

# the art of craft

## - hyme rabinowitz, master potter

When I moved from South Africa to Canada five years ago, I had to be sparing with what I brought with me. Before anything else, I packed those things that would link me with what I was leaving behind. My collection of South African ceramic objects and pottery wares would do just that.

**Written by:** Ronnie Watt **Photography by:** Pottery photographs by Ronnie Watts

Take this bottle-shaped pottery vase, a work by Hyme Rabinowitz, that sits on my desk. It has a simple decoration of grass stalks waving against a pale blue background. It speaks powerfully of the veld and sky of the Western Cape. It speaks of the mastery of Rabinowitz's studio pottery.

The twenty-first century has seen international recognition for South African ceramics artists, notably for those whose works present a new vision of Africa, challenging convention and stereotypes. The new generation of ceramicists builds on the heritage of traditional African pottery, but their studio practices use the technology and processes introduced in the mid-twentieth century by studio potters. Rabinowitz (1920–2009), Esias Bosch (1923–2010) and Bryan Haden (1930–2016) are hailed as the pioneers of South African studio pottery.

To tell of Rabinowitz's accomplishments as a potter, and to emphasise his relevance in the story of South African pottery, I need to step back in time.

Re-imagining Africa through ceramics is not new. It was first seen in the works produced by the English studio potter Michael Cardew, who between the 1940s and 1960s spent time in Ghana and Nigeria, where he taught and produced pottery. Cardew's own roots in studio pottery can be traced to his early apprenticeship with Bernard Leach, who is hailed as the father of the 'Anglo-Oriental' tradition of studio pottery.

The 'Anglo-Oriental' tradition describes a *way* of making, rather than what is actually made. It developed around the idea of producing the 'ethical pot', and brought together what the American art historian Ellen P. Conant calls a mix of 'philosophical, religious and aesthetic elements that saw beauty in utilitarian objects made by and for common people.' This approach to pottery found wide appeal in England, North America, Australasia and, via the three pioneers, South Africa, too.

Because of their association with the English pottery practice of the time, and

because they made things people could use, Bosch, Rabinowitz and Haden would become known as 'Anglo-Orientalists'. It is a misleading label, though, which does not give them their due credit as individualistic artist-craftsmen.

All three had contact with Cardew, but it was Hyme who would emerge as the South African studio potter who most closely followed Cardew's ethos of producing functional wares, in an individual style, without any sacrifice of the principle of good form.

Those ideas became so much a part of Rabinowitz's own style that when he was selected to participate in a group exhibition of 13 of Cardew's associates, at the Beardsmore Gallery in London, in 1993, he was hailed as the studio potter who 'carried the [Cardew] tradition back to southern Africa'.

This recognition was matched by many other awards. The University of Pretoria, for example, awarded him with a silver medal for Singular Merit and Rare Achievement in 1990. In the same year he >

was recognised as a Master Potter by the Association of Potters of Southern Africa. The only other South African honoured with such an accolade was Bosch. And in 1992 the University of Cape Town bestowed on him an honorary master's degree in fine art.

But none of this recognition can be fully grasped unless you know how Hyme responded to a changing world.

After World War II, there was a change in consumer culture throughout much of the world. People started choosing lifestyles that reflected their own personalities. When it came to ceramic wares, this change manifested in a dismissal of mundane, industry-produced wares in favour of more distinctive craftware. By mid-century South Africa, this translated into a consumer preference for pottery that was being produced by more than 40 small pottery enterprises, each producing distinctive wares in limited ranges. The unique pottery wares were produced by individual potters, but on an extremely small scale.

It was into that void that the pioneers stepped. Bosch gained his knowledge and experience in England, and on his return in 1952 set up his first backyard studio in Durban. Haden's training in pottery in England overlapped with that of Bosch, and his first studio was set up in Hay Paddock in Pietermaritzburg. Hyme, however, had his first exposure to pottery in South Africa when he attended evening classes in pottery at the Frank Joubert Art Centre in Rondebosch, Cape Town, in 1953. Soon after, he set up his own small studio space in Long Street, where he worked on a kick-wheel.

