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Shopping for style: The Walter Cook collection

The Post, Wellington



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Justine Olsen documents an extraordinary collection in book

OPINION**Justine Olsen**

In 1965, Walter Cook, a 24-year-old gardener turned student, stepped inside the Wellington second-hand shop Odds & Ends and bought a Liberty & Co. tea set. With its flowing Art Nouveau lines, it was exactly the design for which he was searching. Buying it for a modest sum, Walter set the tone for a 25-year quest of collecting domestic design mainly from Wellington.

Walter was well-read and over time honed his eye for spotting objects by renowned makers in second hand, antique stores and design stores in Wellington and around the country. By the time he finished collecting in 1990 his near-400-piece collection charted the origins of modernism from the Arts & Crafts Movement to post-war modernism (a period of 100 years). His extraordinary collection has been documented in the richly illustrated book *Towards Modernism: The Walter Cook Collection*.

The collection's cultural importance was signalled when in 1992 Cook with his then wife Adriann Smith, gifted it to the National Art Gallery and National Museum, just before the institutions merged to form the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

When Cook began collecting in the mid-1960s, Odds & Ends was one of 20 listed second-hand shops, in Wellington and Petone. Today with the online auction sites their local presence is sadly much reduced but, as Walter reflected, "people were more likely to discard inherited objects associated with the gloomy past..." Perhaps these objects were associated with the impact of the world wars and the economic depression of the 1930s, but many of those domestic designs – jugs, tea sets, vases, decorative tiles – represented designs that Walter was searching for. At a time when the city was succumbing to huge changes through the development of the motorway and skyline, Cook brilliantly captured the past and at times present in the designs he found.

As he collected decisively and modestly, he slowly built a library of reference books and journals, and he surrounded himself with knowledgeable antique and second-hand dealers. Like Walter, they lived in and around Thorndon, and in the inner city too. Among them were luminaries of the trade: Campbell Moon from Marsden Antiques who encouraged him to buy the glorious majolica glazes of Minton's Secessionist ware; from Neale Auld and Beverley Reid he bought Bretby Art Pottery, one of several art potteries dedicated to clean lines and luscious glazes; and from David Owens and Lynley Halliday, he bought post war Scandinavian design including Fazzoletto by Venini & Co, and Stig Linberg sleek designs for \$2.50 and \$6.

Walter bought from contemporary design stores too and often the ends of lines. During this long period of import restrictions (1938 to mid-1980s), the government's annual import licence scheme enabled retailers to import contemporary and modernist design. Department stores like James Smiths imported European and Scandinavian modernist design and so did boutique store Cadeau on Lambton Quay.

At James Smiths department store he snapped up designs by stars from Royal Copenhagen ceramics including Berte Jessen for Tenera designs of the 1960s. As an art school graduate, she was recruited by the company, with five other women art students, to add a fresh approach often inspired by Scandinavian folk art.

By the mid-1980s Walter's collection was almost completed but not before he found some key pieces. Among them was a Peruvian-inspired jug, designed by influential



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19th-century designer Christopher Dresser, bought in a Ponsonby Road junk shop for just \$18. This was extraordinary and decisive collecting.

Walter’s collection is part of the ebb and flow of trade from Britain and Europe that began in the early 1800s. The fact that Walter documented his dealers has offered a unique lens into their influential role while also highlighting the value of the circular

economy. This remarkable collection has now become a gift to the nation.

– *Towards Modernism: The Walter Cook Collection* by Justine Olsen (Te Papa Press) is out now, and an exhibition of the same name can be seen at Te Papa as part of the Toi Art suite of shows on level 5.



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