

HISTORY IN A POT



KWAZULU-NATAL

TEXT
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PICTURES
SUPPLIED

Zulu culture and the natural world as depicted by

the Ardmore artists is a history book in clay



□ Travellers
Exhibition
pieces.

THE YEAR IS 3011. IN SOUTH AFRICA (now Azania, but old habits die hard), classicists and art historians are abuzz with excitement. A treasure trove of superb ceramic art created here a millennium ago is finally on its way home. The pieces were found, along with other significant African artefacts and antiquities, by archaeologists excavating ruins in a North American city.

"We believe the works formed part of a private collection in the early 21st century," says one art historian. "Their importance lies in the exquisite detail that paints not just a charming or amusing picture but, as with all great classical art, charts the history of the period in which they were created." To illustrate his statement, the historian points to pictures of the ceramics in an ancient but still intact book. "They reveal too, the mystique once associated with Africa and the nobleness inherent in those cultures of long ago. It is fitting that these magnificent pieces will be returned to their proper place – the renowned Bonnie Ntshalintshali Museum."

Fiction? Some of it, but the museum is real, as are the ceramics. They're being created today by talented artists at Ardmore, the internationally acclaimed ceramic art studio in Caversham in the KZN Midlands from where so many of the items are exported overseas. It is also where the museum is located.

If you're in the area and have never seen any of Ardmore's works, take the time to drop in for a visit. It's well worth the dust your car will be covered in during the shaky drive along the corrugated dirt road. Upon arrival you'll probably be greeted by a pair of statuesque Great Danes, which in some ways epitomise the must-be-noticed ceramics you're about to see. Indeed, the works, like those great dogs, might even stop you in your tracks. Big, colourful, bold, textured, flowing, surprising, sumptuous, sometimes delicate, utterly unique and very proudly African, the functional and non-functional pieces are unquestionably classics in the making.

But let's travel back in time, to 1985 when Ardmore opened. Then, customers had the choice of little ducks, little ducks, or little ducks with a price tag

of R2 each. Just 23 years later, a vase by Wonderboy Nxumalo fetched a record R180 000 at a Sotheby's auction in Johannesburg.

"It was beyond my expectations," says Fée Halsted, the founder of Ardmore who gave up her career as a solo artist to nurture creativity in others.

Fée's first student at her original studio on the Ardmore farm in the Drakensberg was Bonnie Ntshalintshali. Before long, the two of them were creating spectacular pieces, and in 1990 were jointly awarded the prestigious Standard Bank Young Artist Award. In the meantime, other artists from rural areas had been drawn to Ardmore, initially women, but as news spread men began to join too, each one bringing unique painting and sculpturing skills.

But beneath the celebration and glamour, and the promise of new opportunities for people who had so little, a terrible thing was lurking. In 1998 AIDS claimed its first artist at Ardmore. Since then many others have succumbed to the disease. The shocking reality of the virus and its impact on frail humanity has graphic and often fittingly grotesque prominence

on many of the pieces displayed in the museum.

And while that terrible chapter in our history is not yet closed, and may not be for decades to come, Ardmore artists are not dwelling on it with an air of defeat. They are, after all, sons and daughters of Africa, this exuberant, diverse, intoxicating continent whose people celebrate life like nowhere else. This *joie de vivre* manifests regularly in those glorious ceramics, in shapes, colours and ideas that sometimes make you laugh out loud. Victor Shabalala's pair of 'bonking' zebra candlesticks is one example.

Zulu culture and the natural world, as art historians in 3011 have found, are recurring themes in Ardmore's art. These themes are also represented in many other South African curios but that's the only overlap with Ardmore. Fée's emphasis on people finding their own creativity has helped the artists to push their imaginations to new heights of excellence. And so new ideas are constantly born, new avenues explored, change a vital element in the whole process.

"I'm not sure where it's all going," Fée says over a cup of tea, poured from an Ardmore teapot, >>

□ Ardmore
Design
Tableware
– Zinhle range.

□ One of
Ardmore's
artists, Jabu
Nene.



□ **Makoro for the Travellers Exhibition.**

□ **Artist Victor Shabalala.**

>> on the terrace of the picturesque Coffee Cottage. It's a tranquil spot, set above the river which meanders past the neighbouring Caversham Mill. "It's always fascinating to see what it is that changes the themes of our art. These new facets help me to see Ardmore through fresh eyes." At the same time, she's all too aware of how vulnerable humans are and how any of us could

It's a way of showing people with little hope that you can start something out of nothing by using your hands

□ **The Gallery at Caversham.**

□ **The charming Coffee Cottage.**

'go' at any moment. "I worry that in time, Ardmore could just die out," she says. And so her children are now involved and are equally focused on change. Some of the new ideas and techniques were on

display at Ardmore's African Travellers Exhibition at the Charles Greig Gallery in Hyde Park, Johannesburg, in September 2010. Inspired by, and in celebration of, the Soccer World Cup and the travellers it attracted, the theme explored romanticised notions of travel within our continent, echoing styles seen in the works of old masters like Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Cornwallis Michell, whose early 19th-century water colours painted Africa and African artefacts in an elegant and noble light. "I want to put that dignity back into African art," Fée says, "so that people see it as a celebration of beauty."

Also new is a range of collectible, limited edition dinnerware that, like everything else at Ardmore, is entirely hand-done. The items are microwave- and oven-safe, and to that end Fée experimented thoroughly with different clays.

Tapestry is another skill she wants to explore with a view to elevating handcrafts to an art. "It's a way,"

she says, "of showing people with little hope that you can start something out of nothing by using your hands." This is truly empowerment of people at grassroots level.

In recognition of the difference she has made in the lives of women and her work in empowering rural artists, a Philadelphia-based NGO, Women's Campaign International (WCI), honoured Fée at their annual fundraising event, 'All the Difference', in New York in November 2010. She joins an illustrious group, including Hillary Clinton and US vice president Joe Biden, recognised by WCI for making exceptional contributions to women's rights and global development.

"I don't mollycoddle our artists," Fée stresses. "As a result, new apprentices quickly learn that if they try hard, they succeed faster. It's about growing people, about learning by example, and about artists inspiring other artists."

Expressed in a different way, it's Ubuntu – 'we are because of others' – a theme that will underpin the planned coffee-table book on Ardmore by Fée and Molly Buchanan. It is to be as gorgeous as the works it features, and destined to become a collector's item too.

This we know because that art historian in 3011 was paging through a dog-eared first-edition to illustrate his talk. □

Map reference D7 see inside back cover



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□ **Zebra candlesticks, sculpted by Victor Shabalala and painted by Virginia Xaba.**

□ **Fée Halsted surrounded by Ardmore artists.**

□ **Artists sculpting and painting.**

□ **Ardmore's first studio in the 'Berg, which is now closed.**