

IBRAHIM SAID

A Life of Making

by Jessica Cabe



Shababik-Birds, 3 ft. 6 in. (1 m) in height, wheel-thrown and hand-carved stoneware, fired to cone 8 in a gas kiln. Photo: Daniel Smith.



1 “Shababik Exhibition” at STARworks Center for Creative Enterprise, installation view: *Elegy 2* in foreground, *Shababik-Elephant* and *Shababik-Deer* in background. Photo: Daniel Smith. 2 *Double Ring*, 12 in. (30 cm) in height, wheel-thrown, handbuilt, and hand-carved red earthenware, white slip, fired to cone 04 in an electric kiln. Photo: Dhanraj Emanuel. 3 *Couple*, 35½ in. (90 cm) in height, wheel-thrown, handbuilt, and hand-carved white earthenware, fired to cone 04 reduction in a gas kiln. Photo: Mariam Stephan.

Ibrahim Said has earned praise all over the world for his ceramic work, which stands out for its intricate carvings inspired by traditional Islamic art and architecture, but his formative clay classroom was very different from those of most living ceramic artists.

Said grew up near Fustat, a neighborhood in Cairo, Egypt, known as one of the most important places in the world for commercial pottery production. From the age of 6, Said was in the studio with his father, carving into pieces his dad had formed and eventually learning to throw on the wheel and produce commercial work himself. He did not study ceramics in college; instead, he learned by spending his entire life making pottery.

Said’s upbringing outside of academia was never a hurdle, but rather a boon for both his creativity and technical skill. But being so connected to the commercial world created some internal conflict when Said embarked on his journey to finding his artistic voice. What is the line between commercial pottery and ceramic art? How could he pay tribute to the functional wares that are so important to his culture while placing his own mark on his pieces?

These are the questions Said began asking himself as a teenager. With the guidance of his father, an artist himself, and support from the ceramic arts community, Said has found the balance. His forms are inspired by traditional Islamic pottery, and the carvings are drawn with Middle Eastern art and architecture in mind. The end result is work that can only be his; he has found his voice and managed to maintain aspects of an important tradition. Perhaps best of all, he has carved out a life for himself as an artist who can bring this tradition to an international audience.

Fustat

Now a part of Cairo, Fustat was the capital of Egypt from the years 641–750 CE and again from 905–1168 CE. Much of the area’s rich, long history has been lost to war and neglect, but there are still some gems in Fustat; for example, Said grew up walking past the oldest mosque in Africa on his way to work.

To this day, Fustat is one of the most important places in the world for commercial handmade pottery production. “It’s so beautiful, and it’s very noisy,” Said says. “We have more than 100 studios for ceramics [in Fustat], and it’s near a mountain, so it’s always very beautiful to see people making [objects in] clay there.”

The workers dig their own clay and mix it in interconnected pits in the ground. Others throw on the wheel all day and line up hundreds of unfired pots outside to store before firing in huge kilns. It is a prime example of mass production via traditional methods.

Being surrounded by this commercial pottery operation as well as ancient Islamic architecture sparked Said’s interest in carving at a very young age. “I was six years old when I started going into my father’s studio,” Said says. “I liked to do handbuilding and to carve on the clay. Sometimes my father would make a form for me and I’d carve into it.”

Said’s wife, Mariam Stephan, says the Middle East’s relationship to art is different from that in the US. “In the Middle East, the

history of Islamic art is tied to every functional object,” she says. “So it’s not just architecture, but you see it in the metalwork, in the mosaics, in glass lanterns. There’s this sense of being surrounded by it, that it’s not separate from life. That’s something that resonates more deeply there: You don’t have the separate art object, but you think of ways to surround yourself with beauty in a way that’s a constant reminder of a belief system you have.”

Growing up with this ancient art as part of his everyday life inspired Said to treat his pottery as an opportunity to carry on those traditions.

Commercial Pottery Versus Ceramic Art

When Said was a teenager, he began making commercial pottery on the wheel. “In the studio, we were working for commission, and we made hundreds of pieces a day,” he says. “So I felt like the wheel was more like a machine, not like something you can enjoy. You were just working to make work and make money.”

However, Said did enjoy throwing on the wheel when he allowed himself to create work outside of his role in commercial production. By the time he was 18, he knew he wanted to be an artist. “I started to think about what I should do, how I could make art, and what makes my work different from anyone else’s,” he says. “I started to study all the Egyptian shapes.”

Said began trying to make copies of the pottery he saw in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, and he carved into his forms to further pay tribute to the tradition of this artwork, as well as to set his work apart. “I started to make my own art,” he says. “I started to put my touch, me, inside of it.”

