Keys to the collection—
Form

Charles Brownlow

Charles Brownlow—sporting legend and silversmith?

Charles Brownlow was born on 25 July 1861 at Cullin Lane, Geelong, just three years after the first ever recorded game of what we know today as Australian Rules Football. His father, also named Charles, was a book binder in Oxford in the United Kingdom. In 1858, Charles Snr. married Eliza Whitaker from Releigh, Essex, and shortly after they voyaged to Australia. In 1880, the teenage Charles played his first match in the blue and white hoops of the Geelong Football Club.

Most sports fans know of Charles Brownlow's football achievements. They might know that in 1883–84 Brownlow captained the Geelong Football Club. They might know he retired eight years later, in 1891, and that he was club secretary from 1885–1923 and president of the Victorian Football League (VFL) from 1918–19. They almost certainly know that his name lives on in football in the Brownlow Medal—officially the Charles Brownlow Trophy.

What people might not know is that even before Charles first played for Geelong, he was acquiring skills in a completely different field. In 1880, the same year Brownlow began his football career, he completed a silversmith apprenticeship. His teacher was an outstanding Geelong silversmith of the time, Edward Fischer (1828–1911).

Mounted emu egg—
The German-trained Fischer was responsible for a number of ornate Geelong horse racing cups. In the mid to late 19th century, Geelong was a centre for silversmiths. Brownlow combined his silversmithing with a general business, which included a china warehouse and a tobacco shop. It appears, however, that he hung up his shingle in the mid–1890s—a time of severe economic depression—and focused on football instead. Brownlow died on the 23 January 1924, at home in Sydney Avenue, East Geelong. His blue and white house at that address is still standing.

It's appropriate that Charles Brownlow, a football-playing silversmith, is commemorated by a medal that is the AFL's most prestigious individual honour. Brownlow's finest surviving works as a silversmith is a silver-mounted emu egg, made in the late 1880s which is a part of Geelong Gallery's renowned permanent collection.

Geelong Gallery

AusVELS level 7 to VCE
geelonggallery.org.au/learn

Charles Brownlow
Mounted emu egg 1890s
silver, emu egg and
ebonised wood
Collection: Geelong Gallery

Charles Brownlow
Australian 1861–1924

Mounted emu egg 1890s
silver, emu egg and
ebonised wood
38.0 x 23.8 (diameter) cm
Collection: Geelong Gallery
Dorothy McAllister Bequest
Fund, 1995

Question
The Australian art form of mounting emu eggs in silver settings arose from about 1857. It is an offshoot of the European mounted ostrich eggs. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists practiced this art, with some silversmiths designing elaborate and ornate compositions to hold the eggs. Why do you think this art form was so popular at this time?

Research
The practice of making art from emu eggs was kept alive in the twentieth century by Aboriginal people of south-east Australia and the Carnarvon region of Western Australia. Carving continues today, with dozens of Indigenous artists depicting animals, people, traditions and scenes from the past or present. These works of art provide us with a rich visual history. Compare these traditional objects with works by the Australian artist Fiona Hall, who has created botanical sculptures from recycled materials.

Analyse these works to produce a series of thumbnail sketches as the basis for designing your own piece of sculpture.

Activity
Create a series of small drawings from the environment of the same object. In each drawing reduce the detail so that you progress from highly detailed to a more stylized image. From your drawings, produce a series of small metal sculptures. Consider using recycled materials such as aluminium cans, wire, nuts and found objects. Try to use different materials to create texture and interest within the piece.

Geelong
Gallery

AusVELS level 7 to VCE
geelonggallery.org.au/learn