

## Judith Mkhabela, an inspirational potter from KwaZulu-Natal

<sup>1</sup>Tim Maggs and <sup>2</sup>Val Ward

<sup>1</sup>Archaeology Dept, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, 7701 South Africa;  
tim.maggs@telkomsa.net

<sup>2</sup>KwaZulu-Natal Museum, P. Bag 9070, Pietermaritzburg, 3200 South Africa; valward@vodamail.co.za

### ABSTRACT

The Evangelical Lutheran Church's Art and Craft Centre at Rorke's Drift provided an enlightened environment for black artists during the apartheid years when they had few other opportunities. There is a growing literature on these achievements, but potter Judith Mkhabela, who benefited from this influence, has not yet been recognised in print, probably because she worked mainly at home. This paper documents, as far as we have been able, the range of items, including the distinctive ceramic elephants, made by her and her associates, as well as some details about her life.

KEY WORDS: Judith Mkhabela, Rorke's Drift Art and Craft Centre, Zulu ceramics.

Two current issues make this an opportune time to produce this paper. The first of these concerns is the growing literature on the achievements of the Art and Craft Centre at Rorke's Drift, started by the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) in the 1960s, which has had such an important influence on the development of art in South Africa. The second refers to the fact that the ceramics produced by traditional Zulu potters are at last receiving the recognition they deserve, as is shown by the list of references below. These two themes provide intertwined strands which are expressed in the work of an innovative potter who, until now, has had virtually no published recognition. Since our paths crossed with hers briefly in the late 1980s, we have decided to place the relevant information we have on record before more is lost with the lapse of time.

The ELC Art and Craft Centre<sup>1</sup> opened at Rorke's Drift (S28° 21' 35.6"; E30° 32' 20.5"), near Dundee in KwaZulu-Natal, in 1963, initially producing textiles. The Pottery Workshop was added later in the 1960s but technical problems with clay and kiln were such that reduction-fired, glazed stoneware was produced mainly from 1973 (Clark & Wagner 1974; Le Roux 1998). From its foundation the ethos of the Centre has been to provide the materials and technical facilities of contemporary western arts while encouraging the innate artistic abilities of mostly local, rural people. The blending of western and African is particularly evident in the ceramic output from the Centre, since the medium of clay provided a direct link with a well-developed, local pottery tradition.<sup>2</sup>

It is interesting to note that within the Pottery Workshop from the start there has been a dichotomy based on gender. The women, emerging from the local tradition in which pots are almost always made by women, continued to produce vessels by the coiling technique, whereas the men used kick wheels to throw pots. This difference extended beyond the technical for it is evident in both the forms of the vessels and the modes of decoration employed. Here we could contrast the work of two of Rorke's Drift's most famous ceramists Dinah Molefe, sadly now deceased, and Gordon Mbatha who still leads the Pottery Workshop. Molefe's work clearly has its origins in the local pottery tradition and in particular the Zulu *ukhamba*, the richly decorated pot used for *utshwala*, low-alcohol beer. Much of Molefe's glazed stoneware retains the form and decorative elements, such as the 'geometric' hatched and cross-hatched and grooved patterns of



Fig. 1. *Ukhamba*, beer pot by Judith Mkhabela. Photo courtesy of Otto Lundbohm; date not available.

the local ware. By contrast, Mbatha's forms are more western in concept—bowls, tall vases—the figurative, slip decoration reflecting the distinctive imagery of Rorke's Drift tapestry and graphic design (Clark & Wagner 1974: 145–55).

Prior to the nineteenth-century colonisation of KwaZulu-Natal, pots were used for a variety of functions, particularly for cooking, but during the past 100 years or so their function has been increasingly associated with *utshwala*, with different vessel types being made for brewing, storage, transport and serving this beverage (Reusch 1998; Jolles 2005; Fowler 2006; Armstrong et al. 2008). Among these types it is the *ukhamba* (plural *izinkamba*), used for storing and serving, that normally receives the most attention during manufacture. The exterior is usually well burnished, it carries the most elaborate decoration and, along with some of the other types, it is subjected to a second firing in a smoky atmosphere which produces a glossy black surface finish. Both the decoration and the secondary blackening of the pots are markers of respect for the ancestors (*amadlozi*), because *utshwala* is always “consumed with the ancestors participating” (Reusch 1996: 115, 1998: 26). Both the vessel and its function are deeply rooted in Zulu cosmology.

There are quite marked regional styles of pottery decoration within KwaZulu-Natal, the most relevant to this discussion being that of the Msinga region (Jolles 2005). Here decoration is in the form of grooving to produce patterns of hatched and cross-hatched shapes. These tend to be plant-like motifs around the Thukela River, more geometrical shapes, especially triangles, further north (i.e. closer to Rorke's Drift) and sometimes a combination of plant and geometric forms (Jolles 2005). Echoes of this code of decoration are apparent in the work of Dinah Molefe and the other women potters from the early days at Rorke's Drift (Clark & Wagner 1974). This is also the case with the traditional pots produced by Judith Mkhabela (Fig. 1).

It is against this interwoven backdrop of African tradition and Scandinavian enlightenment that we can begin to examine the contribution of Judith Mkhabela (Fig. 2). We know nothing of her early life but think it probable that she learned the tradition of pot-making from a relative, perhaps her mother or mother-in-law. We also don't know precisely how or when she came to be associated with the Rorke's Drift Art and



Fig. 2. Mkhabela home near St. Augustine's Mission, 1988. From left: Judith Mkhabela, Aubrey her son and other family members with a few ceramic animals in front.

