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NEIL GRANT: MASTER POTTER

THE MAKING OF THE BOOK AND EXHIBITION

Pam McKinlay with Peter Stupples,
Thomas Lord, Joanna Wernham and Rob Cloughley

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Neil Grant: Master Potter, with text by art historian Peter Stupples, shines a light on the development of Neil Grant's skill and artistry with clay and fire, and his legacy as an art educator. The book was launched at an event hosted by Dunedin (UNESCO) City of Literature, on 20 October 2021. Its release coincided with a survey exhibition of Grant's ceramic works curated by Rob Cloughley, Neil Grant and Pam McKinlay. The exhibition was timed to overlap with the diamond jubilee of the New Zealand Society of Potters,¹ of which Neil was a founding and lifetime member. *Neil Grant: Master Potter* is a significant contribution to the art history of Aotearoa New Zealand, covering 60 years not only of Neil's career, but developments in the wider community of studio pottery and ceramics art education in New Zealand.

TYPOGRAPHY

Neil Grant: Master Potter is the collective effort of Peter Stupples (author), Thomas Lord (studio photography), Joanna Wernham (book design) and Pam McKinlay (researcher and publisher).

The manuscript began life in 2019, with the intention of being a catalogue essay for an exhibition proposed for 2021. On-the-ground research, with Pam working with Neil's private collection and personal archive in Dunedin, revealed a wealth of material which augmented Peter's extensive research on primary sources in libraries and online. Further colour came from conversations sorting through material, working closely with Neil and his wife Niki, teasing apart the narratives. Later, in-depth Zoom interviews occurred between Neil (Dunedin) and Peter (based in Wellington). Another feature of the book were recollections from former students and colleagues Neil had taught or worked with over the years. Several weeks of Covid-19 lockdown in 2020 also played a creative role, with the essay blossoming into a sizeable manuscript, at which point we realised that it had the potential to become a small monograph.

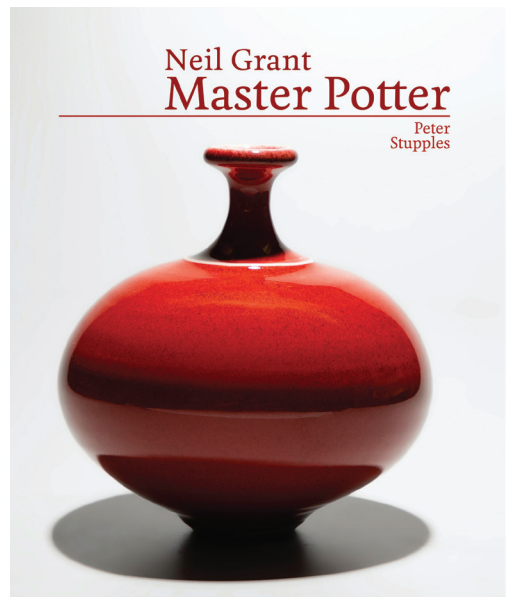


Figure 1. *Neil Grant: Master Potter*, front cover.

The book was intended to function as an illustrated catalogue of the 2021 exhibition and also as a standalone biography. It needed to accommodate a mix of Peter's thought-provoking original text, archival print matter and images, additional technical explanations on glazes (by Rob and Neil), plus the commissioned photographs (by Thomas Lord). The question was whether to separate the biographical/archival materials and follow them with the exhibition items at the rear of the book, or to interweave the studio images. We chose the latter option, interspersing the works in the living story.

Following our first design efforts, we were fortunate to receive professional advice from publisher Gareth St John Thomas (Exisle Publishing); he suggested that our format was too modest, and encouraged us to be more ambitious and adopt a standard American format for the book (page size 235 x 280mm). This is a custom size (not standard) in New Zealand so was not the cheapest solution, but was far more pleasing aesthetically. Each chapter and page of the new book design was storyboarded by Pam McKinlay to assist with the design, layout and photography. This draft layout gave everyone involved a sense of the size, look and feel of the book – the design vision – over the course of the project.

