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Helen Mason: The matriarch

by Kristine Walsh

ARTS - POTTER Helen Wilmot Mason lived on the East Coast for just a decade but her influence extended well beyond that.

In fact, renowned Gisborne potter Baye Riddell credits Mason — who died on August 22 in her 100th year — for helping drive his own commitment to pottery.

Riddell says he moved back to his tribal territory of Tokomaru Bay in 1979, five years after Mason herself arrived in the picturesque coastal township. They both lived in historic homes at Waima, the northern end of the bay, where Mason was revered as an already established craftswoman, potter and weaver.

Among the many Mason-related items it has in its collection, Te Papa Tongarewa: The Museum of New Zealand says the papers relating to her period in Tokomaru Bay are especially valuable as they document her experiences helping set up the Tauria Craft Centre.

As she recalls in her memoir *Fifty Years As A Backyard Potter*, the establishment of the centre was also due to another creative force in the township – weaver and songwriter Ngoingoi Pewhairangi.

It was Pewhairangi who initiated Mason's first exhibition in the Bay after her arrival in 1974, and who hosted it at the old billiard that morphed into Tauria's headquarters.

In his *Bird In The Wind* history of Mason's work (2007), grandson Michael Stuart recounts how, as a child, he would join his family in holidaying with “grandma” at Waima.

Recalling how Mason used to work in the former stables next to her home, Stuart remembers “the smell of the wet clay and the way it felt to cut with a nylon wire”.

“She showed me one or more times how to throw it onto the spinning disc but it was hard to create anything that looked like the symmetric shapes she conjured from the cold sticky earth.”

Not that Stuart felt much affinity with his grandmother's work as a child, preferring the smooth surfaces of commercial domesticware to the sometimes nubby creations Mason turned out in her studio.

That was until his mother Julia told him the story of when, as a child herself, she was walking with Mason in a valley in the Wairarapa, to where Mason had moved while

she awaited the return of her husband Malcolm, then a prisoner of war in Italy.

“She stopped and stared at a cabbage tree for what seemed like an age (and) I can so easily imagine them both there,” he says, “Grandma rooted to the earth, feeding off it, feeling it and afterwards shaping it.

“That’s what her pottery is to me. The exploration of the relationship between land and person: how it looks, how it is.”

Born in the South Island town of Darfield in 1915, Mason’s first introduction to creative life was through her maternal grandparents, her carers while her mother was hospitalised with tuberculosis.

The family moved en masse to Wellington and when Mason’s mother died in 1921 her father’s sister Aunt Winifred moved in to care for the children, despite being a career woman herself.

Mason says the step-mother who later married her father did not support her ambition to study at university.

However, the early influences of her grandparents’ creativity and her aunt’s independence seem to have come together in the artist who, perhaps ironically given her success in creating domesticware, didn’t think much of being tied to a domestic life.

The then Helen Valentine married Malcolm Mason in 1939 and, despite the interruption of the war, the couple had three children (Tim and Andrew coming along after the conflict ended).

Mason started in pottery by attending a class in Wellington when her youngest son, Andrew, started school in 1953 and, she tells Stuart, she “felt, at last, this is what I want to do”.

It was already in the family — Malcolm Mason’s unconventional aunt Elizabeth Matheson was a potter in Seatoun and was able to sell Mason the old diesel burner kiln she was trading in for an electric model.

And it grew from there. Through the new kiln Mason first met Auckland Olive Jones, who, with Matheson, was considered to be a pioneer in New Zealand pottery,

Then came “mad kiln builder” Barry Brickell who was also “mad about trains”.

“He gets a second class railway ticket and goes all around New Zealand for a month or something,” a friend told her.

So in exchange for putting Brickell up when he blew through Wellington, he would keep her kiln in working order.

Over the next couple of years Mason met contemporaries like Len Castle and Colin McCahon through Auckland Education summer schools and by 1957 had exhibited

and sold her first pot (for the not inconsiderable sum of three pounds).

She linked in with the Studio Potters movement that cites her as an influence to this day, and in 1958 joined with fellow potter Dame Doreen Blumhardt in founding New Zealand Potter magazine, which she edited for nine years.

Mason felt she had to meet her commitments at home before succumbing to the lure of creative life but by the early 1960s her work was becoming more important.

In 1960 she attended the First World Design Conference in Tokyo and by 1964 she had a new Roy Cowan-designed kiln, had exhibited in New Zealand and Australia, and had left her home and marriage, “jumping out of polite society” to become a full-time artist.

Mason went first to live in the Waitakeres, in Auckland, then to Otane (Hawke’s Bay) before heading to Tokomaru Bay, a move inspired in part by her desire to embrace the developing Maori renaissance.

By the 1990s she had set up at Coromandal, opposite Brickell’s home, where she lived in the house truck she had paid for by selling the large Colin McCahon painting she had owned since long before prices rocketed.

In a 2010 newsletter, then Waiohiki Community Arts Trust chairman Denis O’Reilly celebrated the 95th birthday of Mason, the “grande dame of New Zealand potters”.

Recounting her movements after she moved back to Hawke’s Bay, O’Reilly writes how she had moved to Porongahau but, “as age crept up on her the family decided she should shift to Waipukurau where her son Tim practices as a doctor”.

“The old lady complied for a while, but reckoned the lack of creative stimulation was killing her,” O’Reilly says.

“On visiting the Waiohiki Creative Arts Village she declared that this was where she wanted to live.”

An architect was commissioned to convert an existing cottage into a communal residence which, to honour its first resident, was named Helen Mason House and was formally opened by Deputy Prime Minister Michael Cullen in 2006.

Mason’s daughter Julia Stuart says her mother’s health had been failing, especially since she suffered a broken leg in 2011, which brought an end to her tenure as Arts Village matriarch.

Though her recent memory was already somewhat unreliable, her love of ceramic art remained strong, Stuart says.

“She still recognises who made a pot and what the glaze is instantly!”

A service to farewell Helen Mason was held in Waipukurau yesterday.

Typically, the service notes requested that, in lieu of flowers, donations be sent to the Waiohiki Community Arts Trust.



A CREATIVE HOME: For many of the last years of her life Helen Mason (MNZM) was matriarch and artist-in-residence at Waiohiki Creative Arts Village, in Napier, where she was captured admiring some new decorative pou at their unveiling (2004). Hawke's Bay Today picture