

TURKUVAZ HARPER'S BAZAAR TURKIYE

ART AND CULTURE

Artistic Portraits | Ibrahim Said

The June guest of Artistic Portraits is Ibrahim Said.

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While I was passing by Yossi Milo gallery in Chelsea on May 3, I was fascinated by a large vase in the gallery's window, and I watched it with admiration for minutes. A name was written on the gallery's window: *Ibrahim Said*.

Both the name and the job seemed very familiar. Before I could wait any longer, I stepped into the gallery with curiosity and met him. I was sure it was him. Praised worldwide for his intricately carved ceramic work inspired by traditional Islamic art and architecture, Ibrahim Said, whose

formative clay style is very different from that of most living ceramic artists. He was smiling at me from among his magnificent works with his wife, painter and art professor Mariam Stephan. I said, I am Turkish. Both your work and your name seem very familiar to me. Can we meet? And at that moment, I decided to interview this humble, heartfelt artist. But our time was very limited. Because, İbrahim and his wife were leaving New York on May 4.

And so, we started our interview with great excitement at nine o'clock on the morning of May 4th.

Here is our interview with İbrahim Said, who started by saying "*Ceramics is the understanding that the hand is an extension of the mind*"!

Ayşe : Hello İbrahim, we managed to get together even if it was such short notice. I'm so glad. Could you please tell me a little about your values? What kind of family did you grow up in, with what values?

İbrahim: I believe in the beauty within us, and I concentrate on that beauty. Since I believe in the beauty within us, I always try to see the beautiful and positive sides of people and life. This is my philosophy in life. When we always concentrate on the goodness within us, I always see goodness and beauty outside of us. I think we need this to be happy. I reflect this beauty in my work.



If you can achieve this, you're lucky.

Yes, I try and apply this every day. I try it every day, with every person, in every situation, and it works.

What kind of family did you grow up in? Could you tell us a little about your family, please?

I grew up in a big family in Cairo. My parents were traditional Egyptian people. We weren't rich, we were a middle-class family. My father's whole life was in this traditional pottery business. My mother was a housewife, and I was the youngest in the family after my three sisters and one brother. And I have experienced and felt the advantage of being the youngest in the family.

What generation was your father in the pottery business?

My father was first generation, he learned the trade on his own by being self-taught. But he did his job with passion and love. I have been working with my father in his workshop since I was 6 years old. This passion and love were passed on to me. He taught me to love clay and play freely with it. I learned everything from my father and I owe where I am now to him. I wouldn't be here today without him, and he has always been a role model for me.

So, is there a new generation following you?

I have no children. But, of course, there are many nieces and nephews. There are people who are interested in them.



Did your father also have an artistic side? Was he a good businessman?

Yes, my father was an artist first and a businessman second. I also got my artistic side from my father. Every day he would dream and try and implement something new. Celebrate the moment with excitement and love every day. Like I do now.

Did you study art?

I did not study art, I grew up in an improvisational workshop. My school was my father's workshop. I learned everything there. I started going to my father's workshop

when I was six years old. My father's workshop became both my university and my art school. I used to play in Fustat all the time. This would drive my mother crazy. Because it was very important for me to see all the pottery and forms that people made. Fustat and its ceramic workshops, was and remains famous for its massive, high-octane commercial pottery industry. The family business required speed and precision. When I was a teenager, I would throw out so much pottery in such a short time that I began to hate the mass production potential of the pottery lathe. I would prefer to make clay by hand and carve it by hand whenever possible. This is how I started feeling clay. My father always supported these impulses and my approach. I was always trying to create a work, spending a lot of time and working on details and decorations.

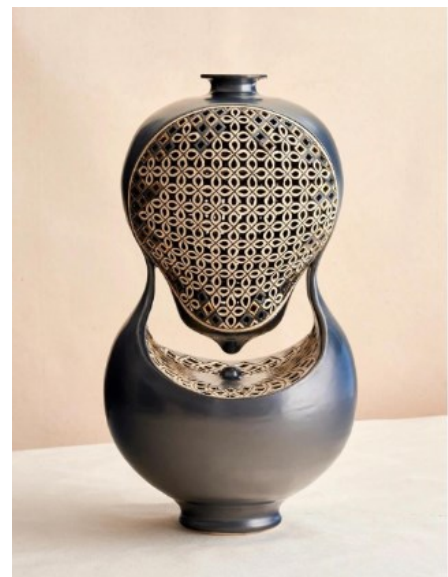
Well, you both inherited the talent from your father and learned the business from him. He made you love clay. But what inspired you in the vision of turning this work into art? When did it come to your mind? Today we know you as an internationally successful artist, you could also be a potter still working in your father's workshop in Cairo.

