

# Briggs Family Tea Service for Broached Commissions

## Cultural Collision in the Early Years of Tasmanian Colonisation

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### Abstract

*In this paper I will discuss the development of the Briggs Family Tea Service, a work launched by Australian manufacturer and gallery Broached Commissions in October 2011.*

*Broached Commissions is a unique company, in that it uses events in history as the beginning of a design collaboration. The collaboration is focused on research, and the design outcomes are directed entirely by each designer involved in the commissions. The Briggs Family Tea Service was one of six pieces created by the Broached Commissions, in its inaugural commission on the topic of Australia's colonial period.*

*The development of the Briggs Family Tea Service was collaborative from start to finish, beginning with research directed by creative director Lou Weis, project curator John McPhee, staff of the Nura Gili Indigenous research center at the University of New South Wales and members of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. This body of research saw the investigation of families of mixed Aboriginal and English heritage, born out of Australia's Colonial Period. For me these families are emblematic of the cultural collision that was taking place during this turbulent period in Australia's history. Eventually I chose to focus on the Briggs family, a family from northeast Tasmania whose evolution was defined by the meeting of free settler George Briggs and local Aboriginal woman Woretermoetyenner.*

*From here the collaborative research continued in the further investigation of materials and forms that could be used to represent the Briggs family and the cultural heritage of its members. Time was spent in Tasmania with descendants of the Eastern Straightsmen (of whom George Briggs was a member), exploring Indigenous and non-Indigenous artifacts used during this period, their materiality and functionality.*

*Eventually the Briggs Family Tea Service concluded through key collaborations with Rod Bamford (Ceramic), Oliver Smith (Copper and Brass) and Vicki West (Bull Kelp). The skills and material knowledge of these individuals allowed for the development of formal and functional elements that accurately express my views on the cultural and historical identity of the Briggs family. The result is six biographical objects that function as a family, as the Briggs Family once did in North East Tasmania.*

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As founding members of the Broached Commissions we began to discuss the inaugural commission in late 2008. Lou Weis (Creative Director), Adam Goodrum (Founding Designer) and I began a loose discussion about the possibility of developing a limited edition design exhibition in Australia, something that had not been done during this most recent global explosion of interest in limited edition design. Very quickly the team grew to include Vincent Aiello (Founding Partner) and Charles Wilson (Founding Designer) and the collaborative development process began.

As creative director, Lou Weis spent some time developing the beginnings of a creative directors statement that would frame the first commission and give Broached (then known as 'Knotted') a direction. It was after this document was issued that the first meeting was held and our thoughts were combined in shaping the direction for this first commission. John McPhee (Curator) was introduced to the team at this first meeting, and it was very clear that John would have a strong historical influence on the development of this first collection.

Lou's initial draft of the creative director's statement had focused around exploring periods in Australia's history through limited edition design pieces, proposing that we focus on the colonial period (1788-1851; the point where the industrial revolution arrived in Australia) for the first commission. During this first meeting John delivered a lecture to the group on this period in Australia's applied arts, taking us through the way in which British crafts were imported from the United Kingdom, as well as the way in which making do had forced the new settlers to develop their own forms of craft, allowing them to survive in this forbidding place. This information inspired some spirited conversation on the possible directions that our individual design processes might take.

I wanted to take a post-colonial view of the time—to look closely at the indigenous experience of European arrival. I was determined that this important event in Australian design history should not go by without the communication of an Indigenous perspective on the events of the colonial period. In addition, I was determined to continue my work exploring human relationships through designed objects. The obvious combination seemed to be the study of a relationship that saw the coming together of an Indigenous and non-indigenous person during this period.

I spoke with John McPhee about this idea, along with Juanita Sherwood at Nura Gili and both suggested that I look into 'the sealers' of Tasmania. This soon became a collaborative research task as John and Juanita found information for me and directed me toward texts and films that might contain information on these people.

After a period of extended research on 'the sealer' of northeast Tasmania, I found a family that I was most interested in focusing on. George Briggs and his partner/wife Woretermoetyenner of the Pairrebeenne people were said to have parented the first child of mixed English and Aboriginal descent in the colony. This child was the first embodiment of the cultural collision that was occurring all over Australia during this period. As such, this family became an emblem of the good and bad that these relationships had to offer during a time of great upheaval.

