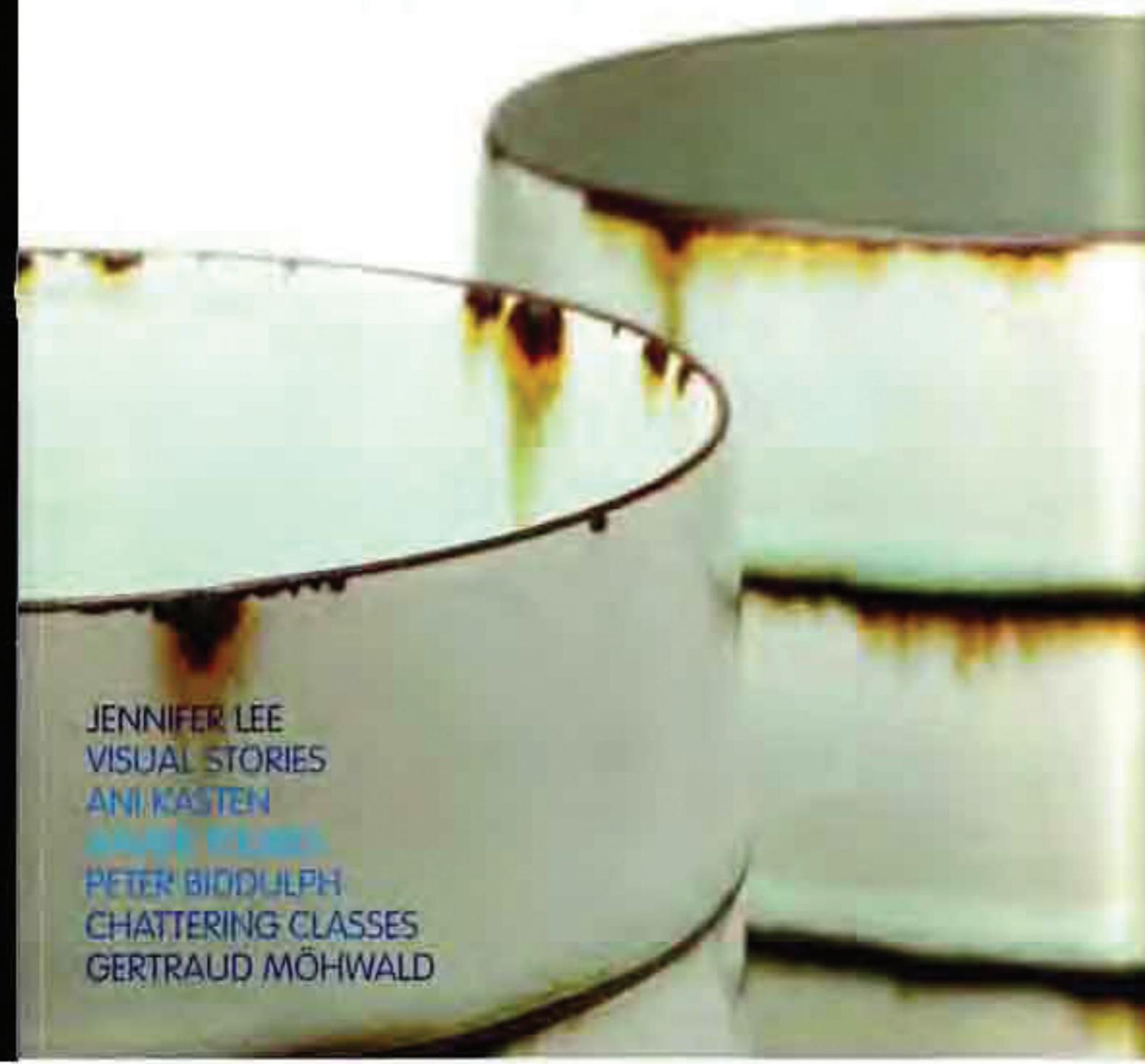


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## Kirsten Coelho



## On the Tiles

Michael Rice reports on his tour of the Kashikars in Pakistan's Sindh Province.

On a sweaty morning in November 2006, I was one of an international group of ceramists travelling to Nasarpur in southern Pakistan, invited to the home of a seventh generation potter by his son Hassan, a ceramic student of the National College of Arts in Lahore, but whom everyone referred to as Commander. My ceramic travelling companions were Scheherazade Alum (Pakistan/Canada), Catherine Kajander (Finland) and Reya Badaruddin (India). We had met at the third ASNA Clay Triennial in Karachi where we had been impressed by the young, extremely likeable and friendly Commander.