I followed Islamic art and got the whole vision from there. I thought a lot about what the main idea of Islamic art is. I read and examined. I've been to many museums. Museums became my school. I spent a lot of time in museums. I've seen a lot of work. I always synthesized these in my head. My father had many artist friends. There I saw what artists thought and how their ideas grew.

So, can you tell me what is the philosophy behind Islamic art?

To me, the I understand the central ideas to be a love of nature, eternity and beauty. Love of nature, love of the sky, love of eternity. This is the love of beauty. Beauty is everywhere and first of all within us. Islamic art is the art of limitlessness and the art of geometry. I was born and raised in this geography. This is my life, my reality...

We may be hiding things from each other, but we are always vulnerable. Every person has inner beauty. God doesn't care



what you look like on the outside. God cares about your heart.

So, do you design all these works? Could you talk a little about the process? How that happens? Do you draw first?

No, frankly, I can't draw. My drawing is not good. I tried it when I was young, I used to draw. I don't draw now. I feel it first. Then I dream. Then I apply it directly. I know my material well and understand it well. Having an innate understanding of my material gives me a certain freedom. I know how to push my potential to its fullest. Dedication and trust in the work you produce is very important: When you work with clay, a relationship is formed that you cannot ignore. It is the only material that will listen to you and do what you want it to do. You are comfortable with it. You are difficult. And you usually fail. Twice. Three times. But if you are very patient, I believe you can do anything you can imagine in your mind with it. That's why I try to talk *with* clay, not *about* clay.



Influential. So, which technique do you use? Do you follow the traditional path or have you developed new techniques over time?

I apply traditional techniques. But yes, I created my own techniques over time. I use carvings in the details. These features; It is present in my most recent works such as *Hourglass*, *Gold Rings* and *Karnak*. The pieces in the *Karnak* series, in which I use new stonemasonry, combine the papyrus flower forms seen on ancient Egyptian architectural columns. You see the pieces sort of reversed. This is intentional; It's a reference to the design approach that cemented my place on the international map shortly after my arrival in the United States: a preoccupation with the relationship between

inside and outside. The carvings on my vases are directly inspired by water jugs made in Fustat between 900 and 1200 AD. These early jugs had filters inside to filter out river sediment. Geometric, floral and animal-patterned strainers were not visible until the person actually drank the water. I reveal the previously unseen by making visible the engravings on the exterior surfaces

of jugs and other ceramic objects. This is a career-long throughline designed to encourage dialogue about public and private, interior and exterior, perception and reality. In *Hourglass*, a clay sculpture inspired by Egyptian water filters that explores the concept of inner and outer beauty, I wrestle with whether it is possible to hide something and reveal it at the same time. I wanted to carve out the inner parts but open up the middle. This is why the cut sections appeared.

I taught myself the art of marquetry and built a decorative wooden base for three ceramic slabs; this base looked like wavy sails once bolted. The resulting work almost spoke for itself, thanks to my feelings for the great river. The Nile is one of my best memories. When I was a kid, I would go to the bank and sit and watch the sky and water and be in a new world. Cairo was busy with people. Sitting on the banks of the Nile was different. I could think about my career, life, the beautiful things I wanted to create, I would feel like I was in heaven.

So, how many series do you have?

I have works in which I use classical, traditional Islamic motifs. I also have modern works that I base on Islamic and Egyptian motifs, but add new meanings by thinking and working on them. In other words, I think about things based on existing ones and apply them in a modern way. They are also my Contemporary series. Of course, what I basically want to do is give new meanings to things.

Before I left Fustat, I realized that I was pushing my creative limits out of necessity. Works of art are frequently copied in Egypt. You can see your work in the exhibition before you even finish it. I did work that was so daring, so difficult to copy, that I hoped those who adopted my ideas would find it easier to do something of their own. My risk-taking style is actually based on the technical confidence I developed as a commercial potter. This is how my new modern series emerged. Typical geometric patterns and architecture of Islamic art, which fill my favorite places and daily haunts, are featured in my works. Egyptians are truly rich in culture. What I mean is a specific type of carving or design that goes far beyond any culture. More than that. This is the culture I live in. It's a feeling that comes from me, daily rituals... Me and my world.



