

Searching for Forms that *Smell* of Egypt

Ibrahim Said

Ibrahim Said has been working with clay since he was a child. Raised in Fustat, an area in Cairo, Egypt that has etched its name in the history of the pottery industry since the Islamic conquest, he learned his craft from his father and other artisans surrounding him. He has participated in workshops and demonstrations throughout the Middle East, and has been highly recognized for his technical ability, creativity, and innovation in the field of ceramics. His work is in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Center of Islamic Art in Kuwait, and the Musqat Museum in Oman, among others. Ibrahim works between Egypt and the USA, and is represented by Tyger Glyn Gallery in London. Works can be viewed on his website at www.ibrahimsaidceramic.com.

Abstract

Ibrahim Said walks us through his journey discovering his voice in clay. He reflects on the place that defined him, his most significant influences, and the most pivotal moments in his creative development to date. He also attempts to describe what it means to try to carve out a distinct niche for himself while simultaneously embracing the rich history of Egyptian pottery and Islamic art, as well as the particularity of the artist–artisan relationship in this country.

Keywords: Egyptian and Islamic ceramic art, pottery, artist–artisan relationship

The two most important things to know about me are: I am the son of Said Hamed Marei Shaker; and I am from Fustat.

My father instilled in me a love of ceramics. He was my first teacher and foremost role model. He was one of the

best potters in all of Egypt, a highly respected, technically skilled ceramic artisan. He was sought after by many artists to make their work for them, most notably Said Al Sadr (1909–86), recognized as the first modern Egyptian ceramicist who researched old Islamic glazes and techniques extensively. To this day I have never seen anyone with my father's facility. From a single mound of clay on the wheel—up to 35 kilos—he could sit and throw hundreds of vessels off the hump exactly the same size and shape just measuring with his hands and could make any shape that was asked of him. When I was six years old I began to follow him to his studio and watched him work any time I could (Figure 1). I also tried to be helpful, but mostly watched and just played with clay. Play turned into drawing on clay, then drawing became carving and cutting, which then slowly morphed into designs like those I saw in the stone carvings at the mosques and in churches in my area. And every step of the way my father nurtured my love of clay, taught me everything he had learned

from over sixty years of working with it, and supported me in everything I ever wanted to do. Clay became my future, primarily because of my father.

Fustat was the first capital of Egypt and became the center of pottery production throughout the Middle East between the ninth and twelfth century. Many parts of Fustat still feel as I imagine they must have been 500 years ago and pottery is still being made in the same areas of the city.¹ This is where my father learned, and where I was raised; I was surrounded by pottery activity, huge wood-burning kilns on average 4 meters in diameter where every day you could smell smoke in the breeze. Crouched men or women steadily fed wood into the fires at the base of the kilns, sometimes for days. Artisan studios were everywhere with tea, cigarettes, and sheesha (a water pipe for smoking flavored tobacco also known as a huqqah); big clay mixing pits border each studio area; huge piles of beige, orange, dark grey, or dark green dry clay left where it was dumped. Mountains of ingeniously stacked



Fig 1 Ibrahim Said with his father, Said Hamed Marei, c. 1982.

fired pots left outside studios. Sometimes a stray snake would be found under a tarpaulin cooling itself against the wet mixed clay like the scorpions also liked to do. This was the area to which anyone who wanted to learn anything about pottery would come. The best professors of ceramics in Egypt have come to watch and learn there. Everything I value in craft and art I learned there, everything that truly molded me started there.

Unfortunately, something has now been lost in Fustat. I did not know that then. Only as I learned what it had once been did I recognize this loss.

