

# Roy Cowan

New Zealander, b. 1918

## Large sculptural form

1973, stoneware, 106.5x64.0 cm

Purchased 1973

Reproduced courtesy of Roy Cowan



### About the work

This is an abstract construction that appears to have organically evolved with its multitude of rectilinear and cylindrical recesses, cavities and formations. Roy Cowan has used the form to explore concepts of the void and solidity, substance and emptiness.

This is one of a number of freestanding sculptures Cowan has made commenting on the complexity of urban spaces, which he has conveyed through intricate and interconnected, textured shapes.

The form rises and expands from a narrow base, which connects it to the forms of traditional ceramic vessels, but this is clearly not a functional form. *Large sculptural form* is typical of 1970s abstract construction that worked with geometric shapes to convey a sense of mechanisation and organic form. With its explorations of the circular form on various axes, it has some associations with the cubist-inspired sculptural forms of artists like Jacques Lipchitz (1891-1973).

The form is made of stoneware, a clay fired to a temperature where vitrification takes place. This makes the clay impervious to liquids. As well, because stoneware particles come together closely and are bonded by glass-forming silica, the clay has a dense body with sufficient strength to support considerable weight.

Cowan has hand-built the form. Hand-building techniques include coiling, pressing, pinching, wedging, slab building and moulding, rather than using a potter's wheel. Cowan has built this work using a number of these techniques. He has been influenced by the pottery of various cultures including Latin American, Asian and, in particular, Chinese and Russian.

The production of this sculpture was possible due to the large custom-made kiln designed and built by Cowan. It grew from a small chamber into one of a 160 cubic feet divided into two chambers. Cowan built it from pieces of pipe and an old aircraft supercharger. His self-sufficiency and love of mechanics and industry derives from his early experiences serving in the Fleet Air Arm during the Second World War and when he was stranded in Africa.

In the 1980s Cowan said, "A large kiln, inaugurated in 1960 and, with additions, still in current service, permitted a move into larger, even monumental ceramics." (*Ceramics 86: Contemporary Work in Clay*, exhibition catalogue, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in association with the New Zealand Society of Potters, 1986.) Cowan's large-scale kiln also enabled him to produce wide panels and multiple piece mosaics made from welded steel, plywood and thousands of ceramic tiles.

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## About the artist

Roy Cowan was born in Wellington in 1918. He graduated from Victoria University of Wellington and Wellington Teachers' College, where he specialised in art and became an arts specialist teacher. After two years teaching, he started working full-time as an artist in 1948.

Cowan received a New Zealand Arts Societies Scholarship that enabled him to study at the Slade School, University College, London, from 1953 to 1955. On his return to New Zealand he became Assistant Art Editor for Schools Publications and worked in ceramics part-time from 1956 to 1959. Cowan returned to working full-time as an artist in 1969. He exhibited with The Group in Christchurch. He became interested in pottery through his wife and fellow artist, Juliet Peter (b. 1915) who learnt pottery at Hammersmith School in London.

In 1966 Cowan received a Queen Elizabeth II Arts Fellowship for the study of kiln design, firing processes and ceramic materials. He built his first kiln in 1970. Cowan has specialised in the design and operation of pottery kilns and, as well as assisting other potters in New Zealand, his advice has been sought by potters throughout the world.

Cowan has experimented with the different physical characteristics that clays have in different regions throughout New Zealand. He also adds numerous composites to the clay, such as grog, silica, felspar, pumice and granite.

Cowan has been active as a painter and printmaker as well as completing several large public commissions in tile throughout the 1970s and 1980s and ceramic murals. These include a mural wall for the New Zealand pavilion at EXPO '70, which is now permanently installed in Japan, an abstract mural for the Reserve Bank of New Zealand in Wellington and panels for the Freyberg Building in the Government Centre in Wellington.

Cowan has acted as commissioner for the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council and the Department of Foreign Affairs, curating exhibitions of New Zealand craft for touring overseas. He has exhibited widely in New Zealand and overseas, with works in public and private collections both nationally and internationally.

## Other works by the artist in the Collection

### *Cellular Form Sculpture*

c. 1967, stoneware  
William A. Sutton Bequest 2000

## Further reading

### *Contemporary Ceramic Art in Australia and New Zealand*

Janet Mansfield, Craftsman House, 1995.

*Ceramics 86: Contemporary Work in Clay*, exhibition catalogue, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in association with the New Zealand Society of Potters, 1986.

*Craft New Zealand: The art of the craftsman*, Doreen Blumhardt and Brian Brake, Reed, 1981.

*New Zealand Potters: Their Work and Words*, Doreen Blumhardt and Brian Brake, Reed, 1976.

