Icons of the Bush

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Introduction

The personal mailbox is one of the first things a visitor encounters upon arrival. It creates a first impression—an impression that people want to ensure will confirm their distinctive individuality. Scandinavians have a whole range of modern designs to choose from to create a good impression. Their stainless steel and matte-black boxes in sculptural splendor grace the perimeter of more humble homes, glinting in the cool sun of the Nordic light. Americans, Canadians and Australians especially indulge in using their imagination and showing off with their own designs in that very public place, right on the front block. The British have no such tradition because their letterbox is almost always a slot in the front door, and the mail drops directly onto the welcome mat. Clearly, the country and cultural context have a big influence on such practices.

The Australian outback mailbox (exerting a hefty influence on the urban variety) is an extreme expression of this human urge for individuality to the point of being outrageous. So how come? There are many answers to that question, and a whole mixed bag of ingredients make up this typically Australian phenomenon. In this short piece, I will focus on the rural mailbox tradition in the context of vernacular art; drawing on the heritage of a pioneer convict settlement, extreme poverty, and "making do" in a country characterized by its harsh conditions and geographic isolation. The main features have to do with:

- *lack of regulations*
- *the bush tradition and perpetuating the myths of making do*
- *she'll be right*
- *access to tools and materials*
- *fun and self-satisfaction.*

The typical RMB (Roadside Mailbox) of Australia draws upon one or several, or all of the above factors, and has become an icon of a bush tradition that is almost as recognizable as the koala. Popular culture (as opposed to high art in a sophisticated society) is reflected in the mass of objects that people choose to keep in their everyday lives. High art is put on show and generally viewed in galleries—whereas everyday art, or folk art, "happens into visibility."[1] There can be little that is more visible than the rows of mailboxes along the highways of Australia. As Jim Logan puts it, we may be able to read many sub-texts behind the things people make, but folk art always is

1 Jim Logan, *Everyday Art: Australian Folk Art*, Susan Hall, ed. (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1998), 4.

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candid. The convict beginnings may have given greater impetus to the universal human tendency to rebel against conformity. (At least, that's what many Australians would like to believe.) Whatever the causes, Australian egalitarianism and social candor has developed with a healthy anti-authoritarian slant on life. Nowhere is this more expressed than in the nose-thumbing irreverence of the RMB.

Lack of Regulations

The U.S. Postmaster General established regulations as early as 1915 for a standard roadside mailbox. Designed by Roy Jorolemen and unchanged in its basic form since that time, the U.S. mailbox is weatherproof and secure. It incorporates a simple flag device to tell the deliverer of the mail, who also is the collector, when mail is inside for picking up. (It is not unusual to come across the occasional imported U.S. model in Australia.) Quite distinctive in looks, the US box is a standard across the country, and in its way has become an icon of rural America.

Australia has no standard design. The Australian Post Office issues a leaflet that states their Post Office Preferred (POP) sizes and recommends 330mm x 230mm x 160mm internal space, with a slot of 230mm x 30mm, but these dimensions are so general that almost anything can be made to fit. In 1994, an article in *Specnews*[2] referred to a proposal for a new joint Australia/New Zealand standard on mailboxes. *Specnews* found it unacceptable in that the "important Australian icon of the milk churn mailbox would be rendered obsolete." Furthermore, they claimed that the average country milk churn falls within the Australian POP recommendations. In effect, there are no restrictions and in the remoteness of the outback there would be a lackluster attempt to try and enforce anything if there were.

Figure 1
A colorful rainbow Jorelmen mailbox, U.S. style. All photos courtesy of the author.

However, there is more to it than the lack of regulations because, when a standard is imposed, many people just can't leave their mailbox alone. Americans (and Canadians who generally use the U.S. standard model) love to add all kinds of extras to the Jorolemen box, from painting it in bright colors (figure. 1), to sticking on heads and legs, wings or fins, and so on, just to distinguish their mailbox from the rest. It is a very human urge to rebel against conformity. The Aussie mailbox—without any regulatory constraints to begin with—exploits that rebellious and creative instinct to a level that, at times, elevates their efforts to a folk art.

