

Discovering Gunda

By Ross A. Waterman

Ceramics, in common with other forms of art, is influenced by its history and informed and renewed by technology. Recently the most advanced and democratic communication technology, the internet, has enabled information about a studio pottery to be shared that both enriches our knowledge of past practices and assists our appreciation of the role that pottery and immigration has played in our lives and culture.

For many years pottery marked Gunda has been an enigma to those interested in retro ceramics. Some pottery guide books list the Gunda mark but the dates and the characteristics of the pottery are inaccurate. This confusion was partly due to Gunda not being listed, as was the norm, in the Pottery Manufacturers section of the businesses directories used prior to telephone books. (1) But an ongoing discussion on an eBay forum between people interested in discovering Gunda, led 'Dora' to provide pertinent information that linked a Gundars Lasis to Gunda. (2)

Once this connection was established, research began which led to the piecing together of bits of information that revealed the numerous important contributions that Gunda had made to the development and history of Australian ceramics.

Gundars Zigurts Lasis was born in Latvia in 1928. In 1944 he was evacuated with his parents, Arturs and Anna, to the Wentorf Displaced Persons Camp in Germany and in 1949 they immigrated to Australia. (3)

Gunda was a studio pottery established by Lasis in the garage of his parent's home in Camberwell, Melbourne in 1956. Lasis named the pottery Gunda as he thought it would be easier than Gundars for Australians to pronounce. (4)

Between 1956 and 1977 the Gunda studio pottery produced a wide range of domestic, decorative and practical, slip-cast earthenwares. Gunda wares included dishes, vases, bowls, cups, plates, salt and pepper shakers, lamps, and ashtrays. Hundreds of different designs exist in a range of sizes from very small vases and planters to large dishes, platters and jugs.

Lasis, known as Gus, studied at a Technical College in Melbourne and in 1964 he married Lidija Kristen and they had a daughter, Yvette in 1966. Lasis by all accounts was a friendly, fun loving, hard working family man who took great pleasure in fishing, skiing and his cats. Lasis' premature death in 1996 could be attributed to lead glazes and an asbestos lined kiln used at the Gunda pottery.

The Gunda studio pottery represented a turning point in post-war Australian ceramics. Lasis was not influenced by the past and prevailing trends in Australian pottery, as exemplified by Merric and Doris Boyd at Open Country and the Arts and Crafts Movement or the Arthur Merric Boyd (AMB) and Martin and Guy Boyd Potteries use of abstract and figurative underglazes. Neither was Lasis influenced by Asian ceramics and the relationship between form and decoration as prescribed by Bernard Leach.

Rather, Gunda reflected an appreciation of European abstract art and design. Lasis elevated post-war abstract decoration on pottery from the rudimentary or the derivative to a design

feature that was to define the look of domestic ceramics, in Australia, for many years to come.

But Lusi was not alone in promoting an appreciation of abstract design.

Bernard Smith explains in *Australian Painting 1788-1990* that ...

'During the early 1950's a talented group of artists from the Baltic settled in Australia, several of whom contributed to the revival of the graphic arts' (5)

'...in Melbourne (in 1953) a group of Latvian painters established the *Blue Brush Group*...and held regular exhibitions until 1963.' (6)

'...the(se) migrant artists did much to change the climate of aesthetic opinion during the 1950s and 1960s.' (7)

'...- they were able to educate a generation of Australians towards a more tolerant view of modern art, particularly abstract art.' (8)

Another Latvian, Maigons Daga, made pottery in Adelaide in the 1950's before departing for America and Milda and Dasa Kratochvil emigrated from Czechoslovakia and established Ellis Ceramics in Abbotsford, Melbourne in 1958. The effects of migration are evident in the use of similar abstract decoration on pottery made at Daga, Gunda and Ellis but it was also a factor in the misattribution of pottery made at Gunda to Daga and Ellis.

As well as being at the forefront of introducing new approaches to the decoration of ceramics, Gunda was also a bridge between pottery manufacturers and the emerging craft movement of the 1950's.