Traditions and innovation have been lost—the artisans and technicians in Fustat work in such specialized jobs: each potter there has just one or two skills, and they can't do anyone else's job. Someone mixes clay, or throws pots on the wheel. Someone throws only small pots, someone else only large ones, someone just does carving but can't throw on the wheel, someone loads the kilns, or fires the work, etc. There is not much glazing because the clay most of the artisan studios are using has too much salt in the clay body to enable proper glazing; this unglazed work is referred to as *fukhar*. (Artists and artisans who plan on glazing their work use red earthenware from Aswan and either glaze the work themselves or have someone else do it.) But another reason most work is not glazed is because it is fired at a low temperature of 800–850°C maximum since most artisans are typically wood firing and the low temperature saves wood and time, especially when producing pottery for the commercial market (water jugs or huge pots for the city or hotels, for example). Somewhere along the way

the creativity was lost, and the urgency to just produce and sell as quickly as possible became the primary motivation. This has inevitably led to a loss of sensitivity by the artisans towards their own craft. I think there is still a pervasive thinking in Egypt that ideas and making/concept and materiality are separate things. I believe they are inseparable. I believe understanding a material, and finding your own voice through it, can only happen once you are fluent with the medium.

My father was one of the few artisans who was different. He knew about every aspect of pottery production. He had the creative sensibility of an artist but had been working for a living since he was about twelve years old both for the commercial market and later as a technician making artists' wheel-thrown work for them. I grew up seeing other people take credit for what he made.

However, seeing my interest and talent, some of my father's customers encouraged and pushed me with my work. But because I needed to help support my family, I too worked for the commercial pottery market through my late teenage years, and also made work for artists who needed a technician, instead of being able to continue my education academically in ceramics. But during that time I knew I wanted to make something special, something new, something different. Although from the beginning I viewed myself as an artisan, I was easily bored with making mass produced forms by hand, and easily frustrated with being asked to produce work for other people who did not understand the limitations or nature of the medium or who seemed to lack any interesting ideas in spite of their education.

For me, the pottery wheel represented a machine purely for manufacturing and mass production, and I knew it was not the future I wanted. (Needless to say I have no interest in slip casting or mold making either for the same reason.) In spite of my initial disdain for the wheel, by the time I was in my teens I found myself on it—coming at the work so naturally. All those years of watching my father work had seeped into my consciousness. Since then I have never looked back. Everything I make is wheel-thrown, even if I finish the work by hand. Every new form I make has necessitated a small innovation in how I throw and with each new piece I make I push myself into new territory, challenging the medium and myself, technically and aesthetically. The wheel has become an extension of myself.

I kept asking myself why the potters in Fustat were unable to make work as strong as centuries ago. With such a rich history why was the pottery not evolving? This question drove me to find my own direction and catch up with the past.

I needed to make work that no other technicians were skilled enough to copy so I could compete with the academic artists. Part of this motivation has to do with the naïve but mostly overt plagiarism of artwork in Egypt. If no one else could make my work maybe I would face no obstructions in my creative path. This is one of the challenges of living in a system where connections entitle few to move forward or reap deserved credit for strong work. In Egypt it seems that the reasons for success or failure in ceramic arts are arbitrary and not entirely dependent on the work that you produce. The artist turned bureaucrat, or bureaucrat turned artist, want to know who you are and where

you are from instead, and how they may benefit by helping you. Outside of Egypt I find my work is judged on its own merit.

For me, the ancient Egyptians made the most beautiful and difficult shapes: my favorite forms are from the Neqada period, Predynastic Ancient Egypt, and although I am also strongly influenced by Islamic art, I feel a lack of sensitivity to its form, as throughout its long history geometry and its ornamental properties have been prioritized.

I began drawing vases in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo and then would go home and try to make them exactly as I had seen them (Figure 2). I would then draw my own variations of that same basic shape. The Egyptian Museum was my school, it taught me the sensitivity that is needed to balance positive and negative space and also the importance of scale: not all forms should be the same size—everything has its own perfect proportion. Through the intensive investigation of thousands of ancient ceramic vases and jugs, my eyes opened to these subtleties. By actually trying to copy them, my hands learned what my forefathers had known.

