

News From Under the Southern Cross (Edition 73): Bonds Deepened Through Art

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Time flies – as I realised in April when I counted 39 years since joining the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. This being said, there are many things I have learned only since becoming Ambassador. One of these is the role of artists and actors in deepening the bonds between Japan and Australia.

1. A Pillar for People-to-people Relationships

These are times in which areas of cooperation between Australia and Japan – already encompassing fields such as trade, investment and security – are broadening and deepening exponentially. At the same time, cultural exchange and people-to-people relationships are a crucial pillar of the relationship.

During my visits to various corners of Australia, I have been invited to a myriad of ceremonies, and have had the chance to meet many Japanese and Australians who engage in cultural exchange. This has given me a great deal of inspiration and encouragement.

Today, I would like to introduce you to some of these people.

2. Megumi Bennett – Bonsai Artist

I first met Mrs Megumi Bennett – who was born in Tokyo and spent her childhood in Nagano to avoid the war during WWII – at the Sydney Japan festival ‘Japanaroo’ when she provided me with explanations for the many bonsai lined up inside Town Hall, where the opening ceremony took place.



Left: The beautiful bonsai of Mrs Bennett's nursery, 'Bonsai Art' in Belrose in Sydney's north



Right: With Mrs Bennett inside the nursery

In fact, I have a special interest in bonsai. When I was seconded to the National Police Agency for two years, many of my colleagues in Ibaraki Prefectural Police had a great love for bonsai. Police officers have to be ready for action at all times. Even on weekends or holidays, you can never know when an accident or incident might occur. I was also told to stay away from such hobbies as golf, hiking and fishing since these activities could take me to place where I could be too far away to make a dash for the station if necessary. In these circumstances, there were many people who became quite devoted to bonsai, a hobby which also takes up little space in the home.

While in Sydney, I went for a tour around '[Bonsai Art](#)', the nursery managed by Mrs Bennett, her husband and her son on the outskirts of Sydney. I gazed wide-eyed at the richness and vibrancy of the works, which filled the garden row after row. Moreover, Mr Bennett's kind manner and gentle gaze as she spoke of the bonsai like a mother who is proud of a beloved child left a deep impression on me.



Mrs Bennett's expression as she spoke of her bonsai was one of a loving mother

In Australia, there are so many bonsai practitioners that they even have their own regular newsletter. It seems the desire to immerse yourself completely in a tiny piece of nature contained within a pot, absorbed in thoughts about the eternal relationship between humankind and nature, and forgetting the trials and trivialities of ordinary life is something unconstrained by borders.

3. Paul Davis - Ceramicist

I was first introduced to Paul by Mrs Hiroe Swen, a native of Kyoto who has been running a pottery studio in Queanbeyan, on the outskirts of Canberra, for many years. After learning the basics from Mrs Swen at Monash University, Paul has gained his own unique experience as a ceramicist, including undertaking training in the city of Hagi, Yamaguchi Prefecture.



With Paul at the Sturt Gallery in Mittagong, NSW

I received an invitation from Paul to attend the opening of his [exhibition](#) at a gallery in Mittagong, about one hour's drive from Sydney. In this affluent NSW town, where time moves slowly, it was a luxurious afternoon. (You can read my speech at the exhibition opening [here](#).)

As you can imagine, when I accepted Paul's handshake, I was surprised at his glove-like hand. I suppose this is from using this hand to spin the pottery wheel. I felt Paul's sturdiness and unique strength reflected in his works.

