

# National Ceramics

Quarterly

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EWEN HENDERSON • CLAY FESTIVAL • KOREAN FOLK POTTERS  
• PLAQUES, PLATTERS & PLATES

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**COVER:** Johan Smith's ethnic tile with underglaze colours, transparent low fired glaze and lustres, articles on page 13.



Stoneware form by Ewen Henderson, see page 5.

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## Comment

Due to pressure of work, Professor Oelof Heckroodt's articles on plastic clays of the Western Cape were not ready for this issue. However they will be completed shortly.

Hym Rabinowitz wrote to me some time ago (see 'Letters' column) and a short story 'Bushman Pots' follows Professor Martin Hall's interesting article 'Pots and People' on page 8.

I would like to quote you the second sentence from this article ... "Ceramic art has become a specialised discipline." It is the word 'discipline' that caught my eye. The Oxford dictionary says "discipline — bring under control, train to obedience and order, drill"; "drill — rigorous discipline, exact routine". Will Rodgers in the USA, back in 1917, said "What this country needs more than anything else is a place to park your car! What our big cities need is another orange in those 'orange-aid' stands." It seems to me here in South Africa in 1989, what our ceramics need is a little more drilling and a lot more 'discipline'. No matter what avenue of ceramics one selects to follow and practise, without a full knowledge of the media and constant 'drilling', one will never produce work that will stand the test of time and that is to make sure one is totally 'disciplined' in all aspects of ones chosen field.

When comparing what is being shown here as our best ceramic works with what is being exhibited in Europe, America and Japan, we are sadly lacking. Their work evokes immediate response and, whether or not it is to ones liking, it none the less speaks of professionalism and quality that only comes from a thorough 'disciplined' knowledge of ones media.

Later this year Plascon will be sponsoring 'SA Ceramic Awards', a competition with R10 000 in prize money. 'Your Family' magazine will have full details of this competition in their July 1989 issue (comes out mid June) and we will also publish these in our next issue.

Please remember that the APSA/Corobrik National Exhibition takes place in Johannesburg early in September; full details from your local APSA branch.

Many thanks to Mr George Duncan of Ferro who gave me a very interesting tour of their factory and laboratory complexes.

*Michael Guassardo*

EDITOR

# Letters

## Corobrick National Ceramics Exhibition

What is this competition coming to? Did you say CERAMIC exhibition or ART exhibition? With no disrespect to the ability of the judges or the artist, I certainly question their choice of selecting a piece that could well have been made out of papier maché or Pratley putty, and would have looked identical to the finished article. Why kill ceramics with Plaka and varnish?

The Art of Ceramics is an art to be mastered and not degraded by using our "Third World Society" cliché yet again!!

The aim should be to test the ability of a ceramic artist and the emphasis should be on ceramics.

Hannah Paine  
Ceramic artist  
Sunningdale

## Bushman Pots

I enclose a quaint little account by the Bushman taken down about 1875, as to how they made their pots; an extract from 'Bushmen Folklore' by Dr W. Bleek and Lucy Lloyd.

In the latter part of the 19th Century, Dr W. Bleek, an orthographer, set about studying and compiling the Bushman language. The breakwater at Cape Town was being built at the time and he was fortunate enough to get permission for some of the Bushmen prisoners to stay and 'work' for him at his home in Mowbray so that he could interview them in peaceful surroundings. In their own words and way of speaking he records how they made pots.

As an aside — in recent years, students of Rock Art in South Africa have obtained a great deal of information from this book for their interpretations of the subject of Bushman paintings.

Hym Rabinowitz  
Constantia

## Judging

I have received a long letter from Mr Robert Lane of Johannesburg, who has been teaching pottery for the past fifteen years and asks in essence: "what criteria do judges use when selecting works for exhibition?"

*Perhaps Mr Stan Cohen (article on page 15) would be so kind as to answer this. Ed.*

## Vaal Triangle News

My apologies for not having communicated with you more frequently. Well our group has had a committee meeting and made plans for this year which they have asked me to write and tell you about.

On 25 February we had an "in-house" workshop on mould making, given by two of our members, Marie McRae and Mike Eagar. The venue was Marie's home in Oxford Road, Henley on Klip. It turned out to be a huge success with 28 people attending and others having to be put off for another time when a similar workshop would be held.

Members were asked to bring along a small object that could be cast in a two-piece mould. Few had to be turned down and most members brought items that were quite suitable. Proceedings started promptly at 10.00 and Mike gave a short talk on the properties and behaviour of gypsum. Then it was on with the mixing of plaster of paris and gentle stroking of soft soap. The workshop took all day with few problems. All moulds released well and we felt that everyone went home happy with a completed two piece mould.

Wendy Goldblat is coming to give us a workshop on 22 April which we are much looking forward to. Also in the pipeline is a talk and slide show which will be given by one of our members who recently toured extensively overseas, visiting various pottery/ceramic places of interest. This is planned for May.

Our so called 'Mini' exhibitions have proven to be very successful. They are held in conjunction with the Vanderbijlpark Art Society and are not subject to selection. Fortunately our members are discerning when submitting their work and very few items turn up on these exhibitions that really should not appear on an exhibition. Our first Mini this year is scheduled for 18 April with a special section which will be "Planters". We are planning another Mini for November.

Our Regional Exhibitions are always held on the coldest day of the year and moving the exhibition to May last year made the coldest day happen on May 16th (or so we felt!). We have therefore decided not to fight it and will wrap up well for the 14th June, which is a convenient date. It will be held in the Vanderbijlpark Library which should give the exhibition more exposure. We have found that venues such as the foyer of one of the local theatres means that the exhibition is only seen by those actually going to the theatre or making a special point of visiting the exhibition.

As there generally seems to be a shortage of functional ware on exhibitions, the special section this year is "For the Table". To encourage

*Continued on page 32*



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# When matter becomes fact . . .

## Ewen Henderson

### a potter to reckon with

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Ewen Henderson is a British potter whose work reflects a mature understanding of both his medium and his message. Studying under both Lucie Rie and Hans Coper, he was educated at Goldsmith's College and Camberwell School of Art in London in the 60's. In 1969 he held his first major exhibition at the Alun Malcolm Gallery, and since then he has exhibited in Britain and on the continent virtually every year. His work is sought after and collected by gallery owners and art pundits all over the world.

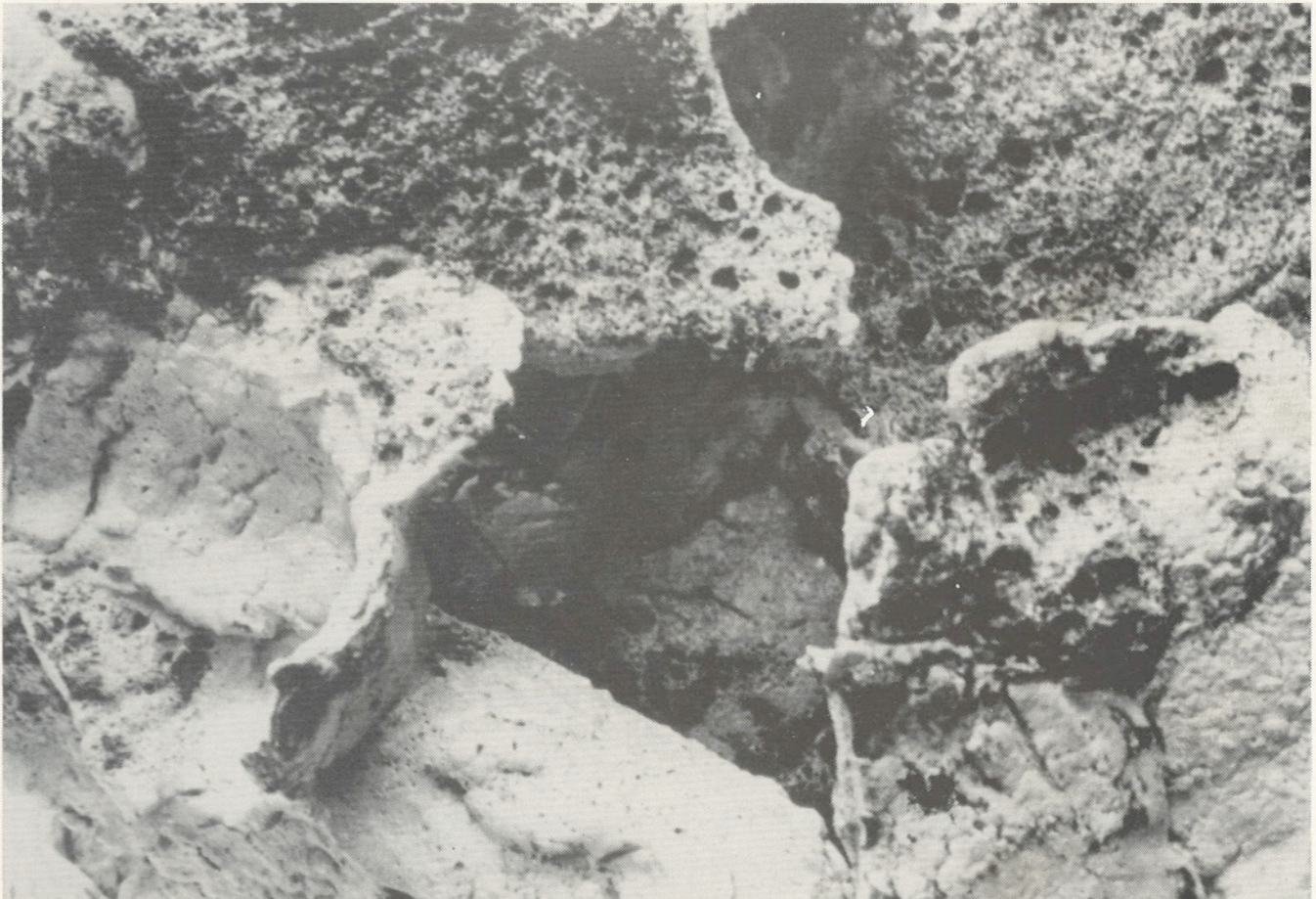
When one first encounters and holds a piece of Henderson ceramic, it is as though a sensation of *deja vu* is summoned from the collective unconscious . . . this is not a new experience, and yet with the same token, the piece is thoroughly contemporary. The ambivalent sensation of aged and modern creates the tension which is in fact the underlying pulse behind the man. Ewen Henderson is fascinated by archaeology, he studies ancient myths and can relate the mysteries which surround Stonehenge and its like. It is no wonder that the rich textural format which he has created to structure his vessels have the appearance of rocks which have stood the test of time.