I began to notice discrepancies between the records kept on this family (and others). All authors agreed that the sealers were a group of mercenary men who lived on the islands to the northeast of Tasmania, pairing up and having families with local Aboriginal women. The accounts of George Augustus Robinson suggested that these pairings were torturous relationships, whereby men stole Aboriginal women and forced them to reside with them as slaves. Alternatively the accounts of John Boulton suggested that these relationships, while not ideal in many ways, were often loving and consensual.

At this point it was necessary to explore a deeper collaborative research process in order to find the truth (or so I thought). I spent one week in Tasmania, meeting with the descendants of 'the sealers', or as I learnt on this trip 'The Eastern Straightsmen' (as they called themselves). Before leaving I spoke with Julie Gough on the telephone and during my time in Tasmania I met with Greg Lehmann, Vicki West, Lola Greeno, Gloria Andrews and Patsy Cameron. The more I discussed this topic, the more I would realize that there is no consensus on the history of the Eastern Straightsmen within the Tasmanian Aboriginal community.

Greg Lehmann was reluctant to voice any certain opinions on the nature of these men and women (his ancestors) and their relationships. Greg had read all of the same books as me and therefore was in many ways as uncertain about the truth of the matter as anyone. Julie Gough on the other hand has come to resent George Briggs (as one of her ancestors) for the way in which he seems to have abandoned Woretermoetyenner and their children.

Patsy Cameron is possibly the most widely read on the Eastern Straightmen, having recently completed a PHD that covered this among other topics relating to the Aboriginal history of Tasmania. From our conversations, Patsy is reluctant to pass judgment on the Eastern Straightmen and the relationships that they maintained with her Tasmanian Aboriginal ancestors. She agrees that some of these relationships may well have been quite brutal, as many relationships were (indigenous and non-indigenous) during this period of history, but Patsy asserts that many of these relationships were consensual and loving. She went so far as to say that she does not believe George Briggs to have been a bad man, and that his relationship with Woretermoeteyenner was probably one of the better examples of relationships between the Eastern Straightmen and the Pairrebeenne women.

After this long process of collaborative research, I developed the following statement to frame the project that I would design:

*The early years of the colony were fraught with complicated exchanges between Indigenous Australians and the new settlers. In some cases friendships were forged, but in most, conflicts resulted from a collision of two cultures that were so very different in so many ways.*

*As a key penal colony and later a rich pastoral area, Van Diemen's Land was greatly affected in the early years of settlement. Early on, Governor Arthur, afraid of the impending conflict between Aboriginal Tasmanians and the settling pastoralists, enlisted George Augustus Robinson to capture as many of the local Aboriginal people as he could. In this early stage of Tasmania's settled history, this initiative along with pastoral conflicts and the inevitable spread of disease saw the population of Tasmanian Aboriginal people reduced from around 5000 to approximately 300. The majority of these 300 people were then taken to Flinders Island, a Christian mission designed to keep these people away from their traditional land and out of the way of pastoral progress.*

*Some Tasmanian Aboriginal women managed to escape the mission on Flinders Island by joining a band of free settler, reformed and escaped convict seamen who had set up makeshift settlements on the Islands around Cape Barren Island, to the northeast of what is now called Cape Portland at the north-east tip of Tasmania. These men called themselves the Eastern Straightmen and lived hard on these open and unforgiving islands in the Bass Strait, relying heavily on the Aboriginal women for their knowledge of local terrain and the ease with which they managed to find food in an area that seemed barren.*

*Out of these very difficult times, relationships were forged between these weathered men and knowledgeable Aboriginal women, and some of the first children of mixed Aboriginal and English race were born in the colony. One of the first of these families was the Briggs Family.*

*George Briggs came to Australia of his own free will as a 15 year-old boy, arriving in Port Jackson aboard the Harrington in 1805. Briggs was one of the original Eastern Straightmen, living rough and exposed to the elements on Clarke Island. George learnt to speak the language of the local Pairrebeenne people, trading tea, flour and sugar for kangaroo, wallaby and sealskins. Through their frequent exchanges and proximity it is thought that Briggs and the leader of the Pairrebeenne - Mannalargenna - became friends, and eventually Briggs was partnered with his daughter Woretermoeteyenner. It is difficult to know how this partnership was formed,*

