

Hoets applying slip

Digby Hoets, Potter

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Photographs by Digby Hoets

At 34, Digby Hoets is among the top three potters working in South Africa; his success has been consistent and prolific since his precocious victory in the 1971 National Exhibition and his work is collected in the major centres of this country and in some abroad. He has had numerous one-man exhibitions in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Pretoria, and Durban and has had work exhibited in West Germany. Critical response has been consistently full of praise.

Hoets did not start on his career intentionally. His ambition, after matriculating from King Edward VII School in Johannesburg, was to become a game ranger. He found, however, that the necessary academic work was too far removed from the practical priorities of his life and he began to put more time into working in his mother Dilys's pottery studio and less time into the requirements for the B Sc degree. In 1971, while a student at the University of the Witwatersrand, he submitted a chess set to the national exhibition mounted by Brickor and won first prize for thrown ware. This gave the young potter the confidence to start looking around for career op-

portunities in this over-populated and under-paying field. Synchronicity asserted itself and, while Hoets was casting around for a studio, the pottery teacher, John Edwards, was deciding to sell his teaching establishment and studio in Fairwood, Johannesburg. The Brickor victory convinced John that Hoets was a fitting successor to his business and in October 1972 Digby and his wife Penny moved into the house attached to the studio and Digby and his sister, Lesley-Ann, began their teaching and serious commitment as professional potters.

Hoets was then working on fairly conventional lines and scales, making platters, bread bins, and casseroles, trying to master the many technical skills which these involve. Decoration tended to be somewhat eclectically derived from organic forms and was painted on with latex resist. However, with daily contact with the medium, the style was soon to develop to the beginnings of the robust and simple form and decoration which are characteristic of his more mature work. In *Breadbins* (Fig 1) of 1975, the emergence of a strong but elegant classicism is evident.

During the years following the move to the Fairwood studio, the work developed in scale, (with pieces very large for the time) and austerity of decoration. After using resists and sprays, then a cumbersome method of paper cut-out resist templates, Hoets developed his own method of using clay slabs as a stop-out during the glazing (Fig 2). Work which then appeared on exhibitions run by the Potters' Association began to draw attention so that by 1977 Hoets was considered by connoisseurs to be *the* potter to look out for and collect. He had not yet had a one-man show. The Ann Zinn Gallery in Cape Town mounted the first show of collected work in April 1977. Paul Buchanan, in *The Cape Times*, remarked on the size of some of the work (these would be considered rather small by today's standards) and on their simplicity and 'harmonious beauty'. On this show the major developments in his work, diverse as they were, could be seen, including the first of his reduction-fired stoneware. Among the run of the mill pieces were some of the forms which were to become unmistakably part of his *oeuvre*.

During 1975-6 Hoets was sharing an oil-fired kiln with the potters Neville Burde and Wendy Baumgarten. The work was fired to biscuit in one of the electric kilns in Fairwood, transported to the oil kiln which was on a

smallholding near Halfway House, then glazed with oxides and brushwork. The change of firing techniques introduced a more painterly and traditional decoration. Hoets says that he felt that the reduction process demanded a less constrained type of decoration and started experimenting along more customary lines, painting designs on to the bisque ware with oxides. He feels that the somewhat 'Japanese' quality of these pots was the result of a deference to the decorating techniques traditionally associated with reduction firing. He did not feel comfortable with the brush and reverted to his effective resist technique. Adapting this technique to suit his decoration, he found that the formal hard-edged design elements became more integrated with the surface of the bowl or platter, achieving a subtle depth, richness, and softness impossible in the electric kilns.

At this important transitional stage the potter was mastering porcelain techniques and experimenting with glazes suitable to this fine medium. But the technique and effects were not suited to his robust handling, and the effects were so anonymous (he says of porcelain that it resists the individualizing stamp of the potter who uses it, so that all good porcelain work looks the same) that after the batch shown in Cape Town he returned to reduction-fired stoneware.



