



# DAVID ROBERTS

TIM SAUNDERS

**D**avid Roberts (73) considers himself extremely fortunate to have been obsessed with hand building raku fired ceramics for the past 50 years.

Known for his vessels and bowls, he trained as an art teacher at Bretton Hall in West Yorkshire. "Initially I was going to train in two-dimensional painting and printmaking, which I did for a year. Then we had to choose a subsidiary subject. I didn't know what to do but discovered the ceramics department. As soon as I started I thought that clay was the most wonderful thing; the most interesting and responsive material, so I never returned to the painting studio."

That was 1967 and he soon discovered the need to make. If he didn't he'd get bad tempered. David became a pottery teacher. "I moved down to Hatfield, Hertfordshire and used to bring home clay and work on the kitchen table. I'd sneak it into school and use their kiln to fire it."

As time went on he craved his own studio. "We returned up north and found that we could afford a run



top - Eroded Vessel, 23 x 47 cm, coil built and raku fired ceramic

Vaso Agitato 2, 29 x 36 cm, coil built and raku fired ceramic



**Eroded Vessel**, 23 x 47 cm, coil built and raku fired ceramic

down property with a dilapidated barn in Holmfirth, an old woollen mill town near Huddersfield."

Teaching full-time as a pottery and three-dimensional teacher at Holmfirth High School he carried on making in his spare time. By the early 1980s he applied for a part-time position as ceramics teacher at Batley School of Art and was offered the job. There he remained until 1999 when he became a full-time potter. "My pots were selling and I ran workshops so we could replace my income. I've been supported all along by wife Jan and we run workshops together."

What is it about hand building that appeals so much? "If you're throwing, you make a lot of stuff and have to quickly finish what you're doing. There has to be an infrastructure; shelving, drying etc. and it was just not suitable to my lifestyle. So I started coiling and love the process. I like the slowness. It's very contemplative and I like the sense of volume. It's like a balloon being inflated; the inside being pushed out. My work is very idiosyncratic. I've developed my own process."

There are two types of potter, he says. "Those who are working in a very fine tradition, tweaking and developing that system and then there are those that are very individual with eclectic influences. I belong to that second group. My work's fairly large and simple. It's decorated with a dramatic monochrome black and white linear pattern with crackle lines and black spots created by the control of a smoking process, which stains the ceramic surface. The idea for these patterns comes from photographs and drawings and are my responses to the landscape. Sometimes these patterns go vertically, horizontally or at diagonals. In a sense I'm a landscape artist but it's very abstract."

**Tall Black Ripple**, 53 x 18 cm, coil built and raku fired ceramic





Whirlpool, 19 x 44 cm, coil built and raku fired ceramic

Swirl 1, 22 x 37 cm, coil built and raku fired ceramic



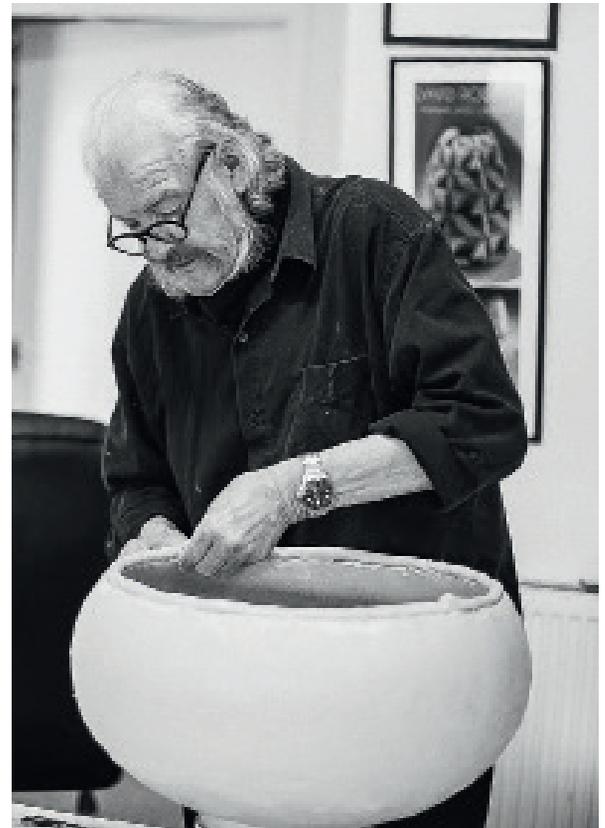
Open bowls appeal to David because of the detail that can be added. "There's a lot of work that goes on the inside. It's not just a blank plain surface but contains lots of internal decoration. Many potters leave the insides blank. I treat the bases and the insides with the same care as the vessels' exteriors. I enjoy the frisson from paying attention to these things."

