

Amy Harvey, Western Australian china painter

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*Amy Harvey was recognised in her home state with an exhibition in 1991,
but is not so well known in the Eastern States.*

Born in 1899 at Boulder on the West Australian goldfields, Amy Ruth Harvey was one of six children of gold worker Phillip Harvey and his wife Alice, a dressmaker. A bright girl, Amy was educated at the scholarship schools of Eastern Goldfields High School until 1915 and then Perth Modern School, where her art teacher was the painter Millicent Kimber. From 1915 Harvey subscribed to *Keramic Studio*, a New York art magazine which contained monotone and colour reproductions of decorated china and analysis of the design process.

Girls had little choice of profession then, so Harvey became a teacher. After a short wartime course at Claremont Teacher's College, she was sent to teach in the country near Toodyay; from there moved to Bally Bally near Beverley, and in 1921 to Maylands Primary School. Here she met the china painter Flora

Landells and became a student at her Maylands School of Art. They became lifelong friends.

In 1929 Harvey had problems with her voice, transferred to the Correspondence School and became involved in educational radio broadcasting. She retained an interest in the natural flora she had seen while teaching in the country. Her earliest pieces such as one c. 1930 featuring a bottlebrush is in a naturalistic style and readily saleable. Her income from china painting equalled half her teacher's salary.

When she married Harold Peirl in 1937 she was obliged to resign, as the Education Department did not employ married women. This gave her more time for her artwork. However she took private students in her South Perth home, passing on her skills to others.

She developed a body of distinctive work, which, with its rich colour and strong geometric design base, was modern for the time. She painted both naturalistic and abstracted nature. The representational work sold very well, but few of the abstract pieces sold and remain in the family.

Harvey was an enthusiastic member, office bearer and exhibitor with the WA Women's Society of Fine Arts & Crafts, a



*Waratab, vase
c.1935, porcelain
blank painted with
overglaze enamel*



Red Bugles, plate, 1947, porcelain blank painted with overglaze enamel



(Left) *Sturt Desert Pea*, plate, 1947, porcelain blank painted with overglaze enamel



Bottlebrush, vase, c. 1930, porcelain blank painted with overglaze enamel



Amy Harvey's painted mark

supportive organisation with many intelligent and well-educated women members. In the first exhibition of the Society, her work attracted praise from the critic for the *West Australian*, Charles Hamilton, who wrote 'Pottery painting by A. Harvey is very good – especially a Waratah Vase and a small ashtray. 'P.S.T.' was not so sure; of another exhibition he wrote 'Various ladies showed painted china, Mrs Peirl's decorative work being rather unusual.

Amy painted Australian wildflowers in two styles, a naturalistic style and a more modern geometric style. While the naturalistic sold very well, much of the more striking work remained unsold and is held by the family.

In 1947, with painter and fabric designer Ira Forbes-Smith and painter Bessie Saunders, she held a major exhibition at Newspaper House. Her work with its rich colour and strong geometric design base was so modern for the time. It attracted praise from critic Charles Hamilton in his review 'Three Exhibit Watercolours, Painted China, Oils and a varied collection' published in the *West Australian* on 22 July 1947. He wrote Amy Harvey 'shows some good china painting, sound in design and craftsmanship. Her naturalistic and conventional designs are well drawn and harmoniously coloured. Two large vases and a loving-cup are specially noteworthy for relation of pattern to containing shape, treatment of plants to form good pattern and brightness and clarity of colour ... The collection sets the tone for a very interesting and stimulating exhibition.'

Red Bugles was exhibited in this exhibition. The flowers in

shades of red outlined in black are arranged with geometric precision against a tripartite blue background. The leaves, folded to fit the circular space, are in shades of green outlined against cream sections near the rim. Three seed-like sections provide a central focus. Another design featuring a Sturt Desert Pea is more fluid, while the earlier piece c. 1930 featuring a bottlebrush is far more naturalistic. A Kangaroo Paw plate painted in 1977 has the same well-ordered geometric design combined with accurate observation of nature.

In 1951 when there was a shortage of teachers, Peirl taught at Girdlestone and Applecross High Schools. She retired in 1963 and returned to china painting until in her eighties, and died about 1990. A retrospective exhibition of her work was held in the Alexander Library in Perth in 1991. A coloured catalogue accompanied this, retrieving Harvey from relative oblivion.

Amy marked her work by painting 'A. HARVEY' in capitals on the base; sometimes she added the date.

Further information

Philippa O'Brien, *The Wildflower Image: The Painted China of Amy Harvey*. LISWA, Perth 1991.

Dr Dorothy Erickson is a practising contemporary jeweller who exhibits regularly in Australia, Japan and Europe. She researches and writes about Western Australian jewellers and artists.