Craft Centre, though Gordon Mbatha (pers. comm. 21 May 2010) was able to help us substantially. Evidently she worked as a weaver for a time and she also worked in the ceramic studio, so she was exposed to the creative ethos provided by the Centre. But it seems that she was not based at Rorke's Drift itself for more than a few years. We have recorded only two ceramic items made by her and fired in the Centre's stoneware kiln, both signed and dated to 1976 (Figs 3 & 4).

Our own interest started when, as archaeologists doing research in the Thukela Basin in the 1970s and 1980s, we became aware of some quite remarkable earthenware elephants, their bodies blackened like the traditional *izinkamba*, their backs decorated in the local hatched ceramic style. Local farmers had these on their verandas and, on occasion, we saw them for sale at Rorke's Drift and at Vukani, the craft cooperative and shop at Eshowe which, like the Rorke's Drift Art and Craft Centre, was also an initiative of the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church. Being involved with the establishment of the KwaZulu Cultural Museum at Ulundi, we tried to obtain examples for the collection. Visiting Rorke's Drift in 1988, we were told they had none for sale at that time, but we were given the name Judith Mkhabela and instructions as to where she lived, across the Mzinyathi (Buffalo) River in the St Augustine's Mission area.

The present low-level bridge at Rorke's Drift had not yet been built so we had to take an hour-long, roundabout drive over some very poor roads to reach her house (Fig. 2). It became clear that this isolation in a poor rural community was making it very difficult for her to market her products. Gordon Mbatha (pers. comm. 21 May 2010) told us that there was a small rowing boat that served as a ferry on the Mzinyathi at



Fig. 3. Stoneware bird-pot with both painted and grooved decoration; signed Judith Mkhabela, dated 1976 and with Rorke's Drift logo. (Courtesy of Valerie Maggs) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 26).

Rorke's Drift, but she would still have had to carry items on foot for several kilometres to reach the Art and Craft Centre. Gabriel Shandu (pers. comm. 19 May 2010), who worked for many years at Vukani, said that he last saw her at her home in 1986, so it is possible that visits from this craft cooperative were reduced or ceased at this time, further increasing her isolation.

Our 1988 visit was the first of several in association with Leonard van Schalkwyk, then of the KwaZulu Monuments Council, when we were able to order and transport a substantial number of ceramic animals, finding homes for them in museum and private collections. Sadly this relationship did not last long, for in about 1989 we heard that the Mkhabela family had become involved in some local feud and had had to vacate the neighbourhood. It seems that Judith and her daughter moved to the Newcastle area where we lost track of her. Recently we were told that she had died in 2005.

#### JUDITH MKHABELA'S CERAMICS

The earliest dated items that we have been able to trace are the two glazed stoneware pieces made at Rorke's Drift in 1976. One of these is a pot-on-pedestal-base to which the head, tail and wings of a bird have been added (Fig. 3). The upper surfaces have both grooved and painted decoration, mainly in triangles, while the lower portions carry patterns formed by painted segment shapes, of which more later in this paper. The



Fig. 4. Stoneware pot with bust of a married woman; signed Judith Mkhabela, dated 1976 and with Rorke's Drift logo. (Coll. ELC Art and Craft Centre, Rorke's Drift) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 24).

base has her signature, the Rorke's Drift tree-of-life logo, catalogue number M. 297 and the date 76. Otto Lundbohm, who was principal of the Rorke's Drift Art School in the 1970s, has a photograph of a bird-pot, very similar in shape and grooved decoration, but made of earthenware, so lacking the painted decoration and glaze. This suggests that Judith Mkhabela may have developed this form of vessel before working in the Rorke's Drift Pottery Workshop. She was still making earthenware bird-pots of similar form when we visited her in 1988.

Figurative additions came to characterise many of the women's ceramics from the Rorke's Drift studio during the 1970s, particularly those of Elizabeth Mbatha (e.g. Bell & Calder 1998: cat. 142 & 146). We are not able to establish what part Judith Mkhabela's influence may have played in this development, though Gordon Mbatha (pers. comm. 21 May 2010) thought that the bird-pot was her innovation. This form

is still produced by Rorke's Drift potters today. Ian Calder (pers. comm. 18 May 2011) suggests that the idea may have come from a European model. This could have been the popular nineteenth-century hen-on-nest form, where the hen acts as lid to the nest-shaped bowl.

The second stoneware item is a remarkable pot surmounted by a woman's head, flanked by two knobbed appendages and with a spout facing forwards (Fig. 4). Decoration is again based on her iconic segment shapes, here outlined with raised clay bands, further decorated with impressed patterns.

We are unable to provide evidence as to the possible meaning of the bird-pot form, beyond its decorative value. But in the case of the woman-pot it would be difficult to deny that some complex symbolism is involved. We have already seen that the *ukhamba* is not a neutral object but is heavily imbued with cosmological significance in Zulu tradition. Pots may symbolise people (David et al. 1988; Evers & Huffman 1988; Armstrong et al. 2008: 542) and this is surely the case here where the body of the vessel carries a woman's neck and head. More specifically this is a married woman as demonstrated by her *isicholo* headdress and perhaps also the raised band of decoration around the belly of the pot which may reflect the thong (*umchilo*) that fastens the leather skirt (*isidwaba*) of a married woman (op. cit. 528). There is even the suggestion that the segmental 'half-moon' shapes, called *inyanga* (moon) (Lawton 1967: 56; Jolles 2005: 122, 129), may symbolise women's reproductive cycle (Armstrong et al. 2008: 528). This pot surely reflects the status of a woman as wife and potential mother.

