack up against the gritty reality of Australia's most infamous women?

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