

FEATURED ARTIST



David Schlapobersky and Felicity Potter are among the most accomplished and versatile of potters and in fact among very few in South Africa still working full-time in the very demanding discipline of high temperature reduction-fired stoneware and porcelain. It is a unique partnership with a remarkable story.

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“Colours, forms - all begin in nature ... we live in a world of patterns. Patterns in nature become patterns in the mind become inspiration for expression...”

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a lifetime of pots

Their story begins in 1972 in Johannesburg. David came to help look after Felicity's son James who had been severely handicapped as a result of a car accident some years earlier. They moved that same year with James and his two brothers to Cresset House, a Camphill School and Training Centre for children in need of special care. As house parents they were responsible for the wellbeing of 12 trainees (in the house), as well as the dairy, vegetable garden, bakery and pottery studio. The pottery workshops and studio began here.



Stoneware jars drying outside the studio in the sun



Porcelain mugs drying before firing

Their professional partnership was never a conscious 'career decision' by either of them in their early days together, but rather a series of events and circumstances which lead them to adapt and interpret their way of life and their working pottery studio. Much of their initial inspiration came from their early association with Tim Morris, renowned South African Studio Potter and Artist, who helped them to set up the first studio at Cresset House.

Their association with Ceramics South Africa goes back to the founding of the Association of Potters of South Africa (APSA) in 1972 while they were at Cresset House, first joining the Association in 1973 in the name of Cresset House. Cresset House Pottery had work on the first APSA national exhibition which was held in Cape Town during 1975.

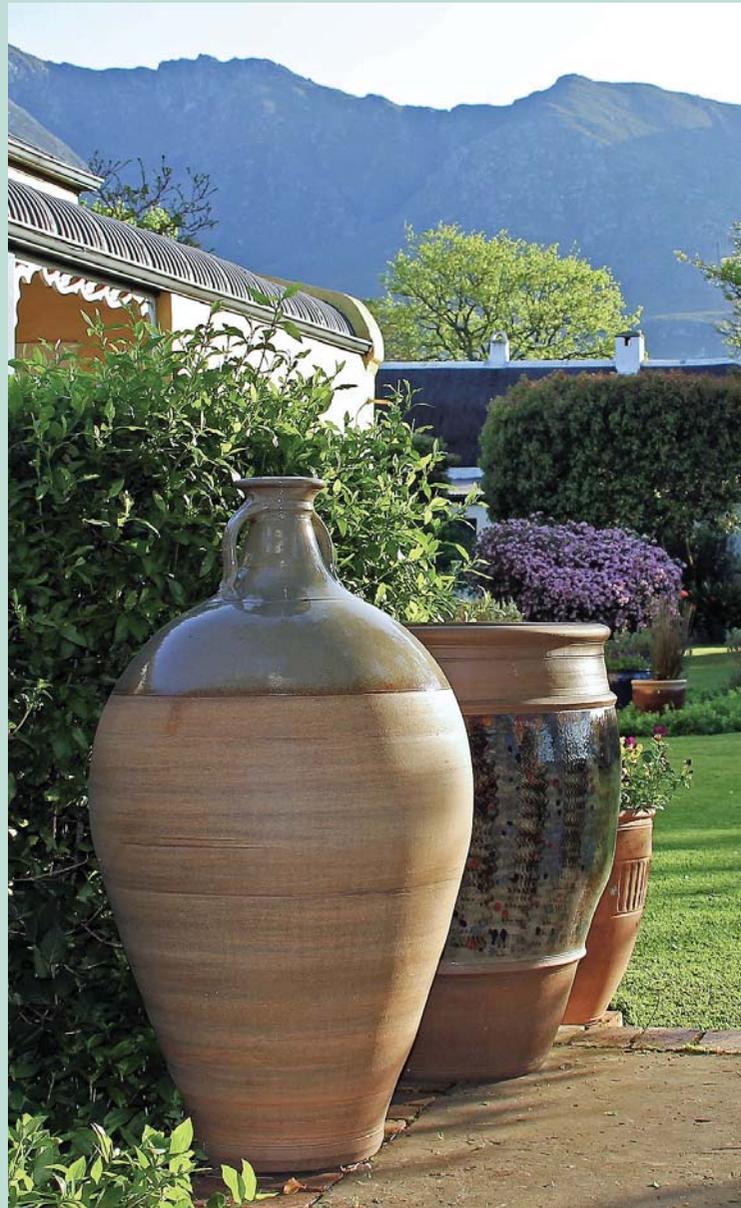
Over the next 20 years they lived and made pots in Johannesburg, establishing a fine reputation for work of exceptionally high quality.