Fig 1 Bread-bins. Height: 38 cm glaze: tenmoku date: 1975



Fig 4 Dish. Diameter: 78 cm decoration: clay resist with sprayed glaze glaze: tenmoku with blue celadon date: 1978

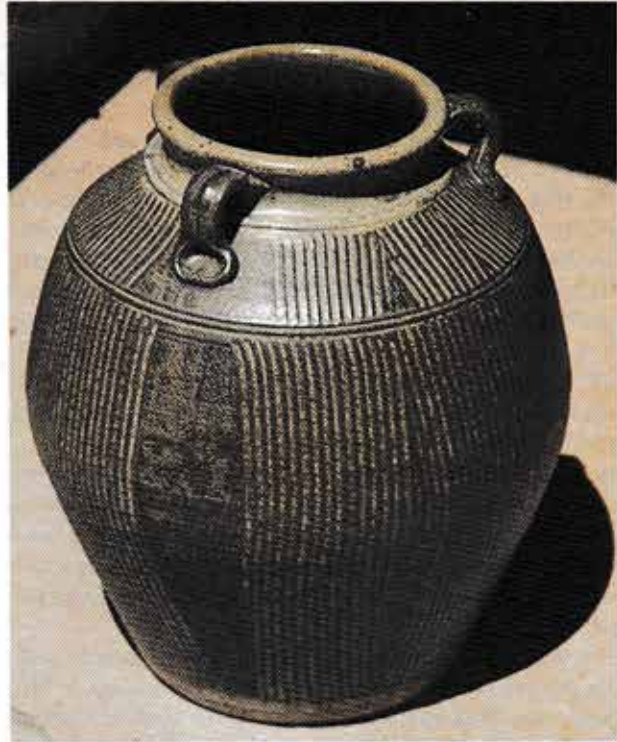


Fig 7 Floor jar. Height: ? decoration: combed slip glaze: green ash date: 1978



Fig 5 Plate. Diameter: 80 cm decoration: clay resist with sprayed oxides glaze: dolomite white and mixed oxides date: 1979

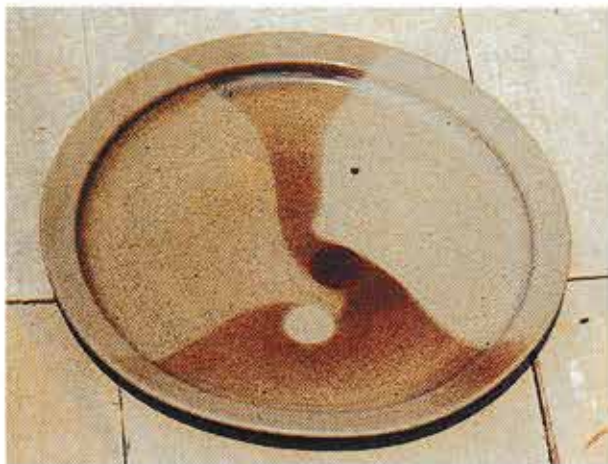


Fig 6 Dish. Diameter: 52 cm decoration: clay resist with sprayed oxides glaze: oatmeal & iron oxide date: 1979

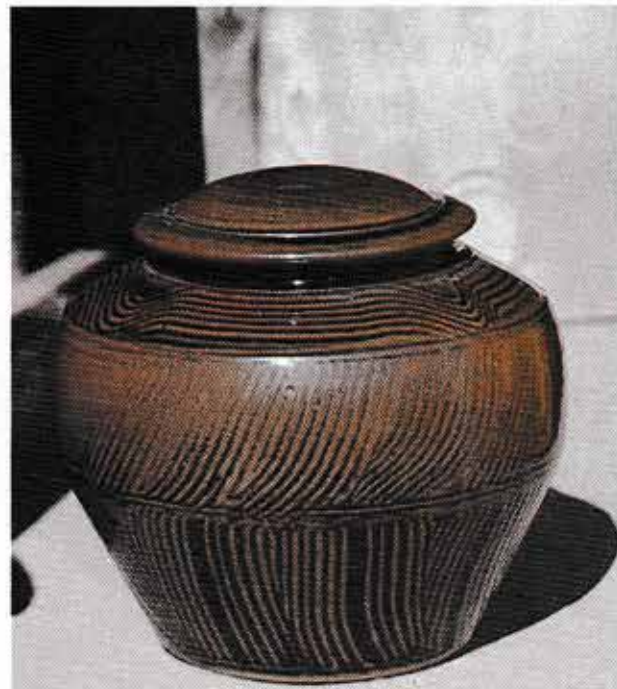


Fig 8 Lidded jar. Height: 50 cm decoration: combed slip glaze: tenmoku date: 1978

