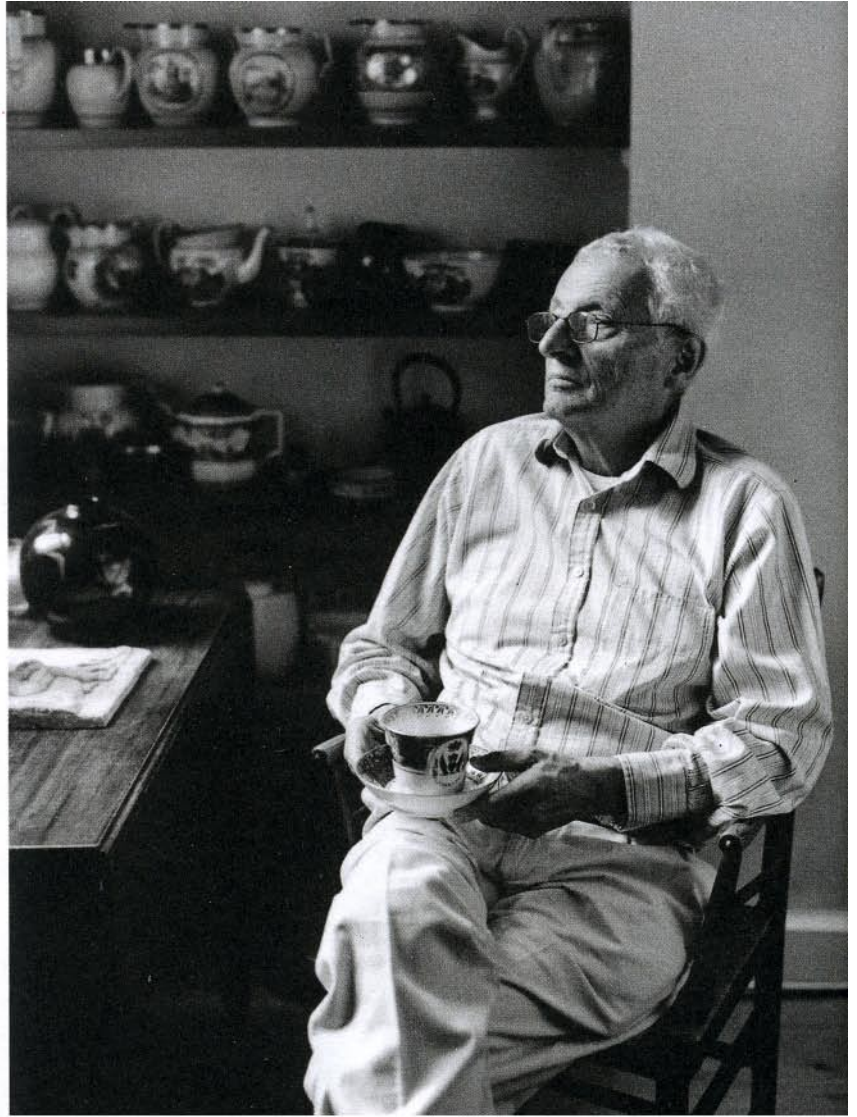


DESIGNS FOR LIFE



David Queensberry maintains that good design should be accessible and affordable, as well as practical and aesthetically appealing. The veteran ceramicist's most recent dinnerware designs reflect this career-long belief

