

DIGBY HOETS: BIOGRAPHY

Born in Johannesburg in 1949, Digby matriculated from King Edward VII, spent a year (compulsory call-up) in the South African Navy. He studied for a science degree at the Universities of Natal and Witwatersrand and taught himself to make pots in his mother, Dilys Hoets' studio during his vacations.

When the opportunity arose to buy John and Val Edwards' teaching studio in Johannesburg in 1973, he gave up university, married Penny who he'd met at Natal University and became a full-time potter and pottery teacher.

Digby and his sister, Lesley-Ann, shared the studio, where Digby taught wheel / throwing and Lesley-Ann handwork, until she relocated to Cape Town and subsequently to Sedgefield in the Western Cape.

In 1976 Digby and Penny moved their home and studio to a large property in Halfway House, half way between Johannesburg and Pretoria, where some large chicken sheds became his new studio.

Although Digby never studied at England's Harrow College, he believes that it had a major influence on his work. Digby met Toff Milway and Bill van Gilder, both products of Harrow, when they managed Kolonyama Pottery in Lesotho during the Seventies. Kolonyama was started by Ray Finch of Winchcombe Pottery and continued to be monitored from a distance by Ray and later Joe Finch. Toff lived with the Hoets' after he left Kolonyama, helped Digby build his first trolley-kiln in 1977 and instilled in Digby his own fervent belief in the craft tradition. Digby believes that it was Toff who made him realise that it is only by making the same object over and over and over again that the potter is able to develop his skills and sensitivity. Today, Toff makes his fine salt-glazed wares from his pottery at Conderton in Gloucestershire.

In 1994 (the year of South Africa's first democratic election), Penny, Digby and their two children Adam and Harriet moved to their new, spacious, thatched home on a 2-hectare stand in Midrand's Carlswald valley, a tranquil, green enclave within an area now rather better known for high density housing developments, office blocks and shopping centres.

Digby built a second thatched house on the property which became his new studio and rebuilt his large oil-fired trolley kiln, in which he completed his 500th firing in May 2025.

Digby's approach to his work is highly organised. He knows exactly what his kiln will hold and plans the ten to twelve pots that he will make during a 5-6 week working cycle in advance so that the kiln space is used to its maximum efficiency. As he works he keeps meticulous hand drawn records of the pots he is making (amount of clay, height and width) so that he can reproduce these same pots at any stage.

<https://www.digbyhoets.com/making-pots>

[Potter's Secrets Digby Hoets \(British Ceramic Review July/August 2023\)](#)

[Digby Hoets - The Art of the Craft - Making Groups of Large Matching Pots](#)

He uses very basic, traditional glazes with high clay content, (tenmoku and other saturated iron glazes, celadons, wood-ash and shino glazes) which are suited to reduction firing. All pots are raw-glazed with glazes being poured over the rotating pot.

Pots weighing up to 70 kg are placed directly on the kiln by Digby and his assistant of the last forty years, Watson Nyambeni. Pots exceeding this weight are transferred onto the kiln using a custom-designed sling and gantry-based pulley system, which allows Digby to manoeuvre the pot into position before lowering it onto the shelf.

Approximately 12 pots are fired at a time in his 120 cubic foot trolley kiln using a clean burning furnace fuel. He fires around ten kilns in a year.

Before he unloads the kiln, Digby photographs both sides of each kiln so that he has a visual record of the contents.

“The combination of high temperature (1380 degrees centigrade - cone 13), the reduction atmosphere and the wood ash glazes that I particularly favour cause a reaction between clay and glaze which gives me the rich glaze qualities and the earthy, natural earthy colours and effects that I am looking for.”

Digby Hoets is a potter's potter: his practice is one of dedicated iteration, a monthly process that produces a kiln full of pots that are fired. In that monthly rhythm, he consistently works towards subtle development of the pots over time – the lessons of one firing being the prompt for refined adjustments in the pots that follow. This process of working steadily day by day results in an intimate knowledge of how clay responds, and such patient practice gives rise to an authentic simplicity, an honesty that comes from looking and knowing: a subtle but certain adjustment to the volume of a series of pots, a slight nuance in the density of the colour of the glaze, variations that are there but too elusive for words.

Digby Hoets' pots also appeal to people who are not potters, and who may have little or no idea of what actually goes into a pot's making, but they will wonder – rightly – about what it takes to make such big pots, and to make them so consistently. They will take pleasure in the lustrous darkness of a glaze or its milky flow. They are able to imagine where such a pot may look really fine or where a row of three leading to an entrance would look perfect. Because the pots are timeless, people do not necessarily need to know how his work continues in the tradition of studio ceramicists of the likes of Leach, Bosch, Rabinowitz, for he creates the timeless tradition anew with each firing.

– Liz Burroughs

Many South African potters and ceramists have started their careers in his studio and continue to work there.

Over the years Digby increasingly focused on making large pots, often in related groups, largely due to his decision to raw glaze his pots and exclude bisque-firing from his production. Recent commissions for large groups of pots include the Chanel store in St Tropez for the renowned US designer and architect Peter Marino in 2023 (<https://edit.pt/chanel-saint-tropez/>).

In June 2025 he completed a commission for 64 pots for a project for Peter Marino for St Barts in the Caribbean. [Digby Hoets: Johannesburg to St Barts in 64 Monumental Pots](#)

In 2024 he was one of 10 judges for the prestigious South African Clay Awards.

Digby is also a competitive oarsman and cyclist (mountain-bikes). He has rowed in several FISA World Masters (The World Rowing Federation, FISA - from the French, Fédération Internationale des Sociétés d'Aviron), including Hungary in September 2019, where he won a gold medal in the single sculls and South Africa in 2023 where he won gold in a quad. He rowed in the World

Masters' Games in New Zealand in 2017. He has ridden many of South Africa's multi-stage mountain bike events including Sani2C, Imana Wild Ride, Swazi Frontier, Tour de Kruger, Tour de Tuli, Berg2Bush.

ARTICLES

[Digby Hoets: Johannesburg to St Barts in 64 Monumental Pots](#)

[Potter's Secrets Digby Hoets \(British Ceramic Review July/August 2023\)](#)

['Objects of Consciousness and Experience. The \(very\) large pots of Digby Hoets'](#) by Ronnie Watt 2014

[Digby Hoets: Larger than Life](#) by Gail de Klerk (National Ceramics Quarterly, Summer 2002)

['Digby Hoets: On a Grand Scale'](#), by Wilma Cruise (from British Ceramic Review April 2002)

[Digby Hoets: Larger than Life](#) by Nigel GK Tharg (Gregory John Kerr) (National Ceramics Quarterly 1987)

[Digby Hoets, Potter](#) by Gregory John Kerr (Lantern 1984)

Digby Hoets by Wilma Cruise, (Sgraffiti no 26 1981)

[Five Potter's by Dina Katz \(Lantern 1974\)](#)

EXHIBITIONS

2 solo exhibitions at Goodman Gallery 1980 and 1982. Subsequently taken part in group exhibitions, notably those by Ceramics Southern Africa and in Exhibitions at his own studio in Midrand, Johannesburg.

VIDEOS

[Digby Hoets Johannesburg to St Barts in 64 Monumental Pots](#)

[Walkabout at Digby's studio showroom](#)

View videos of Digby working:

[Digby Hoets - The Art of the Craft - Making Groups of Large Matching Pots](#)

[Digby loading a large pot onto his kiln using a hoist](#)

[Digby shutting down his kiln at the end of a firing](#)

[Digby throwing the rim on one of his large pots](#)

[Digby applying and combing through the slip](#)