Hyme was born and raised in Port Nolloth, Namaqualand. His father was a *smous* (peddler) of donkeys and mules. He first came to Cape Town to attend school in 1932, and would live there for most of his adult life.

A career in pottery was a far cry from that of accountant, for which he qualified after serving as an artilleryman in the Second World War. But, as he wrote in an unpublished memoir, pottery was an opportunity that he had been waiting for and he would give it a go because 'maybe something will come of it.'

But first, leaving accountancy behind,

## “Everything he made tells a story of intimacy between maker and material.”

Hyme set off in 1956 on a journey of discovery, in which he would travel comprehensively in Europe and Africa.

The first stop was England, where he visited studio potters in Cornwall. One of them was Kenneth Quick, at his Tregenna Hill pottery studio in St Ives, where he eventually took up a position as studio assistant for six months.

In that role he was required to mix clay in a bucket and deliver the pots, packed in a haversack, to customers by bus. During this period, Hyme also met Cardew, who was preparing to return to Nigeria. Hyme met Cardew again the following year in Kano, Nigeria, where Cardew was setting up a training centre.

On his return to South Africa, Hyme found studio space in Higgovale, Cape Town, where he built a wood-fired kiln. It marked his formal entry as a professional studio potter in South Africa. But he did not consider his knowledge of pottery complete. South Africa presented distinct challenges in the production of pottery. The raw materials and studio processes differed from what he'd come to know in England. The one person who could guide him along was Bosch, who by then had established his permanent studio in White River, in what is today Mpumalanga Province.

For six months in 1961/1962, Hyme worked as assistant to Bosch and then returned to Cape Town to set up his own permanent studio at Eagle's Nest on Constantia Hill. This is where he would live and work for the next 40 years.

Hyme visited England again in 1966, financing his trip with an award he received from the Cape Tercentenary Foundation that promoted the development of South African arts. On that trip, he again sought out Cardew. Cardew agreed to take Hyme on for a few months as assistant at the famous

Wenford Bridge pottery. As Hyme wrote much later in his life, Cardew did not really teach, but demanded of his students to observe, practise and 'listen to his sophisticated opinions'.

Cardew had no patience for ceramics that sought to serve only as art. He never abandoned the ethos of producing things that people could use, in which the form of the wares was more important than their style. This ethos resonated with Hyme, and he would always stay true to the thinking of his mentor.