The next chapter of their story began with their move to Swellendam in the Southern Cape. This they did in October 1996 and established their present studio at Bukkenburg, a heritage house in the historic part of Swellendam, one of South Africa's oldest towns. It is here, in a country setting under the towering clock peaks of the Langeberg Mountains, surrounded by ancient oak trees and their lush garden, that they continue to give form and meaning to their lifelong pursuit of making their distinctive high temperature reduction-fired pottery in stoneware and porcelain. The setting is simply idyllic.

Their working studio and gallery are open to the public, and visitors can be found wandering up the path to the studio and gallery. Open studio weekends at Bukkenburg, commissions, orders and workshops, periods of community work and more recently musical evenings in the garden in the summer months comprise the scope of their work. In addition, David runs an informal weekly evening class for local pottery enthusiasts and conducts targeted workshops for small groups of individuals wishing to advance their skills or those looking for a stimulating weekend or few days away from the city. The guest cottage on the property is an attractive adjunct to all of this.

The open studio weekends at Bukkenburg have become something of an institution in and around Swellendam over the past 20 years. Locals as well as visitors from further afield come to enjoy the ambience of the gallery, studio and beautiful garden, and, not least, Felicity's very fine food which is stunningly served on their own hand-made tableware. During these weekends they occasionally host artists and craftspeople from the local area and beyond and often include demonstrations, and sometimes raku firings.

Pots for people at a reasonable price, David and Felicity's maxim, appears to be a simple guiding principle for a potter yet it points to a world of commitment on their part. The statement embraces an approach derived from the English craft tradition that implies that life and work are indivisible. For them this approach is no longer as secure or quite as idyllic as it used to be in the light of constant change.



Big pots on veranda; 1200 mm & 840 mm tall

David throwing wine jars



Their family roots and history have become more important lately, especially the effects of the Diaspora, i.e. the migration, immigration and emigration of successive generations. Felicity and David are both descendants of families which arrived in South Africa in the late 19th Century and early 20th Century in an attempt to escape prejudice and persecution in Europe at that time. In turn, since the late 1960s, their South African siblings, extended family, friends and also many lifetime customers have become dispersed all over the world.

David and Felicity's work is rooted mainly in British and Oriental techniques and traditions, and is an interesting combination with additional inspiration drawn from ancient Middle Eastern influences and African heritage. The pots are made by David using their own blends of clays and glazes, either on the wheel or by hand, and decorated by Felicity whose background in art and textile design is reflected in a wide variety of decorative surface texture and finish. The work is sought after for its distinctive look; and the pots range in size from tiny and delicate porcelain bowls, vases, and tableware, to robust stoneware and porcelain platters and bowls in all sizes; water features, planters and monumental urns and jars in stoneware, sometimes weighing as much as 90kg.

In their glazes and decorating oxides, slips and pigments, they have been able to inject much colour, dimension and life into an ancient tradition, often transcending current perceptions regarding this approach to studio pottery. The glazes in use have become something of a signature: deep cobalt blue, rich tenmoku, pale celadon, darker greens, soft off-white, copper red and oatmeal. The colours are enhanced by Felicity's brush work techniques, and the decorative motifs are drawn from a diversity of sources that are combined to striking effect. They include abstract forms and images, those drawn from the natural environment of the African landscape including flowers, birds and fish and those inspired by ethnic art.

Felicity applies her brush decoration to the dry unfired glaze, using various combinations of iron oxide, cobalt oxide, rutile and copper oxide, as well as a range of glazes used as a decorating medium. Glazes are also applied in layers, and at times up to three layers of glaze can be applied to a single piece, often in addition to wax resist.

All work is reduction-fired to cone 12 (about 1320° C) in one of two oil-fired kilns, 40 cu ft for smaller work or 100 cu ft, exclusively for their large work, using paraffin as fuel.