Words **Paul Dring** Photography **Lisa Linder**

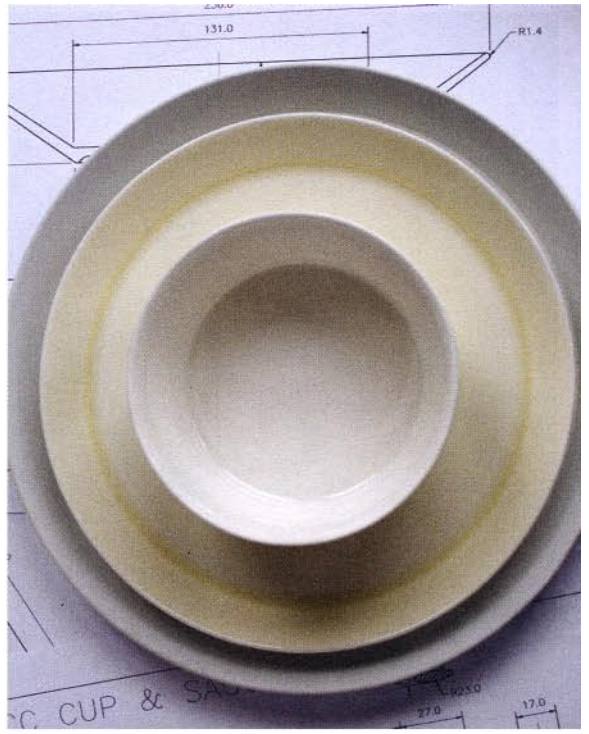
"Pottery is not a very buzzy or with-it form of production," admits David Queensberry. "Making china is the oldest craft of which we have a continuous record. If you design something in electronics, you're dealing in a field that didn't even exist 30 years ago. But you can go to a museum and find a bowl from Iraq that's 6,000 years old and is damned similar to the bowl you're making today."

David should know. For half a century, he has straddled the often conflicting arenas of academia and industry to become one of the UK's leading ceramicists. He learned his trade in Stoke-on-Trent in the mid 1950s – then, as now, home of the UK pottery industry – and has been Professor of Ceramics at London's prestigious Royal College of Art. Together with Martin Hunt, his business partner of more than 40 years, he has designed and marketed some of the most stylish tableware to grace European dining rooms, and has now created a new dinner service, called Coco, exclusively for Jme.

The Queensberry Hunt story starts back in 1966, when London was swinging, England was the World Cup winner and two young designers set up an office on the north side of Hyde Park. "Back then, David was a full-time professor," Martin recalls. "He was doing a bit of his own design work



David Queensberry relaxes at home (opposite and left). Unlike many of their rivals, Queensberry Hunt insist on making full-scale models of their work before it goes into commercial production and the Coco range for Jme was no exception (right). During 43 years in business, David and Martin have amassed a vast trove of samples, including cup handles (below).

