

Introduction

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Abstract:

This special themed edition of *de arte* is devoted to modern and contemporary southern African ceramics. The articles brought together survey a wide range of ceramic production, including early imported commercial trade ceramics from the colonial occupation in the Cape; low-fired, unglazed African utilitarian and sculptural ware; glazed pottery from practices referred to as studio pottery; as well as ceramics created outside of utilitarian circles. The authors, Dr Kim Bagley, Esther Esmiol, Dr Wendy Gers, Dr Elizabeth Perrill, Dr Dave Riep, and Dr John Steele, are respected curators, academics, and artists, living and working in South Africa, the United States, and the United Kingdom. They are internationally recognised experts in their respective fields and they are also educators.

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Article:

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These articles are the culmination of many years of international collegial discussions, often vetted during conferences and symposia. The diverse professional orientations of the authors accentuate the fact that this special issue's focal material—fired clay—deserves and is beginning to attract a variety of nuanced interpretations and analyses. This volume makes a significant

contribution to regional craft, design, and art histories, and the authors welcome further debate and expansion in engagement with and writing on ceramic media.

Binaristic dichotomies of race, genre, and professionalism haunt the field of ceramics. Even today there are tendencies toward demographic factionalisation, which are accentuated by marketing, educational systems, funding structures, and a range of socio-cultural trends. In extreme examples, reductive stereotypes and clichéd tropes in the histories of ceramics juxtapose black traditional artisans who make functional pottery with university-educated white ceramic artists and studio potters who are professionalised within a gallery system. We push back against these tropes.

Dr Kim Bagley is a practising artist who takes up the theme of skin in her article. This poignant theme in ceramics resonates with the fact that ceramic surfaces are often described using terminology of skin and tactility. Bagley's analysis of and direct naming and engagement with, on the one hand, themes of being comfortable in one's skin and the celebration of skin, and, on the other hand, anxiety surrounding the intersections of race, class, and family, highlight the ongoing expansion of ceramic creative practice.

Dr Elizabeth Perrill's article takes a pedagogical perspective on a range of ceramic traditions and indigenous knowledge systems (IKSs). As a scholar focused on isiZulu ceramic practice in her monographic works, Perrill expands her writing here to engage with mathematical and geometric pedagogical practice in South Africa. Her article discusses three case studies to demonstrate how black women's IKS expertise may be utilised by maths instructors, including through the use of diagrams that illustrate these ways of knowing in a manner accessible to individuals less familiar with IKS geometric expression.

Esther Esmyol's article considers the legacy of Asian, Dutch, and British trade ceramics on the work of a range of modern and contemporary South African ceramics artists. The article is written from the perspective of an experienced, long-serving ceramics specialist and social history curator at Iziko Museums of South Africa. Historical works are employed to understand various contemporary aesthetic, conceptual, and technical choices that articulate identity and character. Esmyol's nuanced perspective is informed by her privileged access to the outstanding, broad-ranged Iziko Social History Collections. Works from this national repository are used to analyse and interpret a wide range of historical references, production and decoration techniques, and the aesthetic codes that are appropriated and transformed by local modern and contemporary artists.

Dr David Riep's article explores the production and function of utilitarian ware from a cultural history perspective, focusing on the social lives and biographies of ceramic objects. His study includes diverse groups of objects and makers: early Cape colonial coarse earthenware vessels, historic and contemporary South Sotho ceramic objects, and case studies of works by John Wilhelm (1947–2019) and Lenky Nhlapo (b. 1931). Riep considers the ceramic ware both formally and symbolically, exploring the movement of these objects across cultural and social frontiers. His survey argues that in southern Africa, pottery—particularly pots—continues to play a pivotal role in the formation and maintenance of complex and often contradictory, cooperative, and interdependent relationships as these vessels move through time and space.

Dr John Steele focuses on the geographies and histories of the eastern seaboard of South Africa, and provides a uniquely personal perspective on histories of ceramic utility tied to his own use of and tactile engagement with ceramic forms. Steele's wide-ranging article provides a brief background of Kalunda Tradition ware (650–1080 CE) to open a perspective onto his own appreciation of the works of Nesiwe Nongebeza and Lindsay Scott, as well as a metaphorical discussion of clay as a material that binds artists and human experience.

Dr Wendy Gers offers a contemporary reinterpretation of the oeuvre of the pioneer Mosotho sculptor Samuele Makoanyane. She explores notions of connoisseurship through the lens of ceramic reproduction techniques. In particular, Makoanyane's relationship with professional studio practices, associated with the possible use of studio assistants and moulds, is explored. Gers argues that Makoanyane was a sophisticated and creative entrepreneur who used all the tools and knowledge at his disposal to enhance his productivity and to supply a market thirsty for his beautifully crafted multimedia figurines engaged in various quotidian, social, and ceremonial activities. She proposes that Makoanyane's studio was highly organised, and she celebrates the sophistication of his oeuvre and the complexity of his professional operations.

Collectively, the authors of this series of articles seek to push forward a new era of scholarship into the history of ceramics in southern Africa. They individually challenge received historiographies, genres, and perceptions of professionalism widely associated with ceramics production from the region. The field's understanding of studio practices, issues of professionalism, connoisseurship, complex cross-cultural borrowings, artistic lineages, and innovative design is deepened via this series of insightful, innovative, and original perspectives. The majority of the articles in this special edition present qualitative contextual or comparative surveys of works, opening up an abundance of theoretical and artistic opportunities for subsequent scholarship. It is our hope that future generations of curators, academics, and artists will engage with these articles, using them as springboards for artistic and scholarly debate and research, thereby contributing to the ongoing development of nuanced and polyphonic southern African histories of ceramics.