As one would weave a rich tapestry, so Henderson thoroughly goes about the creation of layering stratum upon stratum of ceramic related media. Once content with the composition, he slices it up and restructures it to develop his highly complex vessel shapes. The surface is dry in parts, molten in others, rough and smooth, bright and dull. The aesthetic charm to be found in the contrasting layers is the mature and highly sophisticated answer to his intellectual requirement. Viewing a Henderson is a sophisticated experience. Being both a painter and a ceramist, Henderson challenges the preconceptions of the contemporary scheme of things. He is post modern in his eclecticism, and challenging in his execution. He understands his medium, and knows about matter. The work of Ewen Henderson was seen at the Galerie Besson and the photographs are by kind permission of Ms. Anita Besson.

R. Lapping

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*Opposite, Leaning and Thrusting Form series, 1988. Stoneware, height 34 cm. Below, a close up of a Ewen Henderson pot.*



# Personally Speaking

by Rosemary Lapping

## Does Matter Matter?

As we approach the waning years of the 20thC. a notion which has provided the thrust for much of our behaviour has been that of communication. Communication — the ramifications of which have penetrated every aspect of our daily existence. Today's media can hardly but acknowledge the profound dependency on the photograph, the printed word, the photostat, whilst computers, electronic communication and fax machines have become part of the everyday existence of most office workers. However, in spite of what would appear to be an ideal way to transmit facts and concepts, there remains the acknowledged reckoning that something is frequently lacking. Very often the 'something' is likened to a human response or a personalised reaction and when this is not felt, the message tends to fail.

During the 19thC. when the camera was invented, its capacity to capture a true likeness of its subject matter liberated the portrait painters on whom the onus of verist reflection had been placed. Artists, ceasing to be storytellers alone, were thus freed to express themselves in relation to both their medium and their subject matter, leaving the camera and the printed word to provide what was considered to be 'factual material'. Artists could concern themselves with what came to be understood as a new perceptual autobiography. The process of making art became more analytical and introspective, whilst the artist could pursue his relationship to himself and his reaction to his medium. What followed was a closer understanding of both the process of artmaking per se and a deeper understanding of the medium as matter.

During the early 20thC. the new concept of psychoanalysis further encouraged introspection and a deeper delving into thoughts, feelings and attitudes. Artists who were deeply concerned with the need to express themselves through their medium were thus caught up in the wave of understanding and appreciating the validity of their visceral response to colour, to line, to application of medium, to subject matter. MEDIUM AS MATTER AS MEDIUM became one essential vehicle for communicating a personalised response.

Running concurrently with this notion was the rapidly developing trend of Conceptual Art which was concerned with IDEA as opposed to visible, tangible subject matter. Now be this as it may, although it is impossible to incarcerate an idea into physical matter, the latter is nevertheless required to carry the former's message . . .

leading one back to the question which still holds . . . does matter matter?

Prof. Martin Hall has described in his article entitled "Pots and People" how social status and hierarchy within tribes was communicated by way of decoration on the pots, and although the actual decoration does not scream out its claim of aristocratic heritage, it is nevertheless understood that certain marks in the clay carry the idea of status.

Ceramists, as has been stressed before, are indeed privileged to work with clay as their direct contact between their inbuilt tools, i.e. their fingers, and their medium are interrelated. The ceramist leaves his mark directly by way of his touch, something which is linked to both emotional and intellectual expression, and is highly personal. It is no wonder that ceramics tend to carry with them a type of personalised coding system. Clay as matter is a vital ingredient for the potter to convey his message and when he sees fit to allow both his marks and his methodology to remain visible, the eventual artwork becomes a decidedly private reflection. One has but to consider the works of Ewen Henderson to appreciate the full implication of this point.

Clay as matter provides the ceramist with an ideal material for self expression. And whether it is used to make a soup bowl or a ritual mask, the prevailing shape will serve to operate on the many levels of contemplation which the ceramic object has found itself through the ages. Whether viewed by an archaeologist or a contemporary art critic, the enigmatic qualities remain, frequently debatable and controversial, but never, never boring . . . and that MATTERS most of all.

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# Pots and People

by Prof. Martin Hall

Today, most people tend not to think much about the ceramics that they use in their everyday lives. Ceramic art has become a specialised discipline. People who are not part of this narrow circle are probably aware of what they like and what they don't like, but beyond this do not worry too much about the meaning that may lie behind particular styles of tableware, dishes, cups, saucers and other elements in the range of ceramics that find a place in the ordinary household. But this has not always been the case. In past years ceramics have had an important meaning for ordinary people in their everyday lives. Archaeological and historical research in southern Africa is beginning to suggest what some of these meanings might have been.

Although people have lived in southern Africa for hundreds of thousands of years, the first common use of ceramics came some two thousand years ago with the arrival of pastoralist people in the western parts of southern Africa and of Bantu-speaking farmers in the eastern regions. Today, the sites where these early communities lived are often marked by large numbers of pot sherds, allowing the archaeologist to reconstruct this dimension of past society.

Obviously these ceramics served important practical needs. Khoi pastoralists (still sometimes mistakenly referred to as Hottentots) made pointed-based jars that could be slung over the backs of pack-oxen, conforming to a nomadic style of life. To the east, early Bantu-speaking farmers, moving southwards across the Zambezi River sometime before two hundred AD, had a more settled lifestyle that allowed them to make use of larger numbers of vessels designed to fulfill a wider range of functions. Ceramics were used for storage and for cooking and in some cases were moulded into highly expressive forms that clearly served important ritual functions associated with the spiritual lives of these communities.

The most striking feature of these early ceramics is their decoration. The earliest pots recovered from archaeological sites dated to around 200 AD are decorated in a variety of forms of which the most common consists of bands, triangles and incised lines. This style of decoration changed through time and archaeologists have identified a number of distinctive styles which are built on their precedents and in turn form the basis for later developments.

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*Opposite sculptured ceramic head. Photo by kind permission of the South African Museum, Cape Town, who hold the copyright.*

The point that I would like to stress here is that, in any one time period, these styles of decoration are noticeably conservative. Pots on sites in the western Transkei dated to around 6-700 AD are very similar in their form and decoration to pots of the same age found on living sites in the eastern Transvaal. It is very easy to write this off to 'tradition' or to 'tribalism', but answers such as these do not really provide an explanation.

Southern Africa in 200 AD looked very different to today. Many areas had dense bush and vegetation and early farming communities lived in small clearings where they grew crops such as sorghum and millet. Communication across large areas must have been difficult or virtually impossible. As a result it would be expected that regional styles of pottery decoration would have developed, marking the mutual separation of villages from one another. The fact that the pottery is so similar is an observation in need of a more sophisticated explanation.

Most archaeologists working on the material between about 200 AD and 1000 AD (commonly termed the early Iron Age) are generally agreed that this conformity to a specific range of decorative styles represents some form of communication, albeit not necessarily verbalised. One possibility is that, by decorating ceramics in this way, farming communities were reaffirming their connections with one another. Life in the early Iron Age must often have been difficult. Crops must often have been lost through drought, and people would have had a real need to call upon mutual obligations with villages living some distance away. In the Kalahari today hunting and gathering communities, who face similar vicissitudes in their environment, have an elaborate system of social networks which allow one person to call upon the resources of another many hundreds of kilometres away, often at intervals of several years. These mutual sets of obligations are marked out by the exchange of gifts, making real a vital, but sometimes tenuous, social network. It seems quite possible that Early Iron Age farmers who lived a similarly tenuous existence also had the necessity of maintaining reciprocal friendships with other farmers some distance away. If this is the case, it would explain both the tenacity of certain forms of decoration and also the extent of this system of communication. Pottery, and in particular its decoration, would have formed a vital medium for holding society together.