Pottery manufacturers such as the AMB Pottery, the Martin Boyd Pottery and Ellis Ceramics were businesses, usually operated by partnerships, that employed staff to make and hand decorate mass-produced slip-cast earthenwares for the domestic market. While the best decorators, at some potteries, were allowed to add their signature or mark in most cases the decorators remained anonymous.

In contrast the craft movement emphasised unique 'one-off' craft pieces that were signed by the craftworkers that made them. This was exemplified by the potters at the Potters Cottage, established in 1958 in Warrandyte. Their philosophy was to enhance the quality of the domestic environment. (9) While some of the potters at the Potters Cottage made slip-cast wares their major, stoneware, works were in time collected by galleries lending the role of the craft potter a far greater significance than that of the designers, potters and decorators that worked at pottery 'factories'.

Lusi described the Gunda studio pottery as "A one man band" as he alone designed, made and individually decorated and marketed the thousands of pieces of ceramics produced there. Gunda was a successful business and in this Lusi effectively linked the commercial intention and methods of pottery manufacturers to the philosophy and practices of the craft movement.

While the large Gunda 'studio pieces' that included platters, vases, bowls and jugs were slip-cast and thus not 'one-off' they were still outstanding examples of the craft of ceramics. While the small and medium sized pieces often used the same styles of decoration, the

larger surface areas of the studio pieces offered Lusi greater scope for the application of his unique and timely styles of decoration.

In Australia, decorated earthenwares have traditionally been somewhat undervalued in comparison to craft stonewares produced in an Anglo-Oriental tradition but in retrospect it seems dated to determine the significance of ceramics based on a philosophy, an approach to decoration or methods of production. Pottery, like all forms of art, is eventually judged on its aesthetic qualities and its cultural relevance rather than the preferred or accepted conventions of the time it was made.

The pottery produced at Gunda exhibited an appreciation of the changing nature of design aesthetics. Lusi was continually innovative and progressively altered his approach to decoration and the use of form. As Gunda evolved over three decades it reflected and predicted what is now considered to be the design mores in ceramics from the 1950's, 60's and 70's.

Gunda was not nostalgic or familiar; rather it was a measure of style. It now serves as evidence of a domestic popular culture; of a generations desire to embrace contemporary ideas and design. Gunda pottery was modernist and decades after it was produced it still mirrors the concerns and concepts of the domestic designers of the times it was made.

The Phases of Gunda

The forms of Gunda wares were consistently stylish and elegant. While Gunda wares from the mid to late 1950's to the late 1960's employed geometric principles, later forms and decoration became more organic.

Although form and decoration co-existed, it was the decoration of Gunda that was its most distinguishing feature. Lusi's application of texture and line was a feature of all the styles of Gunda but his approach to the application and use of colour varied greatly over the years.

Lusi's first designs, carved white linear patterns on brown grounds, might have been influenced by Swedish potters such as Ingrid Atterberg, while Gunda from the late 1950's and early 1960's probably took its inspiration from West German ceramics and the use of dark grounds and coloured glazes applied in raised linear patterns.

Lusi seems to have incorporated aspects of Italian, Swedish and German ceramic decoration to create his own unique and individual styles with flair, originality and great technical skill.

Gunda wares can be characterised by five different styles of decoration: **Brownware, Blackware, Earthware, Lusterware and Caramelware.**

Only a few pieces of the earliest Gunda 'borrowed' motifs from Aboriginal art. A small elliptical dish, inscribed Australia, with a gloss black and brown pattern and another dish with a carved zoomorphic lizard and a boomerang would have been made to cater for international tourists to the Melbourne Olympics in 1956. A small tear-shaped bowl, a souvenir of San Remo was also inscribed with Aboriginal style animals.

Brownware 1956 – c.1960, consisted of a range of dishes, ashtrays and vases characterised by a coating of a matt dark brown glaze often incised with fine lines. The exteriors of vases featured gloss white carved lines, circles and patterns. The interiors of vases were usually gloss white or yellow.

Brownware dishes and vases were also decorated with carved patterns, cats or fish and painted with a gloss grey blue glaze often with tinges of green.

