

# Addition and Subtraction

**INTERNATIONAL** – SARA HAKKERT considers the saggar-fired pottery of Israeli artist Hilda Merom.

PHOTOGRAPHY – AVI HIRSHFEL



For almost twenty years, Israeli artist Hilda Merom has been producing functional ware and sculptural pieces using a variety of firing techniques. It is the art of saggar firing which holds the greatest fascination. Through this process she feels her ideas about pottery, art and life are brought to the fore.

Three different cultures have shaped Merom's identity: born and educated in Argentina of Polish parents she arrived in Israel as a young woman to join a kibbutz and build her life. The work reflects this diversity and the struggle to define her own identity within the amalgamation of immigrants of contemporary Israeli society. She now lives and works in Kfar Veradim (Rose Village) situated in the green hills of the Galilee.

During her days in the kibbutz studio, Merom worked with clay and, under the supervision of a sympathetic potter, started to develop her skills and chose to pursue ceramics as her main occupation. A five year period spent in the United States was significant. She studied Visual Arts at the Florida International University, majoring in ceramics with Professor Bill Burke. Merom became familiar with American art in general and ceramics in particular and participated in seminars with Peter Voukos, Paul Soldner and Don Reitz. Echoes of their influence and that of Abstract Expressionism remain. Merom also discovered various firing techniques of the Far East which she later pursued and adapted to her needs.

Back in Israel, Merom set up her own studio where she realised the significance of her local environment, the landscape surrounding her home and the neighbouring people. These are the resources that feed her creativity and it is within this milieu that she claims to express her origins and her spirit. 'I see an artist's lifestyle as being part of and similar to their work,' said Paul Soldner. Such is the case with Hilda Merom, whose recent body of work has been realised under this credo.

The elaborate procedure of saggar firing not only entails building the work itself but the use of a variety of organic and inorganic matter in the firing. Merom's treatment of surfaces during the making process exploits the firing to the full. 'Saggar firing provides many ways to utilise different materials and is wide open to individual interpretation according to the potter's personality'.

There are few limitations to the materials that go into the work: pieces of iron and copper wire, sawdust, seeds, eggshells, coffee beans, shells and seaweed are a few examples. Nothing is wasted. The ancient olive oil presses in the neighbouring villages provide discarded olive pulp and pits. Merom's brother-in-law, a farmer, sends his unwanted seeds and peat-moss, on which mushrooms are grown. All

THIS PAGE: Saggar Plate, Ø50cm.



are used at different stages of the work.

The making process begins by wedging various amounts of wooden shavings, olive pulp or peat-moss into the clay body. After the firing the body is not only much lighter, but its surface is uneven and irregular. Merom does not use glaze but adds amounts of sand, coffee grounds and seaweed to the piece while still on the wheel. Later more organic matter is wrapped around the finished work and a solution of copper carbonate or copper oxide is applied to selected areas to further enrich surface colour. These additions create patches of muted shades from pale pink to red and brown with wisps of green in between. Although working in a free and spontaneous way, the application of the organic and inorganic matter is based on extensive experiments and keen observation.

Two shapes dominate Merom's current work. An upright, sturdy jar resting comfortably on a large base may reach up to eighty centimetres in height. Straight walls taper slightly inward and the neck is emphasised by a strong collar. It is a vigorous pot, which is never completely symmetrical as it is built slightly off centre.

The second shape is a type of platter, either wheel thrown or slab built. Some works are large, heavy and almost flat. Their rims are usually jagged with indentations often crossing the form terminating in deep cracks. Merom

exploits the greater surface of the platters, where expressive gestures of the hand can be made. Pots and platters alike have a grainy surface that alternates between fine and sandy to rough and cracked like crusts of dry land. Platters are reminiscent of geological reliefs, upon which light and shadow spread in dramatic effects.

Merom experiments with mixed media. Glass is placed in pools and grooves (intended) or cracks (unintended) and, when melted, invigorates the colour of the metals giving vivid patches of green and turquoise. Sometimes a leaf or branch is placed between two pieces of glass. Sheets of metal are specially shaped for the heavy platters with deep cracks as supports and then fired together.

Contrary to common pottery practice the tall jars do not extend an invitation to be touched, nor the platters to be held in the hand. Their asymmetry instils a clear sense of movement and they are best appreciated on a turning table, where their imperfect shape unfolds and the intricacies of the surface can be appreciated in their entirety. **CR**

For more details: [www.camon.co.il/hilda-merom](http://www.camon.co.il/hilda-merom)

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Saggari pot, H25 x Ø18cm | Saggari pot, H38 x 10cm | Saggari pot, H40 x 22cm | Saggari pot, H20 x Ø18cm | Detail, Saggari pot.



### Technical Notes

Details vary according to desired results.

#### CLAY

A stoneware mixture – Potterycraft & Creaton 592.

#### OXIDES

A solution of copper carbonate or powdered copper oxide.

#### FIRINGS

Reduction firing; sometimes once fired at Cone 02, or bisque fired at Cone 06 with glaze firing at 002.