

Tapestry TopicsA Selection from
Spring 2021, Vol. 47 Issue 1**Archie Brennan in Australia****Sue Walker**

I first met Archie Brennan 45 years ago and still have the clearest memory of that meeting. He came into my office at Melbourne Teachers College, uncharacteristically dressed in a suit, and his warmth and his adventurous spirit filled the room. I liked him immediately and was keen to hear what he had to say but had no idea of the far-reaching outcomes that would eventually result from this visit. I never dreamt that his dynamic thinking and persuasive personality would contribute a whole new dimension to our cultural landscape, that fresh opportunities would be created for our visual artists, and my own career path would take a new and exciting direction.

Indeed, it was his love of adventure and his active and engaging mind that brought him to Australia. An Australian academic working in Edinburgh invited him to visit and the timing was perfect. It coincided with our State Government's enquiry into the feasibility of establishing a tapestry workshop here in Melbourne.

Having discovered the Dovecot to be a good model for an Australian workshop the government appointed Archie to advise them and to meet with key people in the art world. At the time I was President of the Crafts Association and had shown interest in the feasibility study but stated my concerns that training was needed before anything serious could happen. Archie was directed to my door to convince me that such problems could be overcome.

We found an immediate rapport and an intense time of talking followed, visits to artists, long talks in coffee shops and pubs, in cars and studios, in galleries and offices. His energy and enthusiasm were infectious. He opened doors in my mind, showed me the excitement of creative collaboration

between artists and weavers, and took me on a journey for which I am ever grateful.

Having been a weaver since school days and married to an artist, Archie's ideas enthralled me. I was totally receptive and eager to see his ideas realised. He saw in Australia, at its great distance from Europe, the opportunity for tapestry to break away from the traditions of European tapestry, where artisan weavers faithfully reproduced the designs of artists in a woven form. He envisaged that weavers who were trained as artists would engage in a collaborative way with designer artists so that fresh new works would emerge, bringing life and energy to tapestry, instead of lifeless reproductions in wool.

For Archie this was a natural extension of the philosophy he had pioneered at the Dovecot, but it had greater potential if government support would enable a period of experimentation at the beginning to establish a way of working truly based on shared creative activity. Public meetings were held and Archie met with artists and weavers, explained his ideas, and showed examples of works from the Dovecot. He inspired our artists with the kind of collaborative tapestry that he proposed. He excited weavers about working in this way, and attracted interest from architects looking for mural scale works in a warm and lustrous medium for the glass and concrete foyers of new buildings. His engaging personality and persuasive conviction, together with the spirit of the times in government, meant his ideas gained full support. Government funds became available and serious planning began.

Back in Edinburgh Archie sent a steady stream of letters and was always available for advice and

strategic suggestions to help in the realization of his vision. It was his idea that I should apply for the position of director—an idea that had me nearly falling off my chair in a pub with surprise at his suggestion. Over nine whirlwind months of excitement and rapid learning I had absorbed so much from Archie, but I had not been thinking that way. It had been like a hothouse of ideas and invention but always directed towards realizing his vision and not with any personal ambition involved. Indeed, the idea of establishing and running a business in the arts would be a big change from teaching textiles to students in a teachers' college. I gave it long thought and became increasingly excited by the idea. With much trepidation but encouraged by Archie's confidence in me I applied for the position. Nine applicants were interviewed, and on February 26, 1976, I was appointed as the first Director of Australia's fledgling tapestry workshop.

What a challenge it was—establishing a workshop from the ground up! Archie was just brilliant, sitting up at night in Edinburgh writing me lengthy letters in his familiar slightly square handwriting a bit like tapestry, advising me how to do it all. Of course, he had left strong recommendations and written advice. but the practical aspects of a workshop were massive especially given there were no models in Australia to follow. In hindsight this was liberating and rewarding, which is what Archie could see, but at times I yearned for closer links with others working in the same field. I drew on advice and discussion with architects and designers and others working in parallel fields and with Archie always in the background I gradually built a workshop that truly followed his original ideas.



Archie Brennan weaving at Australian National University.

Archie introduced me early on in our discussions to Belinda Ramson, who was to be a vital help with training weavers in our initial establishment years. He took me to her tapestry studio in its lovely garden setting in Canberra. She was hard at work weaving her own tapestries and using technical skills learned when working with Archie at the Dovecot while her husband Bill was doing research in Edinburgh.