As with the bird-pot form, the married-woman-pot has also been produced by other Rorke's Drift potters, for example by Elizabeth Mbatha (Bell & Calder 1998: cat. 150). We do not know if Judith Mkhabela was the innovator of this form.

Sometime after 1976, and we are inclined to think it was soon thereafter, Judith stopped working at Rorke's Drift and in stoneware. Instead she returned to the traditional earthenware techniques, making and firing her wares at her home, several kilometres across the Mzinyathi River. We don't know why this happened but Gabriel Shandu (pers. comm. 19 May 2010) from Vukani recalls that she was a widow supporting several children, so it is possible that family commitments required her presence at home.

It was evidently from this time that she was producing the earthenware animals that became her trademark. The requisite raw materials were close at hand; we were shown the shallow pit near her house from which she collected the clay. Otto Lundbohm visited her and photographed a pottery-firing pit that she shared with neighbouring potters who fired their wares—her animals and their large *izimbiza* pots used for brewing *utshwala* (Fig. 5). Lundbohm also recorded an occasion when Mkhabela visited Rorke's Drift and demonstrated the secondary, blackening firing of pots in a shallow pit using grass as fuel (Fig. 6).

### *Making the animals*

As we have seen, pots symbolise more than mere containers in the regional tradition. Nevertheless, the transition from the pot form to a figurative mode, whether human or animal, requires considerable mental readjustment. Significant here is the issue of symmetry. A pot, when viewed from above, being circular, has infinite axes of symmetry.



Fig. 5. Firing pit shared by Judith Mkhabela and neighbouring potters with their large *izimbiza* beer brewing pots. Photo courtesy of Otto Lundbohm.



Fig. 6. Judith Mkhabela at Rorke's Drift demonstrating the secondary firing, using grass to blacken pots. Photo courtesy of Otto Lundbohm.



Fig. 7. Judith Mkhabela (right) and her sister making elephants, 1970s. Note body and head coiled on top of upturned enamel basin, conical legs being prepared. Judith applying legs and smoothing surfaces. Cloverleaf hole and grooved decoration not yet applied. Note forward curve to the trunk and more protruding tusks characteristic of some earlier elephants. Photo courtesy of Otto Lundbohm.

The decoration on the *ukhamba*, being a repeat pattern, provides limits to the number of possible axes of symmetry. We have noted that pots with from two to ten axes are common among local *izinkamba*, and that as many as 18 axes may occur on pots with small repeat patterns. But still the pot does not have specific direction—there is no front, back, right or left.

As soon as the figurative elements are added, as with the bird-pot or the married-woman-pot, a new symmetry is imposed. Now there is a front and back; the only possible axis of symmetry is along the central line—the two sides reflecting each other. We are not suggesting that the potter necessarily followed this rather mechanistic chain of thought, but the fact that she made this transition is very evident in the complex geometry she developed for the decoration of her ceramic animals, as documented below.

But the transition from pot to elephant is still more complex, as we have learnt from a valuable set of photographs taken by Otto Lundbohm of Mkhabela making elephants at her home, helped by her sister. The animals were initially formed by coiling, with their bodies in a vertical orientation, rear end set on a base provided by an upturned enamel basin, the head facing upwards (Fig. 7). The conical legs were then added and the animals rotated through a right angle to stand on their legs, backs upwards and bellies down.

With the form roughly complete, Mkhabela would cradle the animal on her lap and apply finishing touches, ears, tusks, etc., and smooth the surface. It was only at a late stage that she cut the cloverleaf-shaped hole in the belly of the sculpture. This would have been a necessary feature technically, to avoid the body exploding during firing, but at another level it seems to symbolise the ‘mouth of the pot’. Even on her pigs, with their open mouths which would have relieved any internal pressure during firing, she still

made this cloverleaf hole. The cloverleaf as ‘mouth of pot’ now faces downwards—the transition from pot to animal body has involved two reorientations.

This transformation from pot to body thus involves both a sculptural reorientation of the clay structure as well as a new concept of symmetry in the patterning of the cross-hatched decoration, which acknowledges the orientation of the work. Her ability to combine these two fields of innovation so successfully is quite remarkable, as are her technical skills.

These special abilities were clearly recognised by the Scandinavians who ran the Rorke’s Drift Art Centre (Ian Calder pers. comm. May 2010; Otto Lundbohm pers. comm. June 2010). We were told by Gordon Mbatha (pers. comm. 21 May 2010) that Mkhabela had tried to teach the other women potters how to make ceramic elephants, but the results had not been successful and the attempt was not continued. He showed us an ungainly looking stoneware elephant from the collection which bore out this point.

Otto Lundbohm (pers. comm. June 2010) was enthusiastic about Mkhabela’s large elephants and asked her how she came to make them. She told him that she had started “with small elephants for her children to play with while she was working with pots etc. By pure chance they became bigger and bigger and she found a good market”, selling them at Rorke’s Drift. Ian Calder (pers. comm. 18 May 2011) told us that Peder and Ulla Gowenius, who started the Centre, were already aware of her elephants in the 1960s and that they encouraged her to make larger ones. Gordon Mbatha (pers. comm. 21 May 2010) remembers that the large elephants were so difficult to transport and market that they suggested she also make some medium and smaller ones.

