

# A Pilgrimage with Porcelain

In Conversation with SHEHEREZADE ALAM

By Maha Malik

## Introduction

Currently based in Lahore, Sheherezade Alam is acknowledged amongst Pakistan's premier potters. Her work with clay spans over four decades. And it demonstrates the imaginative largesse involved in cohering, and continuing, the region's ancient earthenware tradition.

Gravitation generates essential form, and at the heart of the matter lies the potter's wheel. Author Sara Suleri Goodyear refers to this in an early commentary on the subject. 'In pre-Islamic and the Islamic eras, the Indian potter served as a cultural icon, as the one maker who could give physical shape to the unutterable symmetries of mysticism.'<sup>1</sup> And she adds, 'Sheherezade Alam revives [the wheel] in order to extend the significance of earth in the aesthetic of the east.'

A purist by temperament, Ms. Alam's lifework allows for a steadying, expansive experience of time within the medium of clay. And it contextualises our contemporary moment, such is its ethical force. Research into the gracious legacies of Mehargarh, Harappa, and Taxila undergird the potter's sensibility, her sense of profile and line, the spatial forms of her manifold vessels. But 'tradition' for her is not limited to these instances alone. Ms. Alam has absorbed influences from as far and wide as Greece, Iran, Italy, Japan, the Scandinavian region, as well as Turkey. Work with master potters based in England, a residency in Glasgow, teaching in Ankara,

studio practice in New Haven, and in Toronto, for many years her home base, have each enriched her return to the wheel.

In Fall 2013, Ms. Alam undertook a 5-week residency at The Pottery Workshop, Jingdezhen. A fascination with China's ceramic heritage drew her to the region. But there was also the more personal solicitation: 'Of course, it is the material that is special – it is porcelain that invites you to come work with it. So it was, that my path, my journey brought me here.' The current exhibition is based upon Ms. Alam's Jingdezhen residency.

### **A sense of place**

Established in Hong Kong in 1985, The Pottery Workshop is an initiative focused on development, communication, and education in ceramic arts. Since its inception, several additional workshops have been set up – in Shanghai, Jingdezhen, and in Beijing. Of these four, JDZ is the largest venue, also hosting an international design studio and residency program.

Jingdezhen is itself an 1800-year-old ceramic production town, considered the 'porcelain capital of world.' The Pottery Workshop is located in this uninterrupted milieu, within a former sculpture factory. And it is surrounded by independent craftsmen and artists. Clay producers, throwers, sculptors, mold makers, slip casters, glazers, engravers, brush makers, blacksmiths and box makers, include a sampling of the resident artisans.

The founder and force behind The Pottery Workshop is a Hong Kong based entrepreneur/ ceramist, Caroline Cheng. The renowned Japanese potter, Takeshi Yasuda, was its director for over a decade. Among other attributes, he is recognised for his very contemporary

work with porcelain.<sup>2</sup>

This catalogue acknowledges the influence of Yasuda, as well as a second Japanese potter, Kawai Kanjiro (1890 – 1966). The latter was a key figure in the **mingei** or Japanese folk art and studio pottery movements. He was also an acknowledged poet who translated the humane and spiritual aspects of his practice into free-form verse. In their respective ways, both potters are simultaneously considered revivalists and innovators. Their mentoring spirits are celebrated in this period of work, and within the deep philosophical terrain that marks Ms. Alam's ongoing practice.

### **Arrival**

*Takeshi Yasuda was my teacher from Farnham days in Surrey, UK.<sup>3</sup> I had no idea I would meet him in China after almost 30 years! He suggested that the first time at Jingdezhen one should just SEE and absorb things. And indeed [even outside studio space] it was bewildering to view porcelain manifest in myriads of shapes, sizes, colours and forms. Street lights, traffic lights, walls paved with shards, streets and courtyards paved in clay tiles, ten-foot pots, painted figurines, huge laughing Buddhas, utensils, tables, stools – all made in porcelain. The city was overflowing with inexhaustible energy!*

*So at first, no matter what your intentions, you are overwhelmed by possibilities. The scale of work being done and the thousands of artisans involved – it is remarkable. As I had however, committed myself for a work period, some quick decisions had to be made, starting with sitting on the wheel and putting my hands into this incredible clay. I had heard many people speak about Jingdezhen porcelain as being very, very unique.*

