

Felt Applied to Interior Decoration

By Arthur Murch

Art in Australia, August 15th, 1932

Mr Frank Molony and I have developed the use of felt in interior decoration to the stage where it involves a no more difficult technical procedure than the machining of felt patches cut to design upon a felt base. Following the initiative of overseas artists, we have adapted as far as our materials and means would allow, the perfect patterns of Greek pottery decorations. To complete and assemble the work numerous experiments have evolved a technique which enables us to use skilled assistants but not necessarily trained artists. This procedure, by allowing a repetition of designs, ensures the article being reproduced at a reasonable price. I have always felt that there should be a utilitarian justification for work, and in the last two years nothing has worried me more than the isolated and apparently useless position occupied by artists in times of economic stress. That the artist has been forced to rely on the patronage of a wealthy and leisured class has resulted in his disinterest in the artistic needs of the rest of the community. Exclusiveness has, therefore, been emphasized as an essential property of art, even in this age of scientific manufacture, which with its machinery and beautiful synthetic materials could reproduce (with a few isolated exceptions) the finest examples of art. These could be distributed in large numbers as we distribute the best literature, thus ensuring both a wider appreciation of art and a more adequate return to the artist. I believe that amongst those whose daily occupation demands constructive thinking will be found keen appreciators desirous of possessing and enjoying truly artistic works, but at the present time they are offered large numbers of inferior substitutes. By "inferior" I mean that which is of unconsidered form, pattern or colour, or that which embodying an established decorative style is reproduced by an unsuitable process. A common example of this is Rococo, reduced to low relief in pressed metal ware.

I do not mean to infer that all such work is necessarily bad, because provided the artisan works within the capacity of his medium, and conforms his design to the utility of the article, good work may be produced.

It was not as a crusade along these lines that we launched our decorative felt industry, but because of the failure of other sources to provide a livelihood. We have produced something entirely Australian, which although of utilitarian value, is not unworthily related to the higher arts.



An example of the felt works illustrated in *Art in Australia* August 15th, 1932:
"A cream felt floor mat with a rust red and cream design of a boy chasing a hare, taken from a red figured Kylix in the British Museum"

Murch wrote this article when the Depression was at its peak. In mid 1932 almost 32% of Australians were out of work. Murch was living in Thirroul. He ate wheat porridge and sprouted the wheat to eat greens.

This article reinforces abiding aspects of Arthur's thinking and a tension that resides in his works, as I see it.

The tension is exemplified in the sentence beginning "I have always felt that there should be a utilitarian justification for work..." Arthur was never extravagant or wasteful; he was a teetotaler and happy to live on limited means. He was "workman-like" - a favourite term. He was from a hard-working family that showed drive and initiative in the early twentieth century. From the engineering shop floor he progressed to the art studios of Sydney and then Europe and back to Sydney. He loved beauty, poetry and humanity. He did not relate to the concept that art could be the result of a spontaneous burst of creativity as if administered by a magic wand. He believed that art was hard earned through serious study and practice and should be of use and service. In his artwork Arthur could sing; rise us up on a waft of breeze that rustled through the leaves of a tree or let us see the depth of a person through his representation of their eyes. I can't believe that while producing these lyrical landscape, figure and portrait works he was simply being utilitarian. Except... there are two meanings for the term "utilitarian". Arthur did read philosophy and he may have had Jeremy Bentham's concept of utilitarianism in mind. If so, it would mean that Arthur, perhaps, was working as an artist to produce the "greatest happiness" in his audience.

Edmund Harvey, Murch's long time friend, noted that during the 1930's period, Arthur was "getting the Renaissance out of his system". Murch painted in fine brush strokes such works as "Beach Idyll" (AGNSW), "The Madonna by the Sea" (Howard Hinton Collection), "The Judgement of Paris" (AGWA). Although Arthur does not mention Harvey in the *Art in Australia* article, Harvey was definitely

involved and wrote: "We went in for a bit of commercial art, using Greek vase designs in all sorts of bric and brassy ways."

Murch's painting works of the 1940's through to the late 1960's show an artist enjoying his medium and celebrating with a light touch. Just as in the 1930's, these years were impoverished in financial ways. Living on the northern beaches, Arthur and Ria and the children had few mod-cons and limited food. Arthur caught rabbits and fished to provide for the family. By 1953, Ria realized the necessity for her to return to work in the city to get more food on the table and pay the bills. These years were rich in many other ways – in becoming part of a local community and through continued associations with the arts fraternity. The shared interests in politics, poetry and art had a steadying effect during the ups and downs. The large commissioned murals for the Queensland University (*The Arts of Peace* 1950) and the Overseas Terminal in Circular Quay (*The Foundation of European Settlement* 1963) were time-consuming and required detailed and technical concentration for Murch.

By the early 1970's Arthur was producing "quick turn-around" works for galleries in Sydney. Some of these paintings seem to have less depth; almost like his heart was not in it. I think he felt under pressure. The art scene of this time did not fit with Arthur's style – think of Pop Art, hard edge. Traditional forms were considered old-hat. During the years 1973–1980 he took on two life-size equestrian statue commissions. Once again, these large projects took time and resources. He had to continue painting to keep money coming in to help finance rent and materials. He was in his 70's and this was a stressful period for him. He had always been confident and capable. Fortunately there were a number of saintly assistants who helped him.

Back to the original 1932 Art in Australia article – Arthur writes: "Exclusiveness has, therefore, been emphasized as an essential property of art, even in this age of scientific manufacture, which with its machinery and beautiful synthetic materials could reproduce (with a few isolated exceptions) the finest examples of art." He was always interested in new technologies and materials. He toyed with jewelry making, melting down vinyl records and moulding them. He made a paper mulcher to use for papier mache. The Govett's Leap horse and rider commissioned by the Blackheath Rhododendron Committee was made in a composite material – marble dust and resin. It was easier to cast and transport – thus "utilitarian", functional.

Like most artists and many in other creative fields, Arthur Murch was torn between the demands of daily life; the necessity to provide for family and being a professional artist which mostly offers a precarious income stream.

Strangely, Arthur's father-in-law Sidney Counsell who was only a few years older than Arthur, offered another perspective. Sid was a successful commercial artist. He painted the advertising hoardings and posters for cinemas from the 1920's through to the 1950's. He once told me that he wished that he had been a "fine artist, like Arthur, rather than a commercial artist". What an irony. Arthur was busy being a "fine" artist and trying to be commercial to make ends meet.

Michelle Murch 15th May 2017