

Venerable shards from Broken Hill

Bernard Appassamy | 20 September 2022

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Facing the station platform, the slag heap loomed over the town, and stood as a daring clue to the stories to be unpicked. As I stepped off the Outback Explorer train, Broken Hill introduced me to a monumental reality.

I was tempted to find the First Heritage City in Australia exotic and seductive – except Broken Hill does not hide behind glossy brochures or luxury resorts. It is unfazed and uncomfortable, and eschews nostalgia.



I saw clear plastic bags of vintage ceramic shards for sale. They had been excavated from the Council rubbish tip by so-called 'dump diggers', pre-dating the 1924 closure of the tip at a time when the mining activities and population peaked. I brought one bag back to Sydney.

Artist Kathie Najar came across similar shards 260 km away in the bush at White Cliffs, and interpreted them as 'white man's midden'. Traditionally defined as archive-relics of indigenous domestic activity across the world, this midden iteration speaks instead of an imported culture – crockery used by the miners and their families, and their shared human experience on an unfamiliar soil. They also shed light on more than 800 accidental mining deaths and the resulting birth of the trade union movement.

The shards are earthenware with geometric or figurative coloured patterns. Their cracked glazes and ragged edges echo the outback raw aesthetic, and allude to the ongoing challenging narratives of Broken Hill.

Author and ceramicist Edmund de Waal retraces the biography of a collection of 264 Japanese *netsuke*, carved miniatures, that was passed on in his family through five generations over 140 years. In context, De Waal refers to 'the secret history of touch'.

'Family lores may share universal themes but, like the shards, they are uniquely fragmented, disjointed. These vignettes speak to one another across place and time, and eventually fuse to a composite mural.'

My collection numbers 234 pieces. I wonder about the hands that delicately grasped the original ceramic vessels. From the stages of pottery making, their packing then freighting in crates on ships and trains to Broken Hill, their unpacking and displaying in local shops, their purchase, their daily use and washing-up by mining families until they smashed and were trashed, and found their way to the Council tip when they remained for one hundred years.

Some time this century, the shards were dug out, cleaned, and then sold in a bag with others in a retail outlet. Now they are sitting large on my desk claiming a distinctive extraction value from a mining city, and whispering, like books on a homely shelf, an intimate lasting merit.

Their timeline leads me to speculate some may come from a boarding house run by Giovanni and Elizabetta Ceccato from 1914 to 1918 on Eyre Street across from the slag heap. I first heard about them years ago from an old friend, who happens to be their grandson.

Family lores may share universal themes but, like the shards, they are uniquely fragmented, disjointed. These vignettes speak to one another across place and time, and eventually fuse to a composite mural.

The Ceccato family came to Broken Hill from Cavaso del Tomba in northern Italy. While Giovanni worked at the mines, the Ceccato household became popular for serving hearty home-style Italian meals. By 1916, Elizabetta employed two young women to help feed up to 40 shift-workers daily at all hours. One of their lodgers was Valerio Ricetti, who later became known as the Griffith Hermit.

Again a modest domestic item loaded with 'touch history' has been passed on and remains treasured: Elizabetta's manual pasta extruder that she had brought from Italy, and used at the Broken Hill boarding house. The 1875 *Bigolaro* design is still in production, and works like a meat grinder. The pasta dough is pushed down an auger through a die to extrude very thick spaghetti known as *bigoli*.

By September 1918, with Giovanni feeling the effects of lead and dust inhalation, the family with 4 children, 3 born in Broken Hill, moved to Griffith to an undeveloped farm of 26 acres. The family's farm home completed in 1923, with arched timber frames referencing the Sydney Harbour Bridge, still stands. The length to which Giovanni and Elizabetta then went to settle their family reverberates to this day through their 10 children, 25 grandchildren and family in Griffith and beyond.

'There's a photo somewhere of my Nonna using the *Bigolaro* on the farm', emails my friend. Photos, like vessels, can carry meaning to a lost past.

In a photographic series, artist Li Lang pays tribute to his deceased father. Li Lang felt challenged by the hyphen between his father's birth and death dates on the tombstone. He thought the idea of condensing a lifespan into a punctuation mark was absurd. Over 3 years, he set out to write in pencil the 241,752 numbers of the 30,219 days of his father's life as a fine veil over photos of his father's wristwatch, hat and pension.

At the Mundi Mundi lookout outside of Broken Hill, the 360 degree view of scorched plains appeared to laugh like a kookaburra at notions of scale and time. I stood there awestruck at a hyphen of sorts between the landscape sizing minuscule me and my contemplating that vastness.

Bernard Appassamy is a Sydney writer and artist who grew up in Mauritius.

Main image: Broken Hill pottery shards (Provided)

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