The Bush Tradition and Perpetuating the Myth of Making Do

The historical development and geographical nature of any country exert strong conditions on the way people shape their environment and character. It is the special pioneer heritage of Australia from its convict beginnings to a modern agricultural and mining economy that means this past is somewhat different than other countries. A number of exhibitions in recent years such as "Bush toys and Furniture," "Everyday Art," and "Homemade Treasures" have

2 *Specnews* is the newssheet of NATSPEC, Australia's National Building Specification.

articulated a growing consciousness of this heritage and what it means in a reevaluation of commonplace objects. Here the case has been argued for many humble, homemade, domestic artifacts to be recognized as art objects in a vernacular tradition. Common factors in this development are the bush ingredients of economic hardship, shortage of manufactured goods, geographic isolation, leisure, and of course—the desire to make items just for pleasure.[3] Some or all of these influences combined to force people to make do with what they already had, or with what they could make at minimum cost.

"Making do" probably is the most important aspect of the mailbox culture in Australia and the *raison d'etre* for the majority of boxes seen along the roadside. Making do is not unique to Australia, of course. Every community throughout the world recycles and adapts items for other uses. But the key factors in the making do context in Australia lie in the extreme geographic isolation of communities and the scarcity of manufactured goods in a comparatively new settlement.

The development of modern Australia (its settlement by Europeans that brought paper-based correspondence and a need for mailboxes) has occurred within the last two-hundred years, and was built on a quite incredible manipulation of human resources. That is well-documented elsewhere and I simply want to highlight the ad hoc nature of that European settlement. From 1788, when the first group of ill-equipped and ill-prepared convicts miraculously arrived in Botany Bay, they had to survive with the barest of tools. A vivid account of that depressing beginning is provided in Robert Hughes's *The Fatal Shore*.[4] Considering the hardship that these early settlers endured, the near starvation as a result of the lack of planning for this venture, and their own arrogance in ignoring the experience of the indigenous Australians, it remains a mystery how anyone survived. Fortunately, while basic tools and equipment were in short supply, the newcomers had ample ability to extemporize and adapt objects for novel use.

The paucity of technology stayed with the pioneers of the new colony for a long time, but with the Federation in 1901, when Australia became an independent country, life for many people had become more comfortable. Federation brought the establishment of the Postmaster-General's Department to provide standard postal services across the nation. A range of manufactured goods was becoming available, and a higher standard of living was emerging even though people in the more remote areas had less access. However, World War I reminded everyone of the geographic isolation of the country as goods once more became scarce and home manufacturing turned to war production. The notion of "waste not, want not" became an essential credo for successive generations that lasted well beyond the Second World War.[5]

The period between the wars was particularly lean since this also encompassed the hard times of the depression. In almost all

3 Brian Shepherd and Stephen Anstey, "Homemade Treasures: Interpretive Challenges in Developing an Exhibition of Improvised Children's Items." (Conference paper presented at Fringe Benefits: Fifth Annual Conference of Museums Australia, Albury, New South Wales, May 1999.)

These two curators of the Edith Cowan University Museum of Childhood in Western Australia identified five categories (or motives) within which they located their exhibition: economic hardship, wartime emergency or shortage, geographic isolation, enforced leisure, and pleasure. They were, of course, relating these to childhood toys demonstrating that these have substantially common elements with the vernacular art tradition, citing "everyday art" as a particular source. I have based my own categories along these lines.

4 Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore* (London: Pan books, 1987).

5 As a child of the 1930s, I grew up in England during and following the Second World War, and I understand this attitude very well. The first toys I can remember were homemade from odds and ends of materials, some by German prisoners of war in England who were happy to utilize their time in productive ways.

Figure 2
A small suitcase made from a kerosene can.

Figure 3
A crowd of mailboxes wait for the mail at a Tasmanian road junction.

cases, there was extreme poverty in the outback. Just surviving in the driest land in the world was a precarious existence and settlers seldom had sufficient worldly goods. A manifestation of the waste not, want not ethic was the publication of a booklet "Makeshifts and Other Homemade Furniture and Utensils" in 1924.[6] This booklet extolled the virtues of making the most out of used objects, in this case, kerosene tins and packing cases. It advocated that a thrifty household should make the most of once-used containers rather than simply throw them away. Visits to pioneer museums in rural areas reveal a number of such objects, and a typical example is the small suitcase made from a kerosene tin (figure 2) in the Greenough Museum in Western Australia. Recycling items after they had passed their use-by date was a way of life.