*Above:
Porcelain mugs, jugs & sugar bowl, celadon glaze, brushwork using iron, cobalt, rutile and copper*

*Right:
Stoneware jar, 680 mm tall, wood ash glaze*

*Below:
David throwing with James in studio*



*Above: Felicity decorating big stoneware platter
Below: Porcelain bowls, dark blue, wax resist, overspray
Bottom: Thrown floor jars 620 mm tall - part of a commission for big garden pots drying in the sun outside the studio*



Ceramics the world over are moving in increasingly diverse directions and taking on increasingly different forms. It is refreshing to know that there are still dedicated studio potters such as David and Felicity who continue and remain true to their craft through a growing understanding of their materials and a commitment to the process and traditions.

A year of hard work, adventure and innovation lies ahead for them as they embark on their 2017 work program, marking more than 43 years of making pots together. They have ongoing commissions, the development of a range of new glazes, including ash glazes, using local sources for wood, straw and other types of ash, exploring textures and exposed surfaces, mainly on stoneware.

In the studio they are planning, discussing and exploring ideas about pots, shapes and glazes for important and decorative pieces for exhibition, while working on several commissions.

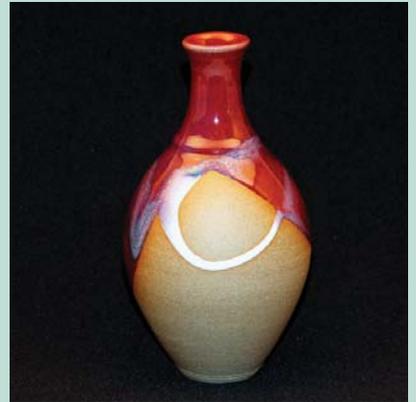
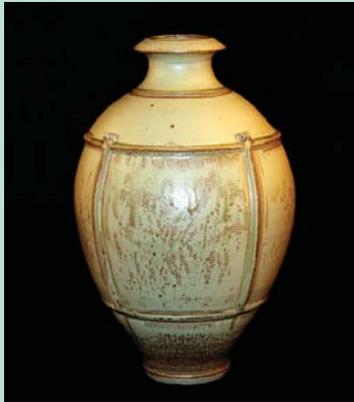
This creative drive is taking place in the presence of recently thrown giant wine jars and planters, platters, serving dishes and a range of smaller pieces to replace work sold from the gallery during the summer months, all in different stages of drying out in readiness for firing and completion.

The presence and scale of these huge jars is hauntingly reflected by the peaks of the Langeberg Mountains which tower above the town, always visible from where they live and work.

We leave them in their studio. This salute is to two remarkable people; their extraordinary synergy is there for all to see in their expressive, richly stylish yet traditional pottery. They have spent a lifetime devoted to the making of fine hand-made studio pots and establishing long-term professional and personal relationships, and in doing so have made a contribution to studio pottery and ceramics in South Africa and beyond. This feature also serves as an acknowledgement of the legacy that many of the pots represent, especially those in corporate, public or private collections.

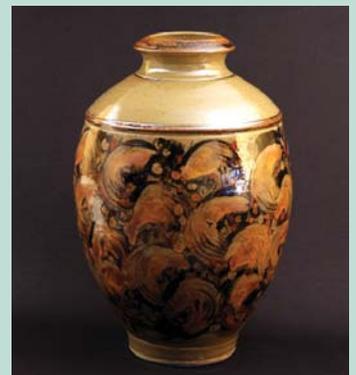
David and Felicity's working lives have been extensively recorded a range of newspapers and professional publications, and a "Timeline" covering some of the major events of their life and work together is included on their website, www.pottery.co.za

Visitors are welcome at the studio and gallery in Swellendam; it is advisable to call ahead if travelling from afar, and the guest cottage at Bukkenburg can be hired on a daily basis when not in use during their workshop weekends.



*Top to bottom: Porcelain vases, celadon glaze, brushwork in coblat, iron, rutile and copper
Stoneware washbasin, tenmoku glaze with wood ash over
Stoneware platter, oakleaf design, brushwork using iron, rutile coblat and copper*

*Above l & r: Stoneware jar 620mm tall, textured surface, wood ash glaze
Stoneware bottle vase 210mm tall, pours of copper red and wood ash glazes
Below l & r: Stoneware vases 460mm tall, tenmoku double glaze with wax resist & wood ash glaze. Stoneware jar 580mm tall, green glaze with brushwork in iron, coblat, copper & rutile*



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