For the documentation of these works we have chosen to illustrate pairs of images, a photograph and a line drawing. For the photographs we have tried to choose an angle that best shows the form of the animal. The line drawings were sketched directly from the animals, and they are therefore not accurate to scale or proportion. (All line drawings as well as photographs, unless otherwise acknowledged, are by Tim Maggs.) Our aim has been to flatten out the pattern of the grooved decoration in order to show the variety and aesthetic quality of the geometric compositions. Ears and tails are indicated to show the position of the decoration on the animal’s body. These sketches allow the viewer to see the whole of each decorative pattern ‘unwrapped’ from around the animal’s body, an image that would not otherwise be visible in total from any one angle of view.

A small elephant figure from 1988 demonstrates the basics of her style (Fig. 8). The body has the typical broad head with separated ears which are quite abruptly stepped up from the head at the sides. The end of the trunk is curved towards the rear. Each tusk is quite short and has an additional protrusion about midway. Geometry of the decoration is quite simple yet the axis of symmetry, along the back line, is concealed by the outlines of a series of four quadrilaterals, the extensions of which, at each end provide the framework to which a row of three foliate (leaf) shapes are added on each flank. The building blocks of her patterns are evident—the quadrilaterals, foliates and segments, each filled with grooved cross-hatching; only the triangles are missing here. Note that with her characteristic style of cross-hatching, one series of grooves follows the long axis of the shape to be filled while the other series is always at right angles to this. In this example the segments play a minor role, indeed one has been omitted, but the segment is the main element in most of her designs.

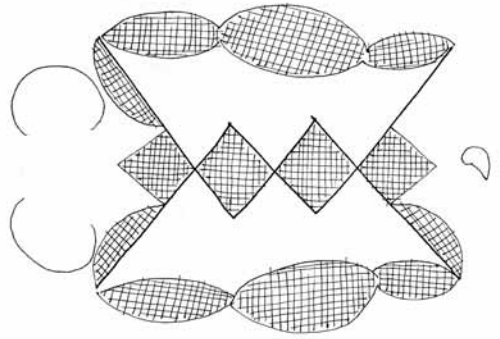


Fig. 8. Elephant (h: 20 cm, l: 25 cm) showing Mkhabela's characteristic decorative elements arranged in a simple pattern. (Coll. T. Maggs, 1988) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 1).

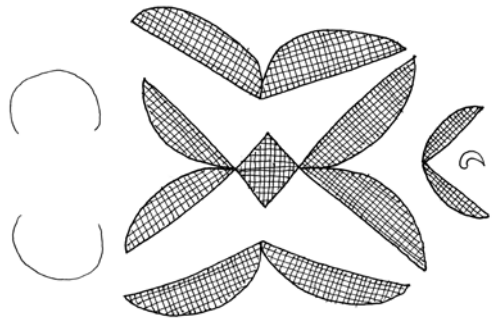


Fig. 9. Elephant (h: 29 cm, l: 36 cm.) decorated with five paired segments and central quadrilateral (Coll. Durban Art Gallery 151, 1987) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 27).



Fig. 10. Elephant (h: 29 cm, l: 36 cm.) decorated with six paired segments and central quadrilateral (Coll. Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg, 818/86, 1986) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 13).

This is evident in two medium-sized elephants (Figs 9 & 10) where the decoration is built up of paired segments, touching at the ends and set at an angle to form 'V' shapes. A quadrilateral forms the centre in each case.

It is on the larger elephants (more than half a metre long and quite heavy to lift) that the complexity of her geometric imagination becomes apparent. Figure 11 is still fairly simple, where two major quadrilaterals, set diagonally on the body, are infilled with her typical shapes; paired segments complete the design. The diagonal layout forming a rectangle (or at least quadrilateral) becomes bolder in Figure 12, while Figure 13 has a nesting triangular theme, flanked by two quadrilaterals, the whole made up of segments but for two triangles along the back.

Figure 14 has a complex central pattern including crossing diagonal lines, flanked again by two quadrilaterals. Mkhabela's full graphic 'alphabet' is present here including foliate, segmental, quadrilateral and triangular cross-hatched shapes. Figure 15 has an even more complex pattern based on diagonals.

This elephant, from the Rorke's Drift collection, differs from the others in that the trunk (now broken) curves forwards rather than backwards. Although undated, we think this is relatively early, as some elephants in Otto Lundbohm's 1970s photographs also have forward curving trunks (see Fig. 7 above).

We have been able to trace two other elephants, made in the 1970s, which provide some evidence on the development through time. The elephant (Fig. 16) was bought by Paul Mikula from Vukani in the 1970s and here the sculptural form and detailing is in line with the later examples. The decorative shapes and geometric layout are also unmistakable; however, this is the only example we have seen where the shapes are infilled with only the longitudinal parallel lines—none are cross-hatched. By contrast, the sculptural form of the second example shows significant differences (Fig. 17). This elephant belonged to Marietjie van der Merwe, the Cape Town-based potter who was appointed as Ceramics Advisor to the Pottery Workshop, and was closely associated with the development of ceramics at Rorke's Drift from 1971. As a regular visitor she taught ceramics and was largely instrumental in establishing the stoneware tradition there, with the new kiln opening in 1973 (Clark & Wagner 1974; Le Roux 1998). Several features distinguish this elephant from the later ones. It has longer front legs, longer trunk (though bent back not forwards), the head more delineated from the body and, most noticeably, the tusks are quite different. Here the tusk, shown as cylindrical, extends from a protrusion angled outwards from the body to denote the root of the tusk (Fig. 17).