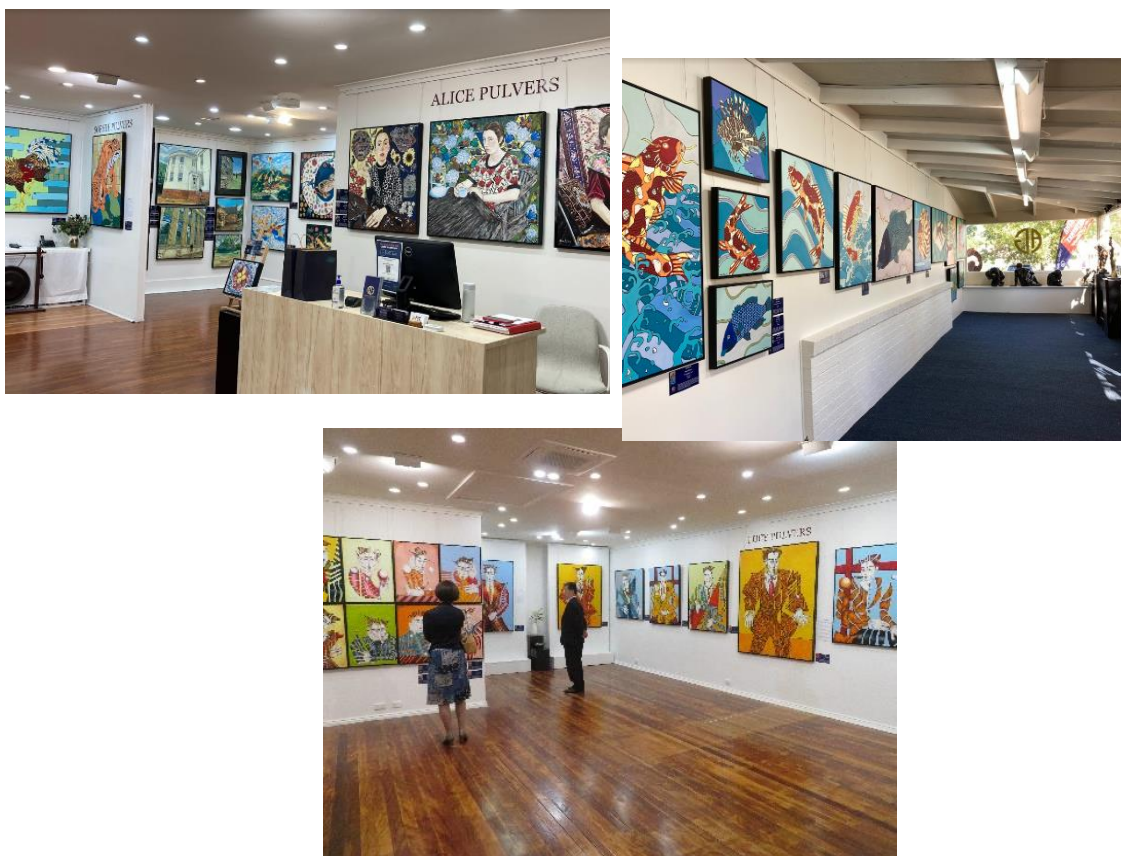


Left: The exhibition Right: With Mrs Hiroe Swen at the exhibition

4. The Pulvers Sisters

I came to know American-born and now Canberra-based Roger Pulvers through former Ambassador of Japan to Australia, Mr HATAKENAKA Atsushi. Mr Pulvers is a master at Japanese, having translated MIYAZAWA Kenji's "Night on the Milky Way Train" into English. His work as assistant director on the acclaimed film "Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence" shows he is a person of culture.

It was Mr Pulvers' three daughters who came together to put on an art exhibition in a suburb of Canberra. The modern art exhibition by Alice, Sophie and Lucy, titled "[Sisters](#)", was rich with fascinating themes and images. I could feel the influences of Japan throughout their works. Perhaps this is because they spent portion of their childhood in Kyoto.



The exhibition "Sisters" at Canberra's Aarwun Gallery

Top left: Works by eldest daughter, Alice; Top right: Works by middle daughter, Sophie;

Bottom: Works by youngest daughter, Lucy.



With Mr and Mrs Pulvers and their three daughters, Sophie, Alice and Lucy

Sophie told me that she would like to once again live in Kyoto someday. I am certain that Sophie and her sisters will continue to play a vital role in bringing Australia and Japan together.

5. Drive My Car

The last point I want to touch on is the Japanese film, 'Drive My Car', which won this year's Academy Award for Best International Feature Film. Not only is it the first Japanese film to receive an Academy Award since "Departures" (2008), but the lead actor NISHIJIMA Hidetoshi was my junior at Tokyo's Toho Gakuen where I studied during middle and high school years. I was most excited, and went to see the film at a cinema in Canberra.

At over three hours, it is a long film but not only was the story development skilful, the dialogue delivered at key points by the actors was humming with depth, intrigue and prowess in portraying the inner workings of the mind. A number of people, including another Ambassador to Australia, told me that the film was “absolutely incredible”, so I arranged for tickets and distributed them among some of my friends.

Through this film, Australians can not only deepen their understanding of what Japanese people are fixated on and troubled by in their daily lives, but they can also experience and cultivate an interest in the everyday lifestyle, the streetscapes, and the natural beauty of Japan. Through this film we may be coming to feel a sense of solidarity, in that people are fundamentally the same all over the world. It may also generate interest in Japan’s uniqueness. I feel immense pride that a film of such high quality was made in Japan.

6. Soft Power

In this way, whether it is bonsai, ceramics, paintings or films, quality art has the power to showcase Japan and Japanese things, and engage a wider audience in cultural exchange – one that is not usually engaged through diplomats’ speeches or the Embassy’s regular activities.

Certainly, soft power is a type of national power which is increasingly garnering attention. While collaborating with organisations such as the Japan Foundation in Sydney, I commit to further strengthening cultural exchanges and the bonds between people as best I can.

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