

Marius van Woerden

A Dutch Potter in Canada

Els van Petersen & Conrad Biernacki

Sometimes the discovery of a new collectible happens in a very unpredictable way. And in some instances, if a unique and unexpected series of events did not take place, the discovery would not have been made at all.

The trail for this collectible actually begins near the end of the story. By chance, I was in email contact with Els van Petersen in the Netherlands, a collector of West German pottery (also known as Fat Lava), like myself. One day she asked if I could locate a retired potter who had worked in the city of Gouda in the Netherlands and now lives in Brantford, Ontario. His name is Marius van Woerden. Els asked Ger de Ree of www.capiolus.nl (a very useful website for Dutch pottery) if he knew anything about Marius. He happened to know one of his brothers, Henk, an expert on a Dutch television program about antiques. Henk wrote a short biography for Ger's website and Els did the English translation.

Els became fascinated by the work and career of Marius, and found that she already had several of his pieces sprinkled throughout her Fat Lava collection. To learn more about Marius and his pots, Els needed to reach him. I found Marius last summer and spent a delightful afternoon with him and his wife, Henny. In October, Els came to Canada to meet Marius.

This story summarizes our encounters with Marius. It is relevant to Canadian collectors because Marius moved from Gouda to Norwich, Ontario, where he established a pottery called Castle Ceramics using many moulds brought from his Gouda pottery called Vest Keramiek. (Vest is the Dutch word for the protective wall that surrounded medieval cities. Marius' pottery was on a street called Vest that was located where the old city wall was.) Pieces made by Marius in both the Netherlands and Canada are found today in 20th century shops, antiques malls and outdoor shows. Fortuitously, on the day I first met Marius, I spent the morning at one of the Flamboro antiques shows and found my first piece of Vest Keramiek. Later that afternoon, I showed it to Marius and the memories began to spill out. It was a golden moment.

Marius was born in 1942 in Rijswijk in the Netherlands. His interest in pottery began in 1961 when he was a conscript in the Dutch army. Evening classes were organized by military staff to keep



Top: Marius van Woerden, at age 38, turns a large vase on the wheel at Vest Keramiek in Gouda in 1980. He is surrounded by some of his stylish creations ready for glazing and firing. Marius was a master with glazes. The consistent texture of the lava glaze emphasizes the intriguing shape of this "jug" vase, shown at left.

the soldiers occupied. One of the activities was pottery, taught by Frans Slot (www.capiolus.com, click Databank Keramiek) from the nearby town of Epe. But Marius' interest in pottery may have begun earlier. When he was a teenager, he spent some of his free time at De Steenuil Pottery (Steenuil is Dutch for stone owl, a small species found in the Netherlands and elsewhere), across the street from where he lived.

Frans Slot taught Marius how to turn clay at the potter's wheel, and how to make and use different types of glazes. Because of the ongoing Cuban crisis, his time in the army was extended from 18 to 23 months. Marius felt that he left the army more as an accomplished potter than as a well-trained soldier.

He started working for Groeneveldt Pottery where he was one of five turners making large vases and floor lamps, including items for the Hilton hotel chain. Next, he went to Ravelli Pottery where large vases, sometimes 75 centimetres (30 inches) high, became his specialty. Using up to 30 kilograms (65 pounds) of clay, he had to draw on all his strength. (Today, he has difficulty in finding a watch strap that fits his wrist!)

After working a short time at Zaalberg Pottery, he left in 1964 to establish his own pottery in the village of Monster. Van Woerden Pottery began in a small building rented from a horti-

cultural company. His brother Hugo (b. 1946), who had been working part-time at De Steenuil Pottery, joined him as the business manager. They used red Dutch earthenware and identified their pieces with a white oblong sticker with the name Van Woerden printed in black script.

Looking for a distributor, they found a wholesaler in Rotterdam called De Mooij. But the orders soon increased so much that a larger building was needed. In 1965, Marius and Hugo moved to Gouda, the heart of the Dutch pottery industry, and a city famous for its cheese. Their pottery was located on a street called Het Raam. Here, Marius and Hugo started experimenting with glazes. One way of creating special effects with glazes is to lower the oxygen level in the kiln. This process, called reduction, was often risky and dangerous when it was done incorrectly. Since the use of large amounts of electricity was not allowed during the day, it was necessary to do these experiments at night.

In 1973, Marius and Hugo again realized that their building was too small. Just a few blocks away, a large furniture factory was available on a street called Vest. Since much of their pottery was exported to Germany, a simpler name, Vest Keramiek, was chosen. The Vest sticker is a small vertical rectangle in shades of brown that looks like an ancient scroll. It shows a castle-like building with two turrets that is actually one of Gouda's medieval city gates. The label reads: Vest Keramiek, Gouda – Holland. There were up to 45 employees and the pottery operated until 1984. They primarily used earth-coloured glazes, popular in the Netherlands in the 1970s. Marius would make many models on the wheel from which some would be selected for mass production using moulds. Sometimes these shapes, such as a flowerpot that looked like a teapot, were quite strange.

Marius and his brother had a good relationship with the local ironsmith who helped them make equipment that Marius would design to improve production. For example, he invented a unique machine that efficiently and economically glazed the inside of vases.

Vest Keramiek ware was not marked, although some have a stamped or hand written letter and number code, such as C7,



Not a real teapot, but a vase, this amusing piece has a rich earthy red lava glaze.



This handsome turquoise glazed ginger jar is not moulded but wheel turned.



Known as a "hole" (see-through) vase, the curious rectangular shape looks good with or without flowers. The whirling dark brown and tan glazes give the piece a cosmic feel.