*but some suggest that Woretermoeteyenner was traded for dogs, flour, seal carcasses, mutton birds and sugar, some of the most valuable commodities of the day.*

*Woretermoeteyenner was the daughter of the feared and respected Mannalargenna, worrier and leader of the Pairrebeenne people. By 1810 Woretermoeteyenner was living on Clarke Island with Briggs, bearing 5 children to him within the ten years that followed. Woretermoeteyenner lived an extraordinary life, leaving Van Diemen's Land in 1825 aboard a sealing expedition bound for the Southern Indian Ocean and Amsterdam. Due to low provision, she and some other Aboriginal women were dropped on the island of Rodrigues. The women survived here for seven months before taking passage to Mauritius where Mauritian officials finally arranged for their return to Australia in 1827. Woretermoeteyenner was the only one to make it back alive and is said to have returned to Van Diemen's Land speaking French.*

*Dolly Dalrymple Mountgarret Briggs was the first daughter of George Briggs and Woretermoeteyenner and is said to be the first child of mixed Aboriginal and English descent born in the colony. Before the age of two, Dolly was given to Dr Jacob Mountgarret and his wife Bridget in Launceston, where Dolly was raised and taught to read, write and sew. Dolly always maintained contact with her mother, eventually having Woretermoeteyenner move from the Mission at Flinders Island to her home in Dunorlan.*

*The second child of Briggs and Woretermoeteyenner, Eliza Briggs, was born on Furneaux Island in 1817, but like her sister was moved to Launceston, to live with William Jones and his wife. Eliza was well looked after by the Jones family until the age of 14 when she left the family. Eliza was eventually admitted to a benevolent hospital, where she died at age 21.*

*Mary Briggs, like her sisters, lived in Launceston, but unfortunately Mary was given to a family who did not care for her as they should have. By 13 Mary was homeless, staying for short periods with different families. Mary was arrested for vagrancy, imprisoned and died at age 21.*

*John Briggs was the youngest of the family, born in 1820 on Preservation Island and cared for by an Eastern Straightsman named James Munro after his mother was taken to the mission at Flinders Island. John maintained contact with his mother until he was ten years old, but lost contact after that age. John eventually married an Aboriginal girl named Louisa and moved to Victoria with her in the 1850s.*

From this body of research I designed the Briggs Family Tea Service, a family of objects that would stand to represent a family of people who once lived in Tasmania. This family is an emblem of the broader Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships that were forming all over Australia during this period of Australia's early history.

In the Briggs Family Tea Service, George Briggs is represented by a porcelain tea pot, adopting a form that merges the elegant lid and spout of Worcester or Bow Porcelain with a gnarly, organic body and handle, borrowing their form from the roots that Briggs was forced to eat in times of hardship and the kelp that was so widely used by the Aboriginal people of the region. These forms portray the environment that Briggs struggled to survive in and the hard man that he became as a result of this coarse existence.

Woretermoeteyenner's evolution sees her represented through the merging of an elegant Pairrebeenne kelp water carrier with a courtly handle and lid derived from the work of French and British Porcelain houses of this period. The grace of this combination represents Woretermoeteyenner as an important member of local royalty, a woman that did all that she could to maintain her family line.

Dolly is represented as a hybrid of her parents, a milk jug that takes on the characteristics of both parents. Dolly's contact with her mother and strong Pairrebeenne heritage is represented through her organically formed wallaby skin body, while her need to adopt elements of her British ancestry is shown through the refined nature of her cast porcelain spout.

The three youngest children are given the form of teacups, constructed with a fusion of ceramic, kelp and wallaby skin. Their physical characteristics are shaped by their childhood experiences as they endeavor to find a safe existence, caught between two cultures in a newly forming colony.

Once these pieces were designed, the collaborative process continued as we sought out makers that could achieve an unprecedented merging of disparate material, including porcelain, bull kelp, brass, copper and wallaby pelt.

Perhaps the most interesting of all collaborations in the development of this project was my collaboration with Vicki West. Vicki is a descendant of the Eastern Straightsmen, and a contemporary artist who works with bull kelp from the northeast of Tasmania. I spent one week with Vicki in her home just outside of Launceston, making all of the kelp components for the Briggs Family Tea Service.