These observations must probably always remain speculative. We have no documentary evidence or ethnographic sources that will allow us to enter the minds of these first South African farming





## Pots and People

communities. It is quite clear that archaeology has only revealed the shadow of a complex and sophisticated social system. But a further fascinating glimpse into these early years is provided by the unique set of sculptured ceramic heads that were discovered some years ago at the site of Lydenburg in the eastern Transvaal. These life size figures incorporate many of the common forms of ceramic decoration found around 700 AD (the radiocarbon date for the Lydenburg finds), but have been used to ornament heads that obviously had a rich and potent meaning for their owners and users. Although we cannot know in any detail the nature of these societies, it is quite clear we are dealing with a complex and sophisticated set of social institutions.

In 1652 the Dutch East India Company established a small settlement in Table Bay to provide vegetables and meat for the Dutch fleet passing through from Europe to the Dutch East India Company's Indonesian colonies. This development, which of course had major implications for the whole history of southern Africa, also introduced a new social context in which ceramics were to play a part.

Dutch society at the Cape, as in other parts of the world, was highly hierarchical in its organisation. Regulations specified what members of the colonial population could wear according to their station in life. People's position was represented and known not only by the clothes that they wore but also by where they lived, where their houses were built and by the objects that were displayed within them. Throughout the eighteenth century, large consignments of Chinese porcelain were imported through Table Bay. Archaeological work shows that even the most lowly Dutch East India Company soldier or clerk had in his possession quantities of Chinese porcelain.

Obviously some of these wares were used for eating and drinking. But as equally clear that porcelains were also used to affirm the status of their owners. Probate records (the lists of household contents which were made on the death of a member of the colonial society) show that porcelains were often kept in a front room of the house and were used solely for display; cheaper wares or else more durable pewter vessels were consigned to the kitchen areas for everyday use. Thus members of the colonial society indicated their status and jockeyed for position in the hierarchical world of the Cape by the conspicuous display of fine and expensive ceramics.

Again this was not a trivial pastime. In the colonial Cape status was everything, giving access to positions of power and importance that could

guarantee wealth and connections in a mercantile world where business was often carried out on a face-to-face basis. Although the meaning attached to ceramics was very different, porcelains in the everyday world of early colonial society were as important as decorated earthenwares in the everyday world of pre-colonial communities.

In 1795 the British captured the Cape from the Dutch East India Company after a brief and relatively undistinguished military skirmish. The British stayed until 1803, relinquished the Cape briefly, and in 1806 returned with the aim of incorporating the territory thoroughly within the commercial networks of the British Empire. Now, ceramics had a different meaning again. Archaeological research suggests that the British systematically threw away all the possessions and goods associated with the Dutch. They probably saw these household objects as dangerously revolutionary. The closing years of the eighteenth century and first decade of the nineteenth century were the height of the Napoleonic wars: a period when Britain was fighting for survival against France. Anything associated with the French was seen as dangerous to the established social order. The British substituted for the earlier Chinese porcelains ceramics produced from the highly successful English potteries centred in the Staffordshire region. These plain pearl and cream wares, crudely hand decorated wares and more sophisticated transfer-print wares occur in large quantities at archaeological sites dated to these early years of British occupation.

The British were, of course, as status conscious as their Dutch predecessors, and were as concerned to mark out their position in society with the use of material culture. But with British rule at the Cape a subtle but important transition had taken place in the role of ceramics. The Staffordshire potteries were highly commercially oriented and the new colonies, particularly North America but also southern Africa, gave potters vast new markets for export. Styles were deliberately changed in order to generate a consciousness of fashion. Thus whereas Chinese porcelains served a social role at the Cape through much of the eighteenth century, during British rule we find a rapid turnover in forms and style of decoration. Instead of the consumers calling the tune (which seems largely to have been the case during the Dutch period) producers now set the fashion. Ceramics had become a commodity, a product of the British Industrial Revolution.

It should be clear from this brief survey of the results of archaeological research that ceramics have had a deep meaning in the past that was understood and shared by many members of

society. Such meaning has clearly not always been the same, but the study and interpretation of archaeological and historic ceramic collections provide an exciting way to enter the mind of earlier southern African societies.

Prof. — Martin Hall is director of the centre of African studies and Associate Professor in the archaeological department. He is author of the book *THE PEOPLE OF SOUTHERN AFRICA* published by David Phillip, Cape Town 1987.

## The making of clay pots

This account is an extract from "Specimens of Bushman Folklore" by Dr W. Bleek and Lucy Lloyd, recorded in 1878, as dictated by Hankasso a Bushman.

The women dig, removing the earth which lies above, lifting it away; and they only dig out the earth<sup>1</sup> which is inside there. And they scoop it out; they put it into the bag. And they sling it (the earth) over their (left) shoulder, they take it home.

And, as they return, they go along plucking grass, they only pluck the male grass; they bind it together. And they take it to the hut.

And they pound the pot (clay),<sup>2</sup> pound (it), making it soft.<sup>3</sup> And they pound the grass, they also pound, making the grass soft. And they put the grass into the earth; and they make the earth wet. And they make the earth wet, and they make the earth very nice indeed, and they mould<sup>4</sup> the earth. And, when they have made the lower part of the pot, they, holding, break off the clay, they rub the clay between their hands. They put the clay down (in a circle). And they smooth<sup>5</sup> the clay very nicely indeed; they moulding, raise (the sides of) the pot. And they smooth it, smooth it, smooth it, make it very nice indeed, they set it down to dry (in the sun).<sup>6</sup> And they make a little pot which is small, beautiful beyond comparison. They anoint the pot with fat, while they wish the pot not to split. Therefore, they anoint the pot with fat, while the pot is still damp, when the pot has just newly dried, the pot's inner part (the inner layers, not the inside) being still damp; because they wish the pot to dry when it has fat upon it (inside and out). And they set the pot (in the sun) to dry; they make a little pot; they make it very nicely indeed. They set the little pot to dry (in the sun) by the side of the large pot; and they take the other part of the clay; they make it also wet. They mould it; they mould it very nicely indeed; they set it down. They also make another little pot, a little pot which is larger (*lit.* "grown"). And they set it to

dry (in the sun). When the pot dries, they also prepare gum;<sup>7</sup> they pound it (between stones); they pound it, they pound, making it fine. They take it up in their hand (and) put it into the pot; and they pour in water (into the new pot). It (the gum) boils, while they feel that gum is that which adheres,<sup>8</sup> it resembles *kwaië*.

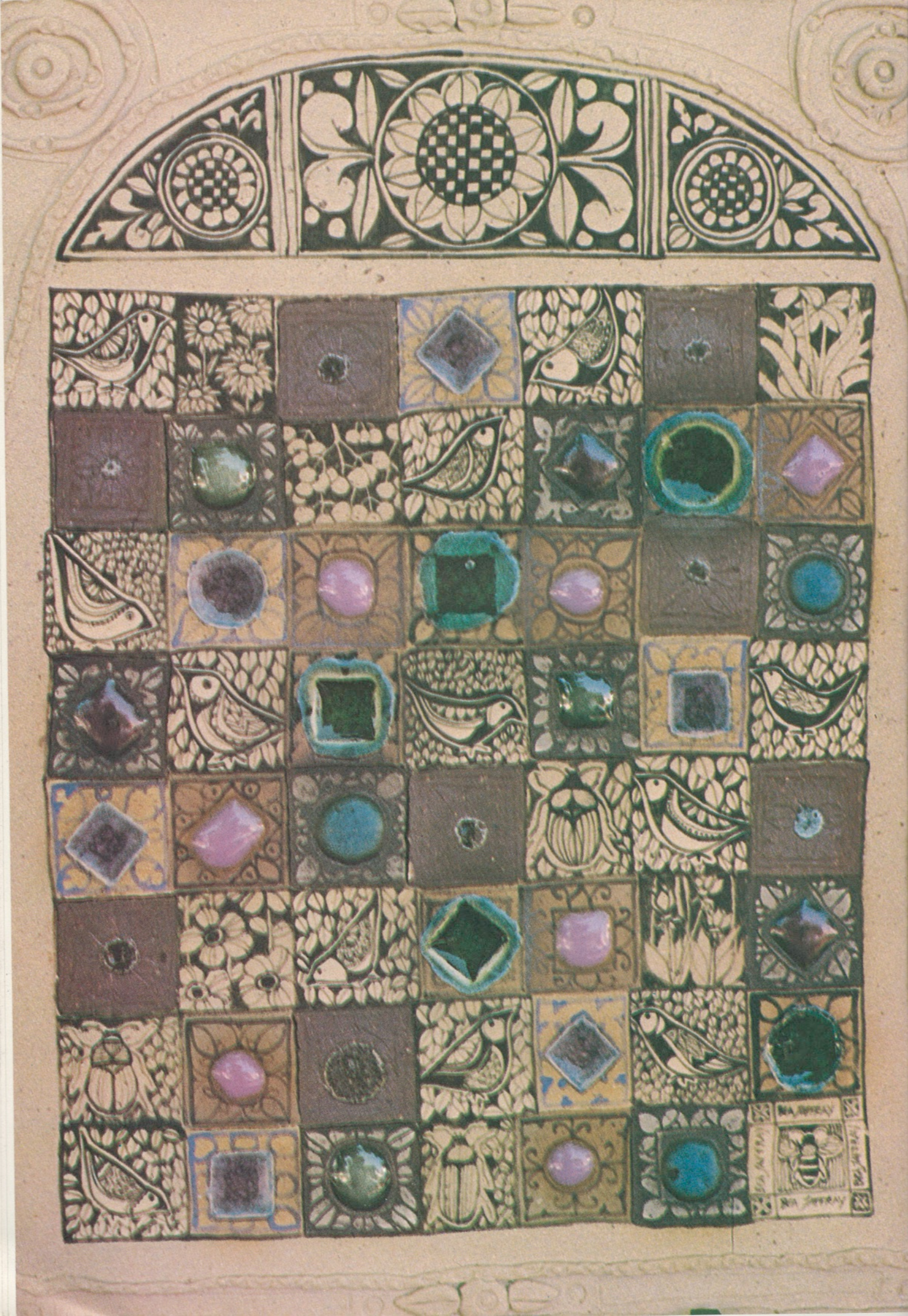
And, if springbok are at hand, a man kills a springbok, they pour the springbok's blood into (its) stomach, and the man brings back the blood; he takes the blood home.