This style also included dishes and ashtrays that featured matt speckled grey surfaces incised with wavy lines and dots of coloured enamels.

Blackware 1956 – c.1964, was comprised of well over 150 geometric forms including triform dishes and vases, oval and square bowls and circular platters, decorated with geometric shapes.

Exterior surfaces of Blackware were coated in a matt black glaze with a smooth or slightly textured surface. Over this ground coloured glazes or enamels were applied either in broad panels coating entire sides of vases etc, in lines or in small areas defined by lines incised through the glaze.

These incised straight or wavy horizontal and vertical criss-crossing lines created squares and rectangles or patterns of irregular shapes. These shapes or floating triangles, pointy ellipses and circles were selectively filled in with combinations of muted yellow, purple, white, orange, green and brown enamels. The interiors of vases featured gloss white, yellow or pale blue glaze.

Another striking approach to Blackware decoration was the use of a gloss white enamel or glaze to decorate platters, dishes and vases with stylised fish and stunning abstract linear designs and patterns.

A matt olive green glaze was also used on Blackware and occasionally on Brownware and was either inscribed with designs or enamelled with linear patterns in tones of green. This type of decoration may have been influenced by the Italian potter Alvino Bagni.

Many small Brownware and Blackware vases, dishes and ashtrays were inscribed with a name of tourist location and were sold as souvenirs throughout Australia up until the late 1960's. Grandparents on both sides of my family had Gunda souvenirs on display. There are two pieces of Gunda on a mantelpiece in a photo from my 3rd birthday party, in 1963, and I have spotted souvenir pieces in homes from Rosebud to Khancoban.

As Lusi mastered his approach to decorating Blackware his ability to control the pools of enamels grew ever more sophisticated until he created on his large dishes and platters an abstract geometric decoration unsurpassed by any Australian potter since. A large triform dish magnificently decorated with incised overlapping triangles, selectively filled in with pastel enamels, is an example of the technical skill and creativity achieved by Lusi.

Earthware c.1964 - c.1970, used many of the same moulds as Blackware but the slip was often left in the moulds for longer as Earthware was particularly concerned with the creation of new edges, surfaces and textures. The common feature of Earthware was the use of a

gloss, occasionally matt, mottled, sometimes speckled brown glaze. Only a few pieces were inscribed with tourist locations.

A cream coloured glaze was also extensively used in carved lines, on the edges of dishes, the rims of bowls and around the bottom of vases and jugs.

Earthenware was often decorated with a green, crusty glaze applied in a linear fashion to create abstract patterns or stylised fish, cats and roosters. Another recurring approach to the decoration of Earthenware employed a pattern of fine incised brown irregular parallel lines atop a cream background. A range of lamps sometimes found with a metal Mayfield (10) sticker, but usually unmarked, regularly used this pattern.

A stylish circular platter combines these two approaches to decoration. A fish is drawn in the centre of the platter and ringed by the linear pattern.

A carved and scooped decoration that produced a seed pod effect was used on large mottled brown and textured dark brown vases.

A mottled mustard coloured glaze often decorated with a thick brown linear net pattern is included in Earthenware and is indicative of Lusi's ongoing experiments with colour and texture.

Lusterware was probably produced from the late 1960's to the early 1970's. It is characterised by the use of metallic lustre glazes and glassy pools of bright colours, often applied with bold painterly strokes that created organic designs. The application of these glazes exemplified an approach to domestic decoration frequently used during this period.

Lusterware glazes varied though from smooth, flowing and dripping, orange, mocha and brown glazes to glassy greens and yellows to crusty burnt orange and whitish glazes. The forms consisted of geometric ashtrays, bowls, dishes and platters.

A large typically 70's studio piece, a circular bowl, has a rough scratched linear surface. The interior has loosely drawn impasto triangular shapes selectively filled in with gloss green, orange and yellow glazes with undefined blue areas in-between.

Caramelware c.1972 – c.1977, featured a gloss caramel glaze with combinations of white, dark blue and dark brown glazes, as seen on a highly textured organic circular platter, with irregular edges. Surfaces ranged from glossy and smooth through slightly pitted to highly impasto.