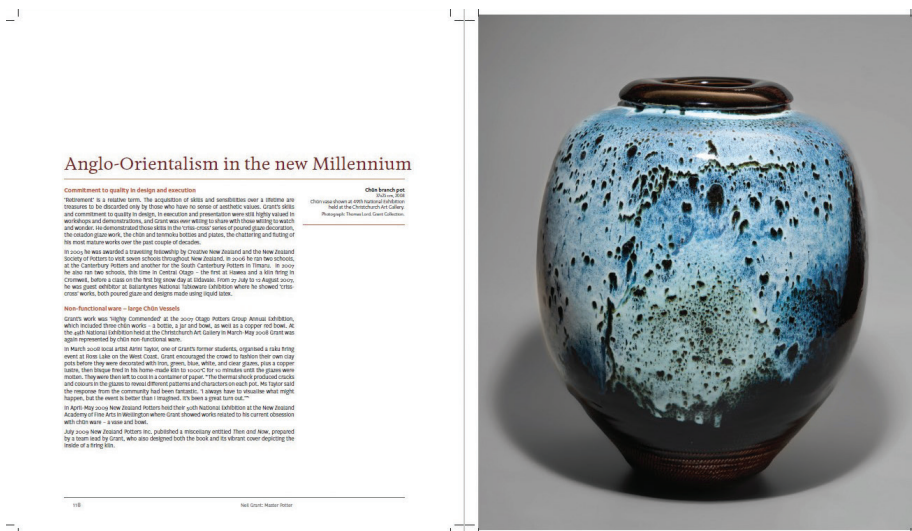


Figure 2. Sample page layout from book.

The decision was made early on to make the book a wholly New Zealand design production, including type fonts which Joanna Wernham sourced from Kris Sowersby's Type Foundry. A combination of serif and sans-serif fonts was chosen to complement Neil's Anglo-Shino approach, reflecting a feeling for the traditional, but with a modern twist. Harmony and counterpoint were achieved through the sans-serif/serif mix in headers and body type, using the sans-serif typefaces National and Karbon for body and caption text, with the serif font Feijoa used for the headings that opened each chapter:

The signature image, plus the serif header for each chapter opening, set the stylistic tone for each section. Double columns were eschewed in favour of a single block of text, with generous margins framing the print space to enhance continuous reading. "A little more width not only gives the text more presence; it implies that it might be worth savouring."¹² Colour notes were added in fine lines taken from the tenmoku teapot³ to frame the captions. Colour was also used in the subheads, which were designed to lead rather than dominate the text. The margins were another design feature. As well as keeping the print space clean, the extra-wide margins were utilised to hold captions and explanatory commentaries. Once the rules of the grid were in place, there was freedom to improvise at critical moments.

Thomas Lord was commissioned to undertake the studio photography. Thomas has spent time living and working in Japan.⁴ His love of Japanese culture brought an added sensitivity, and respect for the *mingei* aesthetic in Neil's work is evident in the photographs chosen for the book. Thomas trialled background, framing and lighting style in a lighting studio ahead of the photoshoot day. His expert lighting skills were brought to the fore when the shoot took place using a makeshift lighting rig in Neil's living room.

Supplementary photographs in the book, including photos of Neil in his studio, the artist's ceramic mural in Dunedin Public Hospital, works in Neil's garden and studio facilities in the ceramics department at the Dunedin School of Art were taken by Pam McKinlay.



Figure 3. Thomas Lord taking photographs for the book on location at Neil Grant's home, Dunedin.

NEIL GRANT: MASTER POTTER SURVEY EXHIBITION 1960-2021

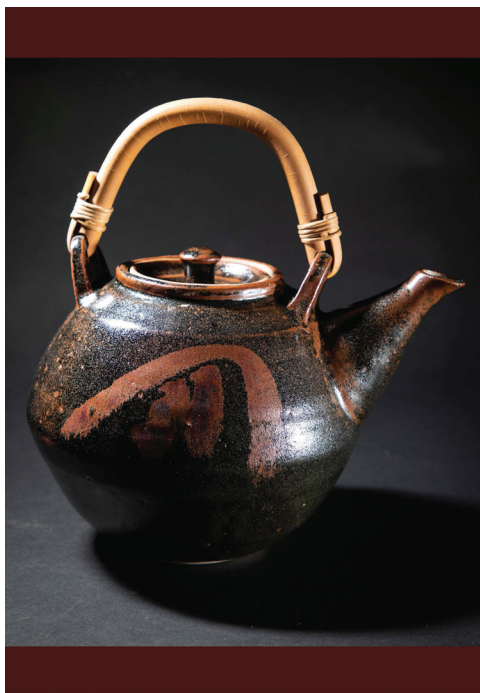
8-28 October 2021, Dunedin School of Art Gallery⁵

Neil Grant was a contemporary of Len Castle, Mirek Smíšek, Barry Brickell, Doris Lusk, Peter Stichbury and Doreen Blumhardt. His 60-year career as a studio potter and ceramic artist spans the years from the flowering of domestic rustic pots in New Zealand to the era of large sculptural ceramics and architectural commissions. He is well known for his distinctive reworking of traditional Shino-Japanese pottery into a fusion of Anglo-Asian forms and recreating them in new and exciting ways. His work and teaching links the Hamada and Leach influence with the new era of ceramics. While the 'domestic' sometimes sits in a marginalised space in the twenty-first century, Neil Grant's work elevates this sphere. His commitment to quality is a reminder of the artist's physical relationship with the object framed as an intimate encounter in the everyday at the hand of the maker.