NG.24, J.2 and BK 4. The letters refer to particular shapes (for example, C stands for a cylindrical form) and the numbers refer to size. The earthenware body was no longer red, but white, and was imported from Germany. Typically, the interior glaze is a yellowish brown colour. It was perfect as a waterproof coating since it did not craze. The exterior glazes are usually lava-like, often in matt brown and white, or sometimes muted blue, purple or red. Only a few of the glazes were glossy. Bright colours were not used since much of this ware was made for florists. (Marius' pottery was very popular in Germany, and he believes that his lava glazes might be the first of their kind, predating what we commonly think of as West German Fat Lava.) The outer perimeter of the base was usually bevelled by grinding. A mould line is often visible across the bottom. You can find vases with original felt pads on the base and, if you are lucky, a maker's sticker.

In an effort to improve the central area of Gouda, the city began a program of moving industries to a suburban industrial park. Instead, of making this short move, Marius and Hugo decided to make a longer one. They immigrated with their families to Canada, settling in Norwich, Ontario, a region already inhabited by many new Dutch Canadians, including their uncle and cousin.

Marius and Hugo established their new pottery, Castle Ceramics, in an abandoned vinegar factory. (The building was demolished sometime after the pottery closed, and is now the site of the town's new library.) Their clay came from the United States and the firing took place in gas kilns. Economically, there was only one firing, rather than the usual two. From 1989 to 1994, Marius switched from pottery to working under licence for a U.S. company, United Design, making animal figurines from a moulded composition material that did not need firing. These items are identified with a medal plaque. Later, with two of his own designers, Marius introduced the Norwich Collection, replicas of important Canadian historic sites. These are labelled with vertical rectangular white stickers printed in blue, yellow and black. They are attached to the felt covered bases and resemble the familiar Ontario Heritage Trust plaques in both design and colour

(royal blue and gold). The label identifies the model by name and number. Looking closely at the Norwich Collection logo, you will see a small shield at the top (where the Provincial coat-of-arms is located on the actual plaques) that depicts the original Vest Keramiek medieval city gate logo. The pieces are also marked in the mould with NORWICH COLLECTION, the copyright year, and the initials of the designer, AL (Andre Langendijk). Both the animals and historic site models were cast in hydrostone, a type of gypsum cement, and carefully hand painted. The company had about 25 employees and more than 50 trained painters working from their homes. These wares were sold in gift stores across Canada. But after five years, Marius retired. Or did he?

Since November, it is now possible to own a contemporary piece of Van Woerden pottery. Marius recently threw 100 stone-ware mugs at the Donn Zver Pottery (www.donnzver.com) in Troy, Ontario, as one of 15 regional potters who are making more than 1,000 mugs as a fundraising project, called the 1000 MUG-A-THON, to support the Carnegie Gallery (www.carnegie-gallery.org) in Dundas, Ontario. The mugs are available at the Carnegie Gallery and are free with every \$20 donation. Marius' mugs are incised "M Van Woerden," or just "Van Woerden."

This chapter in Marius' life was a result of Els' visit. For lunch, they went to Café Troy at the Donn Zver Pottery. This was the first time Marius had been there. But as soon as he walked through the door, he went directly into the studio and started to work on the wheel. A bit surprised, Donn Zver and the other potters watched attentively. Impressed by his skill and technique, Donn asked Marius to participate in the 1000 MUG-A-THON, which Marius was delighted to do. It was the first time he had thrown on the wheel in 15 years!

In the enormous and seemingly exhaustive three-volume set, *The Gouda Pottery Book*, edited by Friggo Visser and published in 2007, Ron Tasman says on page 997, "... Vest Keramiek (is) known to have existed but without any further details (it) could not be included in this chapter..." Happily, this lack of information is being rectified.



Marius van Woerden won second prize at the Gouda Potters Festival in 1978. The trophy depicts a potter's wheel on top of a large round of Gouda cheese.

CHRONOLOGY

Year	Location	Activity
1942	Rijswijk	Marius van Woerden is born.
mid 1950s	Rijswijk	As a teenager, he helps at De Steenuil Pottery.
1961	't Harde	Conscripted for National Service, takes pottery lessons from Frans Slot, then works at Groeneveldt, Ravelli, and Zaalberg potteries.
1964	Monster	Marius and his brother, Hugo, establish Van Woerden Pottery.
1965	Gouda	Van Woerden Pottery continues.
1973	Gouda	Name changes to Vest Keramiek.
1984	Norwich	Marius and Hugo establish Castle Ceramics, work under contract for United Design, begin the Norwich Collection, Hugo returns to the Netherlands.
1994	Brantford	Marius retires.
2008	Brantford	He comes out of retirement to make 100 mugs for the Carnegie Gallery's 1000 MUG-A-THON.

If it had not been for the information that Els found on the Capriolus website, along with her propensity to collect and passionate curiosity, the sequence of events that resulted in this article would never have happened. We hope that our efforts to focus attention on the unique pottery of Marius van Woerden will encourage others to pay attention to his lifelong work. His career in pottery, both in the Netherlands and in Canada, is certainly worthy of acknowledgement.

Els van Petersen is an educational advisor and lives in Zutphen in the Netherlands. Her interests are wide ranging and she travels the world with her husband. She is working on a book about Marius van Woerden. Els is fluent in English and can be reached at e.petersen@aventus.nl.

Conrad Biernacki is the programs manager at the Royal Ontario Museum and frequent exhibition curator at various galleries and museums. He is writing a book on Blue Mountain Pottery to be published by the ROM in 2009. You can reach him at conradb@rom.on.ca.