If necessity is the mother of invention, the conditions in Australia certainly demanded a flexible and creative attitude toward everyday living. There have been many cases of Aussie ingenuity that have resulted in innovative adaptations, particularly in the agricultural field. Imported machines that worked under European conditions did not necessarily work in the outback terrain, requiring significant modification or alternative approaches.[7]

Australia is not only isolated from the rest of the world, communities also are remote from each other (the tyranny of distance). In a country similar in size to the United States, but with less than twenty million people, the distance between homesteads often is considerable. Mail was frequently picked up at the nearest town, and still is in many regions. Policemen on horseback were used to take mail to homesteads in the latter half of the nineteenth century. From the 1880s on, mail deliveries began to be contracted out to "posties" appointed by the Postmaster-General's Department. Getting the mail through to very isolated towns and outback stations could be an expedition of some significance. The courage and perseverance of the early mail carriers is vividly portrayed in John Maddock's *Mail for the Back of Beyond*.[8] From horseback to motor-driven trucks, mail runs to places along the Birdsville Track in South Australia, for example, were hazardous undertakings. The tracks, such as they were, constantly shifted with sand drifts and floods, and the successful arrival of the mail was cause for celebration. The mail trucks also carried supplies to homesteaders, and often were the only source of contact with the outside world.

It wasn't until the dirt roads and motor transportation became more reliable that mailboxes became a common item by the roadside, but individual homesteads could still be a good distance off of the main road. In the context of such distances, the mailbox often was placed at a convenient point of call for the mail carrier, frequently in a group at road junctions (figure 3). Whether intentional or otherwise, these groupings represent the community behind the constructions. Standing together (and sometimes falling) in what often is a harsh landscape, they evoke the lifestyle and loneliness of

6 Cited in David Dolan, Ann Stephen, Caroline Lorenz, and Anne Watson, "Bush Toys and Furniture" a publication for the exhibition of the same title at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, July 4–September 2, 1990.

7 For a recent evaluation of many of these innovations, see Simon Jackson, "The Stump Jumpers: National Identity and the Mythology of Australian Industrial Design in the Period 1930–1975" in *Design Issues* 18:4 (Autumn 2002).

8 John Maddock, *Mail for the Back of Beyond* (Australia: Kangaroo Press, 1986).

Figure 4
Somewhat out of his Victorian territory, this outlaw Ned Kelly was found lying in the Queensland bush.

the outback heritage. Like the isolated chapel that signifies a sense of spiritual community in remote areas, the ubiquitous presence of mailboxes at road junctions represents a more practical, down-to-earth sense of collectiveness that has more to do with a sense of geography. Logan suggests that the settlement of Australia was more pragmatic than in America where communities had a very strong bond of religious togetherness.[9] Rural Australians are thinly spread across the land, and yet that somehow managed to unite the communities with a shared feeling for an outback culture.

This heritage is common knowledge across Australia, and while it is a special heritage unique to this continent, the legends of heroic survival in the outback became romanticized and soon became legends to be retold over and over again. Books, newspapers, songs, poems, films and television all have contributed to the folklore that Australians like to identify as part of their national character. Occasionally, legends are combined and it is not surprising to encounter mailbox models of the subversive character Ned Kelly (figure 4), a notorious nineteenth-century outlaw who has something of a Robin Hood status in Australian history. In recent years, there have been several articles devoted to the cult of the mailbox, including a national competition to find "The true Aussie letterbox," broadcast on a popular weekly television program[10] (carried out with a great sense of fun, because mailboxes seldom are taken seriously). It is inevitable that the past is evoked on the slightest pretext, and often is abused in the perpetuation of bush mythology. Australia is predominantly an urban community with more than ninety-percent of the population living in the cities dotted around the coastline, but people like to identify themselves with the courage and fortitude of the real pioneer generations. A mailbox that emulates the spirit of the outback is one way of associating themselves and their little patch of ground with the rugged independence of the early homesteaders. Crocodile Dundee lives everywhere—no more so than in suburbia.