Caramelware often employed a thick globular white or cream lava glaze usually speckled with brown dots. Lava glaze was common in the 1970's and was also used to decorate German and Ellis ceramics.

Large jugs and ewers made a feature of the handles. These handles were often long with loops at the bottom or made of adjoined circles, squares or rectangles. The forms of some late pieces were quite organic and resembled large bulbous seed pods.

One of the most beautiful pieces of Caramelware is a large caramel dish decorated with a raised dark brown, repeated, L-shaped pattern.

There are many experimental and bridging pieces of Gunda that do not easily fit into any of these styles, including pots that used matt pink and gloss purple glazes or black Zebra stripes.

The Gunda mark was, Gunda, in the form of a signature inscribed through the glaze. This mark was usually accompanied with a pattern number, also inscribed through the glaze, underneath the name of the pottery.

The earliest pieces, from 1956, had an almost straight 'G' and later the 'a' often looks like an 'e', otherwise the mark was consistent.

Pattern numbers. Low numbers are early patterns but as patterns were reused for different styles, decoration is a better method of determining the approximate dates of production. Many pattern numbers were repeated, making it difficult to determine how many unique patterns were made.

And many pieces of Gunda are unnumbered. Sometimes this indicated a studio piece, although some of the same studio pieces are numbered while others are not. Beakers, planters and lamps were usually unnumbered.

In 1977 Lusic established Uni Art; a lamp making business he operated in partnership with his friend Giuseppe Rossi. Lusic made the lamps and Rossi the shades. These lamps were supplied to department stores including K-Mart and Myer. While the forms of these lamps are indicative of the times and are of interest today, there was no applied decoration and the glaze usually consisted of a single colour.

Some of the pots made at Uni Art used Gunda moulds but were marked with an inscribed U A. Uni Art was first established in Frankston and later moved to Dandenong South.

A friend of Lusic's who collected Gunda for many years has in her collection large platters, jugs and vases made by Lusic but stamped GEMPO (11). Gempo platters were decorated with gold lustre grounds and bright orange, yellow and red glazes applied with lyrical expressive strokes, lines and splatters. These glazes were similar to those on Lusterware, while the glazes on other Gempo forms were the same as those used on Carmelware.

Throughout the 21 years that Lusic operated the Gunda studio pottery he produced a body of work unparalleled in terms of output and originality by a studio potter. His commitment to innovation, to his craft and to making a small but significant contribution to the decoration of our houses is his lasting legacy and in time Gundars Lusic will be recognised for the important part he played in the development of Australian studio pottery and ceramic design.

I would like to thank the many people who helped me discover Gunda. Dora and Judith from the eBay discussion boards, Gundars' family, his friends and next door neighbours the Fabinski's, Luddite, Rudite and the other members of the Latvian community who gave up their time, showed me their collections and made this essay possible.

(1) The Sands and McDougall Business Directories listed businesses and residential addresses. The Gunda studio pottery was never listed in any part of the directories. Lusia A. was first listed in the residential section in 1956.

(2) Dora, "Australian Pottery Gunda & Maigons Daga", 17/06/07
<http://forums.ebay.com.au/thread.jspa?forumID=24&threadID=600048065>

(3) Judith, "Australian Pottery Gunda & Maigons Daga", 23/10/07
<http://forums.ebay.com.au/thread.jspa?forumID=24&threadID=600048065>

(4) The correct pronunciation of Gundars is 'Gundaris' with a soft g.

(5) Bernard Smith with Terry Smith, Australian Painting 1788-1990
(Oxford University Press Australia, 1962) Page 335

(6) Ibid. Page 336

(7) and (8) Ibid. Page 340

(9) TarraWarra Museum of Art. Potters Cottage, Warrandyte.
<http://www.twma.com.au/exhibitions/24/>

(10) This Mayfield sticker and the absence of lamps with a Gunda mark indicate that Lusia supplied lamps to at least one wholesaler.

(11) Lusia probably supplied pottery to Gempo Giftware; established by Charles Gara in Melbourne in 1955.

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