## **Process**

*All my work was wheel-based. I realised early on that clay did not throw the way I am used to in my practice. With porcelain, you have to build your pot very carefully, as it can slump during the making and firing process. One must throw thick, and then trim to the desired finesse.*

*Form also posed important questions. For instance, flat platters from my own oeuvre were a challenge to make in porcelain. As I set up work, I found that this new material had a very strong will. It made me do things I had never done before. I kept going though – resolving issues as they appeared, always observing, focused on what the outcomes would be. The techniques I did not have the skill for, I asked other artists to share theirs with my pots. PWS also facilitated a range of local, artisanal collaborations.*

*There simply wasn't a moment during the day and even in the night when one was not in process. The residency was very demanding. And it was exhilarating!*

## **Clay**

*Everything came from the ultimate material – porcelain. It was exciting to observe and one wondered what was in it that made it so special. Then as you start to touch the clay body, it shows you that it will stretch and expand for you. It is 'makhani' and 'mulaaim'<sup>4</sup> and at the same time it is tough and requires great strength. I like your term 'strenuous delicacy,' as a way to describe porcelain's nature, its process of making.*

*In Toronto, I had worked with mid-fire porcelain. But Jingdezhen*

*superwhite porcelain is of an exceptional quality. It's a high-fire clay and comes from the mother rock in the surrounding hills. Traditionally, this soft rock would be pounded with wooden hammers and then mixed with water. (The process is now mechanised.) The result is a very finely grained clay... I worked intuitively, throughout, and I was led by the fluid potential in the material itself.*

## **Glazes**

*Normally, I go through several months of experimenting with raw materials, followed by a period of testing. Different textures and shades are chosen, the glaze applied to my pots, they go into the kiln, and then the results tell you where you went right and wrong. At The Pottery Workshop, glazing involves collaboration within a limited time frame. So on this occasion, I selected first a silvery shade of pale green...hues of glassy, frosty, pale celadon. I used matte whites and a soft, mint green matte with shiny crystals. An old favourite, when it comes out well, is oxblood red, or sang de beouf. This then became my essential glaze palette.*

## **After Jingdezhen**

*Just a month after my return, Muhammad Nawaz<sup>5</sup> was in the process of setting up a Harappan Gharonda<sup>6</sup> at my centre for traditional arts when he was called home. The distinguished ceramist passed soon after, in November 2013. In an unforeseen act of collaboration, I went on to complete his pots.*

*In celebration of his lifework and in continuity, I am now working on 'The Harappan Collection.' This is a museum-quality exhibition of his pottery and mine, documenting our regional clay legacy of several millennia. I have imagined this as a travelling exhibition, with a core educational focus. For more people must know about their own*

*history, and of the vital presence of earth, matti, in it. Clay manifests an expressive presence of 9000 years here...*

*There is also this other path, which continues to evolve outwards and simultaneously back in towards my studio base in Lahore. I continue to return to the cosmopolitan nature of clay. More recently, my work was surveyed and I was honoured with membership to the International Academy of Ceramics. As the principal organisation representing the interests of ceramists worldwide, IAC facilitates a vital and enthralling network of professionals. Its community consists of individual makers, supported by writers and critics, museum and gallery curators, private collectors, as well as ceramics work centres, professional associations, and educational institutions.*

*As the sole representative from South Asia, I attended IAC's General Assembly held in Dublin this year. The experience was truly exceptional! I have returned with a sense of being part of an incredible world-dialogue. And I am inspired to share this energy and intelligence with young ceramists here. I have been given the opportunity to guide and connect them with this extraordinary resource, wherein they too can link their visions...from where they too can dare to dream.*

## **Clay Wisdom**

*If you can imagine it, most of my forms are coming from gazing at pottery in museums around the world. I have been fascinated by their shapes, and by the power of their presence, whether it was in the work of the potters of Mehargarh, Harappa, Mohenjo daro, Takshashila (Taxila), the pottery of the Hittites, the Kybele 'mother goddess' culture from Anatolia, or the Grecian vases and stands from the Palace of Knossos in Crete, the Neolithic Chinese Pottery and the Jomon Pots from Japan, and more...*