A distinguishing feature of Hoets's early work is its sturdiness in construction and design. After the juvenile forays into more delicate forms and decoration the style quickly became distinguished by a vigorous command of the plasticity of the clay, and a quickly-recognizable simplicity of decorative design. Work which had been painstakingly decorated with latex in 1973 (Fig 2) gave way to the elegant, spatial simplicity of the slab-decorated pieces which he made between 1978 and 1981 (Figs 3-6). By the end of 1978, Hoets's work was among the most recognizable being shown around the country. It was also among the most respected. When Joyce Ozinsky, writing in *The Rand Daily Mail*, chose to term the work accepted for the 1977 Oude Libertas Exhibition at The Rand Afrikaans University 'a slick decay,' she made sure that the work of Digby Hoets was a specific exception — referring to its '... imaginative freshness'. The reason for her response is that Hoets's work is without gimmickry. In a field too often populated with dilettantes, the professionalism is a refreshing characteristic.



Fig 3 Dish. Diameter: 75 cm glaze: clay resist with sprayed oxides over oatmeal glaze date: 1978

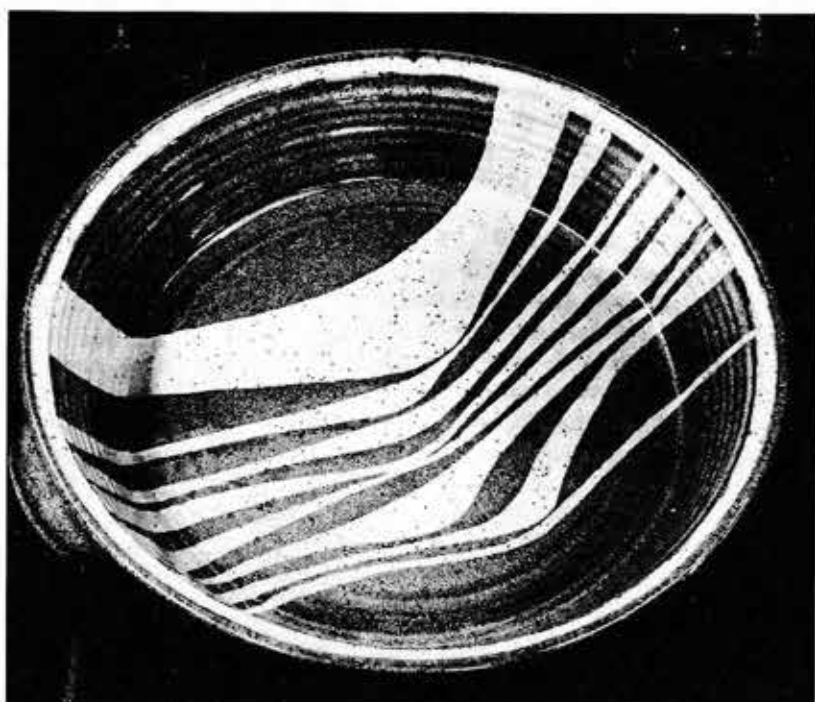


Fig 2 Dish with handles. Diameter: 50 cm decoration: latex resist with sprayed overglaze date: 1973
(Photo: Robin Leibbrandt)

As Hoets started to make more and bigger pots, the need for bigger premises became urgent, so in October 1976 the Hoetses sold the Fairwood studio and moved to a smallholding at Halfway House, where the outbuildings were suited to conversion to a teaching studio, pottery, clay-making area, and showroom. Some modifications of the buildings were necessary to house the large oil-fired kiln which Hoets and the English potter Toff Milway built. With this kiln Hoets began work on raw-fired glazed ware. What began to emerge may be considered the prototypes of the typical Hoets floor pot (Figs 7, 8). He showed the first of these in May 1978 at his first one-man exhibition in the Transvaal at the Helen de Leeuw Gallery, Johannesburg. The same style was to win him the Oude Libertas Award at the 6th National Ceramics Exhibition in Pretoria in the same year.