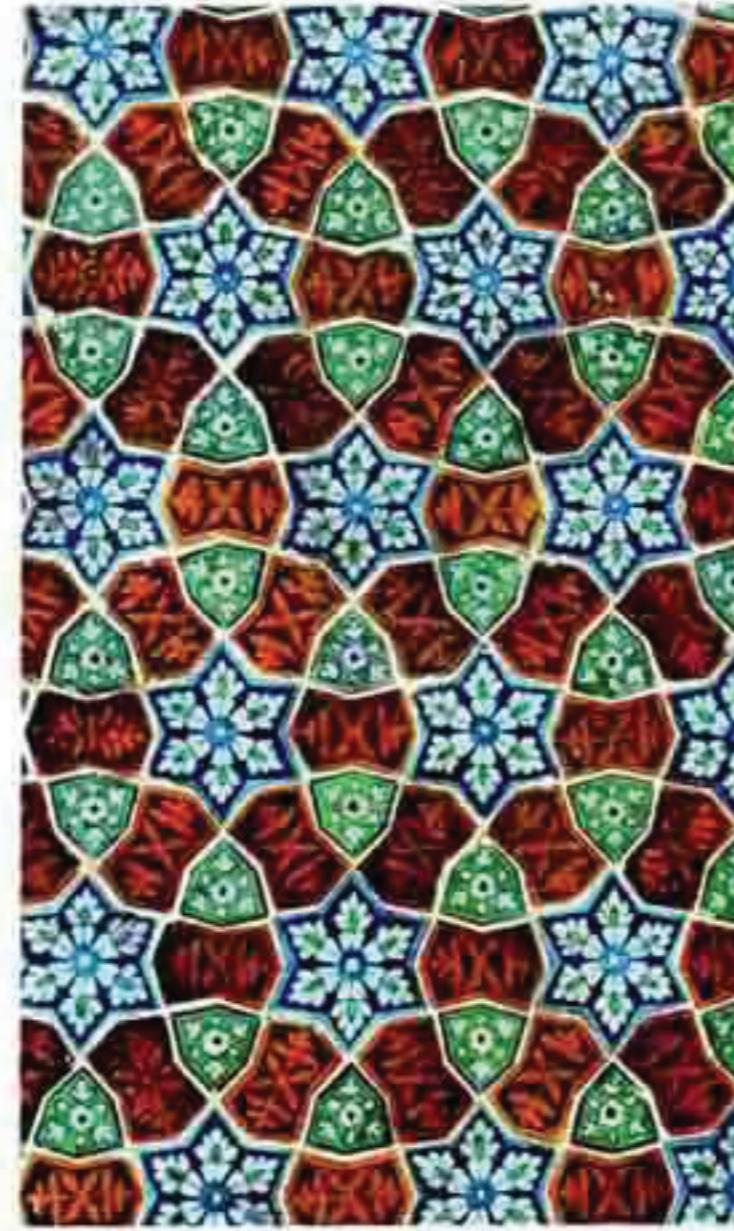
We left Karachi at 6.30am and travelled north toward Hyderabad into remote interior Sindh. My Landy Planet guidebook thoroughly discouraged this style of adventure, warning of the need for an armed guard but Commander assured us that it was no problem. Our journey was magnificent – camel carts, the odd elephant, fields of mangoes, working tribal women with huge bundles posed effortlessly on their elegant heads and in the distance vast chimney kilns firing bricks; the landscape totally unfamiliar and strangely intoxicating.

We were greeted by Commander's father whose only words of English seemed to be 'Michael' and 'yes'. He immediately began to show us around explaining in Urdu the processes and methods his family had used practically unchanged for centuries. Although we shared no language I could almost understand him as he took me round the outdoor workshop and nearby mosque holding my hand the whole time as a father would, gently explaining everything with sentences that began with 'Michael' and ended with him smiling at me widely and saying 'yes'. It was magical.

Over lunch Commander explained that he and his family were called Kashikars and that this was their occupation as well as their caste name. His ancestors were from the Kashan town in Persia, which is where the art of Kashikari originated. When Muhammad bin Qasim invaded what was then India in the eighth century AD he brought his craftsmen as well as his soldiers and Commander's family had been there ever since. The Kashikars' job is now, as it was then, to make and decorate the tiles that cover the shrines, public buildings and the mosques. This highly specific knowledge has been handed down from father to son and the techniques and methods used have remained literally the same for centuries.

**TILES** The local clay is brought to the pottery by donkey cart at a charge of 500 rupees (about £4), which is a lot considering the few skilled workers are paid a pittance of 100 rupees per day. After being cleaned it is allowed to stiffen before being cut into tiles. Each type of tile has its own name and purpose. Beams are smaller and mosaic-like; these are interlocked for a complete design. Rings or mudkili are parapet tiles. Nella are border tiles for dozes. Dau are decorative tiles.