*Essentially, I have been concerned with the disappearing of earthen vessels and utensils. It is these robust and lively shapes that are embedded across my work.*

*In my early years, at NCA, clay was an unknown material to me. It was like any other, like wood and paper. It aroused fascination but it had no personal meaning. Then it started to involve me in a way... as something sensual, as a holistic, cyclical way of life. There was in fact, a seven-year process of initiation, before I began to experience a dialogue with clay. And I found a more mature devotion. A rhythm, attachment (attachment in time), a personal practice and return to clay...*

*In fact, centring is what drew me to pottery.  
This is pivotal. The experience of creating pots on the wheel...*

*The first action is to centre your clay body. It has its own force on the wheel – it is moving around a force. You then provide the counter-force. You and the clay body become one.*

*With the energy you have applied, you locate a still point, an invisible central line from top to bottom. It is intangible – one part not moving, and the rest moving around this still point. Your whole body is involved. It is yogic, in a way. The sense of unity required on the wheel...*

*This energy drew me to clay more than anything else.  
I am speaking of an elemental experience.*

*And this inside outside... You know your hands are working together, but each one is engaged in a specific action. The combination of the two 'speak of inside outside.' The hand inside tells you what the pot*

*looks like from within, and the hand outside shapes the form, from the outside...such unity.*

*In Lahore (from the 80s onwards), I was introduced to sufi poetry and to a philosophy of the earth – the presence of clay in our wisdom traditions and folklore. I was introduced to a whole belief system. There, you were placed firmly on the ground. You surrendered to matti.*

*Even though the context is different at venues such as Jingdezhen, it is true that an essential relationship between one's self and clay remains. The work is deeply tactile. There is the language of dance with a pot. And a constant sense of return, stages of handling, nurturing. There is injury and delicacy. It is true, pots disintegrate if they are not cared for. Clay teaches you to listen well and to share well. And it teaches you to let go.*

*If I had not experienced clay, how could I have understood life, death, dying, and being born again, tested by fire, re-claiming life. There is this ardour...*

*You touch the material, and you begin to be transformed.*

*There is a wonderful phrase in Urdu: 'matti ki talimat...' Implying magic...wonder...healing, rahm ...in the sense of a realm or universe. You really are in the presence of something very ancient, this experience of clay. And it always leaves you in awe.*



1. Sara Suleri Goodyear, Yale University, 1989.
2. Yasuda learnt his trade in Japan before shifting to England, and later to China for a span of ten years. Ms. Cheng refers to him as 'Master Potter of the Universe.' Having worked on stoneware for four decades, his own shift to porcelain is comparatively recent. 'During my training in Japan, certain potters I admired, they all worked in rather low-grade material. We were proud of making precious art out of humble materials. So I personally avoided porcelain. We did not play with fancy or difficult techniques. As young, ambitious potters we believed in art rather than preciousness or complexity or difficulties. Value is in art, that was our youthful belief. And perhaps I still believe this. So porcelain...not as a precious material, just as a material, that has been my challenge.' *China's White Gold: Interview with Takeshi Yasuda*. The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, February 2013.
3. Ms. Alam attended the West Surrey College of Art and Design (Farnham, UK), on a British Council scholarship during 1983-1984. Part of the program entailed working with master potters across England. She met Yasuda for the first time, during this period.
4. 'Like butter...soft, pliant texture.'
5. Muhammad Nawaz (d. 2013) was a Harappa-based potter. During the 1980s, he began work with the Harappa Archaeological Research Project directed by Dr. G. F. Dales and Dr. J. M. Kenoyer. Nawaz Bhai, as he was affectionately called, trained in the replication of excavated works and was integral to the documentation and preservation of Indus Valley relics.
6. The Harappan Gharonda or Museum of Harappan Pottery is located within 'Jahan-e-Jahanara - Centre of Traditional Arts for Children,' in Lahore. Muhammad Nawaz built the adobe structure in order to house authentic replicas of Harappan pottery. Through the venue, children may be exposed to and learn about their clay heritage.
7. Term for mercy, grace.