I was first recognized for my vases, for their small bases and varying delicate finials and lips. These small bases presented the most difficult challenge. The vases are thrown on the wheel—no coils or hand building—and it is very difficult to get a vase straight and stable with such a tiny base (Figure 3). It is also impossible to use a mold because of the differences in drying time between the half that is exposed to air first, and the one still in the mold: the piece inevitably tilts. The most difficult of these vases so far has been about 90 cm tall, a width of only 18 cm, and a base 5 cm wide

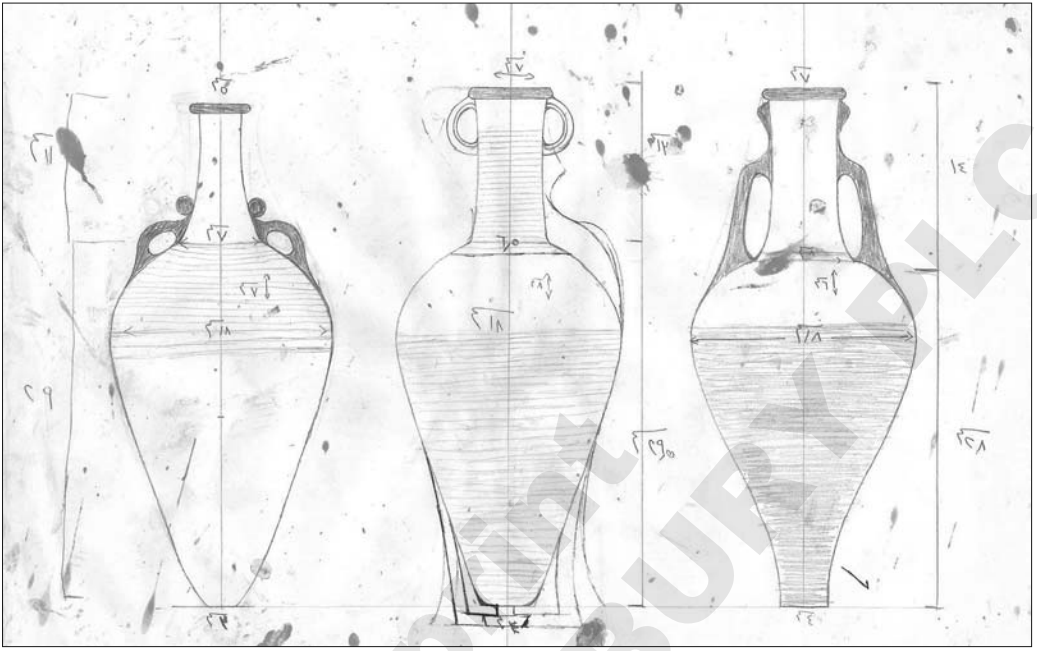


Fig 2 Drawings for work with measurements, derived directly from vases observed at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, Egypt, by Ibrahim Said.



Fig 3 Early Nile Bride vases, red earthenware, reduction fired on select areas, c. 2009.

(see Figure 3, vase on the right). If the form is even a millimeter off the piece would not be stable.

In 2002 I was selected as an Egyptian artisan representative to a craft fair in Belgium. This was my first trip outside my country and it made a striking impression on me; for the first time I was among top international artisans, and I realized the uniqueness of my work. I may never have learned this had I not left Egypt and it created a sense of urgency and excitement. This may seem a small thing to many Western readers, but I also learned that situating my work within more space created a sense of value; the idea of presentation is maybe taken for granted in Europe, while in Egypt you see everyone trying to fit as much work as possible into the space allotted (in both the commercial and fine art realms). I never even considered how my work should be *presented* before I went to Belgium: the trip helped recognize a different value to my work, beyond the obvious monetary value granted to works that sit alone in their own space.

