



melbourne's  
**design**  
cache

Inspired by Melbourne, designed in Melbourne and proudly made in Melbourne, hometown creative maestro and author Maree Coote puts a unique spin on our city of style

Words Marg Hearn | Product photography Maree Coote | Portrait photography Andrew Lecky

Step into Melbournestyle, gallery and bespoke design store on Clarendon Street in South Melbourne, and you'll notice that creative ideas flow naturally for owner Maree Coote, who is an accomplished artist, illustrator, designer, maker, writer, photographer and marketer.

Maree began developing Melbourne-inspired products in 1994 and continued to dabble as a hobby while employed in advertising before launching this creative venture in partnership with her husband Lex Ridgeway and daughter Ginger in 2006. Twenty-five years in advertising, the latter seven heading up the Melbourne office of John Singleton Advertising, saw Maree hone a sixth sense for capturing and projecting product and brand soul with pizzazz to specific audiences.

"Advertising has been really good to me. It's taught me lots of skills," she says. Graphic design-trained and a zealous painter and drawer from a young age, Maree made a point of staying in touch with the hands-on side of the industry along the way, motivated by a desire to put notions to the test. Her parents were also key influences as writers and painters.

"We have our own Melbourne-based workshop, so any idea I have, I do a sketch, make it, see if I like it then transfer it via computer for a play on the engraving, routing or laser machines. If I'm happy with the way it looks, I'll then work on structural changes to make it all doable."

For the design whiz, visualising opportunities for spin-off concepts has become a habitual by-product of "packaging ideas up for other people." Maree's inaugural effort, the nifty Melbourne Cup and Saucer range is a classic example that she brought to fruition after working on a Spring Racing Carnival advertising campaign 10 years back.

Among the designs in striking black-on-white fine china are typographic puns, Melbourne building silhouettes, pictograms and, of course, horses. Targeting the Cup Day picnic basket and Melbourne Spring Racing season tourist markets proved a winning strategy. Her first customer was none other than Myer, with the company buyer placing an order for 800 on sighting the product at its debut trade show where Maree had piggybacked a section of a friend's stand.

This lent substantiation to her inkling that Melbourne was void of quality merchandise that picked up on the city's design cache and many unsung but worthy icons. Tacky, fluffy koalas and penguins simply did not cut the mustard in Maree's search for Melbourne memorabilia worthy of giving to international guests or to pass on when abroad.

"I always had the problem when I travelled of giving people a gift. I wanted to give them something from Melbourne that had meaning, style and reflected my experience of this city."

That dilemma is now sorted as Melbournestyle is a brimming array of design-savvy, predominantly Melburnian-initiated books, art, bespoke stationery (cards, wrapping paper, journals complete with a map of Melbourne),



Clever Coote has Melbourne wrapped up. Pictured are Maree Coote, husband Lex Ridgeway and daughter Ginger. Opposite page Inspired by the Garden State slogan is Melbournestyle's own range of Gardenstate gifts and homewares.



soaps, books (for adults and children), jewellery, homewares (ceramics, mirrors, coasters, sculptures, mobiles), furniture (room dividers, chairs, side tables), lighting, handbags, knick-knacks and T-shirts.

There are no flippant inclusions. Everything has a reason for being “a connection to Melbourne or Melbourne people who are doing something special”.

The complete box and dice themes for the merchandise are carried through from product to packaging and span significant people in our history — Ned Kelly, Dame Nellie Melba and William Buckley to name a few — iconic buildings, our Garden State’s beautiful flora and significant issues such as indigenous recognition and the exit of tram conductors.

Much is designed, crafted and exceptionally well-packaged by Maree, but there are also selected Victorian, interstate and international artists and artisans in the mix. A smidgen of the product is customised to fit a particular “story” while other lines are developed from scratch.

There is an underlying intent to foster recognition and build ties between various design capitals. Among the locals represented are

ceramic artist Bern Emmerichs and photographer Kim Tonelli. Their work featured in a recent exhibition in the Melbournestyle gallery space, which is available to Melbourne artists, called **FACING HISTORY** — Famous Faces Old and New — A Who’s Who of Then and Now.

“What I’m trying to do is to create a relationship with other design-orientated cities — Barcelona, New York and Louisiana — to get a two-way collaboration happening.

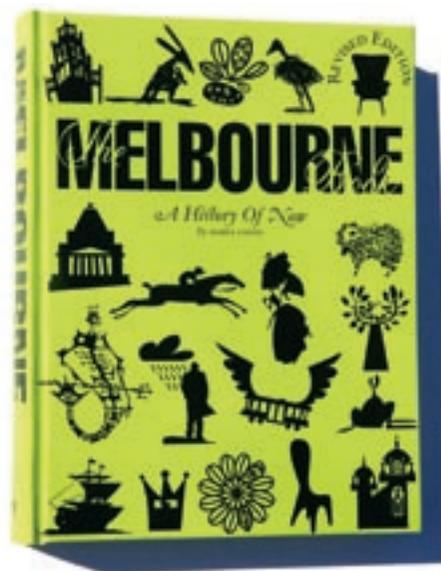
“I wanted to offer people product that wasn’t stubby holders and road-kill signs — something with a bit of a story to it and even history,” she says.

A major undertaking, *The Melbourne Book: A History of Now* is a cover-to-cover collection of Maree’s wonderfully sharp wit, discerning eye and predilection for Melbourne’s untold stories. First launched in 2003, a second updated issue was published in March this year.

Downplaying her photographic exploits as totally amateur, the book contains in excess of 700 of Maree’s happy snaps taken over the years out of a concern that many of Melbourne’s buildings and structures were in danger of extinction courtesy of development.

