

Bh - Tinsmith: Artisan Opening Talk by Barbara Heath - Why Tinsmithing?

Well, the motivation to inquire into this category is homegrown. Our own house built in 1906 has several examples of 19C sheet metal design. Most charming are the acroteria - decorative cut-outs which ornament each corner of the guttering, when backlit by the ubiquitous Queensland blue sky the design reveals a 'blue' bird in flight.

It makes sense to inquire into these familiar objects produced by artisans whose methods were so closely related to our own.

Certainly reference to the vernacular in early Queensland architectural detail in our work with lattice and screens has already characterised the Jeweller to the Lost practice. Increasingly I want to identify our outcomes with a relevant sense of place.

Anyway we are here now amongst the material results of the search you can see the content of this show is weighted more towards the source than the response. What we were able to find out about the trade is written up in real time on our blog <<http://viewersite.wordpress.com/>> and documented in the catalogue which you can purchase here in the store. (or email us to download the .pdf file <barby@co-opones.to>)

So you can ask what is the residual from a project like this?

What have been some of the constraints and what questions are left unanswered?

It is important to understand that the defining material that lent 19C tinplate its particular character was a soft iron sheet coated with a layer of tin manufactured in Britain and exported across the globe as ballast in ships this is now well and truly extinct. By the late 1800s the malleable iron was replaced with tin coated steel and eventually this was superseded by galvanised steel a much harder metal with quite different working qualities.

In its place we chose to work with copper a similarly malleable metal - and over the past few months some of the trade tricks of the tinsmiths have infiltrated our workshop - plenty of rolling, folding and slicking the surface of the copper with molten tin.

Another constraint arose while searching the internet for existing surveys on tin invariably the trail leads back to the US and in particular the rural tinsmiths of Pennsylvania. The scope of work produced from the early 1700's delivered artifacts that seem to define everything wonderful about folk art. A fact which only serves as a reminder of the effects of an extra 200 years of settlement and a far larger population of free immigrants.

Nevertheless - repeatedly returning the focus to the smaller scope of Queensland brought a clarity and relevance to our findings.

One of the questions that remains is sort of a favorite (if you can have favorite questions?) and it queries the language of form and pattern.

Remnant local work is often embellished with various patterns cut simply from the sheet metal by hand with a pair of tin snips. Perhaps the tinsmith art is really the art of the mimic. Everything that was produced in Terracotta, Cast and Wrought Iron could be produced cheaper and of course at a much lighterweight, in sheet metal; we can observe roof finials mimicking the archetypical Queen Ann Terracotta finials even down to applied floral decoration, such were their skills.

Which leads to the question what might be the genealogy of patterns such as these on display?

Trades such as tinsmithing, with its reliance on hand skills are usually learned person to person and by example. History shows us that as populations shift and migrate, whether in flight from political or religious persecution or simple in search of new opportunity they carry with them learned methodologies and the visual language of their place of origin.

So a continuity of skill sets and methods can serve to express a visual language which through diffusion mutation and appropriation may both reveal and conceal its origins.

Artists today appropriate and re-appropriate, relinquishing the concept that they might be the owner of visual ideas - rather the task is to recognise assemble and re-interpret the visual. Given our access to overflowing visual stimulus, its hard now to imagine how limited pictorial references were in the mid 1800's. Owen Jones survey The Grammar of Ornament, one of the first and most influential sourcebooks of historic design was only published in 1860.

Perhaps there is a key in the very old term 'tinker', which refers to an itinerant traveller or peddler, the word has a Gypsy connotation. Although Tinkers were originally not Romanys or Gypsies, some did adopt the tinker's trade and with their few simple tools did hawk their wares often on foot to rural farms and villages.

This journeyman, nomad ancestor, this traveller may have gathered up a richer visual vocabulary than those rooted in more settled trades?

What we do know is that as elsewhere Queensland workers of the 1800s reiterated designs and patterns as if compelled by a genetic code and what remains of their output today can enable us to scope ideas of this place and of our collective history.

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