She'll Be Right

Australians have a saying "She'll be right" that covers a multitude of situations, literally meaning, "It will be all right." In the context of the pioneer hardship, when everyone had to make do in the severest circumstances, few people expected sophisticated solutions or great craft skills. As long as it did the job, it was okay. Sharing this understanding (mythical or otherwise) is part of belonging to the community. At best, it sums up the spirit of flying by the seat of your pants in precarious situations and getting away with it—the virtue of improvising and creating solutions to problems "on the fly."

"She'll be right" still is very much in use but, unfortunately, the other side of the coin means that it also is used as an excuse for lazy or uncaring work. The complacency factor in "She'll be right" allows for the profusion of the poor and ramshackle human-made environment that is found in many rural areas. Farms, smallhold-

9 Jim Logan, *Everyday Art: Australian Folk Art.*

10 "Burke's Backyard," a weekly television program devoted to homes and gardens, as reported in the magazine *Burke's Backyard* (July 1998): 30–31.

ings, paddocks, shops, garages, homes, and outbuildings often are littered with old equipment and junk accumulated over many years. Tractors, plows, cars, fridges, ropes, old tires, and the kitchen sink are left to rot and rust where they fall. On a purely practical level, this open warehouse is the source for the spare parts and materials that saves money and a probable long trip to a township for replacements. One might argue that the stockpile could be tidied up and hidden from view with a little more planning, but it is this acceptance of the general untidiness that allows so many of the mailboxes to be tolerated along the roadside. Many have gone by their use-by date a long time ago. "She'll be right" frequently is an abuse of a proud outback heritage, and is a counter-culture to designing and making things properly. Paradoxically, it is within this context that the freedom to erect the weirdest contraptions is fostered.

Access to Tools and Materials

Farmers traditionally have a range of quite sophisticated tools in order to maintain the infrastructure of the farm. Country people generally have access to welding equipment and a stockpile of materials lying around that can be put to good use for the second or umpteenth time. It has been comparatively easy for anyone in a rural community to "rattle up" something that will do the job. In most cases, if the aim of making do with a revamped piece of equipment or a container of some sort is for cheapness and practicality, almost anything will do. Recycling or making a one-off special mailbox sometimes is left to (or taken over by) the teenagers in the family. In this instance, the result more than likely will be something creative and idiosyncratic but, again, that is by no means the rule.

The rural habit of the do-it-yourself letterbox has been emulated by urban dwellers for decades. While a factory-made product is most common in the cities and suburbs, there are a number of homeowners (like their counterparts in the U.S.) who enjoy making something from their own design. Derham Groves has described the urban phenomenon as stemming from the do-it-yourself period in the postwar years.[11] There certainly is a lot of time and effort spent by owners (invariably men in their backyard workshop) to make a mailbox that is distinctive. But the rural custom for making do with an on-hand container came first, and the inspiration for the extrovert homemade suburban mailbox was (and still is) the rural roadside mailbox.

Fun and Self-Satisfaction

If making do is the main factor for the vast majority of mailboxes, the other significant factor is the humor behind the more out of the ordinary examples in present-day life. These are the ones that have developed the mailbox sub-culture into a full-blown cult of the weird and wonderful. The outback make-do culture frequently is parodied in the continuation and upstaging of that heritage, which is both

11 Derham Groves, *Mail Art: The Do-it-yourself Letterbox from Workshop to Gatepost* (Melbourne, Australia: Hale & Ironmonger Pty Limited, 1998).

Groves is an architect and popculture historian based in Melbourne. His book explores the homemade letterbox in the context of the do-it-yourself craze of the postwar years, and the social role of the male backyard workshop. It contains many bizarre examples of homemade letterboxes, mostly around Melbourne and its suburbs.

treasured and mockingly presented at the same time. In the case of the mailboxes that exist out there—as part of the rural tradition—it can be hard to draw a line between those that are naïve expressions of a genuine outback culture and those that are made with a prominent tongue-in-the-cheek.

There is almost a subversive element in the mixture of bravado and self-deprecating humor in some of the more bizarre models on public exhibition. The humor can be contagious, because it is not uncommon for a locality to indicate a competitive spirit among the designers. That is, where one finds a particularly unusual box, it is quite likely that there will be several others in the same area. Having said that, some of the most distinctive creations that may be encountered can suddenly appear as lone examples among many conventional efforts. There are no set rules.