But don’t expect the usual coffee table

**Above** Melbournestyle is a celebration of Melbourne, the city of style, drawing on the city’s individual dignity, cultural distinction and local eccentricity.



Maree Coote is passionate about preserving Melbourne’s history. Her book, *The Melbourne Book*, won commendation — Best Print in the 2004 Victorian State Government History Awards. A new revised edition has just been relaunched for 2009.

photographic tourist trail essay. "Mine is a bit opinionated, a bit subjective, a bit nuts — ah, it's a bit me. I bang on about the things I like and why I like them," she chuckles.

"*The Melbourne Book* contains stories and a history that I thought we should know; contemporary culture told through photographs and anecdotes from Melbourne characters and legends Phillip Adams, Mirka Mora, Dame Edna Everage, Julia Zemiro, Kerry Armstrong, Paul Kelly and Vince Colosimo."

Case in point is a chapter casting light on the naming of one of our CBD's main streets, Swanston Street, in honour of Charles Swanston. "Who was he? We should know that," implores Maree. "This is the first contemporary profile of Swanston to be written. It's long overdue."

State slogans are one of the topics earning some fun banter in the book from Maree who has an adroit grasp of jingles and words.

"So Queensland is no longer The Sunshine State, it now prefers The Smart State despite there being continual preponderance of sunshine. South Australia is now sometimes The Festival State and sometimes The Wine State but no longer The State of the Arts. Western Australia is no longer The State of Excitement and is having a rest from both excitement and slogans at the moment. Tasmania, once The Island State (too obvious), has moved on to become Your Natural State (better) and New South Wales is not budging from The Premier State (right or wrong). Victoria, The Garden State (while that's the best position we could have had), went on to become Victoria On the Move which only lasted a few years and then became Victoria, and now it's Victoria, The Place to Be."

Never short on inspiration, she enthuses: "There is a story everywhere you turn — the possibility of something coming to life." Maree also enjoys serious research into Melbourne's sights and characters.

"I love the State Library. Melbourne has such wonderful facilities. For me, the research stage at the State Library is like being in a lolly shop." The rare books and manuscript section hold particular appeal to Maree.

*The Melbourne Book*, from which much of the paraphernalia evolves, is the ticket to really comprehending how clever all of this really is.

"I like to tease out the quirky bits and pieces," Maree offers.

Speaking volumes is *The Victorian Native Sorry Bracelet, Necklace*. The bracelet was created long before Sorry Day was officially observed "in the hope that one day it would happen. Now we've added the Treaty Necklace to the range."

One that strikes a particular chord is the *Tram Man* sculpture.

"Waiting for a tram in the Melbourne weather can be character-building or just plain freezing. Who is it? Is it a Ticket Nazi or the ghost of the Poet Connie? Bring back the soul of the city," lobbies Maree.

Down the same track, *Tram Rings*, according to the explanation tag, commemorate "the way

trams used to be. Conductors, real bells and the ideal travel speed".

The beloved gala television industry event, the Gold Logies, is not immune. On the one hand, recognising and paying homage to Melbourne's strong historical contribution to TV (and serving as a subtle reminder to Sydney), the "bling" *Gold Logie Time in Melbourne* brooch is as much a tongue-in-cheek suggestion that — literally — anyone can have a Logie.

*Melbourne Lover Lovehearts* charm bracelets remind us of those confectionery bracelets devoured in a by-gone childhood and that the loveheart lolly was, in fact, a Melbourne invention by Macpherson Robertson back in the 1920s. Leaving no stone unturned, Maree has shaped her own Melburnian messages.

As an illustrator, Maree has written and illustrated three children's picture books based on Australian themes, local icons and natural history. Artworks from these are part of the permanent collection of the Dromkeen Children's Literature Collection.

Her children's books also march to the beat of a different drum as is revealed in *The Gum Queen*.

"It's about being individual, being yourself, being the nut you are," Maree explains. The book explores all of the flora and fauna in the Aussie bush with the underlying message for little kids that it's OK to be themselves and to find their own curl, defying the view they're bombarded with suggesting that there's one way to look and there's one way to be, she says.

Ned Kelly, who needs no introduction, has enjoyed a high profile in the extensive body of work. Described by the artist as "Australia's sexiest bushranger", Ned is reinvented in a series of artworks collated in a book titled *50 Neds*. The Kelly series has evolved from being "almost like folk art, playful; turning over ideas using the Ned icon and later moving to more complex work and darker themes".

There are no spruikers on microphones attempting to lure passers-by inside Melbournestyle. Discovering this gem, which is demurely housed in a beautiful Victorian Terrace, is the reward for international and local design buffs who have done their homework.

In a sign that people are seeking out Melbourne design products, *New York Times Magazine* listed Melbournestyle among "Melbourne's Top Shopping Picks" with a five-star rating. The in-bound Japanese tourist market has also enthusiastically come on board as has product demand from interstate stockists.

But it's certainly not a domain confined to tourists. Melburnians alike get to view Melbourne through a new lens against the current tide towards the "homogeneous and predictable. We strive to offer a unique alternative," says Maree.

"Melbourne has a great design credibility that is increasingly being recognised and embraced around the world."

**FURTHER INFORMATION** 155 Clarendon Street, South Melbourne Tel: 9696 8445 Web: [www.melbournestyle.com.au](http://www.melbournestyle.com.au)



Image credit: Liam Lynch

Melbourne Cup and Saucer was a finalist in the 2006 Memento Australia Awards.



Ned Kelly artworks by Maree Cooote are available in book format, *50 Neds*, or as smaller limited edition Giclée prints on ragpaper or large one-off prints on canvas. This work is titled *Dead Man Riding*.