From 2003 onward, I continued to attend various craft fairs focused on traditional Islamic arts. I was supported by, among others, Dr Nazi Marouf who works for the Research Center for History, Art, and Islamic Culture in Istanbul (IRCICA) and who had known, loved, and supported my father and his work, and Dr Ezzedin Naguib (Egyptian artist, critic, and Head of Authenticity of Traditional and Contemporary Arts) who later invited me to include two vases in a group show at Sawi Gallery in Zamalek, Cairo, which led to my first solo show there at the end of 2005. This exhibition marked the beginning of a difficult transition for me

of straddling two divided worlds in Egypt, that of artisan and artist, and not completely fitting into either.

Prior to this first solo show I had been hired, like my father, to make work for many artists who would then alter the pieces a little, glaze them and sign their names, but after this show I stopped doing such technical work because it was—it is—work that very few people can do and I wanted to invest all my time into my own work. However, this is not a common transition to make in Egypt where there are very defined boundaries between the world of academic artists and that of traditional artisans. I can think of only one other person who has made that transition: Mohamed Mandour (b. 1950). Mandour also trained as an artisan when he was young and was recognized as gifted by Mohamed Hussein Hagra, a former professor at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Alexandria. Hagra provided Mandour with financial support, encouragement and exhibition opportunities as a platform to expand and improve his own work while working as Hagra's assistant. Mandour is now known for his strong vase shapes rooted in classical Egyptian forms. When I was about twenty people began saying I was the next Mandour because of the strong lines in my work but I was actually copying vases from the museum. Such responses show how little people actually looked at and learned from the works of our own past history, as I was doing. The prospect of artisans making work for themselves is a frightening possibility for many purely academic studio artists in Egypt who depend on artisan's skills to make their work: what if there is someone who can technically make anything AND think for

themselves. Mandour was highly criticized for having said that the academic ceramicists did not even know how to mix their own clay.

Acceptance into the 4th CEBIKO, 2007 Gyeonggi (World Ceramic Biennale, in Korea²), along with two other Egyptians, Dr Diaa Eddin Daoud and Osama Mahmoud Eman (the only three selected from the African continent), allowed my work to be taken more seriously in Egypt (Figure 4). This was a big step for me personally and professionally. However, it was not until 2010, when my work was included in the 33rd Annual General Exhibition of Fine Art—a

juried exhibition of artists over thirty years old across disciplines—that a vase of mine was selected for the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in Cairo.

Although I am primarily interested in the formal properties of everything I make, my connection to my vases has also been rooted in figuration; the vessel embodying parts commonly referred to as belly, waist, shoulder, foot, trunk, and lips. If I consider them figures then it ensures each vase will be unique and perfect in its distinctiveness, thus becoming personal and alive with the character. My figurative decisions are tied to *Baladi* culture, *folk* references. *Baladi* means



Fig 4 First work of Ibrahim Said to be exhibited internationally in Korea, approximately 45 cm, reduction fired.

my country, something that is native or indigenous. We use it to refer to *our* bread, fruit, chicken (e.g. baladi bread) or clothing or music that is connected to tradition, is something local, of the people from the area, and not imported. For example: some of my *Nile Bride* vases reference Nubian women from Upper Egypt, known for their unmistakable large gold hoop earrings—this is a baladi style. In Egypt these are very specific unambiguous references. My *Nile Bride* sculpture (2013) is a long narrow table, 7.3 meters long lined with 23 unique black vases inspired by old Egyptian myths of virgin sacrifices to the Nile for a fertile flooding that year (Figure 5).

While working full time as a ceramic technician at the Fustat Ceramic Center

I took a course in the basic principles of geometry in Islamic art. The Fustat Ceramic Center began as an idea initiated by ceramicist Said al Sadr in 1958 for a traditional craft center in the center of Fustat. My father worked as a ceramic technician there before me for over twenty years. Since then the Center has grown into a complex over 2400 square meters devoted to preserving traditional crafts in Egypt, primarily in ceramics. The Princes School of Traditional Arts³ holds annual courses at the Al Fustat Crafts and Ceramic Center, and it was there that I refined my sense of how design could be tightly interwoven into geometric structures. It was through this course that I was able to *read* the complex structures imbedded in all



Fig 5 *Nile Brides*, red earthenware, 7.3 meters long, 2013. Photo: Dhanraj Emanuel.