All the other elephants we have recorded (Maggs & Ward 2010) show a more stylised treatment where the tusk is shown as a flattened ridge raised but not separated from the body. Midway along this ridge is a roughly square further protrusion, apparently a stylisation of the previously displayed root of the tusk. The stylised tusks, shorter legs and backwards-turned trunks came to characterise all her later elephants, yet even with these earliest recorded examples her iconic geometrical patterning was already well established. The graphic elements seem to have been fully developed while the details of her monumental animal forms were still evolving.

In addition to the elephant, among her earthenware animals Judith Mkhabela was drawn to the form of the domestic pig. The elephant is a powerful symbol of royal authority in Zulu cosmology, which may explain her choice. But the pig, being a colonial



Fig. 11. Large elephant (h: 42 cm. l: 46 cm.) with pattern of quadrilaterals and paired segments. (Coll. Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg, 817/86, 1986) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 12).

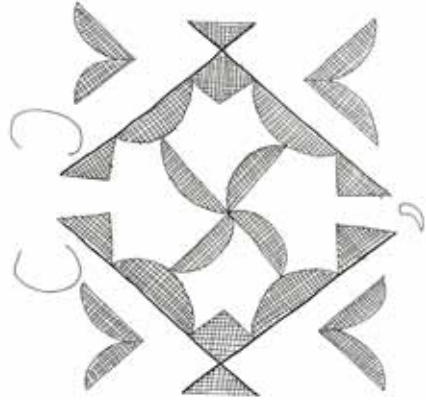


Fig. 12. Medium-sized elephant (h: 32 cm. l: 38cm.) showing bolder quadrilateral-based decoration. (Coll. C. Beckett, 1988) (Maggs & Ward 2 010, cat. 9).



Fig. 13. Large elephant (h: 46 cm. l: 56 cm.) showing triangular decorative patterning. (Coll. V. Ward, 1988) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 11).

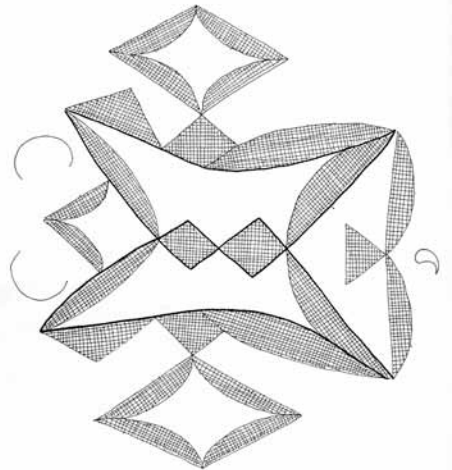


Fig. 14. Large elephant (h: 47 cm. l: 53 cm.) with complex geometric patterning. (Coll. KwaZulu Cultural Museum, Ulundi C2323, 1988) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 14).

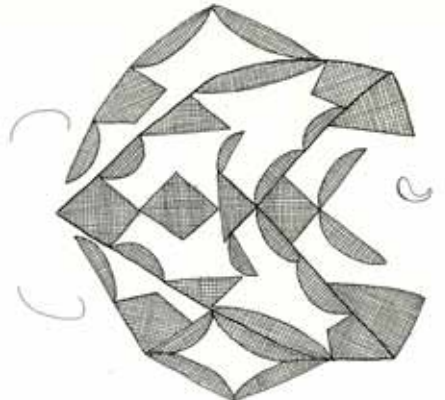


Fig. 15. Large elephant (h: 45 cm. l: 58 cm.) with complex geometric patterning based on diagonal lines. (Coll. ELC Art and Craft Centre, Rorke's Drift, 1970s) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 18).

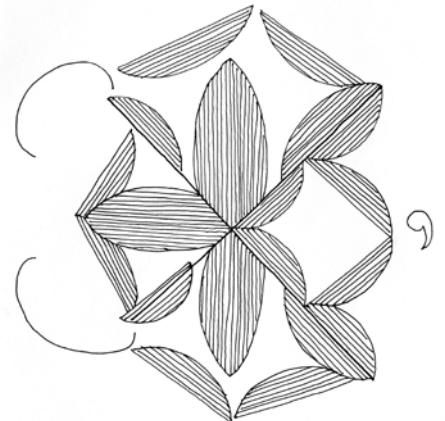


Fig. 16. Medium sized elephant (h: 33 cm. l: 41 cm.), the only recorded example where the typical decorative shapes are hatched in only one direction. (Coll. Paul Mikula, 1970s) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 30).

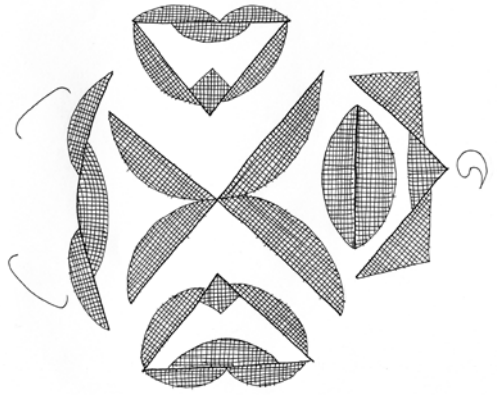


Fig. 17. Large elephant (h: 35 cm. l: 45 cm.) with characteristic decorative patterning but different sculptural features, viz. longer front legs, trunk and head, as well as more naturalistic tusks. (Coll. Hugo van der Merwe, 1970s) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 31).

