The boy who talked to teapots: Bill Abrahams

Bill Abrahams has taken a boyhood love of beautiful objects and turned it into a passion for op shops and collecting.

By Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="font-size: 35px; color: #8cc7d0;"] A [/dropcap]sk **Bill Abrahams** how his obsession with op-shops, thrift shops and secondhand stuff began and he pulls out a memory from deep in his early childhood.

"It began with these little teapots. I was about three or four – very young – and my mother (Warrnambool artist **Marie Cook**) would buy them for me in the op shop. The op shop ladies started to keep them aside for me, actually, because they weren't very exotic teapots, just those little metal ones," Bill recalls with a laugh.

"They became my friends, these teapots. I would hang out with them, talk to them, and my grandfather built me a little red

wagon so I could take them for walks.”

Donate

The slightly eccentric little boy grew into a slightly eccentric young man who, during his senior high school years in Warrnambool, distinguished himself by wearing elegant costume jewellery – marquisette brooches, diamante-studded pins, that sort of thing – on his school jumper.

“I don’t think the teachers knew what to do with me, to be honest,” he laughs.

“It was clearly not part of the school uniform, but I think it was easier just to ignore it, or maybe they thought it was cool, I don’t know.”

Bill with one of his collection of vintage after-five gowns from the 1930s, 40s and 50s that were once worn by Melbourne society women.

Bill’s avant-garde dress sense as a schoolboy in the 90s was more than just a push-back against authority, however, it was also a statement about his sexuality.

“I came out in high school and I was getting picked on anyway, so I thought, oh well, I might as well just wear what I like,” he says.

It was the beginning of a melding between Bill’s emerging identity as a gay man and his love of beautiful, secondhand objects, be it clothing, linen, jewellery, ceramics, furniture, glassware or kitsch memorabilia.

“After I moved to Melbourne (to study art history) I worked in a gay-owned op-shop in Fitzroy that was simply amazing. On a Monday, all of the drag queens would bring in these amazing outfits that they had last worn at the weekend, looking for something new,” he says, smiling.

“But it was also an education for me. I would listen to the older guys – and they were all guys that worked there for some reason – talk about what it was like for them as young gay men, when AIDS was first around and about the whole gay scene around the commission flats.

“It was incredible to listen to those stories.”

Unfortunately the op-shop went broke after, as Bill tells it, spending “too much on polished concrete floors and chandeliers”.

A wedding cup from the 1800s where the man pledged sobriety and the woman, domesticity, apparently guaranteeing a union as “firm as an oak”.

Bill is now 33, back in Warrnambool and studying for a teaching degree, but he remains one of the best known faces around the top four op-shops: the Salvos thrift shop, St Vinnies, Lifeline and the RSPCA shop where he also volunteers.

“It is an obsession, no doubt about it. I get really upset if for some reason I can’t go, because you never know what might be coming out that day,” he says.

Bill is compelled to visit at least one op shop every day, even when on teaching rounds, during which he manages a brisk walk (he doesn’t drive) after school to the CBD, where he can often squeeze in an hour of browsing before they close for the day.

The workers all greet him by name and he, in turn, knows the routines of the op shops right down to when they put their fresh supplies of linen out on sale (sorry, I have to keep

that a secret…).

Bill strikes a pose with one of the many beautiful glass pieces in his collection, this one being originally owned by his grandmother.

Bill credits his great aunt, **Betty Beavis**, and his grandmother for giving him a collector's heart and a stylist's eye: he knows the good stuff, like the cedar wood, Georgian-period chest of drawers that popped up at the Salvos for $100. It is still his greatest find, in terms of value.

Some treasures he collects to sell for fun through his etsy store , providing funds to spend back in the op-shops, while other collectables, clothing and jewellery are just too good not to keep.

"I can't show you my bedroom, really I can't. It is embarrassing," Bill explains, before relenting and allowing me a quick peek.

Yep, it is "busy", but not overwhelming, and there are objects of great beauty and whimsy: a wedding cup from the 1800s, a

stunning glass jug, designer dresses from the 1940s…

“I see it as recycling,” Bill says.

“And anything we can do that helps reuse and recycle, well, that has to be a good thing.”

Bill chose this as one of his favourite pieces of kitsch: a souvenir from Surfer’s Paradise that is open to all sorts of interpretation.

[box]Bill recently sold a large range of his costume jewellery to Channel 7 for use in its period drama series, *A Place to Call Home*, starring Noni Hazelhurst. His op shop finds are now finding buyers from around the world. You can visit his etsy store, The AsFoundEmporium, here. [/box]