We can ponder over the simple making do practice and ask at what point did it turn to full-blown humor? Was it the frequency with which some solutions resulted in unintentional humor that sparked someone to set up a deliberate joke? Or did it all emerge at the same time? I guess that outback communities needed a strong sense of humor from the outset if they were to survive the deprivations brought about by their geographic isolation. But the fallabout fun that is evident in Aussie mailboxes (both in town and in the country) is a self-perpetuating cult that shows no abatement. The more fun people have in concocting the bizarre, the more it is appreciated, and the more it is accepted as the Aussie way of life. The cult of making an unusual mailbox is so strong that one newspaper article[12] described the "purchase of a purpose-built mailbox from a hardware store as an act of national betrayal."

Such claims by the media unashamedly cash in on the myths of the outback heritage. Nonetheless, the rural mailboxes are products of the bush—they are not suburban replicas, and they represent a nonconformist outlook that is part of the search for a national identity.

What's Out There

Not that all of the Australian mailboxes may be described as art or parody, only a minority graduate to this category. There's a plethora of objects that have been hung out on the road with a minimum of thought and effort. Any humor probably is accidental. Some of them could better be described as roadside junk and, at worst, a form of environmental vandalism. At this level, they can be an embarrassment to modern Australia and provide some justification for the "cultural cringe" that would rather ignore their existence. But there are many shades of design between the extremes of art and vandalism.

The main charm (where charm exists) of the Aussie mailbox lies in the fact that it can be anything so long as it holds the mail. That really leaves things wide open, for it can be something that is

12 Peter Laud, "The Mail gets Through" *The Sunday Times* (Western Australia), April 16, 1998.

13 Among the items we have seen:
air-conditioning flue,
beer barrels,
bread box,
buckets,
buoys,
cashbox,
chest of drawers,
cookers,
dustbins,
exhaust silencer, [muffler]
fire safe,
fire alarm case,
fridges,
freezers,
gas cylinders,
gearbox,
kennels,
lavatory,
lawn mower box,
milk churns,
microwaves,
mop buckets,
motorbike engine,
oil cans,
outboard motors,
petrol cans,
radios,
saucepans,
ships funnel,
stoves,
straw chaffer,
toolbox,
tractor hood,
water tanks,
watering can,
wine barrels,
and many more unidentified objects.

too old, worn out, or no longer needed[13] to a homemade, purpose-built container. In the first category (that may be described as genuine recycling), the most common item that country people use is the milk churn (figure 5), closely followed by the cylindrical oil can or fuel drum (figure 6). It often depends on the region: a predominantly dairy farming community will tend to reuse the many old milk churns that are available, whereas other areas may find more fuel cans no hand.

In recent years, the ubiquitous plastic liquid container has joined the club as the cheapest and most easily recycled item because it is soft and easy to cut and screw to a stand (figure 7). The plastic upstart generally is more unsightly than the rigid metal cans, but these three varieties are the most common recycled items seen along the roadside. However, it is the milk churn (conjuring up nostalgic ideas of a healthy rural life) that has become the *de facto* standard.

The homemade mailbox is the second category. It frequently is quite large, made of scrap wood or metal, or a combination of both, and often resembles a house (figure 8). The homemade box is as common in the countryside as the milk churn or oil drum. Sometimes, a quite ordinary box is mounted onto a specially constructed pedestal, and any creative effort is channeled into the stand rather than the box. Containers made of rock and slate, and even a whale-bone (close to the southwest coast) have been seen. Homemade letterboxes allow the makers to use their imagination to the full, and this can take on animated forms—human or otherwise. (There have been one or two alien "ET" appearances!) As one might expect, Australian bush animals also are popular.

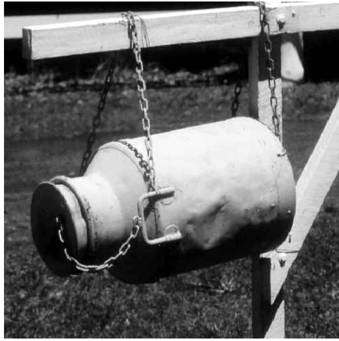

Figure 5
The most popular and now the *de facto* standard Aussie mailbox.

Figure 6
Old oil cans are a close second in the popularity stakes.