And the wife goes to pour the blood into the new pot. And she boils the blood; and, when the blood is cooked, she takes the pot off the fire, she takes the blood out of the pot (with a springbok horn spoon), and she sets the pot down; because she wishes the blood (*i.e.*, the blood remaining in the pot) to dry.

And she<sup>9</sup> again takes the pot, and she pours water into (it), she boils meat.

And, also, they do not strike with a stone,<sup>10</sup> when a new pot is on the fire, because they wish it not to split.

- 1 The earth resembles stones which contain things which seem to glitter. Hence, the earth of which the people make a pot contains things which are like them (*i.e.*, like the said glittering particles). The earth is red. The earth to which the people go, to dig it out, is red. They call it "a pot's hole", because they dig, making a stick's hole, there. Therefore, they call it "pot's hole."
- 2 The earth of which they make the pot. It is earth; it is dry; the people pound it (when) it is dry. And they sift it, sift out the earth which is soft. And they pour down the earth which is hard (to be pounded again at another time). With regard to the soft earth, they pour it out upon a skin (a whole skin, which has no holes in it, a springbok skin).
- 3 Pound, making it like sand. (They) put it upon a skin.
- 4 They work it; they work, making a pot of it.
- 5 This is done with a piece of bone called *kaù* or *àu*.
- 6 (They) wish that it may become dry.
- 7 The berries (*lit.* "the eyes") of the "Doorn Boom" are black (*i.e.* "black gum"). The people call them the dung of the "Doorn Boom", because they come out of the stem of the *khòù* tree. A white gum, called *gùì*, seems also to be found on this tree.
- 8 They smear the pot outside (with gum taken out with the spoon, made from springbok horn, with which they stir the gum which is boiling inside), while they wish this gum to adhere to the outside of the pot.
- 9 A man works at springbok's arrows, making them straight. A woman moulds pots. *han kass'ò* further stated that his wife, *Ssuóbba-kèn*, had been taught to make pots by *Kkòë-án* (an elder sister of her mother, *kuábba-áù*), and also by *xà-án* (another elder female relative on the maternal side).
- 10 To break bones (with a stone). The Bushmen do this because they do not possess an axe. They place a bone upon a stone which stands upon the ground, while they hold a stone which has a sharp edge, they strike it; strike, dividing the bone; because they intend to boil it, that they many gnaw it.



# Plaques, platters and plates

A group exhibition of ceramics with the title 'Plaques, Platters and Plates' was held recently in the Dorp Street Gallery, Stellenbosch.

This exhibition offered a broad spectrum of ceramics on a specific theme, ranging from funky plates and decorative wall plaques to functional platters.

The title of the exhibition made clear the boundaries within which each ceramist had to work — from the robust stoneware platters of potter Steve Shapiro to the delicate porcelain of Katherine Glenday; from award winner Bea Jaffray's exciting new colourful wall hangings to the stark modern simplicity of Susan Kruger's glass mounted tiles; from giant wall panels by Bruce Walford to tiny lustre ware plates by Christine Smith. The exhibition had something that appealed to everyone interested in the stimulating world of clay.

The participating artists, some from as far afield as the Free State, Pretoria and Johannesburg, range from well known, established potters to relatively unknown names. The participating ceramists were Verene Baraga, Nelius Britz, Elizabeth Buhr, René de Villiers, Jerice Doeg, Lorette Espi, Katherine Glenday, Tienie Grobbelaar, Lesley-Ann Hoets, Joan Jackson, Bea Jaffray, Margot Johnson, Ralph Johnson, Susan Kruger, Nicole Palmer, Barbara Robinson, Steve Shapiro, Christine Smith, Johan Smith, Sandra Uttridge, Bruce Walford, John Wilhelm and Cilla Williams. This exciting and successful exhibition was opened by Mr Theunis Walters.

Shown here are a few of the entries. Johan Smith's ethnic tiles (front cover) and platters whose designs are derived from the rural Free State were extremely popular. Bea Jaffray showed wall tiles which combined delicacy and fineness of detail with their bejewelled surfaces highlighted by clay inlaid in clay. The rich depth and amazing colours of Nelius Britz's tiles were complimented by Christine Smith's lustre ware.

Ralph Johnson exhibited clay collage porcelain platters which are an exciting new development as is his low fired textured platter shown here.

Christine Smith



Left, Bea Jaffray

Nelius Britz

Ralph Johnson



## To show or not to show — Art market or flea market?

This article is a sequel to a commentary on the 1988 Cape Regional Corobrik exhibition in which the view was expressed that the exhibition was essentially sound, but lacked inspiration, vitality and freshness — it was not necessarily a true reflection of the state of the ceramic arts in the Western Cape region. In that article, I opted to examine some of the factors that mitigate against significantly more potent exhibitions and to attempt some opinions on how these might be redressed.

My vantage point is from outside the parameters of the practising potter but from within the field of aesthetic education. My intrinsic interest, therefore, is vested in the development of the craftsman, his art and public perception. It is solely to this end that I have reflected on responses to the regional ceramic exhibitions that I have viewed in an attempt to tease out what it is that prevents them from being singularly impressive or inspirational events.

In his introduction to the catalogue of the 1988 Cape Town Triennial, the Chairman, Raymund van Niekerk, states the following: “. . . Of prime importance is the fact that the (Cape Town Triennial) exhibition's scope and character is determined by what is submitted: It cannot reflect all the best that happens in the art community if some artists do not submit work and, perhaps more important, if others do not submit of their best.” (1).

What is articulated in this statement is clearly what I detect in our own ceramic exhibitions and it is useful, therefore, to consider some pertinent questions that arise out of the dilemma;

1. Why do some ceramists not submit work?
2. Why do some not submit of their best?
3. Is it possible to impose standards without discouraging participation?
4. How can patronage and sponsorship be secured and fostered?
5. Can exhibitions positively influence the ceramic scene and the perceptions of the public?

It is necessary to clarify that in addressing each of the above in turn, I have pertinently focussed on stumbling blocks and have intentionally refrained from re-stating what is clearly positive, commendable and worthwhile about the status quo.

### WHY DO SOME CERAMISTS NOT SUBMIT WORK?

Let us deal with the serious, established and esteemed ceramists first. To them, the incentive to exhibit is their desire to be part of a show of excellence; to establish their place within the mainstream of the artform and in so doing to contribute to the creative heritage of South African ceramics. For them to exhibit merely for the sake of exposure is unnecessary and to be aligned with anything less than the best is undesirable. Another group of artists, perhaps less

secure in their place than the first, fear unreasonable public expectation and anticipation. While it is indeed true that only the best is expected of the best, they need to trust their inner eye and artistic integrity as sufficient filters to justify participation. Yet another group of ceramists are at odds with exhibition policy and cannot reconcile their participation with disparate standards, vague criteria, arbitrary categories or attempts by selectors to please everybody. At the other end of the scale are the “Sunday potters”. This is merely a means of classifying those who are in the process of mastering the skills of the craft and is not intended disrespectfully. I regard it as an important sign of their inherent healthiness and integrity if, out of self-critical awareness, such ceramists choose not to exhibit. In avoiding the “fools rush in” syndrome they spare themselves and the ceramic cause alike. Of course they need to experience public response to their work but that should be addressed in the right context.