I arrived at Vicki's house very prepared. Vicki had given me some kelp during my visit the previous year, allowing me to experiment with the material and devise mechanisms for achieving the desired outcomes. I had spent the best part of a year perfecting a particular kelp moulding technique, and while Vicki had not used this technique before, it was an effective system for both of us. Some of the forms to be moulding were modeled very closely on traditional Pairrebeenne water carrying vessels, while others were new forms. This meant that there were some forms that Vicki was experienced with making and others that were new to us both.

Vicki and I worked together, collecting, washing, cutting and forming the kelp. Time restraints meant that it was important for me to be very clear of the processes for forming each component. There were unexpected problems, as there always are, and it was in these moments that Vicki's experience with the material was invaluable. We worked side by side, using the systems that I had developed until something did not work in the way that I had intended. In these instances Vicki and I would work through the problem together until a solution was found.

After the forming process the kelp was left to dry for the rest of the week, hanging over Vicki's wood-fire place. By the end of the week I was able to begin removing some of the forms from their moulds to start the trimming and finishing processes. Many of the forms were not ready to be taken to this next stage during my time with Vicki, so it was necessary for me to take much of the work back to my studio to be completed.

Rod Bamford and Janine Brody from Cone 9 Studios were an obvious choice for the porcelain components. Rod, Janine and I worked together in their studio near Woy Woy, north of Sydney. We discussed at length the best way to construct these objects to ensure a seamless connection between the ceramic components and the non-ceramic components that were to be added prior to firing.

Once a plan of attack had been formulated we began forming the plaster models that would be used to slip-caste the final ceramic forms. Rod turned all of the symmetrical models with great ease, leaving me to carve all of the lumpy, organic forms by hand. What took Rod a few minutes would

take me half a day, but eventually the models were complete and ready for casting. From here Janine and Rod took over, casting and firing these objects with an amazing level of precision.

Working with Rod was less of a collaborative process. Working with porcelain requires vast amounts of experience and knowledge, not something that one can pick up in a few days. As such, Rod asked me to sculpt all of the forms that were open to interpretation, allowing me to control the development of these shapes as we worked. The forms that were clear from the technical drawings were largely modeled by Rod, with moments of referral where a detail was unclear, or in need of change. After the model making stage, the ceramic process was left to Rod and Janine. They were responsible for the pouring, cleaning up, firing and glazing of the ceramic components.

The brass and copper components were constructed through collaboration with renowned silver smith, Oliver Smith. When I first approached Oliver about the project, I asked him if he would teach me the skills that an early 19<sup>th</sup> Century black smith might have possessed, working in the first years of the colony. While Oliver taught me many of these skills, enabling me to planish a bowl, forge a base and cut many components, there were some skills that Oliver could not teach me in such a short period of time. As such Oliver took over when it came to the silver soldering of components and the precise positioning of a lid sleeve. The resulting vessel is something that could well have been forged by a black smith during the time of George Briggs and Woretermoetyenner.

During this process Oliver and I operated in the workshop together, Oliver would teach me a skill through demonstration and then he would hand over the task to me. He would always monitor me for a period to ensure that my technique was correct, but then the task was left for me to complete. In instances where complex processes were necessary, Oliver would take over the making. When problems arose we worked through them together, marrying his knowledge of the material with my vision for the final outcome.

The making of this complex series of objects finally came down to three collaborations with skilled makers and the ability of these makers to develop precise components that would marry seamlessly. Without the skills of these makers the creation of the components that make up the Briggs Family Tea Service would not have been possible. More importantly this project required the combination of a group of three materials that are not easily combined. Only through a hands-on collaborative process were we able to address the issues created by these materials, solving problems as we went and evolving the design as it was needed. If this process were left to the designer or maker alone, either the function or vision would have suffered, but through the constant conversation that a collaborative approach allows, we were able ensure that the final outcome is strong in both areas.

The Briggs Family Tea Service was finally assembled in October 2011 and exhibited as part of the inaugural Broached Commissions exhibition—Broached Colonial Commissions.

We are currently commencing research on the next Broached Commissions range, and although I cannot discuss the specific direction of this next commission, it is daunting to consider finding a new research topic that will offer as much rich conceptual information as the tales of the Eastern Straightmen, and in particular the Briggs Family from northeast Van Diemens Land.

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