David Roberts was born in Sheffield, England, in 1947. Twenty years later, he gave up working in an engineering factory to enter a teachers' training college – Bretton Hall – that specialized in the arts. Like many others, he wanted to be a painter, but expected to become a teacher. His first contact with clay was not a happy one. He found it hard to work with and unappealing. Gradually, however, his control of the material improved and he grew to like it.

By the time he left college in 1970, to teach in a large school, Roberts was absorbed by pottery, mostly making thrown stoneware. Soon after, a turning point came when Jim Robison came to live near him in Holmfirth, and showed him photos of American potters making large-sized raku pots. The American influence on Roberts was immediate. He thought the traditional oriental raku technique was boring. In the hands of artists such as Paul Soldner, however, he saw raku as a path to a large and sculptural form of ceramics.

Roberts usually works on a series of pots, which may vary in scale and proportion and surface qualities. Like most hand-builders, he sometimes works on a number of pots by stages, with natural drying and strengthening of the forms as the work proceeds. But in special circumstances, or where the character of the pot requires it, he may quickly stiffen up the clay by the use of a gas blow-torch.

One of his main concerns is with open and closed forms and how they can come together as a whole. Ideas for his forms come from many sources: the skyline or the lines of hills and horizon, or from the curve of a water-cooling tower, or an electrical insulator, or the curves of dry stone walls cutting across the Pennine hills above his studio. Roberts is trying to give his work the same sense of presence and spirituality he gets from walking in the local hills. He sees the smoke marks and patterns from the raku having a relationship to nature and landscape. It goes beyond just the decorative. Recently, he has been looking at smooth eroded pebbles and prehistoric flint and stone tools and the sculptures of Brancusi.

His work is both contemporary and historical, especially related to hand-built pots from West Africa, Pre-Columbian America and Bronze Age Cyprus. The firing technique he uses is an American development of traditional Japanese practice. Although his work could be placed in the contemporary practice of raku, it would be more accurately described as coil-built, rapidly fired, carbonized, non-glassy ceramic.

In the 1970’s, Roberts had two reasons why he worked with large coil-built raku pots. He wanted to react against the small and precious porcelain that was popular back then and he liked the physical challenge of working on a large scale. He uses arm and wrist movements rather than a finger pinching action. The pieces have monumental presence that reflects a serious intention. He is concerned with
pushing the building and firing process to the limits and has no interest in the finished pieces except as reference for future work.

A dominant influence on the final result of Roberts’ pots is the adventure of coiling itself. The repetition of coiling can be very relaxing. Roberts loses awareness of his surroundings and goes into a trance-like meditation, which shows itself in the finished pot. The length of time and almost obsessive handling involved in coiling transfers an energy or presence into the work itself. Also while coiling, Roberts is considering how the firing will effect the outcome of the piece.

*Raku* – In Japanese the word "Raku" refers to happiness, comfort and pleasure.

The Raku technique originated in Japan during the 16th century. Pottery fired in this style was customarily used in Tea Ceremonies. Raku firing begins after a piece is formed and bisque fired like any pottery. Special glaze is used and the pottery is heated to approximately 1600 -1800 degrees. When the glaze has a glassy appearance, it is removed from the kiln with metal thongs.

The rapid cooling, which occurs causes the cracked look on the glaze. While still very hot the piece is then placed in a fire proof container with combustible materials such as sawdust or paper. These materials ignite and by placing a lid or cover on the container, the flames are starved of oxygen producing a reducing atmosphere. They remain in the container until cool. The flames and smoke mark the artwork with unique, varied and often surprising patterns and luster's.

Roberts has been a leading influence in the popularizing of raku. The difficulty is usually size. Larger pieces in traditional raku have been hard to do without cracking or breaking during cooling. Roberts’s approach was to create a spacious kiln that could be removed from the pot, instead of the pot being removed from the kiln.

He built his first kiln out of two oil drums lined with the then revolutionary ceramic fiber – Kaowool blanket – which combined lightness with insulation. He could hoist this lightweight canister (top-hat) away from the fired pot by a simple pulley system, using a bucket of water as a counterweight.

The source of heat was two propane burners. His large insulated metal-can kiln would reach an internal temperature of 1800F in about an hour. Roberts could have packed his oil-drum kiln with lots of glazed bisque-ware, but instead each work is given the full attention of its own firing.

By rigidly sticking to this routine, and by using the latest materials and techniques, Roberts has made raku work for him. To withstand thermal shock (cold to hot and hot to cold and hot again in two hours) he uses a white stoneware clay body (high fire) that doesn’t expand and contrast in extreme temperature changes. Grog is added to keep the clay open and flexible.

Nowadays, his bisque firing is done in a conventional electric kiln, and the original oil-drum kiln has been replaced by two larger, similar top-hat kilns – one with a tall firing chamber for vases, the other shallower for bowls.
For glazes, he avoids lead because of the potential toxicity. It is well known that lustrous surfaces and bright colors, particularly reds, are achievable in raku ware, but Roberts has mostly created dark blue-grays. The peephole in the kiln is vital to see how well the glaze is firing. After the work receives a short glaze-soak at 1740F, the top part of the kiln is removed when the temperature has fallen to 1560F – still red-hot. Roberts counts the seconds before locking tongs around the huge pot and transferring it to a reduction chamber where sawdust or straw, in contact with the molten glaze, burns.

Starved of oxygen (as the reduction chamber is sealed with a lid), carbonization takes place through the glaze. There is darkening in the glaze cracks as the rapid cooling takes place. The smoke soaks into the cracks and bisque. Once the temperature has fallen inside the sawdust chamber, the pot is removed, hosed down and scrubbed clean. A fine crazing (glaze cracking) appears as the pot cools, giving the pot surface an extra depth.

The final surface of his raku piece is controlled patterning by the arrangement of sawdust on and around it. For Roberts, there are no happy accidents. Unsatisfactory pots are discarded. It is only to be expected that in raku ware there would he a high failure rate. Between 10% and 50% are lost, a fact he accepts and expects will remain the same.

When dealing with large and extra-large pots, the form is very visible. Only on small pots can a beautiful glaze make up for an uninteresting shape, and Roberts feels strongly that form is the most important aspect of his work.

When coiling, he uses extruded coils for uniformity and speed. They are made by compression and do not have the tendency to spiral fracture that raku firing induces in some wheel-thrown ware. By rotating the pots on a banding wheel as he builds them, Roberts achieves with the aid of a metal kidney very regular shapes.

In the bulbous (round) bottle forms, for which Roberts is best known, you can clearly see the influence of African coiled pots and the beautiful eggshell-like pots of the Pueblo Indians of North America. The ideas for much of his new work come from a study of ancient Cypriot pots from Cyprus. This influence is shared with a potter whom Roberts never met but greatly admires, Hans Coper. Coper’s own sources of inspiration were Mediterranean.

Examples:
http://www.artcn.net/worldstudio/europe/DavidRoberts/david01003a.htm
http://www.ceramicsnow.org/tagged/David_Roberts_Ceramics
http://www.hartgallery.co.uk/artists/roberts/work.htm