Going International

In 2002, Said was selected as an Egyptian artisan representative to a craft fair in Belgium. This marked the first time he ever left his home country. “It was very good to see a Western country,” he says. “You know, when you go to a show in Egypt, you find thousands of things in front of you, so you can’t really see what you want to buy because it’s too much. But, I went to Belgium, I saw how very few pieces are in a show. It’s simple, which I loved. It was a very beautiful trip for me.”

In addition to new ideas on how to display his work, Said’s time in Belgium opened his eyes to a different kind of arts culture, where the work someone makes is more important than who the artist is.

“In Egypt, it was very difficult for me to be in a community of artists, for so many reasons,” he says. “First, the group of artists in Egypt all went to college. But many of my father’s friends pushed me and helped me to be in this community.”

Ten years after his first international trip, Said moved to North Carolina, a place that he felt had deep respect for the history of ceramics. Even so, work like Said’s is a rarity.

“African pottery gets overlooked in America,” Stephan says. “It’s been exciting because people don’t see the shapes he makes here, and it’s really because of that oversight of what’s going on in Africa.”





4 *Infinity*, 19 in. (48 cm) in height, white earthenware, fired to cone 04 in an electric kiln. 5 *Fountain*, 3 ft. 7 in. (1.1 m) in height, red earthenware, fired to cone 04 reduction in a gas kiln. 6 *Deepness*, 4 ft. (1.2 m) in length, white earthenware, fired to cone 04 in an electric kiln. 4–6 Photos: Dhanraj Emanuel. All pieces are wheel thrown, handbuilt, and hand carved.

Over time, Said has focused on refining both his forms and his carvings, creating works at the perfect size for each shape (often very large) and making his carvings more and more intricate. Today, his pieces are unmistakably Egyptian, employing the technical skill of a commercial potter and the vision of an artist.

His Father's Son

If you ask Ibrahim Said what the most important factor was in forming him into the ceramic artist he is today, he would not say growing up near Fustat, or being a commercial potter, or walking past the oldest mosque in Africa on his way to work. He would say his father. “My father was my first teacher,” he says. “He gave me the love of clay. He never pushed me to work in ceramics at all, but he gave me everything he had learned over 50 years of working with clay. “He was a great artist,” Said continues. “He was working as a commercial potter, but he was an artist; if a piece in his hand broke, he would take an hour trying to fix it because he loved what he was doing, even though in this hour he could have made another five pieces if he’d just started from the beginning.”

Said’s father never went to school, but started working as an assistant to a commercial potter at six years old. “He totally lived the life of an artisan in Egypt,” Stephan says. “For you to go from that generation to suddenly he wants his son to become a great artist, it just makes me want to cry. It’s really amazing. He was so proud of Ibrahim.”

Without the support of his father (and his mother, who would give him money for supplies to make work), Said may have never created work beyond the commercial realm in Fustat. When Said started thinking about leaving his mark on the timeline of Egyptian and Islamic ceramic art, his father gave him all the resources he could to make that dream a reality. Without his father, Said would likely never have started making his large vessels with intricate carvings, would likely never have taken this work into the international realm of ceramic art. Said says his success brought his father nothing but joy. “He was very happy,” he says. “He said, ‘My son did what I couldn’t do.’”

the author *Jessica Cabe studied arts journalism at Syracuse University and has been a clay hobbyist for two years. She lives in Chicago, and works as a freelance journalist.*

Thrown, Constructed, and Carved

Ibrahim Said begins by throwing both ends of his work on the wheel, which allows for the neck and base to be equally narrow (1). Next, he puts a slab on top of the neck and draws his pattern on the surface (2). He then hand-carves the area of the form that will be impossible to reach with his tools once the piece is assembled and cuts out the inset areas (3).

Once the sections are cut out, he checks the thickness of the clay. He threw this piece around an internal support cylinder because the first version could not hold up its own weight (4).

He then attaches slabs to the form. In order to attach each slab, he presses a thin sheet of fabric onto the slab so

he can lift it up and work without it breaking (5). Then, like the neck, each slab gets an underlying geometric pattern traced on it—like this six-pointed star (6). Using the same geometric structure, the slab insets on all six sides become a unique, carved pattern (7).

Once both halves are complete, Ibrahim uses a foundry crane to delicately align the top half exactly in place (8). Then, he completes six arms: three from the bottom half extended to attach and support the top half, and three from the top half down (9). The piece will be fired with a supporting ring in the middle until the arms are strong. After the bisque firing, he will chip that ring out.



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