

Press Release

Renowned South African artist revives a neglected tradition at Solms-Delta wine estate

Cellar façade by Joachim Schönfeldt

A cellar façade created by internationally acclaimed South African artist Joachim Schönfeldt, with the farm workers at the Solms-Delta wine estate in Franschhoek, was introduced to the world in the early part of 2009.

The façade pays homage to an ancient tradition. It is set to stir as much comment and interest as the pediment facade created in 1791 by Anton Anreith at Groot Constantia. Anreith's façade was described as "prurient" by the opinion makers of the time. Schönfeldt said that "as no one is doing such façades any more, someone had to remind us how it should be done".

Schönfeldt has work in various private and public collections, including the Museum of Modern Art (MoMa) in New York, the Smithsonian, the University of the Witwatersrand and the National Gallery in Cape Town. He relished the opportunity to work on the vast 33m x 9m 'canvas' of a Cape cellar wall. The façade was created using a variety of mixed media techniques that he workshopped with the farm workers, including sculpture, clay modelling, ceramics, grouting and painting - with pigments using Khoesan techniques and natural materials drawn from the farm.

His inclusion of the people that live on the farm reflects Schönfeldt's endorsement of the Solms-Delta philosophy. This wine estate has just won an Irish-sponsored Social Inclusion Award for the "excellent and innovative" steps it has taken to promote the economic, social and cultural well-being of its farm workers.

Schönfeldt felt it vital that this participation – and the discovery of unrealised talent among the people who live on the farm – should extend to the production of the façade, from concept to execution. This had to accommodate the seasonal and day-to-day demands of working farm life, including the pressures of the harvest. The craftsmen of Franschhoek were also drawn in. For example, the haunting gargoyles that loom above the vast façade were manufactured by ceramicist David Walters and mould maker Klaus Fuhlbruegge.

The early stages of the work saw Schönfeldt himself perched Michaelangelo-like throughout the night on scaffolding, outlining the curving topography of the map that shapes the basic design of the cellar wall. The map is based on an 18th century drawing attributed to Adam Tas, the Stellenbosch wine farmer best known for his outspoken criticism of government corruption in his time.

Superimposed over the landscape is a series of linking, golden highways that reinforce the stark lines of the cellar. The usual dots that demarcate destinations on maps are replaced by raised and glazed ceramic discs ("like jewels") depicting Cape Town, Paarl, Stellenbosch, Solms-Delta and Franschhoek. Each provides a précis in relief of these selected landmarks, adding texture and contrast. The Solms-Delta disc is located directly over the cellar door.

Workers on the farm helped choose the motifs for each disc, trying their hand at clay modelling during workshops led by Schönfeldt. For example, Table Mountain was the popular choice for Cape Town, the local church for Franschhoek, and "the Professor's house" for the Solms-Delta disc.

Unpretentious, with a sense of humour that punctures arrogance and ego, Schönfeldt would not sign the façade. "I don't want to hog it all," he says. "Those who know my work will recognise it." But as regards the standard of the piece, he is acutely aware that it will be judged by his international peers.

Additional information:

A friendship between Solms and Schönfeldt dating back to their University days contributed towards this public façade with private touches. Shared memories of a friend who passed away are included in a death mask beside the cow gargoyles that decorate the façade.

Why gargoyles? Because they break the austerity of the architecture. And having lived in Venice, Schönfeldt admits to a fondness for the façade of the Venetian library: "I was always tempted to take a pot shot at it." And why cows? Because, in Africa, cattle have always implied wealth and sustenance.

This symbolism underlines his sensual, tactile treatment of the façade - the outcome of reasoned thinking, based on the history of the Delta wine farm and what it now stands for. The early stages of creation saw Schönfeldt perched throughout the night on scaffolding, outlining the curving coastline and topography of a turn-of-the-17th century map projected onto the cellar wall.

The map, drawn by Adam Tas, Stellenbosch farmer best known for his outspoken criticism of corruption by the governor of the time, provides the historical background.

Superimposed over the landscape is a series of linking roads and freeways that reinforce the stark lines of the cellar. The usual dots to demarcate destinations are replaced by raised and glazed ceramic discs "like jewels" depicting Cape Town, Paarl, Stellenbosch, Solms-Delta and Franschhoek. Each provides a précis in relief of selected landmarks and history, catching the eye and adding textured contrast. The Solms-Delta disc, featuring the manor house, artefacts, palms and vines, is directly over the cellar door.

Children on the farm helped choose the motifs on each disc, trying their hand at clay modelling during workshops led by Schönfeldt, and responding to questions on what they associated with the places depicted with disarming honesty. Table mountain was the unanimous choice for Cape Town, while for Solms Delta the answer was a decided "die groot huis!"

The choice of materials for the facade was crucial, for the unprotected surface will be exposed to extreme weather conditions and the erosion of time. The design colour was originally to have been blue, offset by the white cellar wall, tying in with the distinctive blue-on-white Solms wine label. But to root the design in history, Schönfeldt opted for a more indigenous Khoesan link.

Meticulous in his research – "your mistakes are going to be on view for a very long time" - he sought advice from experts in rock art and Stone Age pigments like Stephen Townley Basset. Blue was not part of the palette of Southern Africa's early cave artists. Their colour choice was limited to red and yellow iron oxide (ochre), organic charcoal, and white, derived from white clay, bone, raptor faeces or heated eggshell. Given the white cellar wall, only three pigments were used on the facade: red and yellow powdered ochres, mixed with egg and water, and charcoal sourced on site and converted into black paint.

The roads are a modern statement in gold, which, like the ancient Greek friezes, reflect in the late-afternoon setting sun. Schönfeldt visualised an interplay of light and shade throughout the day, replicating the changing shadows cast by the oaks that traditionally shade Cape homesteads and cellars.

To reinforce the undulating topography, the flat cellar wall was lightly grouted and the engraved parts painted with pigment. Here the artist pays tribute to farm workers and managers alike: Jan Radlof, Adam Ampie Pietersen, Francois Vermeulen and 'AD' Steyn. Having proved their skill at paint mixing, they displayed a steady handed expertise with angle grinders, even when elevated metres above the ground on scaffolding or on the farm's forklift truck, which was hijacked from the cellar.

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