And in addition to all this, common to all categories of artist and prevalent among many is the notion that certain categories or styles of work do not receive their due recognition from selectors and therefore there is little point in submitting them. Rather, we should take heart from Alison Britton's invitation:

“. . . Some potters are dealing first of all with formal ideas and a kind of commentary and others are dealing first of all with practicalities. For those who enjoy ambiguities there are all the things in the middle with a double presence, prose and poetry, that intrigue most.” (2)

### WHY DO SOME CERAMISTS NOT SUBMIT OF THEIR BEST?

This is a very real problem which manifests itself in several ways. Sometimes several articles are arbitrarily submitted for exhibition without any prior critical self-selection having taken place. Is this in the hope that the selectors might include best and second best or is it the outcome of genuine uncertainty? It is equally disconcerting to consider that some ceramists adopt the view that their second-best work is good enough or that it can, at least, hold its own on any exhibition. Others, again, see the exhibition primarily as a market-place and hence they submit what would prove popular above what is quality or unique. It has always been my contention that our major ceramic exhibitions should serve as creative highpoints and must in no way emulate the many craft shops and galleries that already cater for the marketplace. Allied to this is the question as to why some ceramists mistakenly equate innovation, experiment or new directions with radicalism and therefore not on. Surely sound, logical development is synonymous with evolution and not revolution?

### IS IT POSSIBLE TO IMPOSE EXHIBITION STANDARDS WITHOUT DISCOURAGING PARTICIPATION?

I am of the opinion that it is indeed possible to do

*Continued on Page 19*

# Durbanville Cultural Society Clay Festival

"The first Clay Festival ended and with two weeks of fun, learning and sharing of expertise and experience over, there are many who will return to other parts of South Africa with happy memories and increased skill, knowledge and motivation. The Durbanville Cultural Society, the Durbanville Municipality, APSA and the clay committee have shown the way to begin — the Museum will be a living thing with ongoing exhibitions, workshops, demonstrations and displays and will provide a permanent ceramic home and venue for potters to meet and learn. Durbanville is well known for its roses, so successful because of the clay in which they grow. It has supplied clay from the very beginnings of settlement in South Africa from overseas and now has provided this home for South African ceramics and ceramists." Quoted from an article by Ted Rowen in the 'Cape Potter' No. 37.

During March 1989 the second clay festival took place. Hendrik van Staden who is now Director organised a very stimulating fortnight and it drew enthusiasts from all over the country. They were afforded the opportunity to attend workshops, lectures, filmshows, raku and sawdust firings and daily demonstrations.

The concurrent exhibition displayed work from a group of 42 invited South African ceramists and its professionalism was reflected in the large public response and the exceptional record of sales. The Cultural Society funded the purchase of three pieces of excellence for their permanent exhibition and the following ceramists will be represented: Marietjie van der Merwe, André Hess and a piece from Katlehong Art Centre.

We understand that the Clay Festival is to become an annual event and may well run in conjunction with a national competition which will offer substantial prize money to the award winning pieces.

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*Below: Elizabeth Buhr, stoneware vessels. Facing page: top left, Charles Gotthard, "Indian", stoneware with manganese wash. Top right, Andre Hess, "Cape Town", raku. Bottom left, Daan Verwey, raku vessels; and bottom right, Rochelle Beresford, raku piece.*





## To show or not to show?

*Continued from Page 15*

so if a system of differentiated levels of exhibition participation were devised. Such differentiation would enable ceramists to determine the level at which they function best and to participate at that level. Some of the advantages would be that participants feel comfortable when they are evaluated with others on equal terms; the selectors would have a clear frame of reference for selecting work worthy of exhibition; it is easier for the public to evaluate work emanating from a common context and the chances of selection from within a uniform standard are greater than from among disparate standards — the recognition of quality is easier.

A system of differentiated levels of exhibition creates the structures for upward mobility as skills and insights are acquired or refined. This is a most desirable state and crucial to the upliftment of standards in the ceramic arts. To determine the various levels of participation is no easy task but they should be formulated with great circumspection so as to be neither simplistic nor exclusive. There are endless precedents in sport, the performing arts, academic grades etc. but we would have to define our own appropriate structures that would best serve our cause. I feel sure that a natural order will no doubt arise or evolve once attitudes have changed.

### HOW CAN PATRONAGE AND SPONSORSHIP BE SECURED AND FOSTERED?

It was both revealing and heartening to see which articles on exhibition were sold or reserved first. What is emerging from this is that the buying public are increasingly more discerning each year. The prevailing economic climate, an informed public, and the battle for supremacy among the works themselves sorts the wheat from the chaff. If we are to sustain public interest, resist the detractors of ceramics as an artform and enjoy the benefits of sponsorship we need to scrutinise what we stand for and what we promote. No sponsor wishes to be associated with mediocrity or complacency — their investment is constantly under review!

### CAN EXHIBITIONS POSITIVELY INFLUENCE THE CERAMIC SCENE AND THE PERCEPTIONS OF THE PUBLIC?

Yes, but only if they are good! By being exposed to only the best at any level of exhibition, both ceramists and the viewing public are compelled to hone their aesthetic sensibilities. We have all seen superb exhibitions, here or abroad, and can recall their exhilarating impact upon us. (Similarly, it is difficult to recall those that were ordinary or bland). Europe and America have a well-established tradition of museum involvement in contemporary ceramics and even the esteemed auction houses assign a high profile to quality contemporary works. Our museums are not yet convinced of the place of contemporary ceramics in their collections and shows and we have not

gone far enough in helping them to review their policy. Is it a pipe dream to envisage a superb exhibition of the finest contemporary bowls or vessels hosted by an art museum and accompanied by a parallel exhibition of historical pieces? Would it not be even richer were the old and the new displayed comparatively alongside one another to reveal influences and innovations and to include related articles of any kind that enhanced the concept and explored connections?

A most useful and educational device for any exhibition is a THEME. This could range from specifics such as slab work, clay and other media, hand-built, tea pots, bowls, wall panels, porcelain, raku etc to more abstract themes such as "Inspired by Africa", "Bare Essentials — a minimalist approach" or "Vessel?" A well-prepared catalogue that researched the theme and defined its sources in support of the exhibits would undoubtedly fund itself by its very nature as a desirable contemporary art document. We have a lesson to learn from the success of other definitive publications on South African art and artifacts.

In addition to the traditional ceramic shows that are held, consideration should be given to "process exhibitions", exhibitions that are designed to reveal a way of THINKING rather than merely the ceramic product. Such exhibitions would show preliminary and inspirational sketches and designs, widely diverse resource material and documentation, photographs and samples of the artists' explorations and interests at various stages. The emphasis should be broadly aesthetic and philosophical rather than exclusively technical if it is to have any real impact and sustained influence.

Yet another strategy for a thematic approach is to establish pre-exhibition and post exhibition forums. For the former it could be useful to explain the format of the proposed exhibition and the criteria for selection. Similarly, an introduction to the scope and potential of the theme and exposure to richly explored areas of inspirational resources, be they visual or aural, would do a great deal to extend awarenesses and open avenues. Following the exhibition, a discussion of the selected works, what had emerged from the entries, and even perhaps why work was rejected, would serve a useful and educational purpose.

The role of the ceramic exhibition is not to be taken lightly nor must its impact on the art be underrated or underplayed. It is becoming clearer to me that if anything profound is to occur in the ceramic arts, it needs to be engendered with something akin to the zeitgeist in our country. Change, renewal, re-evaluation, reform and refinement are the stuff that the future is made of. Ceramics that deny this have little future.

S. A. COHEN

(1) *Cape Town Triennial 1988. Catalogue.*

*Rembrandt Van Rijn Art Foundation. Pg. 12*

(2) *The New Ceramics: Trends and Traditions.*

*Dormer, Peter, Thames and Hudson. London. 1988. Pg. 10*



# Wendy Anne Goldblatt — Potter

The discipline and order of Wendy's studio belies the cool gardens it nestles in and the gentle warmth of her adjoining home. It is in these surroundings that students gather to learn and grow under her guidance. Wendy is one of those rare people who not only enjoys her work but also the people she works with; above all she is unselfishly putting back into ceramics her time, experience and leadership.

This is her third year as Chairperson of APSA Southern Transvaal Region and one in which all her talents and abilities will be tested to the full, as they will be hosting this year's Corobrik National Exhibition.

Wendy has been a potter for some 20 years, having originally trained under John Edwards at the Wits Tech and later obtained a Diploma in Ceramic Science at the Johannesburg Technikon under the guidance of Hans Boyum. She also was a founder member of the S.A. Craft Guild and has been a regular exhibitor of her work throughout the country.