When we offered a short training period for people interested in becoming workshop weavers, Belinda helped with training them on small frame looms and then offered advice in the selection of the first five weavers. Flying down from Canberra at regular intervals once the Workshop had started, she gave valuable help on practical aspects of tapestry production. Belinda and Archie were firm friends and during one of his visits he and Belinda mounted an exhibition of their own personal tapestries which created great interest. It was an encouragement to tapestry weavers

pursuing their own work outside the Workshop and resulted in the acquisition of some of Archie's tapestries by public collections such as the National Gallery of Victoria and private collections, including that of Dame Elisabeth Murdoch.

In addition to his critical role in establishing the Workshop, Archie's example to individual weavers and the various teaching workshops he conducted in different parts of Australia led to a flourishing level of individual tapestry activity, some of which continues today despite the challenges of such a labour intensive art form. A recent exhibition of the past 50 years of textiles in Australia held at

the Ararat Textile Gallery in Regional Victoria was an exciting reminder of just how broad and pervasive Archie's influence has been, especially for weavers brave enough and with the resilience to create their own tapestries.

Through the Tapestry Workshop, which became the largest provider of public art in Australia in its first 25 years, and through the continuing influence he had on individual weavers, Archie's influence on the cultural life of Australia has been immense. He opened new doors for visual and textile artists and enabled the viewing public to enjoy an ancient art brought into new life in a country far from its origins.

Archie always maintained a strong interest in the projects in our Workshop, and when our most ambitious one was proposed—a massive tapestry 20 metres wide by 9 metres high (65 feet x 30 feet) for Australia's new Parliament House, based on the work of one of our most celebrated artists, Arthur Boyd—Archie came to Melbourne and provided valuable practical advice and support. He wrote a well-considered reference to our parliamentary clients, encouraging them to trust our Workshop in this huge commission, the second largest tapestry in the world. It took five years from first discussions to its launch by Queen Elizabeth in the new building in 1988, Australia's bicentenary year.

My friendship with Archie has continued over the years and I visited him in various places as his nomadic lifestyle and adventurous spirit saw him moving around the globe. One memorable visit to Papua New Guinea, when he was supervising the art works program for the new Parliament House, stands out. My husband came with me to the tropical site of Archie's work and the somewhat challenging lifestyle of Port Moresby. Archie was living in the grounds of the National Art School with his beautiful partner Tess, who he had met as a student in one of his Australian workshops, and her small blond daughter Ry. We

stayed with them, sleeping in a strange bunk-like double bed high up above the living space. Archie was in his element—wearing only shorts and sandals and so tanned as to blend with his indigenous workers. He loved the heat of the tropics and the freedom from more conventional life while working on a project that excited him. When they returned to Australia and Tess's health deteriorated until she sadly died at such a young age, Archie was there, supporting her until the end. We all shared the sadness of the loss but admired the grace and dignity of her final weeks and days, the loving care she got from Archie, and the beauty of her warm and informal funeral.

Another visit to Archie in a tropical climate was in Hawaii where Archie was living with his American lawyer wife Bonnie and small son Jesse. Again, Archie was enjoying the climate and the interesting cultural mix. Japanese textiles were a special delight. As he drove me around the island in his small car, visiting art galleries and shopping in local supermarkets, I gained an insight into a different place and way of life, just as I had in Port Moresby. In both these cases and due to Archie, I had experiences that I never would have had otherwise. I was able to enjoy his friendship again, but from a different perspective. Of course, when Archie and Susan settled in in their New York City shared studio and living space, it was a great drawcard for me, and I made my way to see them several times.

Archie's welcome visits to Australia over the years always brought happy reminders of earlier shared adventure as Australian tapestry emerged as a vital and exciting part of our contemporary art scene. His contribution to the cultural life of Australia through his enthusiastic introduction to an exciting collaborative form of tapestry was enormous. It continues today through the many lively and spirited tapestries woven by weavers in Melbourne in collaboration with artists not only from Australia but also from many parts of the world.

Read the entire Tapestry Topics issue dedicated to *Archie Brennan's Legacy*: [HERE](#)

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