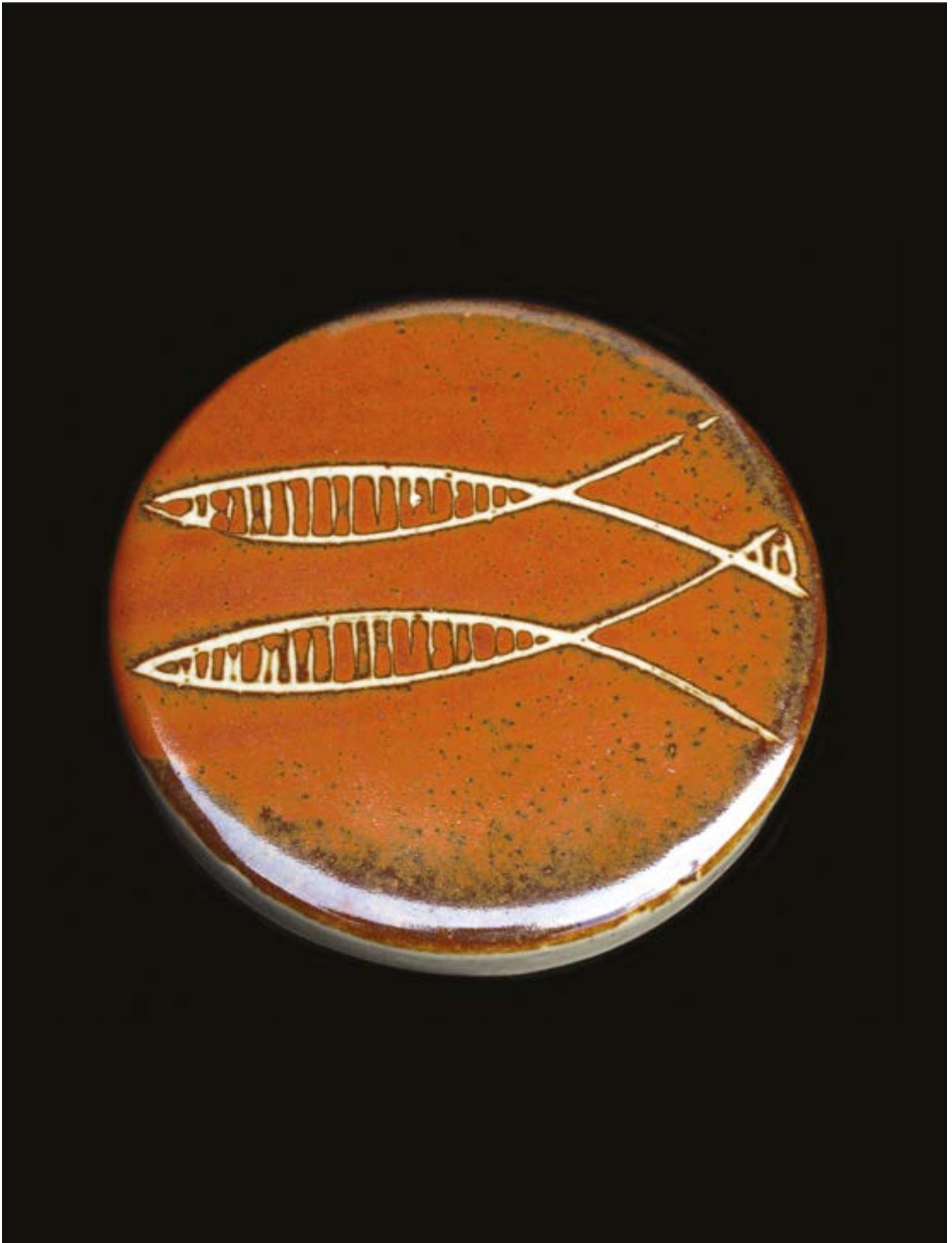
Working from his remote and rather rudimentary studio, Hyme nudged his style along through trial and error and endless correspondence with his peers. He and Bosch would even exchange works to compare the results of various glazes on different clay bodies. Hyme never ceased to experiment with glazes, and those, alongside his meticulously thrown forms, were to become the hallmark of his craft.