Fig 9 Fish bowl. Diameter: 90 cm decoration: combed slip glaze: tenmoku inside & clay ash outside date: 1982

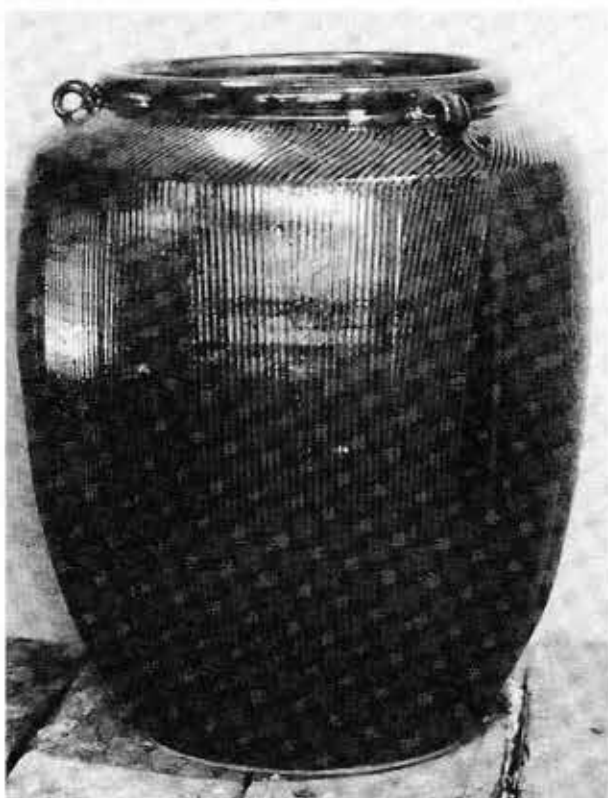


Fig 10 Floor jar. Height: 78 cm decoration: combed slip glaze: tenmoku date: 1982

He began to be admired for the clean and functional forms he continued to develop and his technical virtuosity. Press criticism is almost invariably punctuated with references to the size of the works. Georges Duby, in *The Pretoria News*, commented flippantly on work shown later in 1978 at the Skolimowski Gallery, '... he must be very strong!' Flippant or not, however, the remark is a convenient introduction to the very important question of scale in Hoets's work for it raises the issue of exactly why the prodigious size of the work should present such a primary trigger to people's responses. While the work is well constructed, sensitively decorated, ably formed, and pleasing on all the normal sensory levels, the element which sets Hoets's large pieces (Figs 9–12) unquestionably apart from production pottery is the fact that one knows that one cannot hope to use them in the ordinary sense of the word. So the question arises for the viewer to what extent can one perceive the pieces as pottery in the way that one may see a bowl or jug bought for both functional and aesthetic reasons. The potter uses a traditional means for making a traditionally usable artefact yet makes the artefact practically useless. It may be argued that the response which the work evokes has to be explained in the enigmatic language of the fine arts, specifically sculpture.

In viewing a Hoets pot, the spectator is divided between its apparent functionalism and its practical uselessness. In the same way that Marcel Duchamp's *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915) is a snow shovel which will never be used for digging, so the floor pot is unlikely to be used for storing cornflakes. Once the viewer is aware of the physical and psychological bar-

rier to his normal apprehension of a 'pot,' he has no choice but to adopt the role of 'art spectator'. The floor pots echo the vitalist concept expressed by Henry Moore that one should conceive of a sculptured form as if it were cupped in the palm of the hand. By relating closely to the normal human application, and being the result of a human action, the pot engages the senses on a primary level, yet the spectator is not permitted to get away with a simple, first-level classification of the piece.

In response to the work on show at the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, in 1980, the critic for *Beeld* made the comment that,

al het 'n mens dan nie werklik gebruik vir reusehouers nie is die verskeidenheid van vorme en die waagmoed in skaal op sigself 'n belewenis

The use of the word *belewenis* — the experience — is perceptive in that the critic realizes that in appraising the work he needs to put aside a conventional response to 'pottery' and adopt an attitude more diverse and tolerant in regard to the value or substance of the work. To speak of 'experience' is to lead the reader into an area which must rely on such non-normative terms as may commonly be attached to sculpture. While the notion of using a typical Hoets floor pot in the kitchen is ludicrous, there is no difficulty in placing one, or a set, of these in an architectural space in the same way as one would place free-standing sculpture. Both articulate and define space while containing in themselves a formal vitality — an expressive inner life. It is as if the artist/craftsman *speaks* in the language of sculpture, but retains the *accent* of his native craft.