Fig 6 Large vase in progress, h 137cm, 2012.

Islamic design, and then begin to integrate the ratios and structures into my own ideas (Figure 6).

In the beginning of 2009 I attended my first artists' symposium, an annual ceramic workshop held each year in a different traditional pottery village in Egypt. That year it was held in Ashmoun, Monofeya where we focused on learning special forms and processes unique to that village, best known for making colanders used for preparing couscous. I wondered why they

could not make something both functional and beautiful. Part of the mission of the workshop was to consider mutually beneficial knowledge for the local pottery community as well as the visiting artist participants: what could we teach one another? If the colander was beautiful it would still serve its function but then the owner could also hang it in their home when they weren't using it, the potters could broaden their market and sell them to tourists or others as décor as well. I enjoyed this challenge, without realizing



Fig 7 Ibrahim Said copying designs onto clay, through a layer of white slip, from images of early Islamic jug filters.

what prominence this step would play in the future of my work.

A colleague at the workshop had a book on Islamic jug filters and when I saw it I knew that I could do something with them—at first only in relation to the colander, but soon as I made the carved colander, the artist Diaa al Daoud, a professor at the workshop challenged me to push the idea of the jug filter and see what I could make. Dr Diaa recognized that artists in Egypt, as well as many technicians, were becoming more and more detached from the rich traditions and techniques surrounding them: he saw my potential and really pushed me to expand my vocabulary and understanding of contemporary work. After my father, he became my second mentor.

This was the start of my serious investigation of the Islamic jug filter, marking a new beginning in my studio practice

(Figures 7 and 8). The jug filters themselves are carvings made into a “filter” built into the neck of water jug. The filter and the jug become one entity.

As water was collected from a river or lake it was held in the jug’s neck, which functioned like a funnel. At the base of the neck, built into the jug were the small perforations that sifted out debris to keep the water in the jug clean. They are special to me because the delicate carvings within the neck of the jugs are really only visible to the drinker. Everything about the water jugs and their custom-made filters was born out of necessity: the beauty of the jug filters was primarily hidden within the water jug and the circular form of the carvings came about because of the shape of the jug’s neck. The carvings themselves primarily needed to serve the practical purpose of filtering debris, but instead of remaining blandly utilitarian,



Fig 8 Islamic jug filter from Fustat, Egypt (900–1200). Earthenware, incised and pierced. Given by Mr G. D. Hornblower; museum number: c. 897-1921. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

we find exquisite examples of Islamic art in the most modest of places. Maybe when something is a necessity and we have to use it or we need it, it is even more of a reason to take the time to make it beautiful and make the labor meaningful, and enjoy it. With this, a conversation began. What was necessary for me in my work?

I needed to exploit the course I had taken in Islamic geometry and figure out how to apply in three dimensions the design principles I had learnt: I did not want to end

up just arbitrarily decorating any shape. I needed to find out who else was working with jug filters, what they were thinking, and what were they making. Most of the work I found used the jug filter motif as pure decoration; the shape of the filter and its core “idea” was not explored.

I wondered how I could combine this traditional artifact with ideas of contemporary art and yet still make something that *smelled of Egypt*. I want to reclaim quintessentially Egyptian motifs and

forms that have been either trivialized or overlooked and come up with something new that does them justice. To see artwork rooted in Egypt's own cultural heritage with its own complex and diverse aesthetic histories is rare. I want to connect the present with the past, bypassing Western art. Clearly Egypt is an amalgam of its influences but there is so much in our long history to mine. I feel it is a practically untapped and endless well of influences.