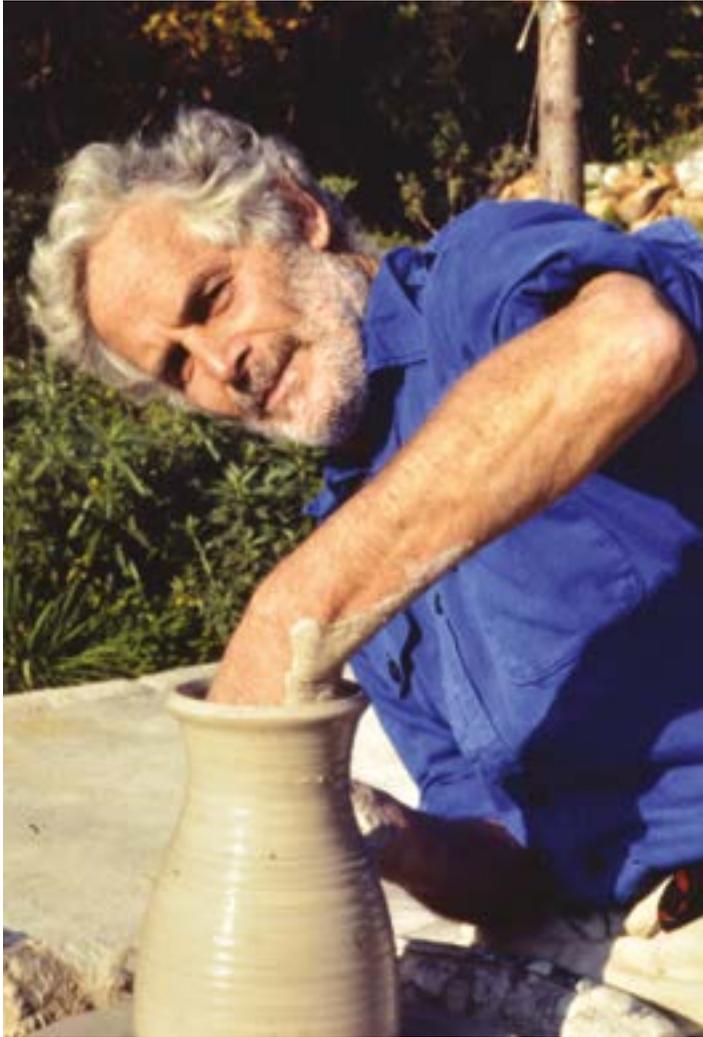
In her article titled 'A Passion for Pots', written in 2000, the ceramicist and writer Ann Marais said of Hyme's work: 'There is no artifice, no "cleverness" in his strong, simple forms. Form, surface and decoration are integrated in harmonious balance. There are no trivial appendages to distract the eye or block the hand in holding. All elements serve the goal of "usefulness".'

His range of utilitarian wares did not offer anything novel. That was not his intention. He threw lidded jars, vases, platters, teapots and tea bowls, casserole dishes, round cheese plates, bottles and tiles. His wares were sturdy to the point of being robust, but never chunky, with rounded bellies and strong but graceful handles and lugs. On the surfaces, the hands of the potter could be read – the marks deliberately or unintentionally left when the clay was shaped on the wheel. Everything he made tells a story of intimacy between maker and material.

For decoration, he would either use the brush or execute them in *sgraffito*, which is the process of scratching through layers of glaze to create contrasting images. The decorations were executed in simple and even sparse linework and revealed his love for nature: flowers in outline, swaying grasses, leaves and birds.

And the glazes! By sight and touch they were generous, whether Hyme used >





a single glaze or layered them to create even further depth: feldspathic, celadon, shino, khaki and the deepest and richest of tenmoku. The kiln added the finishing touches, often with the mischief of causing the glaze to crawl or craze or pinhole or coagulate at the lower edges like dripped mutton fat. For other potters, such surface effects would spell a kiln disaster. In Hyme's case, the whims of the kiln simply served to enhance the organic look and feel of his wares.

Though he didn't have formal apprentices, his influence worked in other ways. It was his way of life and his way of working that served as inspiration for the next generations of studio potters. And they would come to know Hyme's famously down-to-earth

personality, which clung to the belief that the work was more important than the ego. Hyme generously shared not only his pottery knowledge but also his thoughts on beauty and usefulness. In the last years of his life, he wrote: 'It is good to enjoy one's food in a container that gives pleasure and aesthetic joy at the same time.' It was as simple as that.

The thriving and dynamic ceramics fraternity in South Africa in the twenty-first century has grown from humble beginnings. In 1972, a small community of potters established the Association of Potters of Southern Africa (APSA). By the end of the century, it grew to boast a membership of some 1,000. Hyme and his fellow pioneering figures, Bosch and

Haden, laid the foundation for this – not in defining how South African pottery should look, but in setting the example of the studio potter as a combination of persona, practice and ethos.

Hyme's beloved Eagle's Nest studio was partially destroyed in 2000 in a raging veld fire, but he continued working. His death in 2009 closed a career that spanned some five decades. The respect for Hyme as studio potter and the memories of his humility, which he maintained even as praise was lavished on him, have yet to fade. And in any case, Hyme lives on through his works that grace our homes and enrich our lives. He would not have asked for anything more.