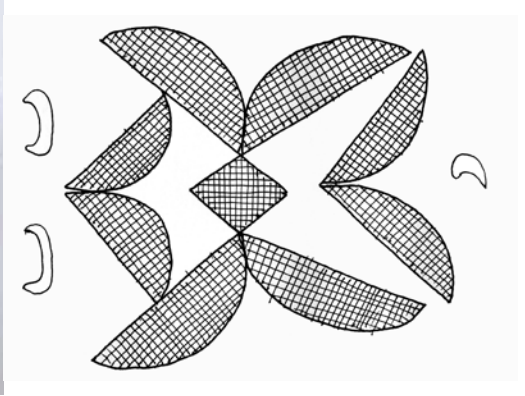


Fig. 18. Small pig (h: 21 cm. l: 29 cm.) with characteristic Judith Mkhabela geometric decoration. (Coll. L. & C. van Schalkwyk, 1988) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 22).

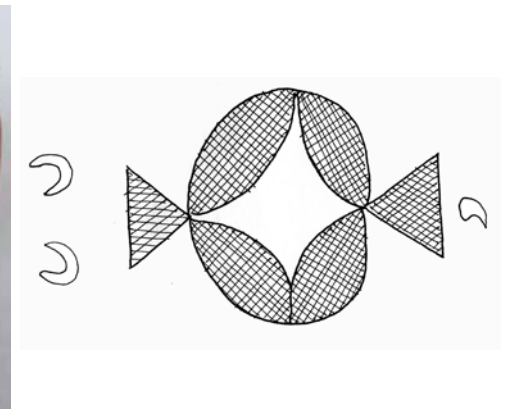


Fig. 19. Small pig (h: 19 cm. l: 29 cm.) where the decorative elements form a circle with two triangles. (Coll. L. & C. van Schalkwyk, 1988) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 21).

period import, has no such associations. Perhaps the rotund bodies of both animals appealed to her as a potter.

As with the elephants, her pigs vary in size and the larger examples have more complex geometric decoration. A small pig (Fig. 18) is decorated with four of her typical paired and cross-hatched segments, arranged around a central rectangle. The layout concept is reminiscent of that on one of the smaller elephants (Fig. 9) although each one is slightly different. Another small pig shows quite a different concept where four foliates form a rough circle, with a triangle at the front and back (Fig. 19).

Of the larger pigs, the decoration on Figure 20 is centred on two nested quadrilaterals, the whole pattern being made up of cross-hatched segments. By contrast, Figure 21 is



Fig. 20. Large pig (h: 34 cm. l: 51 cm.). (Coll. T. Maggs, 1988) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 5).

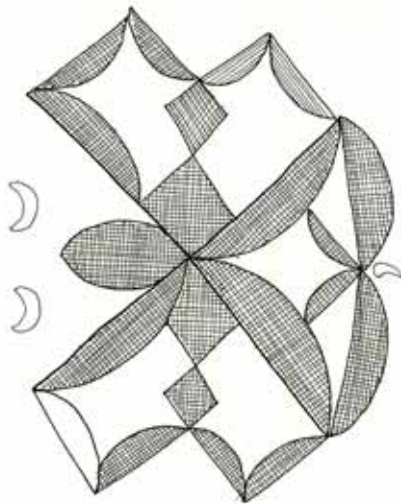


Fig. 21. Large pig (h: 33 cm. l: 43 cm.). Note one segment left unhatched. (Coll. KwaZulu Cultural Museum, Ulundi, 1988) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 17).

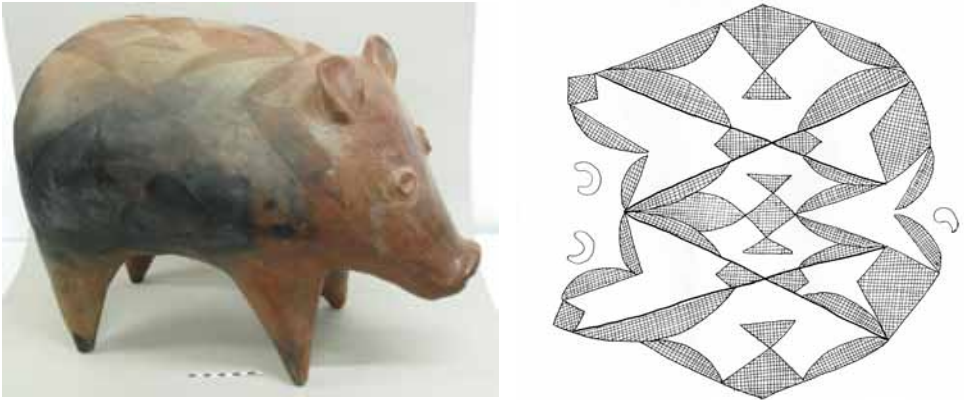


Fig. 22. Large pig (h: 46 cm. l: 63 cm.) where intersecting lines form three diamond shapes and there is a complex arrangement of hatched panels. (Coll. KwaZulu Cultural Museum, Ulundi C2324, 1988) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 15).

based on two diagonal lines crossing the animal's back and forming an X. Segments, quadrilaterals and a foliate add complexity to the basic structure. Most complex of the pigs, Figure 22 has a decorative geometry based on two sets of parallel lines crossing each other obliquely to form three 'diamond shapes'; these and the intervening spaces showing complex infills with her typical cross-hatched panels.



Fig. 23. Small warthog (h: 16 cm. l: 24 cm.) with exaggerated tusks but no decoration. (Coll. T. Maggs, 1988) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 3).