Typically, David makes four pieces a month that are each fired twice. "The first is a biscuit firing between 1,020 and 1,050 degrees Celsius. This turns the clay into a pot but it is still porous afterwards. It cools and then I start decorating (which can take days) with slips and glazes in readiness for a second firing. I pour a slip over the piece and let it dry. This liquid slip is very important; it separates the clay from the next surface. Once that slip is dry the next surface is a simple raku glaze. That's then allowed to dry. I can then either leave it like that or I start inscribing linear patterns. At the moment my patterns are influenced by the rhythms and patterns of agitated water; the eddying and pooling. Once that's done the piece is placed inside a raku kiln."

David enjoys the raku process, which takes just 30 minutes at low temperature. "There's a mix of measurement and judgement. I use a lot of measurement to make sure that the kiln is heating at the right rate and I'm leaving the pot in long enough for the glaze to melt evenly. But the decision to withdraw the pot and stop the firing is a judgmental one. Each pot is fired individually. The firing cycle depends on the size

## Biography

David makes large, handbuilt, raku fired ceramics. He is acknowledged as being responsible for the introduction and promotion of modern, large-scale raku in Britain and instrumental in its re-introduction in America. "This is my life and my art," he says. "In my work I am attempting to transform a long ceramic tradition into a vibrant and contemporary art form relevant to the 21st century. I have no interest in making replicas or pastiches of Japanese tea bowls." His current work reflects an increasing engagement with landscape and an interest in postwar abstract painting. "Initially my pieces were covered with rich crackle and copper coloured glazes. Eventually being frustrated with their limitations I began experimenting with non-glazed raku surfaces in the early 1980s. Even in the very early pieces I felt this process had more potential as an expressive mark making activity than conventional glazed raku. My intuition has over time proved correct, subsequent experience has proved this process to be ongoing, developmental, flexible and dynamic." New work is constantly being explored while simultaneously previous themes are constantly being revisited and reworked. David's work is represented in many public and private collections internationally. He is an Honorary Fellow of the Craft Potters Association of Great Britain. "The reason I am very chuffed about that is that it's your peers deciding that you merit this award." He is an exhibiting member of Contemporary Applied Arts and a member of the International Academy of Ceramics, Geneva (AIC / IAC).



and form of the pot. For example an open bowl form is fired slower to allow its inside to melt simultaneously with the exterior. This is because the exterior is exposed to the actual flame of the burners which heat the kiln up.

"The fluxes in these low fired glazes are powerful; they melt rapidly. I look at the piece being fired through goggles and shine a torch on its surface through a spy hole. I can easily see the glaze melting. I'm physically involved with the process; I'm not just putting it in a kiln and controlling the temperature with a pyrometer. It's a very similar approach to wood firing and salt glazing, both processes that rely on controlling fire and smoke. It's much like cooking, too.

"The low temperature glaze melts and I remove the piece from the kiln when it's hot. This can be done with metal tongs but I prefer heat proof gloves. The piece is then placed in some sort of combustible inside a container. That container is then sealed with a lid. The piece is red hot and it sets the material (paper, straw or different types of sawdust) off. It starts flaming. The lid is put on and because the fire is starved of oxygen it turns to smoke. That smoke penetrates any kind of mark on the glaze and bleeds into the clay body. When all the smoke has disappeared and it has cooled, the piece is removed. The liquid clay barrier between the glaze and the body of the vessel results in the glaze and the slip just shelling off; like peeling an egg. Dust and an unpleasant surface remains. This is cleaned off with a microfibre cloth and a drop of water. Subsequently a wonderful black and white graphic pattern is revealed. My work isn't about colour but tones of black and white."

David started experimenting with this process in the early 1980s. "Unbeknown to me several other potters in America and Europe were also investigating variations on this process. It took several

years to understand what I was doing. I knew there was potential there and felt this was something I could develop and work with."

His own glaze is produced using commercial raw materials from Stoke-on-Trent. "It is just three substances; one is a low temperature glaze frit, the other is a small proportion of china clay to help with the adhesion and suspension, both are mixed with differing proportions of water depending on the required final result.

"The materials are simple but the process is quite complex."

### Tim Saunders

Tim Saunders is a British journalist. He regularly contributes to international publications on subjects including art, ceramics and travel. He enjoys making pottery and paints under the pseudonym Ted Wates.

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