

Potters on pots:

Ibrahim Said



Islamic jug filter carvings have had a lasting impact on Egyptian potter *Ibrahim Said*. Here he discusses the meaning behind these carvings and the influence they have had on his work

My first experience with clay was carving it as a child. When I was around six years old my father, who was a potter, would give me leatherhard forms to draw on and carve into as playthings. I grew up in Al Fustat in Old Cairo where I was surrounded by relief carvings. It was on the sides of churches, mosques and the synagogue. Carvings in stone, wood and ceramic bordered doorways and framed the mihrab (a niche in the wall of a mosque that indicates the direction of Mecca) as architectural decorations. It was everywhere and I tried to copy what I saw.

Through those early studies of my surroundings, I began to ask why these old things were more beautiful than the items I saw being made by living artists and artisans. As I became more proficient at carving into my teenage years, my father made more complicated forms for me to consider. I realise now how significant that time was in developing my technical skills, but more importantly of laying the foundations of my culture and love of Middle Eastern and African architecture. My fondest memories are of those times spent with my father in his studio and clay connects me to him.

When I finally began throwing on the wheel, I was drawn to the strong lines and bold shapes of vases from the Naqada III period in Egypt (from 3,200-3,000 BCE) that I saw at the Egyptian Museum. Their delicate finials and small bases embody an elegance and strength that are still unmatched for me. I wanted to make vases that had a strength yet lightness to them. These are characteristics that I continue to strive for in all my work.

In my early 30s, I was introduced to Islamic jug filter carvings made between 900–1,200 ACE in Fustat, Egypt, similar to these ones from the V&A Museum (pictured above). I was given a photocopy of the *Catalogue General du Musée Arabe du Caire: Les Filtres de Gargoulettes* by Pierre Olmer from an Egyptian professor, which featured images of these medieval carvings that separated the neck from the body of the jug. The water jugs had a broad neck that could hold water while it filtered into the body. Although the carved designs were made for functional reasons, to either filter out river sediment or keep bugs and dirt from entering the jugs, the beauty of geometric, floral and animal designs that are prevalent in Islamic art adorned the filters. The designs included peacocks, fish,

THIS PAGE: Said standing next to *Magnolia*, 2018, earthenware, H136cm

OPPOSITE: Water jar and filters with pierced and incised decorations, Fatimid earthenware, 11th–12th century, found in excavations in Fustat, Egypt

Images: courtesy of the artist; V&A Museum



Deepness, 2013,
earthenware, H38cm


camels, elephants, rabbits, abstract geometric patterns and floral designs, as well as calligraphy from sacred to secular. The range of designs gave me permission to be expansive and embrace many possibilities in imagery under the umbrella of Islamic art.

In 2009, I attended a ceramic symposium in Ashmoun, Menoufia, Egypt, that focused on learning special forms and processes unique to the village, which is best known for making colanders used for preparing couscous. During the symposium, I wondered why these colanders could not be both functional and beautiful and began playing with jug filter patterns on the colander form. I then continued exploring ideas around the jug filter, the relationship between form and design, and the literally embedded meaning of hidden beauty in the neck of the vessel. I didn't want to make carvings on any shape – I needed there to be an intrinsic relationship between the two.

It would be years before I figured out ways to bring my vases and carving interests together. It was the jug filters that nudged me towards sculpture because I wanted the carvings to be mirrored in a three-dimensional form that also spoke to the geometry of the design. What is particularly poetic about the jug filters is that only those drinking could see the designs: they embodied a principle emphasising inner rather than external beauty, and an individual contemplative experience. These beautiful carvings were the centrepiece of a simple utilitarian object.

Searching for ways to bring these carvings and their narratives back to life has become one of my interests. The first piece I made that embodied that connection was

Deepness. This wall sculpture is a series of seven burnished white earthenware arches that diminish in scale so as to appear as though they are receding in space. From directly in front one sees only white lines, it is only when you walk closer to view the piece from the side and look through the arches along the wall do you see that hiding inside each arch are intricate carvings.

The Islamic jug filters have led me to consider water as the soul within the jug. When I pierce the body of my vases I render them lost to function and yet the body itself then becomes the filter for another connection to life and transformation. I have tried to create vases that reveal the interior setting of the original filter, suggesting fountains, rivers, basins and pools. In some ways trying to tell the story of the vase as carrier of life: water. In a recent piece, *Magnolia*, I suspended two necks on top of each other with two obvious jug filter references facing one another. The viewer has to look closely into the centre to see the carvings. The value I place on something so small and seemingly incidental as the jug filters is at the core of my practice. I want to make connections with the past and value things that are done with care and consideration – they remind me to aspire to something larger than myself. 

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