While Hoets does not have high-flown notions about his work he admits that there is no logical space for his large pieces in the functional parts of the home. One may make a special teapot, he argues, but the quality that sets it apart from the other twenty teapots can be seen only through the perceptual screen of its functionalism. A teapot which has a good form is a poor teapot if it leaks. With the floor pots the potter removes the perceptual barrier to the work, allowing it more directly to engage the viewer's perceptions. Hoets is traditional, however, in his views of what constitutes pottery. Funk pottery and sculpted pottery he considers frivolous, no doubt as a result of the influence of crafts-oriented potters such as Bosch, Milway, Van Gilder and Morris. He simply makes pots in the same way as any functional worker would do — striving for the special piece which might emerge from a well-disciplined and technically perfect batch. So, even if the potter does not set out to make sculpture, if the pots do not *don the attire* of sculpture, their size transcends normal ergonomic functionalism and thus, without change in form, they are relocated ontologically as sculpture. To the question: 'When is a pot not a pot?' Hoets would say in his case, never. The pot is always a pot, for he, Hoets, can make only pots, but the role of perceiver can change.

The treatment of the slip decoration on the most recent work (Fig 13) suggests that the potter is moving away from the traditional three-part process of bisque, decoration, and stoneware firing and the limitations the process implies. Work is now covered in a film of slip on the wheel and then combed-into for the integrated design.



Fig 11 Floor jar. Height: 55 cm decoration: combed slip glaze: green ash date: 1983

It is not over-fanciful to see in this preoccupation with the single, self-articulating surface of the raw-fired stoneware a concern for the texture, patina, and monochromism of traditional sculpture. (Fig 14).



Fig 12 Floor jar. Height: 100 cm decoration: combed slip glaze: shino date: 1983

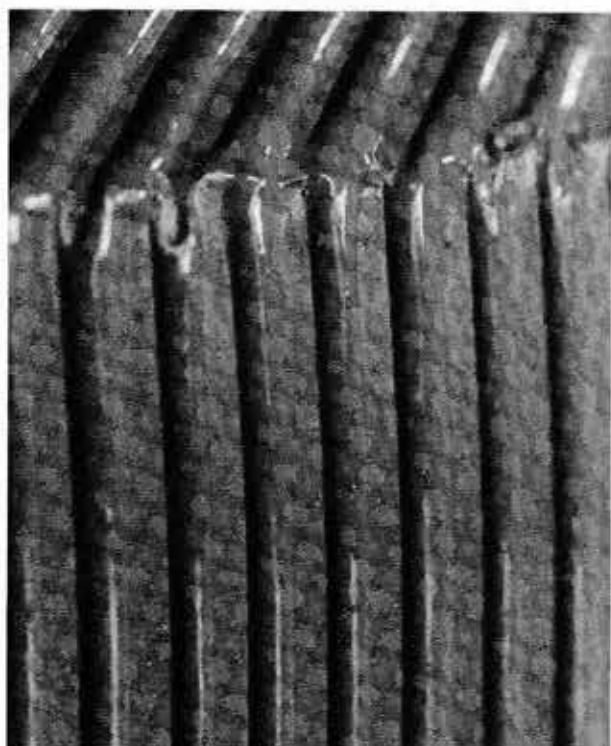


Fig 13 Detail of freshly combed slip.

Hoets's work, therefore, while stylistically traditional, is nevertheless a part of a more modern aesthetic. The development of 'art' pottery in South Africa is recent and dramatic. Traditionally, pottery was exclusively functional but in the 1960s, tastes changed to Cape Cottage furniture and to 'personalized' ceramics. For the first time, functionalism was integrated with art. It was natural that this development would lead to a more self-conscious attitude among the potter/craftsmen of the time and the rise to fame of Esias Bosch, Hym Rabinowitz, Tim Morris, and Andrew Walford began. Hoets is a direct descendant of this fusing of traditional functionalism and the personalized, individual 'statement'.

This does not preclude all kinds of function. Hoets sees his work as tied to specific practical issues. Even the gargantuan bowls can be fish ponds (Fig 9) or the floor pots planters for indoor trees, but this dual role does not confuse their sculptural qualities; it extends the number of levels on which one can approach the work.

Hoets sees his present role in the steady, organic development of his craft. The consistent integrity of his approach to all aspects of his work, coupled with an energy and capacity for experimentation, will ensure that those fortunate enough to possess his work will have work by a potter who is at once truly indigenous and of world class.



Group of pots. Exhibition, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, Jan 1982



Fig 14 (top) Floor jar. Height: 75 cm
decoration: combed slip glaze: dry ash
date: 1983 **(right)** as interior decoration, and
(below) complementary to contemporary
architecture (Pretoria Portland Cement building,
Johannesburg.
Photo: Terence O'Hara)