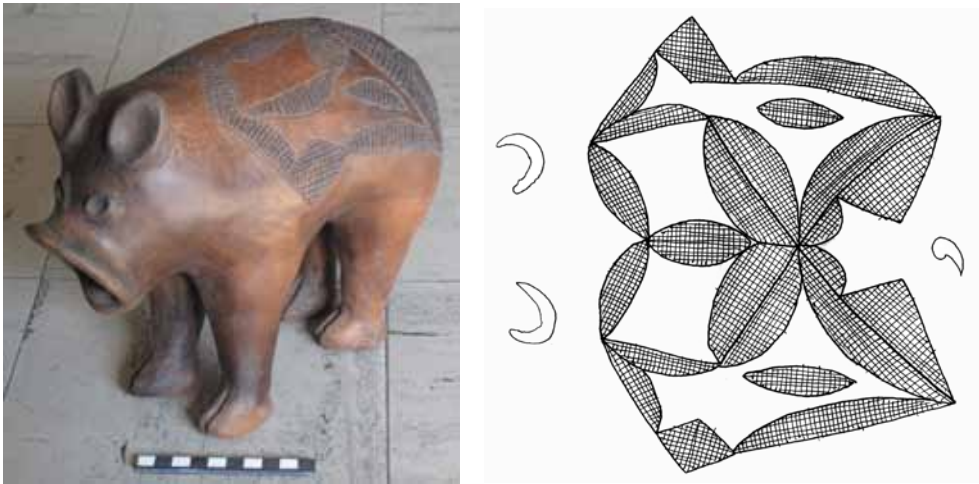


Fig. 24. Small pig (h: 22 cm l: 28 cm.) made by Buyisiwe Mkhabela, Judith's daughter. As far as we can determine, all the items illustrated above were made by Judith Mkhabela herself. Note typical Mkhabela decoration but different sculptural details to head and hooves. (Coll. Durban Art Gallery 376, 1989) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 28).

This pig and the large elephant (Fig. 15) are particularly good examples of her layout strategy. Firstly, no two patterns are alike, except perhaps on the smallest animals. Secondly, while there is always left-right symmetry along the centre line of the animal's back, she never follows the obvious solution of placing a main construction line here. She follows the more difficult path of building the symmetrical structure with a series of usually oblique lines. Since it is improbable that she made preliminary sketches, we would argue that she must have had a mental image of each pattern before applying it to the three-dimensional surface of the animal. We have become increasingly impressed by the evidence of this creative skill as our recording has progressed.

Two other pigs complete the list. One is a small warthog, undecorated but with extravagant tusks (Fig. 23), perhaps an experiment since we saw this form on only one visit to her house. The other (Fig. 24) differs in form from the other pigs in that it has a short, broad snout and forward-protruding, cloven hooves. While the decoration follows the Mkhabela style, the burnish is more evenly applied.

This pig, from the Durban Art Gallery collection, was acquired in July 1989 and the maker is recorded as Buyisiwe Mkhabela. On enquiring at Rorke's Drift we were told that Buyisiwe is Judith's daughter. This is the only information we have to indicate that Buyisiwe worked with, and learnt from, her mother.

#### ELIZABETH AND MARTHA MSIYA

During the course of this project (Maggs & Ward 2010), as our recording progressed and as we started to sketch the decorative patterns on the animals' backs, we became aware that another distinct style characterised some of the animals. We have been able to identify the makers of this style because the catalogue information on one of the elephants in the Durban Art Gallery collection records the artists as Elizabeth and Martha Msiya. At Rorke's Drift, Gordon Mbatha (pers. comm. 21 May 2010) recalled

that there had been other makers of these animals and the name Msiya was familiar to him in this respect.

One of the surprises we found is that among the batches of animals we ordered and bought from Mkhabela in 1988, several elephants are clearly in the Msiya style (as detailed below). Further questioning at Rorke's Drift and from Gabriel Shandu (pers. comm. 19 May 2010) at Eshowe revealed that Judith Mkhabela and Martha Msiya were not related but they did work together, evidently Msiya learning this delicate procedure from Mkhabela. Though they "worked together" they chose to make rather different forms.

This explains why, in the batches we ordered and collected from Judith's own home, some of the items were in the Msiya style, although she made no mention of this at the time of our visits. Clearly Mkhabela was also helping the Msiyas to market their products and perhaps, because our order was unusually large, they were helping her produce sufficient to fulfil the demand.

We are now confident that individual pieces can be differentiated according to the Mkhabela versus the Msiya style. Firstly we have seen only elephants in the Msiya style, no pigs or other creatures. Secondly, in terms of body shape, the Msiya style has relatively narrow heads often with a ridge running from between the ears to the trunk, the ears being close together, indeed usually joined, and they are not so sharply stepped away from the body. Thirdly the tusks, while like the Mkhabela style in having lateral knobs, are much longer, usually running from the middle of the front leg to the trunk, where the Mkhabela tusks start in front of the front leg. Fourthly the Msiya elephants tend to be longer in the body. But it is in the decoration that the differences become even more pronounced. The main element of the Msiya style is the foliate motif not the segment. Within this shape the long element of the cross-hatching follows curved, not straight, lines parallel to one side of the foliate. The intersecting series of lines meet these at an oblique, not right, angle. Both series of lines are spaced wider apart than in the Mkhabela style. Some shapes are filled in with curved, parallel grooves without cross-hatching, while some shapes are left plain.