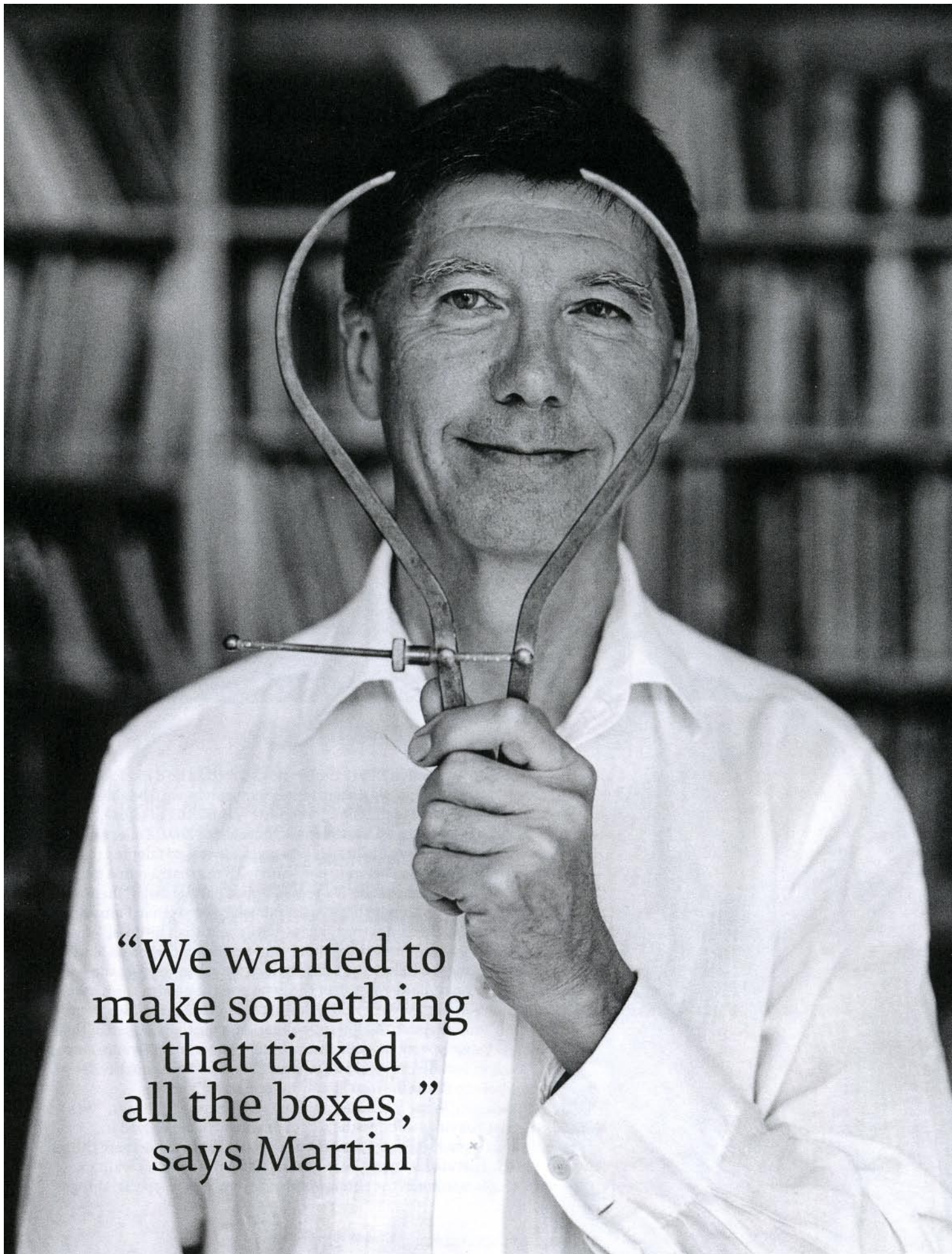


but he didn't have time to do as much as he'd like. So he said that if I joined up with him, then maybe we'd be able to take up some of the commissions he was having to refuse."

"Martin was a student of mine at the Royal College of Art," remembers David. "He was good. He was so talented that I felt it was better to have him with me than against me."

Over the years, it's proved a good partnership. "There are a lot of things that Martin's much better at than I am and certain things that I know more about than he does," says David. "I'm perhaps more entrepreneurial, whereas Martin's more hands-on as a designer." Their client list over the years reads like a roll-call of the great and the good of the pottery industry: Wedgwood, Crown Staffordshire, Hornsea Pottery, Midwinter and Royal Doulton, among others. Much of their early work was sold through Habitat, the shop Terence Conran founded in 1964, and whose ethos of bringing quality design to the high street closely reflects David's beliefs.

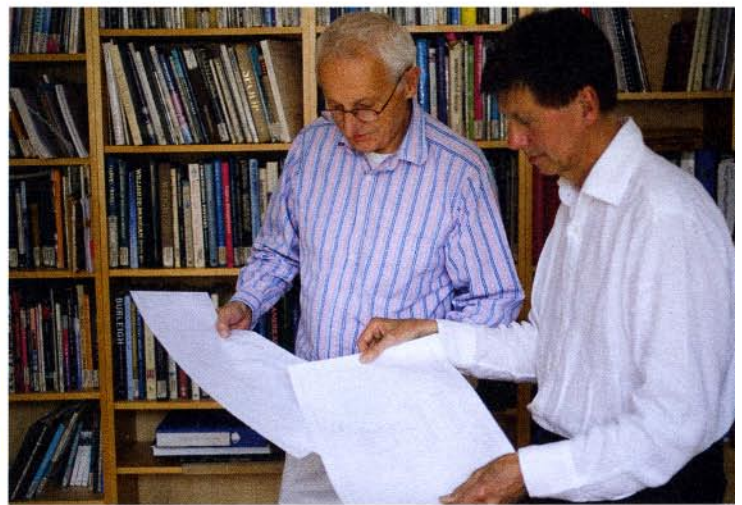
"What interested me from very early on," he says, "was trying to design the sort of products that I believed in, products that I thought were good, but to make these things available to people at a reasonable price. I didn't want to operate in the elitist world of designing very special things



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Martin Hunt poses with a pair of compasses (opposite) and (below) pores over the plans for Coco with partner David. Previous designs by the pair include the Concept range for Hornsea Pottery, whose teapot is crowned by a ceramic swan (left), and a range of plates for Wedgwood with patterns by the artist Eduardo Paolozzi (far left).



that are only on sale in galleries or boutiques. I don't see an incompatibility between good design and the mass market."