Figure 7 (above)
On the increase is the plastic liquid container that is easy to cut and nail to a post.

The Social Role of the Mailbox

The large rural box is a functional design. Living in the country means that mail often is in the form of spare parts or mail-order goods that require a space large enough to contain a good sized package. It is one reason why the old (post-World War II) refrigera-

Figure 8 (right)
A small-scale house that functions as a depository for many items, noted in South Australia.

Figure 9
An old fridge mailbox blends better with the countryside when painted olive green.

tor makes a functional mailbox. It is large, generally watertight, and has shelves that can be adjusted for large or small packages. Left to rust on the roadside, it is seldom a pretty sight, but when painted an appropriate color, the fridge can be a serviceable mailbox (figure 9).

In addition to the large mail-order packages, neighbors leave message and return borrowed items or even money in the mailbox as an alternative to making the visit out to the distant homestead. The convenience of groups at strategic corners facilitates this social interchange by proxy. And few will worry about who else might see what has been left for a neighbor—everyone knows what is going on in small communities even if they are miles apart. Times may be changing, but the country tradition of leaving homes unlocked applies equally to the mailboxes. Occasionally, one sees a padlock on a roadside mailbox, but generally they are open to the elements and anyone passing by.

Valuing the Past

The potential supply of materials and spare parts from old machinery left in the corners of sheds is not the only reason for junk to accumulate. Country folk usually have a keen sense of family history, and it can be quite heartbreaking to just throw away a once-loved laborsaving device of their parents or grandparents. If the old item can be preserved and put to good use again, then several problems can be solved at the same time. The straw chaffer (figure 10) is just such an example. The farmer who converted this was pleased to explain the machine's function, and took us to his machine shed to demonstrate how a less ancient chaffer worked. He had saved the old machine for sentimental reasons, and had carefully welded the moving parts together so that it was safe in a public place. It was set in concrete in the ground, and he was justifiably proud that his distinctive mailbox was a noted landmark along the highway.

Figure 10
In retirement, a family workhorse (a straw chaffer) reposes as the family mailbox.

Figure 11
Engine spare parts and other junk make up a realistic kangaroo on the southwest coast.

This is another function of the distinctive mailbox: it doubles as a marker along the road. It can identify the particular homestead where it stands, and also serve as a landmark for other properties. "Two roads on the left beyond the pink pig..." might be the directions for finding an unmarked track. Special mailboxes create a local reputation for their creators, and contribute to the collective pride of the neighborhood.

The Mailbox as Everyday Art

These days, it sometimes is difficult to distinguish folk art from professional art. The influences seem to operate both ways. Images of soft-drink cans or piles of bricks have been exhibited in galleries around the world as art. In 2001, an empty room with a light switching on and off was awarded one of the most coveted art prizes in the UK.[14] Some of the mailbox constructions made by untrained people may lack a few craft refinements here and there, but they often are indistinguishable from the art object. Taken out of the roadside environment and put on a modern pedestal in a white-walled gallery, many would make a fine exhibition.

I am not suggesting that we should put the mailbox phenomenon on a pedestal. They are functional items, and it is right to see them in their authentic surroundings. The kangaroo (figure 11) is an ingenious construction from spare parts of machinery, and is simply one example of the everyday roadside exhibition. The battered oil can with flaking paint and half-obscured plot numbers glinting in the Australian sunlight has an attraction that may be appreciated as an art object. Art often is challenging us to see again, to look at ourselves in a fresh light and to rethink our values. The homemade rural mailbox is not made for commercial gain, and it is certainly not ersatz. The roadside product is not part of a cynical cashing in on a kitsch object—*this is the real thing*. The objects along our verges all have a story to tell of their makers, of the wear and tear of time, and of the harsh climate. More than myth, they are part of the narrative of the Australian culture.

14 The Turner Prize is awarded by Tate Britain each year for innovative contributions to contemporary art. In 2001, it was awarded to Martin Creed, who simply adjusted the light switch in one of the empty rooms in the Tate Gallery to go on and off every five seconds. The text states: "Creed celebrates the mechanics of *the everyday...*. We are invited to reevaluate our relationship with our immediate surroundings, to look again and to question what we are presented with." (My italics). http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/turnerprize/winner.htm