Her career as a potter started with an order for a dozen mugs, immediately followed by an order for a dinner service for twelve! In at the deep end went Wendy and her partner, Lorna Bloom, who was to work with her for the next twelve years. Over the years Wendy has changed from earthenware to stoneware and now also uses porcelain, all the work being fired in oxidation. What she enjoys most is the decorating of pots and at the moment is introducing bright colours into her work as well as experimenting with airbrush techniques. Her main motivation is the need to work for exhibitions — lets hope she finds time this year to once again show us the progress of her work.

Michael Guassardo



*Above, Wendy in her back garden patio with one of her new brightly coloured dishes, and left, two porcelain bowls, oxidation fired.*



# KOREAN FOLK POTTERS

BY THANO & JOHNSON®

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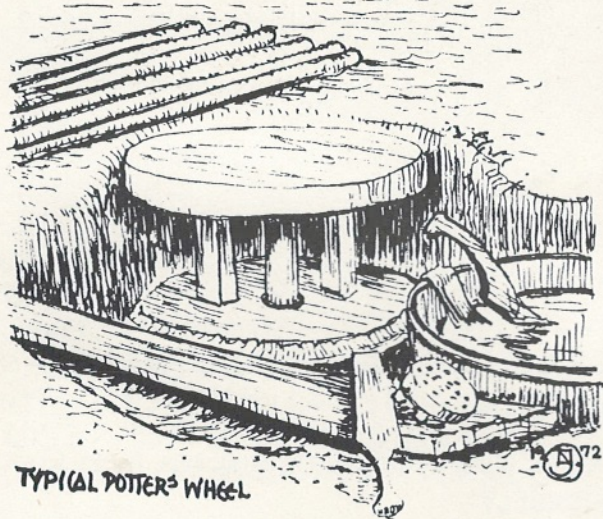
IT WAS PERSIMMON TIME WHEN WE ARRIVED IN SEOUL. THE SKY WAS CLEAR BLUE AND THE BRIGHT ATMOSPHERE MADE EVERYTHING SPARKLE. — II —

I HAD BEEN INVITED TO COMPLETE A STUDY ON KOREAN FOLK POTTERS BY MR. RALPH RINZLER, FOLKLORIST IN THE DEPARTMENT OF PERFORMING ARTS, SMITHSONIAN NAT. MUSEUM, WASHINGTON, D. C. AFTER TWO DAYS IN SEOUL, WE MET WITH MR. SOJAYANG AND OUTLINED OUR PROJECT. OUR PLAN WAS TO DOCUMENT THE KOREAN FOLK POTTER BOTH AS A WAY OF LIFE AND THE TECHNIQUES INVOLVED IN THE PRODUCTION OF THE HUMBLE HANG AREE THAT IS A VITAL PART OF DAILY LIFE IN EVERY CITY, TOWN AND VILLAGE OF KOREA. MR. SOJAYANG, OWNER/DIRECTOR OF THE EMILLE FOLK ART MUSEUM IMMEDIATELY IDENTIFIED WITH OUR PROJECT AND SENT FOR HIS FRIEND MR. KIM, CHUN BEY. BOTH HAD EXCELLENT COMMAND OF OUR LANGUAGE AS MR. SOJAYANG IS A HARVARD GRADUATE IN ARCHITECTURE, AND MR. KIM, CHUN BEY, A YALE THEOLOGIAN GRADUATE AND FORMER DIRECTOR OF THE KOREAN YMCA. MR. YUNG, OUR FEARLESS KOREAN COWBOY DRIVER MADE THE FIFTH MEMBER OF OUR COMPACT GROUP.

WE'D VISIT MARKET PLACES TO FIND THE LOCALS OF THE POTTERIES. ALTHOUGH THEY WERE NEAR CITIES AND TOWNS, WE HAD TO SEARCH FOR THEM. THESE QUIET CLUSTERS OF HOUSES WERE BUILT AROUND THE CERAMIC CRAFT. THERE, WE FOUND CRAFTSMEN WORKING WITH INCREDIBLE SKILL JUST AS THEY DID CENTURIES AGO. THE SAME TOOLS AND METHODS, INCLUDING THE POT WHEEL PROPELLED BY FOOT, IS STILL IN USE. IT SPUN ON A STAKE BURIED IN THE GROUND, SHARPENED AND GREASED TO REDUCE FRICTION.

WE ARRIVED AT THE POTTERIES UNANNOUNCED AS THERE WERE NO TELEPHONES, YET WE WERE TREATED WITH WARMTH AND HOSPITALITY. POTTERS WERE COOPERATIVE IN ANSWERING OUR QUESTIONS AND EVEN GAVE US THEIR TOOLS. WE RECORDED INFORMATION ON BOTH AUDIO AND VIDEO TAPE, TOOK NOTES, MADE SKETCHES AND PHOTOGRAPHED IN BLACK AND WHITE AND COLOR. — III —

IN THE EVENINGS, WE ALSO RECORDED ON TAPE, THE FOLK SONGS SUNG BY THE LOVELY KAESANG GIRLS. PLAYED ON TRADITIONAL INSTRUMENTS. — IV — WE TRAVELED THROUGH EIGHT PROVINCES WITH SPECIAL STUDIES NEAR THE CITIES OF ICHEON, DAEGU, ULSAN, GEONGJU, JINJU, GURYE, JEONJU, SOSE.



TYPICAL POTTER'S WHEEL



THE POTTERS FORM THEIR POTS FROM EITHER LONG COILS OR SLABS, SOMETIMES THEY COMBINE

BOTH. LARGE POTS OVER THREE FEET HIGH ARE MADE SO RAPIDLY THAT CHARCOAL BROSERS ARE SUSPENDED INSIDE AS A REFLECTOR BURNER ASSISTS IN DRYING THE OUTSIDE. THE PADDLING GIVES THE CLAY WALL STRENGTH. THEIR SKILL AND CONTROL PRODUCES WALLS OF EVEN THICKNESS. IN THE WEST, POTTERS STRETCH THE CLAY FROM A SOLID MOUND AND USE MORE WATER. HENCE, A BASE OF WOOD OR PLASTER MUST BE USED TO REMOVE THE POT FROM THE WHEEL. NOT SO WITH THE KOREAN POTTER WHO DEFILY SLIPS TWO THIN STRIPS AROUND VERY WIDE DEEP PLATES AND CARRIES IT OFF TO THE DRYING AREA. —

GLAZING IS DONE BY DIPPING, POURING OR EVEN IMMERSING LARGE DAMP-DRY POTS IN THE GLAZE VAT. THE GLAZE IS COMPOSED MAINLY OF SLIP CLAY (YAK), PINE ASH AND RED LEAD. SOME POTTERS ADD A SMALL AMOUNT OF MANGANESE TO MAKE THE COLOR DARKER. IN THE "OLD DAYS", LEAD WAS NOT USED AS A FLUX BUT POPULAR DEMAND FOR "GLOSSY" GLAZE BROUGHT THIS ABOUT. POTTERS ARE NOW LOOKING FOR NON-TOXIC LOW FIRE FLUXES AS THERE HAS BEEN GOVERNMENT CONCERN THAT PROHIBITS ITS USE. —

SINCE A YOUNG PERSON MUST SERVE A TWO TO THREE YEAR APPRENTICESHIP WITH NO PAY, THERE ARE FEW YOUNG PEOPLE WHO CAN AFFORD THIS WITH SUCH A LOW WAGE. HENCE, MOST POTTERS THAT WE VISITED WERE FORTY YEARS OLD, OR OLDER. I AM CONCERNED AS TO WHO WILL BE MAKING POTS TWENTY YEARS FROM NOW, THE SIZE ALONE MAKES IT EXTREMELY COSTLY TO MANUFACTURE AND PLASTICS DO NOT MAKE THE BEST KIM CHEE. YOU SEE THESE POTS



EVERYWHERE, IN COURTYARDS, ON FLAT ROOFTOPS, IN ALLEYS AND EVEN OUT FRONT ON THE STREETS. THEY ARE USED BY EVERY SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC LEVEL IN THE NATION. THEY DO NOT GATHER DUST IN A MUSEUM CASE BUT FUNCTION TO SERVE AND FEED THE KOREAN NATION EVERY MEAL, EVERY DAY. AS MR. RINZLER SO APPLY STATED, "KIM CHEE POTS ARE AS COMMON IN KOREA

AS THE CAMPBELL SOUP CAN IS IN AMERICA. IT IS A VALID FORM OF CONTEMPORARY ART. YET, YOU DO NOT EVEN THINK OR CONSIDER IT AS ART BECAUSE IT IS SO COMMONPLACE."



