

# Helen de Leeuw: Pioneering interior decorator and potter

**OBITUARIES**

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**H**ELEN de Leeuw, who has died in Cape Town at the age of 89, shaped the taste of a generation of South Africans. She taught them to see beauty in everyday things, to appreciate plain, scrubbed surfaces, clean lines, simple furniture and home-spun fabrics.

She became an icon of good taste through an interiors shop-cum-gallery which she ran in the upmarket Hyde Park Corner shopping centre for 25 years. She was one of the first tenants when the mall opened in 1969.

Before this, and for a while concurrently, she ran the Craftsman's

Market in a basement in central Johannesburg, using it to showcase the work of up-and-coming black artists. Her first exhibition in 1954 was opened by Father Trevor Huddleston, the priest who became world famous for his opposition to apartheid.

De Leeuw (née Mentis) was born in Johannesburg on April 3 1917. Her parents were from Greece.

She was a lecturer in English literature at Wits University when she married the sculptor Gerhard de Leeuw. Gerhard — who died 21 years ago — was a volatile and emotional person. After two years, Helen, herself very dynamic and certainly no walk in the park, demanded a divorce.

After World War Two, she went to England with her young daughter to further her literary studies. She couldn't find accommodation and so hired a large Victorian house which she paid for by renting out the rooms.

One of her tenants was a pupil of the famous British potter Bernard Leach. She got her landlady so hooked on pottery that De Leeuw dropped out of her PhD course at London University and enrolled at the Camberwell College of Arts to become a potter.

When she returned to South Africa she opened a pottery studio in Johannesburg. The boss of the Greatermans department store group, Norman Herber, used to walk past it on his way to work. One day he told De Leeuw there was an empty basement at Greatermans which he would convert into a temporary studio, complete with kiln, if she would give public pottery demonstrations there for a week.

De Leeuw moved in and stayed.

She extended her range beyond pottery and created the Craftsman's Market, which showcased the work of many craftsmen, including the sculptor Edoardo Villa and black artists from the Polly Street Art Centre run by Cecil Skotnes. One of them was the linocut artist Ezekiel Segole, who became her general factotum.

De Leeuw travelled widely, collecting material for her shop in Hyde Park: Greek and Turkish jewellery; jerseys woven by peasants on the Greek islands;

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furniture from Sweden, together with pieces of Cape-Dutch furniture; glassware; ceramics and fabrics from Zanzibar, Denmark, Finland and Greece; tapestries, woven platters and mats made by Zulu women, and bits of wood, dried grass and seed pods she found in the veld.

Her well-known sign was made from tumbleweed she picked up in the Karoo.

De Leeuw's definition of taste was beauty, simplicity and functionality, nicely exemplified in the simple roller blind which she was one of the first, if not the first, to import into South Africa.

Her choices created an alternative way of living for thousands of South Africans suffocating in a stuffy aesthetic inherited from the British colonial past.

There was a lot of the down-to-earth peasant about De Leeuw. She was forceful, direct, frank and unpretentious, a formidable lump of a woman who wore a nightie under her kaftans. She had a mop of silvery-grey hair, twisted on top of her head and skewered with something sharp to hold it together.

She was good at business, but was eventually undone by staff who pilfered from her on such a grand scale that she went bankrupt 10 years ago. She had to go and live with her daughter, Marieke, son-in-law, Danny, and granddaughter, Kria-Yesshi, in Glencairn near Simon's Town. — *Chris Barron*