These principles informed the design of Coco, says Martin, turning over a mug from the range in his long, elegant fingers. "We wanted to make something that ticked all the boxes. One of the boxes in terms of pleasure of use was fineness, so we used bone china because that is the strongest ceramic material. Its strength meant we could make it thin. Bone china is also translucent, so it has a slight glow about it - it's very white unlike most other ceramic materials."

"It's also very practical," adds David, who explains that the broad, flat central area of Coco's dinner plates are designed to be more useful than gradually tapering curved shapes of other plates. "Curves are pretty but if you put food and maybe a little sauce onto a plate with a flat surface it doesn't all run into the middle. So if you want a peripheral area - like chefs with their little squeeze bottles, drizzling all their sauces - then this flat plate is a good canvas for food."

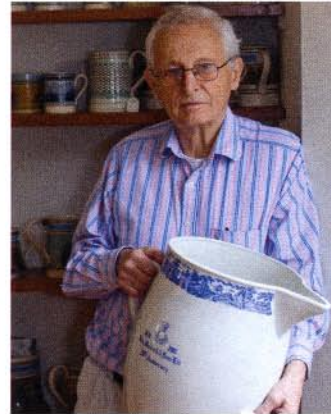
"Yes," agrees Martin, "it's a big area, so you can either make a little composition in the centre - or just heap it up."

With its simple lines, bold geometric shapes and brilliant sheen, the Coco range is quite minimal in its look. But, as

David might say, minimal is perhaps the hardest thing to do well. "It's easy to design things that are very different," he says. "You can do a teapot and you can make it funny, you can put it on little legs and do all sorts of amusing things. But then it becomes something that maybe you put up on the shelf but it's not much use for your morning cup of tea."

"Then there are irons and kettles. I can never find one that I like. They seem to be designed as if they're meant to have very low wind-resistance while travelling at 150 miles an hour. There's a great Japanese design philosopher who said that it is easy to design the extraordinary but the real problem is to design the extraordinary within the framework of the ordinary. That seemed to me to put it very well."

Many plates, ordinary and otherwise, adorn David's home. There are stacks of them in cupboards, on shelves and plenty on the walls, including a striking set of six designed by the artist Eduardo Paolozzi, David's friend and former colleague at the Royal College of Art. In fact, it's a beautifully decorated house, an elegant pied à terre - though, in its rather scruffy northwest London location, not perhaps somewhere you'd expect an aristocrat to reside (David is the 12th Marquess of Queensberry; his notable forebears include the man who



For Martin (below), it was important that the Coco range be pleasurable to use. One way to achieve this was to use bone china, which is strong enough to allow the range to be fine yet durable. It's also more translucent than other ceramic materials, which endows the mugs with an appealing sheen (below left).



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codified the rules of boxing and, that gentleman’s son Bosie Douglas, who notoriously aroused the passion of Oscar Wilde.)

“It’s quite ironic,” says David, as he takes down a plate bearing his family coat of arms from its position on the wall. “I come from quite a grand family but inherited absolutely nothing apart from a lot of old plates that were made for them in the late-18th century. So it’s fortunate that I should be very interested in ceramics.”

So what does the future hold for the designer, as he nears his 80th birthday? “Well,” he says, “it’s difficult to monitor the seasons in one’s life but I’m still more interested in my work than golf.” More immediately, the future holds lunch and David moves into the kitchen to whip up an omelette.

“I think there’s a similarity between pottery and cooking,” he muses. “I’ve found that people who make pottery are, on balance, quite good cooks. Cooking is about how things are changed by heat. You take ordinary ingredients – olive oil, pine nuts, flour, this, that and the other – and suddenly you’ve got some magical new thing. It’s the same with pottery. So the plate on your table and the food on your plate are, in some way, connected. I hadn’t thought of that before. Maybe there’s something in it.” ●

Coco dinnerware is exclusive to jmejmeccollection.com. For more about Queensberry Hunt, visit queensberryhunt.com