ON OUR RETURN TRIP, WE VISITED WITH HAMADA SENSEI AT HIS STUDIO AND HOME IN MASHIKO, JAPAN. WE INTERVIEWED HIM, SITTING AROUND THE IRORI AFTER A VERY BUSY DAY. HE HAS GREAT ADMIRATION FOR THE KOREAN FOLK POTTER AND THEIR AMAZING CONTROL. HE ALSO GIVES THEM MUCH CREDIT FOR THE TECHNIQUES THAT EVEN PRESENT DAY JAPANESE POTTERS USE PARTICULARLY IN KYUSHU AND OKINAWA. THEY EVEN USE THE SAME TOOLS AND USE KOREAN NAMES FOR THEM. KOYAMA SENSEI, ALSO A GREAT AUTHORITY ON ANCIENT CHINESE AND JAPANESE CERAMICS, RECOGNIZES THE CONTRIBUTIONS MADE BY KOREANS.



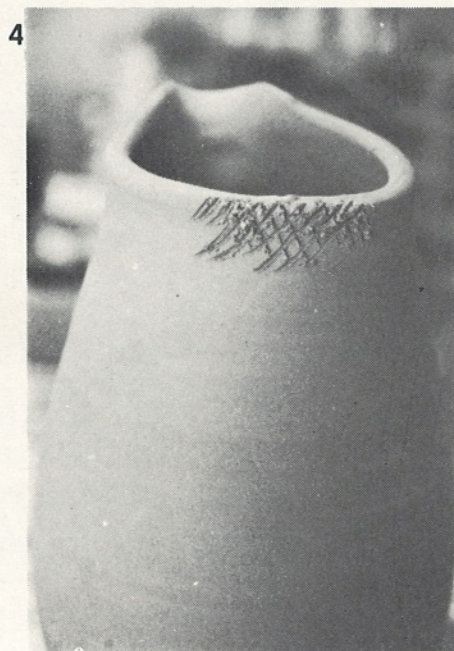
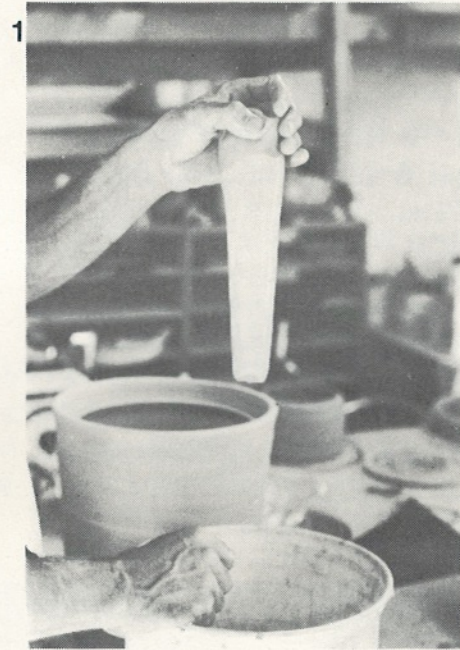
PERSIMMON TIME IS SUCH A BEAUTIFUL TIME TO BE IN KOREA. THE HARVEST IS AT FULL FORCE AND THE SOFT SUN WASHES THE MOUNTAINS WITH A WARM GLOW. THE TALL YELLOWING POPLARS SWAY IN THE BREEZE WHILE TILE ROOFS CONTRAST WITH THE SOFT BEAUTY OF OLDER THATCHED BUILDINGS. — IN LEAVING, I TAKE MUCH THAT IS KOREAN WITHIN ME. IN RETURN, I GIVE MY DEEPEST RESPECT TO THE WONDERFUL KOREAN PEOPLE, BUT IN PARTICULAR TO THE KOREAN FOLK POTTER. —

MR. JOHNSON IS A PROFESSOR OF ART AT COLLEGE OF MARIN, CERAMICS

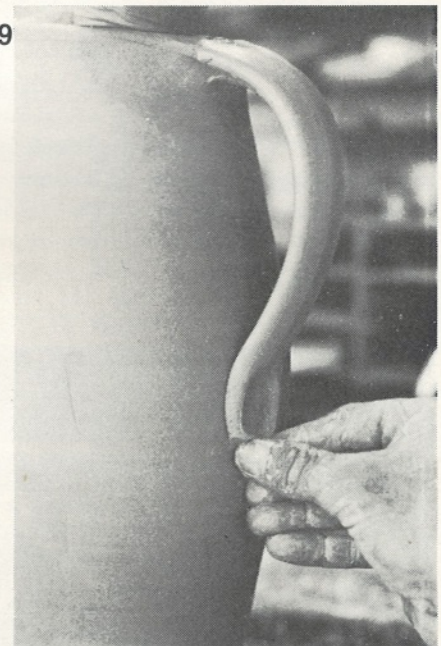
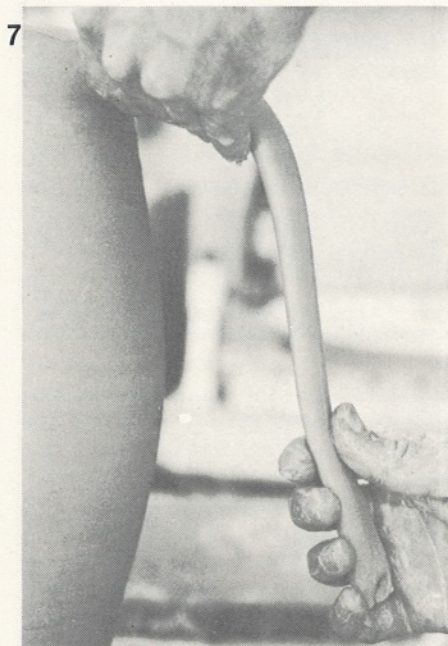
# Throwing with Bruce Walford

In issue No. 6 we made a jug. We will now pull a handle and fix it to the jug.

Wedge about four times the amount of clay needed for the handle. As you finish wedging, shape the clay into a rough cone (icecream cone). Hold the thick portion in your left hand and with the right wetted form a ring with the thumb and index finger. Put this ring at the top of the cone below your left hand and with one movement pull your right hand straight down closing the ring. Repeat this pulling down from the cone about four times and this will thin the clay and form a rough handle (Fig. 1). Cut off about 15 cm (Fig. 2). Holding the thicker end in the palm of your left hand, flatten the top for joining onto the jug (Fig. 3). The jug should already have been scored (Fig. 4). Dip the end to be joined to the jug in water or slip. Holding it in your right hand, work it onto the jug with your left thumb while the fingers of your left hand are **inside** supporting the jug wall (Fig. 5).



Now gently using the same method for pulling handles, rework the clay into the desired length of your handle (Figs. 6 and 7). Shape your handle to the length you need and cut off the excess (Fig. 8). Putting your left hand in the jug to the spot where you intend to fix the bottom of the handle, support the inside of the jug as you now spread the handle clay fixing it to the wall. Various styles can be used; here Bruce has used a 'fish tail'. Depending on your clay you may need a little slip to help the join (Figs. 9 & 10). Bruce adds a little feature decoration to finish off the top of the handle (Fig. 11). The finished jug (Fig. 12).



# Craft versus art

by Nana Wagner

My interest in craft generally, and in ceramics in particular, be they contemporary, old or ancient, goes back many years. I have read and looked extensively in this field, and am informed about oriental traditions and their influence on Western ceramics. Specialized magazines from the USA and Europe keep me up to date on what is going on elsewhere. My interest in the Fine Arts and their history is equally strong.

Polemics in overseas magazines featuring the topic craft-as-art were therefore of special interest to me, as this controversy has also given rise to heated discussions locally. The issue is discussed in opening speeches to ceramic exhibitions, both on a regional and national level. To add to the confusion, differentiations are made between potters and ceramists or ceramicists.

The Penguin dictionary of the Decorative Arts says under the heading 'Ceramics', that the term originates in the 19th century, that it covers both porcelain and all types of pottery. The same source states under 'Pottery' that all things that are made of clay and baked are pottery. The Oxford Companion to Art (the 1979 edition) on the other hand does not list 'Ceramics' at all, but covers 'Pottery'. In the substantial text that follows we read about 'ceramic art' and the 'craft of the potter'. Very confusing indeed. The general term used in the leading ceramic magazines is 'Ceramics' and 'Ceramist' or 'Potter'.

In contemporary ceramics there are two distinct sections, namely functional and non-functional work. Non-functional ceramics are by no means the invention of our time. Just think of the timeless beauty of ancient Chinese ceramic sculptures or nearer in time the delicate Meissen porcelain figurines. But let me come back to the craft-as-art issue. It is mainly the producers of non-functional ceramics that would like to see their work 'upgraded' and termed 'art' rather than 'craft', a term they would like to see reserved for functional ware. The 'functional group' on the whole does not mind being 'craftspeople'. But they feel that their work is made to look inferior because of the much higher prices being charged for non-functional work. The non-functional group in turn feels that their work is not presented to its best advantage at joint exhibitions as it considers the environment too 'domestic'. It would like to be looked upon as a completely different 'art movement'.

Unfortunately, this craft-as-art issue has not only produced heated discussions, but outright animosity on our ceramic scene between the two groups. This is a most regrettable state of affairs and I feel more tolerance should be exercised on both sides. There is room and scope for both.

