



a Potter's Tale *in Africa*

The life and work of **Andrew Walford**
An insightful account of one of South Africa's best known potters

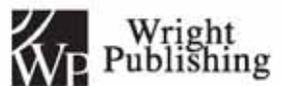
Neil Wright



A Potter's Tale in Africa

The Life and Works of Andrew Walford

Neil Wright



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P.O. Box 1033

Kloof 3640

KwaZulu-Natal

South Africa

Email: bonisa47@mweb.co.za

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Layout and design by Flying Ant Designs

(031) 309 5385

Email: ant@flyingant.co.za

Photography by Liesel Wright and Widbert Giessing,
Leanda and Andrew Walford.

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for sound advice, including cautioning me against being too broad in covering leading contemporary ceramicists in current postmodern developments. More importantly, I have to thank her for declining to write a chapter on historic perspectives in the ceramics industry. She had written this for me in Carl Roberts' book. This meant I had to do it myself. I had fun, enjoyed the research and learned a great deal. I then wrote two chapters on the subject.

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our knowledgeable and authoritative academics at the KwaZulu-Natal University in Pietermaritzburg. Authors and titles of these books and research reports are listed in the Bibliography. I learned a great deal from them.

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Thanks to David Basckin for writing the foreword; he has known Andrew for many years, he made a video of Andrew and his pottery. We have shared a similar experience.

Foreword - David Basckin

My association with Andrew's ceramics goes way back to 1967, when I bought a large bowl from his father, who ran a shop in Fenton Lane near Durban Bay. The shop was a place of taste and refinement, which probably explains why I had walked past it forty or fifty times without a second glance. Then one day, while undressing a passing girl with my eyes, something even more compelling grabbed my attention. There, in the window of Walford Décor, was a single ceramic pot, set in a billow of Marimekko fabric. Since my relationship with this pot lasted nearly three decades, I can describe it with some accuracy. The bowl had a diameter of 300 mm rising from a turned foot. The shape, almost needless to say, referenced classical Japanese design, while the glaze was a light grey with iron sunspots, gloriously random artefacts of high temperature reduction firing.

"Lovely pot," I said to Mr. Walford Snr.

"Indeed," he said, looking down at me with his angular face under heavy brows, "And don't you love the generous lip?"

This was more than just a lip or a spout, being 75mm in width, giving the pot a singular and aimably jarring

feature in terms of the overall proportions.

Time passed. The date became late 1979 and I needed an urgent gift for some woman. I got onto my Yamaha 500 and rode to Shongweni where Andrew sold me a flattish bowl, the form chosen to fit into my shirt for the homeward ride. Also grey with an iron fleck, it featured a bamboo motif over one third of the surface. This arrived safely back in Durban. The woman liked it.

And then all of a sudden it was a hot day in 2002. I phoned Andrew at his studio.

"Let's make a movie," I suggested.

"Of what?" said the perplexed potter.

"Of you and your craft," I said. "We can show it at the Drive-In," I added. We laughed, and given the nature of the cosmos, the random forces of fate, the benignity of the universe, not to mention a large side serving of satori mixed with a soupçon of chutzpah, we did just that.

Shooting the video was a powerful experience. Like all projects fueled exclusively by the imagination,

it consumed huge chunks of time, grabbed in sticky handfulls from weekend after weekend after weekend. Following an artist though the various processes of craft and manufacture means that the cameraman gets a singular insight into his subject. I guess the subject also gets a singular insight into his cameraman, but I've never quite got round to finding out.

Since Andrew controls his entire ceramic enterprise, we began with an early morning journey by bakkie to his secret claypit. Clay is an ancient substance, made up in this case of untold billions of little bits of Gondwaland, deposited by streams into a soft bog. Given the effort involved in prospecting clay of high quality, the location of the claypit was and always shall be a secret. After a couple of hours the dirt road vanished and we completed the last kilometre or two driving over bare veld. At the diggings, Andrew and two assistants loaded a ton of raw clay onto the truck and then we were off again, back to Shongweni.