Grant achieved early recognition in his art career and was selected for the exhibition "Young Artists New Zealand" in 1961.⁶ From the 1960s to the 1980s Grant was a regular exhibitor at New Vision Gallery, Auckland. New Vision was one of the most influential galleries



Figure 4. Sample page layout from book.



Tenmoku Glaze

Tenmoku (sometimes spelled temmoku), a Japanese term, is a family of stoneware iron-brown glazes, that fire to black or dark brown with a surface that resembles oil spots, with flashes of light brown on rims or edges. The word tenmoku was the name given by the Japanese for the tea-bowls imported from China, specifically from the T'ien Mu mountains, where the tea ceremony had its origins, where they were sometimes referred to as 'Jian stoneware' or 'black ware'. The oil spot effect was achieved by using a layer of iron-rich slip under a similarly iron-rich glaze. In the heat of the kiln, around 1300°C, the molten glaze and slip form a separate iron-rich layer and the boiling glaze brings some of the iron particles to the surface. As the kiln cools the spots of iron crystallise as magnetite, creating iridescent spots across the surface, so-called 'oil spots'.

Figure 5. Wall label of *tenmoku* glazed teapot, with commentary explaining glaze types and how such forms were created. Before flying out of New Zealand, the Hamadas visited Grant's studio in Auckland where Shōji Hamada chose a pot, a deep-sided bowl with an oil-spot *tenmoku* glaze, like the one shown here. "Neil Grant: Master Potter Survey Exhibition 1960-2021."

in a crucial period of cultural change in the visual arts in New Zealand, specialising in high-quality applied and contemporary art.⁷ He featured in the second New Vision Gallery calendar (1968) of local artists photographed by Marti Friedlander.⁸

Like his contemporaries, Grant's career followed a course from the vogue for rustic pottery in the 1960s to the rise of studio-based sculptural and conceptual ceramics in New Zealand. Peter Stupples writes that this was a shift from parochial amateurism to a postmodern internationalism fed by an increasingly sophisticated professionalism. The elaboration of form was accompanied by changes in function,

from pots for domestic use to bespoke ceramics, candidates for display in bourgeois interiors and national gallery collections. The style of pottery [also] changed from the dominance of Anglo-Orientalism, originally influenced by Bernard Leach and Shōji Hamada, to a heterogeneity of forms influenced by the globalisation of information: closed styles based upon individual studios, regional characteristics or national traditions have given way, almost everywhere, to a rootless cosmopolitanism. Within this whirlwind of cultural mixing, Grant remained constant to his own creative agenda, born of Leach and Hamada, refined by his experience of the wider world of ceramics but focussed on the virtues, as he sees it, of the ancient Oriental history of fired clay.⁹

These virtues were rooted in the *mingei* style, an Arts and Crafts-type aesthetic where the domestic is revered in the everyday.¹⁰ This tradition was at odds with aspiring middle-class tastes for decorated bone-china wares imported from England and New Zealand tableware such as Crown Lynn commercial potteries. For Grant, a major consideration was how each piece sat in space as an object. Equally important was the flow of process from raw earth to table: skill at the wheel, technical knowledge and an understanding of the complexities of the relationships between glaze and kiln – a blending of art and science which became truly ingrained over a lifetime's work.

Grant's work developed its own momentum beginning with the early mass-produced pots of his early Auckland years, which answered the needs of financial stability but never produced a lowering of standards. The domestic ware eventually made room to share space with more conceptual pieces such as the nikau piece pots.¹¹ At Otago Polytechnic Grant returned to a reconsideration of Asian influences, not in imitation of Shino-Japanese pottery, but as an original reworking of the tradition, experimenting, refining, rearticulating and recombining both form and glaze – “innovation as the perpetual accretion of small instances.”¹² Work from this period includes refined deep-fluted bowls with delicate celadon glazes or rich copper reds, pour-glazed shallow bowls (his “criss-cross” pots¹³) and expert control over in his *chūn* and *tenmoku* work.¹⁴

Neil's contribution to the world of New Zealand ceramics continued at the Dunedin School of Art where he taught for over 40 years in the Ceramics Studio. Throughout his extensive career as an art educator, Neil continued to develop his own practice, juggling the demands of students and an art career with family commitments.

“Twenty years to learn, twenty years to forget, and then the real work begins.”

Neil Grant

Pam McKinlay (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1731-6437>) has worked as a teaching and research assistant at the Dunedin School of Art since 2006 and shared an office with Neil for many years. She has worked in publishing for most of her working life, from humble beginnings in the OUSA *Critic* office, Dunedin, working with waxed galleys to working as a typesetter at advertising agency Amazing Faces in Sydney.