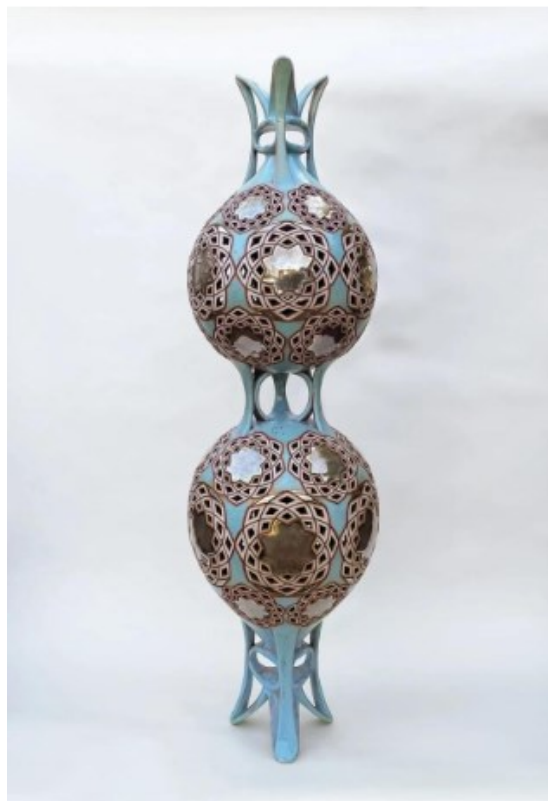
Intricate carvings inspired by traditional Islamic art and architecture are my signature. Sometimes my father would make a form for me and I would carve into it.

How did you open your international path?

I can proudly say that my father clearly encouraged me and with his financial support, I left Egypt for the first time in 2002 to attend a craft fair in Belgium. This experience convinced me to further explore my passions, including specific types of Egyptian pottery, such as vase forms from the Naqada III period in Egypt (3200 to 3000 B.C.), as well as broader creative concepts that include storytelling, tradition, and remembrance . Ten years later, after participating in competitions and shows in Qatar, Spain, Oman, and Kuwait, I immigrated to Greensboro, North Carolina.

You currently live in North Carolina, USA. Where do you produce your work? Is your workshop in North Carolina?

Yes, I have been living in America for the last 10 years and producing my work here. My father still has a workshop in Cairo, but I also established a new one in North Carolina.



What brought you to America?

Love. Love for my wife. She was born and raised here. Actually, our plan was to live in Cairo. We lived there for a while after we got married. But we had to come here after the revolution.

So, what did life in America bring to your business?

My current inspiration is Egyptian and Islamic art. I'm proud of Egyptian and Islamic art. I am more confident here, I think bigger. I learned to think bigger and act bigger, my goals grew, my scales grew. The work I do has grown and diversified. I produce more and more diverse works. I came here as an

artist. Do you know what gave me confidence as an artist? People here care and value art and artists. This is very valuable, this value and importance has widened my path.

How many solo exhibitions is this in the USA?

As I mentioned before, I came here as an artist and had many international group and solo exhibitions before coming. And I have many solo exhibitions in the USA.

First in New York.

Yes, the first in New York.

Do you have a mission behind the art you make?

This is my voice. As an Egyptian coming from an Islamic culture, I want to make my voice heard to the world. I want to share the vision of Islam. I want to announce and keep alive the richness and beauty of Islamic art and Egyptian art and history of 3000 years ago.

So, were you interested in the Egyptian pyramids and did you have any works inspired by them?

I used Islamic motifs and Egyptian and Islamic architecture in my works. And I still combine Islamic motifs with Egyptian and Islamic architecture. Architecture is a powerful resource for me.

Do you think you owe something to your country?

Of course, my hometown, my culture, is everything to me. I wouldn't be who I am without my country.



Are your family and country proud of you?

Of course. Many Egyptian artists turn to Western art and do not look at their own art and values. They forget them. It is very important and valuable for me to be aware of the richness we have and to make people realize this.

So, what are your plans after the New York exhibition? What will come next?

Frankly, I don't know what to do next right now. All I want and need right now is to renew myself, my brain, my thoughts. I need a refresher to start over. What I want to do after this exhibition is to visit the places in my dreams and on my list, especially my country and my family.

How long did it take you to prepare the New York exhibition and how many pieces are there?

It took me 4 years to prepare for this exhibition. That's a good question. I haven't counted how many pieces there are. But there are many.

Do you love New York?

Yes, to visit, and for my work.

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to share it with you and for this unforgettable conversation. We would continue with you longer, but you must go on the road.

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to express myself. It was also very enjoyable.

İbrahim Said's works are on view at Yossi Milo in Chelsea, at 245 Tenth Avenue, until Saturday, June 15, 2024.