In honour of Armstrong

A RETROSPECTIVE exhibition of the work of Juliet Armstrong, who was perhaps the best known ceramic artist in KwaZulu-Natal until she died 18 months ago, is now on view at the Tatham Art Gallery in Pietermaritzburg – until Sunday, August 17.

Armstrong obtained her BA Fine Arts degree at the then University of Natal in 1972, before heading to England for two years to attend Leicester University where she studied glassblowing and industrial ceramics.

She later worked as a governor in Stuttgart, Germany, for the famous Porsche family and travelled across America before returning to South Africa and her alma mater, where she did her masters degree thesis on the well-known British ceramic artist, William de Morgan, and rose to professorship.

She taught at the UKZN Pietermaritzburg for 30 years.

Armstrong was best known for her exquisite porcelain sculptures, several of which are on display at this exhibition.

She became well known for championing Zulu pottery and played an enormous role in the decades before her death, promoting this work and lending a helping hand, specifically to the Nala family and the Magwaza sisters.

Armstrong didn't make a huge body of work because she was focused more specifically on social upliftment through her work with rural crafters.

During her years at UKZN, she did extensive research into the use of bone china as a sculpture medium and developed a method to lessen the water content in the porcelain, which some artists favour.

Colleague Prof Ian Calder, also one of UKZN’s finest ceramic artists, said of her: “Armstrong's greatest achievement was the manner in which she pushed the boundaries of a notoriously intractable medium – bone china.

“Bone china is an almost magical material. Its preciousness, in part, answers the conundrum of what is art, and what craft.

“Yet it can't be moulded by hand, coiled, or thrown like conventional ceramic materials.

“Her genius lay in finding unique ways to use this rather gassy material.

“Yet designed for factory not individual production, yet she was able to craft enormous wall hangings from tiny shards of the material, which showed that clay could be used in different ways and that it did not have to look perfect.”

Together Calder and Armstrong helped the profile of Zulu pottery through a research project, which began in 1995, that put several black potters on the national and international road to success.

In a tribute to her, Brendon Bell, director of the Tatham, said: “Juliet was a huge loss to ceramics in this country. When you look at our collection so many pieces in it are connected to her through her work and her teaching... her spirit wanders through our collection.”

Armstrong leaves a larger than life memory. She was not a feminist per se but she was deeply interested in women’s points of view.

Women potters of KZN were her focus. Their work and lives consumed her and she was involved in the details of their lives.

Her work, life skills and generosity will be kept alive through this retrospective.

Running concurrently with the retrospective is the travelling Legacy Exhibition, showcasing the work of past and current lecturers and alumni of the ceramic studios at the UKZN’s Centre for Visual Art.

It was showcased recently at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum and is curated by master potter and lifelong friend David Walters in commemoration of Armstrong.

Several interesting talks will be given during the duration of this exhibition;

Chris Morewood (retired head of UKZN PMB Scientific Workshop) and Michelle Hall (ceramics lecturer at UKZN) were scheduled to speak last Sunday.

Gavin Whiteslow (archaeologist and TV presenter) will present documentary material focusing on the indigenous material culture that inspired Armstrong on Sunday, June 22 (11am to 12 noon).

David Walters from Franschhoek (master potter who put the Legacy Exhibition together) will speak on Sunday, July 20 (11am – 12 noon).

For more information, contact Kobie Venter at the gallery at 039 392 2619 or 039 392 2617.