Processing the clay took a couple more weeks, with all work carried out at the Shongweni studio.

In many ways, this has features of a medieval craftsman's household, combined with aspects of a Zulu homestead. The double storied thatched house dominates the setting, with the former goat dairy and fuel tanks behind. Beyond a gravelled space ornamented with a carp pond, a stand of bamboo and a viewing platform, the entire aspect seawards takes in the Shongweni valley, dotted with thornscrub, strelitzia and acacia trees, with a steep koppie rising straight out of the landscape like a giant rock-topped fungus.

Moving down a path past the carp leads to the studio proper. This is a complex space of grace and aesthetic intensity, made up of a large, organic architectural structure, under gently peaked roofs. Within it we find dedicated spaces of display and production, each one clearly delineated yet flowing into each other.

Shooting Andrew at work gave this cameraman a singular insight into the throwing process. There's a special intensity of image that results from tightly-framed big close ups. Usually, watching a potter at work includes distracting visual data from the surroundings. The big close ups, each one framing just the potter's hands reveal the interfaced nuance of hands, fingers and clay. There's a big, really

big, window next to Andrew's wheel, showing the branches and canopies of nearby trees.

Decoration is integral to Andrew's work. Using the tools and styles of classical Oriental ceramics, he combines the carp and bamboo motifs of Japan with the botanical references of Africa, his home. While Leach and Hamada constructed the Anglo-Oriental tradition, Walford has invented a synthesis that is uniquely his own, in which elements of Far Eastern ceramic production methods and decoration, meld serenely with the natural presences of Southern Africa.

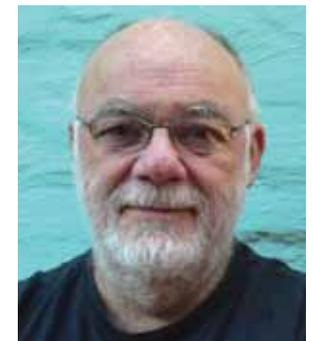
Shooting the decoration process was a singular set of events, in which we moved to yet another production zone of the studio. Seated cross-legged on an elevated platform, Andrew deftly and economically painted the images onto bisque fired pots, with yet another large window providing a panoramic landscape.

But the big drama was still to come: the final firing. Here, in a giant oil-fired kiln made by the potter himself, sat a couple of months' dedicated production. The firing, a huge roaring event consuming thousands of litres of fuel to produce that single moment of perfection in which fire, atmosphere, clay and glaze come together,

is a time of relentless anxiety and attention to detail. Ancient forces from the earliest dates of civilisation come together, monitored by digital thermocouples and the day- and- night presence of the potter himself. If the firing fails, the financial loss is considerable. The eternal presence of the random makes anything possible in this enclosed space of fire, running, at its peak, at over 1350 degrees Celcius. Once the firing point is reached, the kiln takes days to cool. Too sudden a breach of the seal and the pots within craze and crack.

Like all good productive interactions between man and nature, a Walford firing ends with a market day. The general public arrive to buy not only ceramics but also biryani by the brimming plateful.

Was the movie a success? I think so. But it's most important achievement for me was the opportunity it provided to enter into the world of Andrew Walford, a man who is one of this country's most distinguished artists.



A Potter's Tale in Africa is a celebration of Andrew Walford, his pottery and life in Shongweni KwaZulu-Natal. The tale follows a long tradition of "ubumba," this is a Zulu word for clay, used in the production of ceramics. Andrew adds to the richness of the "ubumba" tradition.

He may come from another tradition, the Anglo Oriental, but he has been influenced by the minimal decoration of Zulu artefacts. It is very Zen. Andrew has been a potter for 50 years. He manifests this Zen influence in his brush strokes which are minimal and subtle.

To quote Ilse Wolf who has one of the largest private collections of ceramics in Europe:

*"I love Andrew's brushwork,
he does it like no one else".*



The book is a must for all those who have collected Andrew's work over the years. It is a commemoration of the life and works of a very creative and industrious man.



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