The entire exterior and interior of many buildings are covered with brightly coloured tiles in cobalt and white. Several themes recur with the geometric design and patterns created by the interlocking tiles consistent with many other areas of Islamic art in expressing logic and order in the understanding of the universe. Floral patterns are understood to indicate paradise and many designs have a simple repetitive yet comprehensive floral pattern. Calligraphy, in Arabic

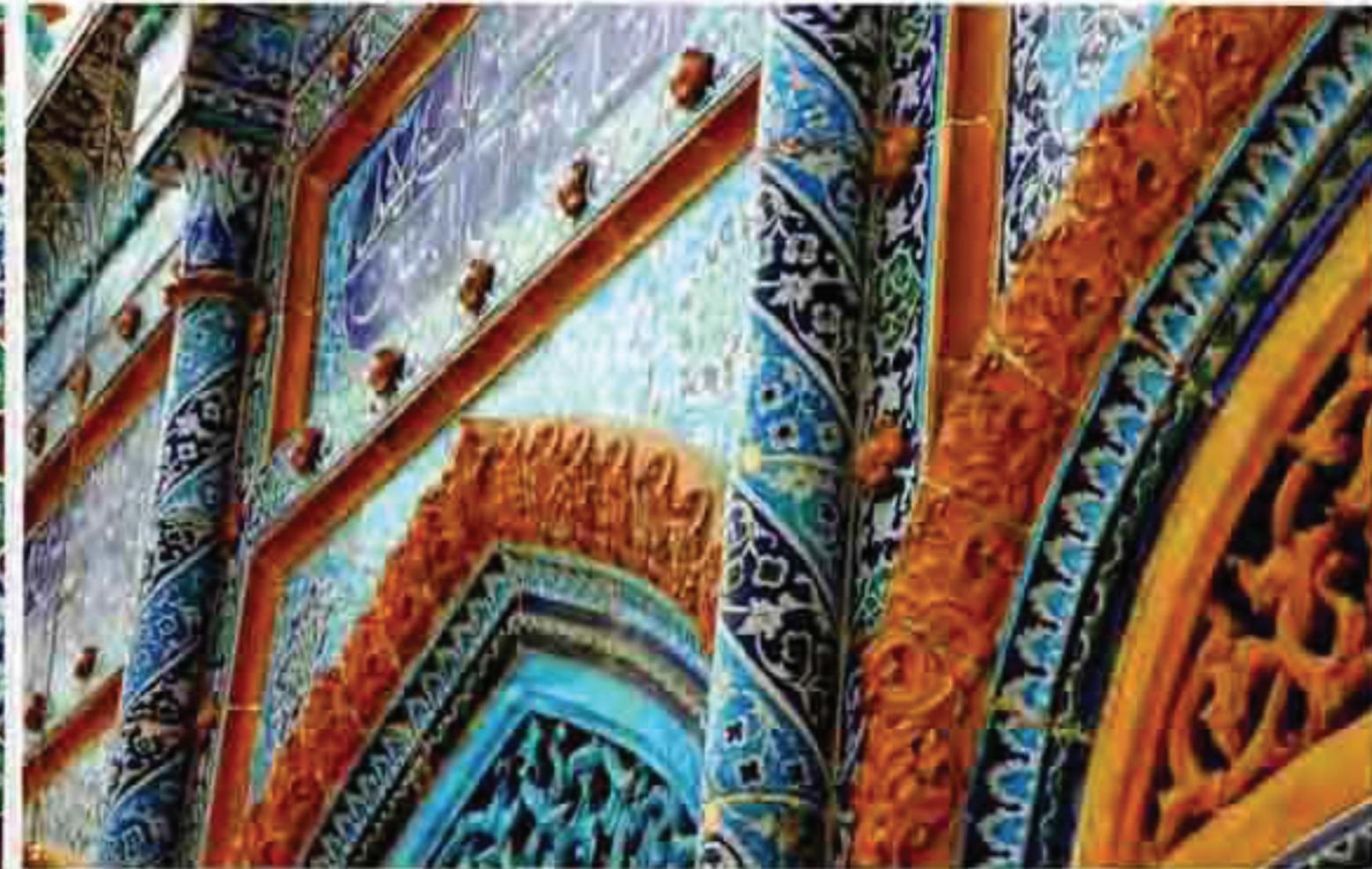


and Persian, appears throughout the finished buildings, with no figurative motifs. Quotations coming from the Qur'an. Some tell the story of the building.

To the western eye it is curious that there are no figurative figures. Commander explained: 'In Islam images that could lead to any type of idolatry or reverence are to be avoided as they distract one's attention away from God and so we never use the body in our art... there is only one God'.

After the tiles are cut they are decorated using goat hair brushes with patterns applied one layer at a time. The work is fired in two large wood-burning kilns for up to thirty-four hours. The huge mud kilns dominate the outside of the studio and look like two large anthills, almost part of the earth itself and indistinct from it. In the work is packed around a central chimney and when the kiln has reached temperature the top is sealed with bricks and the kiln is allowed to cool for several days.

Unfortunately, the title of Kashikar may soon be redundant as cheap imports and poor wages make this a dying art. The trade may end within a generation. Commander's father's studio uses employ more than twenty, now it has only six and he feels that



would all leave if they could get work elsewhere. New markets in the affluent cities of Lahore, Islamabad and Karachi have failed to materialise, the rustic Kashikar style perceived as something from the past. The new generation prefer to look West. Commander is positive. He would like to see the work celebrated on an international platform and he is attempting to modernise his own work whilst keeping the tradition alive. 'Insha'Allah (God willing) if people from other countries could see what my family and I have been doing here I'm sure we would get more orders and we could save the family business'. Insha'Allah Commander.