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CERAMICS

Ancient
Traditions -

The Nala family of potters of Middle Drift

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he fame of three generations of potters, the Nala

family working in the traditional Zulu style modi-

C ll h 0 d fied by individual talent and self-expression is
O ectors ave recognise spreading rapidly from their home in the aloe-spiked
Thukela valley, near the village of Oyaya, 50 km from

the uniqueness of Nesta Eshowe. Now Nesta Nala has won the prestigious first
prize at the First Nattional Bank Vita Crafts Now

Exhibition of 1995, organised by the Crafts Council of

INellay S exceptional skill . South Africa, with a truly magnificent vessel.

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Top: Nesta Nala preparing for a
firing.

Left: Three small pots by Nesta
Nala.

Right: Nesta Nalaâ\200\231s magnificent
vessel which won the first prize
on the FNB Vita Crafts Now
Exhibition, 1995.

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Zulu beerpots are made for the beer ceremony which is associated with ancestor worship. Beer is made from sprouted millet (amabhele) and mealies, which are ground to a pulp, and mixed with lukewarm water. It is then boiled in a large container and left in a large brewing pot (imbiza) to ferment.

When the beer is ready it is strained through a woven strainer (ivovo). The imbiza is covered with a lid (imbenge) and stored in the dark sacred, section of the hut (umsamo). The imbenge is usually placed in such a fashion that a gap is left for the ancestors (amadlozi) to participate.

Rural Zulus find it very hard to part with old pots as they fear retribution from the amadlozi. Old pots are frequently placed outside huts to contain â\200\230medicineâ\200\231 which appeases the amadlozi.

Nesta Nala, whose pots are collectorsâ\200\231 pieces, learned the art from her mother Siphiwe, who still produces her own pots, incised or decorated with little pellets of clay called amasumpa (warts).

Nestaâ\200\231s pots are characterised by their combination of complex raised and incised designs and high gloss, the designs being meticulously built up and incised with a sharp instrument in contrast to the surface, which is burnished with smooth river stones before being finally polished with soot and fat.

Nestaâ\200\231s vessels are unique â\200\224 while using the traditional shapes of pots, her decorative style was given further impetus and inspired by Iron Age pottery she admired.

Leonard van Schalkwyk, an archaeologist from the Ondini Museum, Ulundi, was excavating in the Tugela valley near Wozi in 1982-3. He took some of the Iron Age pot shards that he had discovered to Nesta, and requested her to copy some of these motifs. (In Contemporary Ceramics in South Africa, by W Cruise and D Hemp, p. 122, is an excellent comparative photograph showing the potshards and Nestaâ\200\231s consequent reinterpretation thereof.)

Since then, she has rarely produced identical pots, her creativity being allowed full scope in clay. Her designs are based on geometrical and abstract forms interpreted in many ways, but she will also use stylised fish and, recently, floral designs.

In her earlier pots dating from the 1970s, Nesta used incised floral designs. (Some excellent examples are available in the collection of the African Art Centre, Durban.) After encountering the Iron Age specimens, she evolved a style of:

- i. Combining incised floral motifs with raised chevron

patterns arranged in slanting lozenges.

u. Geometric arrangements of raised chevrons, round pellets (amasumpa) and incised triangles.

i. Circular bands of raised chevrons and amasumpa.

iv. Incised triangles and semi-circles with a border of raised chevrons.

Since 1993 fish and shields have also appeared on Nesta's pots. During a field trip undertaken by Jannie van Heerden and Kim Sacks in 1994, Nesta was requested to make larger pots. This resulted in large izinkhamba and

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uphiso, with a dazzling variety of decorative motifs.

She is very aware of the effort and inspiration which go into every work and will not be rushed or brow-beaten by exploitative buyers. She proudly signs and dates her work, confident in her own skills and creativity and knowing that it has attracted praise. Private collectors have recognised the uniqueness of her exceptional skill. The Tatham and Durban Art Gallery have collected her work. The recently opened Vukani Museum in Eshowe has a splendid collection of her earlier work from the 1980s which will be augmented. It was in fact Reverend Lofroth, a perspicacious missionary based in Eshowe, who began the famous Vukani Collection, including many of Nesta's works, now housed in the Old Post Office in Eshowe.

Nesta's daughters Jabu, Thembi and Zanele are continuing the tradition. Thembi, still at school, has been inspired by the environment and her favourite subject, Biology, to create pots with figurative and narrative qualities. She builds up mermaids, stars, flowers, butterflies and letters in a low relief style. One of her most recent pots bore the title An Ecosystem. Jabu, the eldest daughter is making large pots similar in style and design to Nesta's.

Two types of local clay are used together. It is very hard when dug out and must be soaked in water before being mixed, cleaned and rolled between the palms to form coils. A circular woven base is used, the coils being pinched together as the pot is built up and smoothed with pieces of gourd.

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The designs are built up or incised when the pot is a little drier, and is then left to dry completely before being fired for about two hours in an open area using dried aloe or umthombothi wood.

Large storage pots for liquids may be fired twice. Traditional Zulu pottery is black, lacks a lip and takes specific forms – four of which are favoured by the Nalas = umancishana (a very small drinking pot), ukhamba (larger and used to serve beer or amasi – curds), uphiso (small and/or large, with a flared neck designed to stop spillage when carried, and imbiza (a large pot for storing liquids).

Nesta's versatility, however, knows no bounds – she has used many other forms with elegant style and often

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some whimsy, such as meat trays and small salt and pepper pots. Her pieces are always beautifully crafted and finished.

[It is important to mention the totally matriarchic setup of the Nala family. Nesta was conceived out of wedlock, as were her own six children. Pottery is the family's sole source of income. The pots have to be transported, often on foot for 3 km to the nearest bus stop and from there to markets such as the African Arts Centre in Durban, a good 250 km away.

Their work is steadily becoming better known and sought after, Pots are available commercially in Eshowe at the Unorthodox Gallery and Fort: Nongayini (Vahlhiream) Art Centre in Durban, the Kim Sacks Gallery in Johannesburg and soon further afield. Vv

Opposite: Siphiwe Nala

Left: Selection of pots by Nesta
Nala, collection Jannie van
Heerden.

Below: Three generations of
the Nala family, (left to right)
Siphiwe, Nesta and Thembi.

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