



South African potter *Digby Hoets* shares the techniques he uses for making a group of four large matching pots

For the last 40 years of my 50 years as a potter, my focus has been on making large pots and more specifically, groups of large pots that relate to each other. I think of these groups, like the four black pots I focus on here, as single works. Although each kiln may contain a variety of pieces, each individual pot builds on a group of related pots.

My working life is attuned to firing a kiln containing 10-12 large pots every four to five weeks. As a result, it has a natural rhythm and a cyclical flow – not unlike throwing on a wheel. Repetition is a fundamental part of my process and it was through Harrow-trained British potter, Toff Milway, who spent a year with me in 1976-77, that I realised you only develop your skills and sensitivity as a potter by making the same object over and over again.

I am often asked how long it takes to make one of my big pots. My answer: '50 years and one week!' Each pot is a learning experience from which I continually receive feedback on what works in terms of form and harmony. I am very sensitive to the shape and balance of my pots.

I do not make big pots simply to make even bigger pots. Ageing is a great leveller and the four black pots that are the focus of this article are bordering on my physical limits – and the limits of my clay. They form part of a commission by renowned US architect and designer Peter Marino for his famous garden in The Hamptons, New York, USA.

I work in a large, airy, thatched studio on our two-hectare property situated between Johannesburg and Pretoria. The house where my wife Penny and I live is a few moments' walk from the studio, which is situated close to a small dam that is a haven for birds and quiet contemplation. Large acacia thorn and other indigenous trees are interspersed between areas of natural grass and wetland. Our home remains a green oasis in an area increasingly dominated by shopping centres, office blocks and new developments.

MAKING PROCESS

I make the biggest pot in the first week so that I don't need to move it off my wheel until it is complete. I start by throwing the base section and then each day, when the pot is leatherhard, I add a coil and throw the next section.

One of my favourite tools and the one I use to shape the inside of my pots as I throw, is a mezzaluna or curved chopping blade that is missing one handle. I also use a nailbrush on the outside when I am pulling up the coil, plus various plastic forms that I usually cut myself.

These black pots comprise six sections including the rim and take six days to complete. The Johannesburg climate clearly helps in the drying process. The texture is applied when the pot is at the right hardness, using a roller that I made from bisque-fired porcelain.

We buy our clay in powder form from Ndebele Mining and I mainly use stoneware clay. The company makes it according to a recipe we have developed together. We mix the clay in a pug mix. I am deeply envious of the wonderful



ABOVE, FROM TOP: applying texture with a roller made from bisque-fired porcelain clay; finishing the pot

clays available to potters overseas but have learned to work within the constraints of the clays we have available.

I generally spend four weeks making the pots and in the fifth week I raw glaze each one with the help of Watson Nyambeni, who has worked with me for nearly 40 years. In terms of glazes, we make our own from various materials and oxides we buy from suppliers. Many of my glazes include a proportion of wood-ash, which I source from friends with farms in the bushveld. The black pots are glazed in matte black, which I make from a recycled slip and cobalt and iron oxides.

With Watson's help, we manoeuvre each pot into the kiln, using a hoist for moving the biggest pots. The loaded trolley is then rolled into the kiln, and the night before the firing, I preheat it to around 120°C with gas pokers.

RECORD KEEPING

Each kiln firing has one or two very large pots – in this case one of these black pots. My 120 cubic metre oil-fired trolley kiln was built in 1977 with Toff Milway. It did 211 firings before it was dismantled and moved to our current home, where it has done a further 226 firings to date. I keep meticulous records of each kiln load including the



ABOVE: the pot in position in the kiln

width and height of each pot and the amount of clay in each section. The space in the kiln is finite and I need to make pots that will fit – and they do, often with millimetres to spare.


These records allow me to repeat pots that I have made previously or, in this case, to make a group of four that match. Clearly, despite this, no item made by a person can be identical and it is these subtle, unintended variations within the appearance of uniformity that give the individual pots their warmth, identity and ‘humanness’. I have kept a printed photographic record of each kiln load since my 221st firing in 1995.

FIRING EFFICIENCIES

Since we live in an urban area, I use a burner fuel, which produces little smoke or smell. Potters dealing with the ever-increasing cost of fuel will be interested to learn that I have managed to reduce the length of firings from 20 hours to nine and the amount of fuel from 500 to around 320 litres. I fire to cone 13 with approximately two hours of reduction between 750°C and 1100°C. With the shorter timings, I am able to obtain a more even firing, no localised oxidation and am finding celadon and tenmoku glazes are richer than they were in longer firings.

Opening a kiln remains an exciting event – even after 50 years. It is also my opportunity to learn what to build on in the future. There is always something that has not turned out as expected – good or bad. The black pots have, however, turned out as I intended and they will soon be on their way to their new home in America.

In an article entitled, ‘On a Grand Scale’, in *Ceramic Review*, Issue 194, March/April 2002, Wilma Cruise wrote: ‘I would be inclined to describe Hoets’ pots as ‘African’ were it not for the fact that this term is usually confused by expectations of ethnicity, pattern and bright colour. Yet, his pots are ‘African’ in a quite literal sense. They are made from African clays and glazed with the ash from indigenous hardwood trees. They take on the colours of the veld; the grey-greens of the hardwood trees, the ochres, browns and washed-out textures of winter on the highveld. They express a love for the landscape that seamlessly and inchoately melds from the vision of the craftsman to a physical manifestation in the forms of the pots.’

I was intrigued by Wilma’s response to my work and her meticulous observations. I am a seventh generation South African: my Dutch roots date back to Jan Hoets who arrived in the Cape in 1774, and my English ones to John Centlivres Chase who was in the first party of the 1820 settlers. Both played significant roles in shaping the history of South Africa. My interest in my family heritage is strong. Living in South Africa clearly shapes the way I work, as do the glazes and textures that I apply to my pots – as did interacting with other South African potters such as Esias Bosch, Hyme Rabinowitz, Andrew Walford and Tim Morris. Yet, I do not consider my pots to be particularly African – I believe I could have made them anywhere. 

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