The shape always comes first to me. Shape is the foundation, and every additional element I add is in support of that form whether working with carving or glazes, they must reinforce this shape. I believe making the form—finding the form—is the most complicated aspect of ceramics. The techniques of glazes can be learned far more easily. Unfortunately too many people think the secret is in the glaze and far too many people are seduced by the glaze and don't see the form. My glazes have always been based on old Egyptian colors of blues and greens and luster reductions, or I have used a palette from traditional firings like pit fires and black fires to finish my work. Through Said Al Sadr's work I learned that I could use not just copper oxides for luster reduction but also silver nitrate, bismuth carbonate, bismuth oxide, and iron oxides. Also, in a continued attempt to keep the surface as simple as possible and minimize surface variables, especially as I began to carve more, I began using a neutral white slip on red earthenware to highlight where the carving will be, first delineating the area to be carved with line, then painting slip over it, then drawing and carving through the slip. (If I am using white clay I do not need to highlight anything.) I then glaze around the carving.

Trying to make something new is difficult, but my experience has been that unless I copied from great work, and learned all the things the past had to teach me I would never find anything new—the past needed to be my staircase as well as my foundation, otherwise I might naively remake bad versions of what was made before. As I had copied Egyptian vases in the earlier part of my career, I now copied Islamic jug filters from the museum and from books, until ideas grew out of the process. By copying these jug filters I also learned for the first time what it meant to have a conceptual relationship to objects. Those jug filters are evidence of Islamic teachings that inner beauty is more valuable than outer beauty, that a balance between the complexity of one part to the simplicity of another part is necessary, and that art's beauty is most powerful when experienced alone with the possibility of contemplation. The first complex object I made using the jug filter as its basis was the *Double Circle*. The outer ring originally came from both Pilgrim Flasks and Ring Vases I saw at the Egyptian Museum, but I was also thinking about the crescent moon in Islam: the negative space between the circles was an opportunity to have an "inside" to my own work (as I have more successfully done recently with the piece *Deepness*, 2013) (Figure 9).

The recent inclusion of two of my sculptures in the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection in the beginning of 2013 has been an incredibly exciting and humbling experience. That the Middle East Curator Mariam Rosser-Owen recognized and understood the historical references of my work makes her support of my work even more compelling to me. Her interest in



Fig 9 *Deepness*, h 40 × w 110cm, carved white earthenware, 2013. The carving can only be viewed from the side of the piece. From the front the work appears to just be ivory lines diminishing in scale on a wall. Photo: Dhanraj Emanuel.

including my work in the V&A's collections was not down to my celebrity or name, it was about just the work, and this is a great source of pride. I was equally moved by the decision to exhibit my work with their collection of jug filters: my work is now on stage with some of its heroes, and it is tested by them.⁴

Since then, I have explored the idea of the circle as the core of geometry. Geometry is tied to the perfection in nature and infinity. I want my forms and designs to be interdependent (Figure 10). Concurrently, the problem of how to bring the jug filter back to the jug interests me. And so the vase continues to be part of my sculptural



Fig 10 *Water Lily*, w 230cm, white earthenware.

language. These have been my challenges over the past few years and I'm sure they will continue to occupy my interest for years to come.

Notes

1 The name of the actual area where the pottery studios are located is called, Fawakheer Al Fustat, "The Studios of Fustat". That area was originally located behind the first mosque built in Africa in 642 AD, Amr ibn al-as Mosque, but in my lifetime had almost completely been moved about a kilometer away. Now there are no studios in the original area.

2 See http://www.kocef.org/eng/03_biennale/01.asp (accessed August 15, 2014).

3 See <http://www.psta.org.uk/international/developacentreforthetraditionalarts/developing/> (accessed August 15, 2014).

4 *Editor's note:* Ibrahim Said's work is part of the permanent (Middle Eastern) collection of the Victorian and Albert Museum (museum numbers ME.5-2013 and ME.6-2013). They are on display in Gallery 137 (Ceramics Study Galleries) alongside the large collection of water filters from Fustat. Our thanks to Miriam Rosser-Owen, Middle East Curator at the Victorian and Albert Museum for this information.