Peter Stupples is a social historian of art and specialist in the Russian avant-garde. He has taught at the University of York in the United Kingdom, at the University of Otago and the Dunedin School of Art at the Otago Polytechnic. At the Dunedin School of Art, he was responsible for the distance programme in art history and theory for the Diploma in Ceramic Arts, where he was a colleague of Neil Grant's.

Thomas Lord is a lecturer and technical teacher in the photography studio at the Dunedin School of Art. As well as photography, Thomas has held exhibitions in painting where nostalgia, ecology and the concept of home form a common thread between the two media. Recent projects include a group show on the Isle of Lewis, Scotland, as part of the Hebridean Dark Skies Festival and his 2021 large-format photographic series *Super Sport Sunday*.

Joanna Wernham has an extensive background in design, print, hard media and product design. She has worked for the Design Studies and Foundations Studies programmes at the University of Otago. Joanna is a member of Dunedin's LoomRoom as both a weaver and loom technician and is also renowned in Dunedin for her creativity in the world of miniature furniture making. From 2016 she has been a lead designer on the *Scope (Art & Design)* journal.

Rob Cloughley is the programme coordinator for the Diploma in Ceramic Art and ceramic lecturer in the Dunedin School of Art. He has worked for Otago Polytechnic since 2002 and holds a Master of Fine Art. Rob's practice is in ceramic sculpture and he teaches a wide variety of ceramic-related topics.

- 1 In 2018 the society was renamed the Ceramics Association of New Zealand (Ceramics NZ). See <https://ceramicsnz.org/about/history>.
- 2 Robert Bringhurst, *Back to the Master: The Elements of Typographic Style*, 2nd ed. (Vancouver, BC: Hartley and Marks 1999), 163.
- 3 Peter Stupples, *Neil Grant: Master Potter* (Dunedin: Pamphlaterra Publications, 2021), 21 (Page 27).
- 4 Thomas Lord, "screams like home: A Photobook Project," *Scope: Contemporary Research Topics (Art & Design)*, 22 (2021), 175-81, <https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1022002>.
- 5 For photo documentation of the exhibition see https://www.flickr.com/photos/dunedin_school_of_art/albums/72157720081179772.
- 6 Stupples, *Neil Grant*, 11. "In May [Neil] was one of the three sculptors selected as part of an exhibition, 'Young New Zealand Artists.' The exhibition included young emerging artists such as Ralph Hotere, Greer Twiss and Arnold Wilson."
- 7 Len Bell, "The New Vision Gallery, Auckland," *Auckland Art Gallery, Toi o Tāmaki*, 4 July 2018, <https://www.aucklandartgallery.com/article/the-new-vision-gallery-auckland?q=%2Farticle%2Fthe-new-vision-gallery-auckland> (accessed 2 February 2020).
- 8 Stupples, *Neil Grant*, 38. According to Douglas Lloyd Jenkins, "Potters in the sixties were the pin-up stars of the Auckland art scene."
- 9 Stupples, *Neil Grant*, 130.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 48.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 37. "Piece pots" is the name Grant gave these ceramic forms, made in two pieces. See *ibid.*, p. 77, for a photo of Neil Grant in his studio creating forms for the Fletcher Brownbuilt Pottery Award in 1977.
- 12 Stupples, *Neil Grant*, 131 (quote Neil Grant).
- 13 Stupples, *Neil Grant*, 124. "From 1995 to the present, Grant has experimented with variations on his Chūn/tenmoku dishes with a series of ladle-poured, criss-cross patterns, a decorative technique, originating in Mashiko-ware, in which Hamada excelled. The technique has an ancient Japanese provenance known as *hishaku*, named after the wooden ladles used to carry water from the kettle to the tea bowl in the Japanese tea ceremony. This is a tricky process to get right as the pouring must begin before it is over the dish to prevent splash marks. ... The glaze must be thick enough to run slowly across the tenmoku/Chūn surface. If the plate is held at an angle the glaze can run from a dense top to a thinner base."
- 14 Stupples, *Neil Grant*, 80. "Chūn or Jūn glazes are opalescent bluish stoneware glazes ... originating in Song Dynasty, China. These high fire glazes are typically fired to Cone 8 or 10. Their color is primarily an optical illusion stemming from light refracted off the inside of bubbles trapped in the glaze. The glazes are usually high in silica. The color comes from small percentages of iron often enhanced with minute amounts of copper. Chūn glazes are often used in conjunction with copper red slips underneath to develop a range of opalescent purples and blues. Similar opalescent effects may be made by covering a high-iron content temmoku glaze with a fluid ash glaze." Robin Hopper; "The Beautiful Variations of Chun Glazes," *Ceramic Arts Network*, blog post, 7 February 2022, <https://ceramicartsnetwork.org/daily/article/The-Beautiful-Variations-of-Chun-Glazes>.