The small Msiya-style elephants tend to be decorated with pairs of cross-hatched foliates (Fig. 25). However, one of these (Fig. 26) is anomalous in that it has Msiya-



Fig. 25. Small elephant (h: 17 cm. l: 26 cm.) in the Msiya style; note joined ears, longer tusk and foliate decorated panels. (Coll. J. Sealy, 1988) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 2).

style decoration but the body has the broad head, separated ears and short tusks of the Mkhabela style. The implication that it was of Mkhabela make but Msiya decoration suggests an even closer working relationship between the two families.

The overall elliptical form of this decoration is echoed on a larger elephant (Fig. 27) where the Msiya decorative elements are clearly identifiable. This item, from the Rorke's Drift collection, is the only animal we have seen that was not blackened in a secondary firing, but retains its terracotta colouring.

At its most elaborate, as demonstrated by this series of large elephants (Figs 28, 29 & 30), the Msiya decoration can become as complex as Mkhabela's, while retaining its distinctive qualities. With a geometric centre, a square or rectangle, the sides are elaborated with patterns of foliates and arcs. The result is a softer, more curvilinear effect, compared with the more geometric structure of Judith's larger pieces.

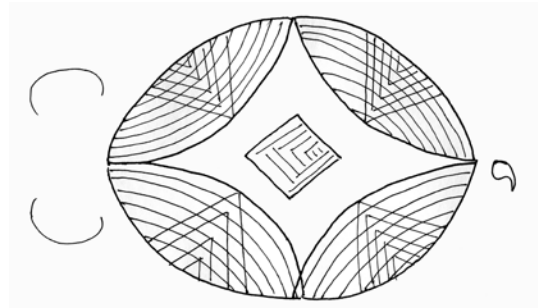


Fig. 26. Small elephant (h: 20 cm. l: 24 cm.) in Mkhabela sculptural style (separated ears, shorter tusk) but Msiya decorative style (foliates, curved infilling lines). (Coll. L. & C. van Schalkwyk, 1988) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 23)

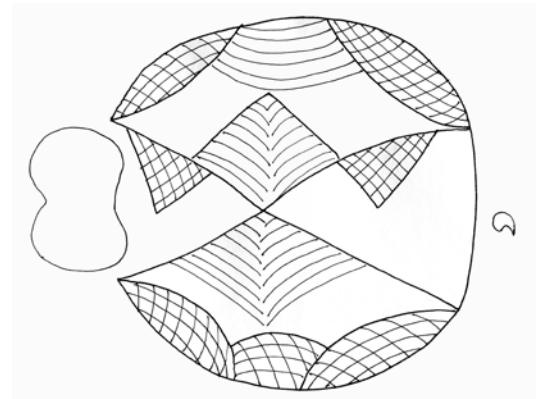


Fig. 27. Medium-sized elephant (h: 32 cm. l: 46 cm.) in the Msiya style, the decoration within a circular outline. The terracotta colour shows that, unlike the other items, this did not undergo a secondary smoke firing. (Coll. ELC Art and Craft Centre, Rorke's Drift, date unknown) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 20).

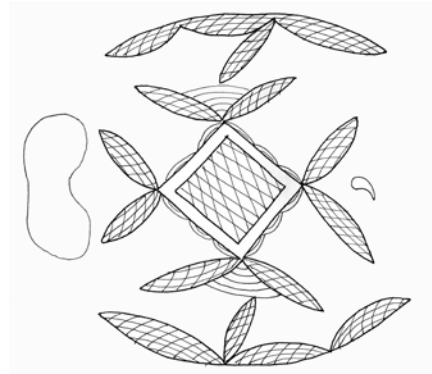


Fig. 28. Large elephant (h: 42 cm. l: 52 cm.) in the Msiya style, the foliate decoration developed around a central square. Note that the trunk (now broken) apparently curved forwards like some of Judith's earlier examples. (Coll. ELC Arts and Craft Centre, Rorke's Drift, date unknown) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 19).



Fig. 29. Large elephant (h: 41 cm. l: 55 cm.) made by Elizabeth and Martha Msiya, note similar decorative style to Fig. 28, but the triple foliates have been transformed into scalloped shapes. (Coll. Durban Art Gallery 431, 1990) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 29).



Fig. 30. Large elephant (h: 43 cm. l: 55 cm. Weight: 16 kg.) in the Msiya style, decorated with a complex pattern of cross-hatched foliates, arcs and 'V' shapes, centred on a plain rectangle. (Coll. T. Maggs, 1988) (Maggs & Ward 2010, cat. 25).

At the beginning of this project we had assumed that Judith Mkhabela was the sole maker of the earthenware animals. As the research progressed we learnt that members of her family had also contributed—a sister, according to Otto Lundbohm, as well as Buyisiwe her daughter. The fact that she also worked with and helped the Msiyas to market their work also came as a surprise. This remarkable artistic endeavour flourished under difficult circumstances for a period of about fifteen years, but came to an end two decades ago. Judith Mkhabela was evidently the innovator and inspiration within this group of women potters from an impoverished rural area of KwaZulu-Natal.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Hereafter referred to as the Centre or Rorke's Drift.
- <sup>2</sup> Following the Gun War in Lesotho (then known as Basutoland) in 1880–81 the colonial administration moved a group of Tlokwa people to the area across the Mzinyathi River from Rorke's Drift. These Southern Sotho people were culturally distinct from Zulu communities already living in the area. However we have not noticed any influence from Sotho ceramic styles in the earthenware which is the main subject of this paper. We would agree with Jolles (2005) that the local style (his Msinga Region) is a geographical variant of the broader Zulu concept of pottery—a tradition which developed during the later nineteenth century and through the twentieth century.

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