I would like to quote in detail from two articles in the American Craft (December 85/January 86 and April/May 1988 respectively) which deal with the craft versus art and the craft-as-art issue. The first article deals with functional and the second one with non-functional contemporary work:

Jane Addam Allen writes on the human qualities of functional craft, as opposed to contemporary Fine Art:

"The distinctive and essential aspects of functional craft are their intimacy and accessibility, their reinforcement of the human body, and their material ties to our distant past. Despite their universalities and evolution of human culture the crafts have not fared well in intellectual discourse. Since Aristotle Western philosophers have traditionally divided human works into those dictated by the free play of mind and imagination and those dictated by man's urge to master his environment for the fulfillment of practical needs. The first have been called the Liberal Arts and the second the Mechanical Arts.

There are strong cultural reasons why the distinctive and essential aspects of functional craft are downgraded. The economic value assigned by our culture to art objects tend to rise, in inverse proportions to accessibility: the more valuable the object in a museum, the more insulated it is from the public by ropes or glass. By association, distancing acquires a value in itself for itself.

Contemporary art criticism lacks a conceptual base and a vocabulary for tactile appreciation. The worldwide resistance to and rapid boredom with futurist designs and cheap plastics for objects of daily use is perhaps some measure of their value to us in establishing our human identity.

The crafted functional object demands to be handled as part of its completion. A pot, a chair, a costume are designed for touch. When they are sensitively formed and well crafted, they call on bodily movements and sensations that are as old as mankind. By revaluating our historical ties to the material and biological world, they reinforce our sense of human identity as no other works of art can presently do.

For this reason it is tragic that so many of the most talented workers in clay, wood, textiles have decided that making functional objects is a lower calling, one unworthy of the creative imagination. In essence that is what is meant by the commonly used phrase 'beyond craft'. They make unusable vessels that represent 'ideas about making vessels, unsittable chairs that challenge the mind . . . all this is to reinforce the striking rejection of the physical, which is characteristic of today's debased visual arts. What these artists are doing is heeding the call of the philosophical idealists and voluntarily giving up profoundly valuable heritage at a time when it is most needed."

*Continued on Page 31.*

## Craft Versus Art

*Continued from Page 29.*

Ms Adam Allen suggests that "craftspeople take leadership roles in articulating through their work and writing their commitment to the creation of functional objects that can speak to the body and through the body to the mind in intimate and accessible language. Workers in the crafts (she says) should attack alienation through the revaluation of the sense of touch, the reintegration of the eye's delight with the needs of the body, and the effort to understand the continuity and integrity of human culture. If they can achieve these goals, Ms Addam Allen continues, then they are ideally situated to spearhead the rejection of an impersonal and intellectualized future."

John Bentley May, art critic for *The Globe and Mail* in Toronto, discussed here why contemporary crafts are so little dealt with by art critics. His emphasis is on non-functional ceramics:

"In this informal ramble through the mind-field of the art-craft controversy, I am going to explain why I don't regularly cover crafts. And later on, I will suggest reasons why artisans should do their work, ignore the art world and forget about craft-as-art. Indeed, everything I have to say here is addressed to the potter who is tired of his wheel and the weaver weary of his loom. I have nothing to say to or about the contented, devoted craftsman — who will, in turn, be interested in nothing I have to say.

It is worth remembering that Modern art criticism, as we journalists practise it, began in popular reports on the news of the Modernists — who was who and what was what at the salons and 'salons des refusés' in Paris during the mid-19th century. Whatever else we do, art critics will probably always be reporters on the complex, rambunctious tribe of Modernist artistry and sensibility, as it has descended and proliferated from the time of the great French Moderns down to the present. It's a big and wonderful job. But it does mean that art critics will never be paying as much attention to crafts as craftspeople (and even some artists) think they should.

This is so not because craft or craft-as-art (as I have experienced it) are inferior to art, but because they are not art. Ceramic and fiber artists, like novelists and composers and physicists, belong to other tribes of creative discourse with peculiar languages, technical strategies, codes and histories. These may be engaging to the critical imagination, but, at present anyway, it is all most art critics can do to keep up with the developments in visual arts without trying to take on and do justice to so large an area of human creativity as crafts . . . But beyond my clear mandate as a critic, there is another more compelling reason for writing about

art and not about craft. It is not the antic newness of contemporary art, but its deeply humane, critical spirit.

Modern art yields up its complex, ironic truth about the world, not in being handled and known intimately (as in craft), but in being contemplated by the educated eye.

To my knowledge craft-as-art has never undergone critical pitched battles comparable to the ones painting and sculpture have endured during the last 100 years. There appears to be no force in the craft-as-art movement comparable to the urgency which again and again, has pulled Modern art back from complicity with aristocratic privilege, self-satisfied Biedermeier comfortableness, and the suffocating pieties of ruralism — the three principle enemies of art, and of human liberty, in the liberal democratic countries of the West.

The artisans who take the dictates of art critics seriously are bound to suffer, simply because the worst art in the world is made by those trying to please our second-guess art critics.

Whatever the outcome on that score, the lust for recognition has already had the effect of luring talented young artisans away from their wheels and looms and condemning them to obscurity as producers of arty sculptures destined for the trash heap of history. Also the quest for certification has undammed a sea of imitative 'clay art' — a flow that continues unchecked by a craft press too cozy with the people it should be criticizing, and far too enchanted by the goal of validation itself, to say much about emperors and new clothes . . .

Clearly the craft press has its work cut out for it. Because I have my work cut out for me, I will not be involved in the rethinking of craft priorities that is so urgently needed. But I do hope that one outcome of this rethinking is fresh appreciation for the work of the potter and weaver and jeweller, who must be exempted from everything negative I have said about the practitioners of craft-as-art. The quality of mercy in great pottery and weaving is much needed in a visual culture which, under the steady bombardment of television and advertising, has become hugely wordy, demanding and obsessive, and saturated with insatiable desires. The artisan's commitment to the physical stuff of his craft is his only hope for salvation from the brushfires of fashion and the art world's endless poodle parade. It remains an exemplary commitment, with the power to inspire all creative people with its high seriousness, and its intelligent detachment from the astonishments and empty pageantry of contemporary mass culture."

Not everything that Jane Addam Allen and John Bentley May say would apply to our South African ceramic scene. Both authors state clearly

## Craft Versus Art

that craft is not inferior to art, that craft and the visual or Fine Arts are two different things altogether, the former appealing mainly to sensory and tactile emotions and aesthetic feelings, but also evoking deeper spiritual and critical communication. Craft is mainly concerned with good design and my feeling is that South African manufacturers should call on our top craftspeople to design for them. If a non-functional piece can stand up to the same criterion as applied in Fine

Art, i.e. painting or sculpture, no-one will be concerned about the fact that it is made out of clay. And if a beautifully conceived and crafted pot excites our emotions — who is to stop you or me from calling it a work of art?

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(1) "Craft versus Art", *American Craft*, Dec. '85/Jan. '86 p. 36.

(2) "Crafts-as-Art", *American Craft*, Apr./May '88 p. 38.

Nana Wagner studied languages and history of art, and was the president of the Arts Association of S.W.A./Namibia for five years prior to moving to Stellenbosch. She has always supported the arts and is both a collector and dealer.

## And then there was Liza

A short extract taken from East Cape's newsletter by Ad van Nimwegen on a Raku day in Knysna.

And then there was Liza. A remarkable lady approaching 80. Moving her own attractive handbuilt pots in and out of the kiln and not always using the tongs but using asbestos gloves. She has attended many workshops and seminars on ceramics in the United States where she stays during our winter and on her way back there intends to stay over in Greece where she will attend a Raku week. How is that for growing old.

Some recipes from Liza's notebook:

### RAKU COPPER

6 Barium Carbonate  
64 Gerstley Borate  
12 Feldspar  
6 Ball Clay  
12 Flint  
12 Copper Carbonate

### RAKU LUSTRE

80 Gerstley Borate  
20 Cornish Stone  
2 Copper Carbonate

You can substitute Gerstley Borate with 25 % more Frit 510.

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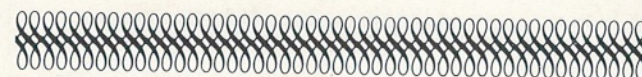
## Letters

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members to work for this exhibition we have also decided to offer a prize of R100 for the best candlestick.

As far as "National Ceramics" goes — well I'm afraid we can only offer pats on the back at this stage. We look forward very much to each edition of these magazines which is certainly a highlight of belonging to the Potters Association. Thanks to yourself and Rosemary Lapping for all the effort and time you are putting in to make this publication so professional — and enjoyable!

Nancy Eagar



## Pilot Lab Kiln

Harrop industries now offers a gas-fired periodic kiln capable of simulating complex time/temperature profiles from large scale continuous kilns. The system includes combustion atmosphere control, which is known to influence the maturation of ceramic materials. Special emphasis has been placed on design to simulate the fast-fire roller hearth conditions now entering the ceramic processing scene. Usable setting volume is 0,04m<sup>3</sup> with total cycle time less than one hour.

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