

Conversation with Ceramist

Asmait Tekie Sona



Interview conducted by: **Sona Berhane**

How old were you when you decided to take up this craft?

Remember playing with wet sand and clay after it rained in the summer? I used to love doing that. This would be my earliest memory of enjoying it as a kid. I had loads of fun and my parents didn't discourage it. I was quite young so those years might have been formative. I wasn't serious about it until after I went to Sawa. When I returned from Sawa, I felt a bit listless, not sure of what to do. My father suggested I try pottery since I used to like playing with clay. I enrolled into pottery school, and once I passed all their preliminary tests, I got in.

One has to be tested to get into pottery school?

Of course. At that time, wanting to make pottery or ceramics wasn't enough to get you accepted into the school. You had to display a certain level of spatial awareness – you had to be able to imagine your piece in 3D, so to speak, and represent it on paper before you could begin the process of making it. What happened after you got in? I fell in love with ceramics. I have been making ceramics for over 20 years. I'm still extremely passionate about it. I find it so therapeutic. I have my own studio. Every spare time I have is spent in the studio. It can be a bit isolating but that is the nature of the craft. So far, I have put out 10 solo exhibitions. The first of these I did while still a student at the pottery school.

Tell me about your latest exhibition at the Casa degli Italiani.

For this exhibition I collaborated with fellow artist and ceramics sculptor Nasser Abdelwasie. The exhibition was initiated and organized by ambassador Marco Mancini of the Italian Embassy.



It was in early July of last year so it attracted quite a bit of the Eritrean diaspora who were here for the summer. Although Nasser and I work and craft through the same medium, you can see that that our respective styles are wildly different. My pieces are generally smaller, bolder statement pieces. I'm drawn to colorful and defined African patterns. Yes, the first things I noticed were these vibrant patterns in all of your works.

You also feature the ecclesiastic cross and the Byzantine style with the signature wide eyes. Actually, the correct term for that style is Abyssinian, not Byzantine. Really?

Yes, Abyssinian is a designation that covers an amorphous cultural expanse. It is often monopolized but it is a historical and cultural designation that belongs to the various peoples stretched along the Red Sea, all the way up to the Mediterranean. I believe it should be reclaimed. That is why I use the style on most of my pieces.

You are a ceramist. Is there any notable difference between pottery and ceramics? Or even porcelain, for that matter?

Ceramic differs from pottery with regards to the grain texture of the clay, the temperature at which it is baked and the glaze used on it. Additional processes like vitrification can transform the product into porcelain. If I had access to the

fine-grained clay and non-porous glaze, I could easily make a porcelain item. The difference can more clearly be found between our traditional crockery (such as ዳሕሊ፡ ጀበና፡ ዕትሮ), which are extremely practical products of pottery, and the delicate porcelain coffee cups (ፍንጃል) that are used for the traditional coffee ceremony.



What aspect of the pottery do you most appreciate?

That it gives me such a creative range. I mean, the clay is there for me to mold into existence, in whatever way I choose. It is also a very haptic activity. I find that this makes it incredibly soothing and therapeutic. I also love the necessary uniqueness of an object crafted by hand. You can't replicate it if you try a hundred times. All the little mistakes and dissimilarities add to its charm. That, for me, is the beauty of handmade art. It is inimitable. And the fact that it is a thousand-year-old artform. Much older, in fact, than just a thousand years. Using earthenware was one of the earliest tools human beings could create. When I visit the National Museum and see the potsherds unearthed from our archaeological sites, I feel a sense of kinship but also a kind of satisfaction at upholding an ancient tradition of fashioning tools out of the earth.

Take me through the steps involved in pottery?

Choosing the right kind of clay is important. It is usually found on riverbeds. The dried slabs of clay that you collect are then mixed with water. The kneaded mixture is sifted to remove any lumps and impurities. This creates the smooth, fine texture on the finished product. The dough is then left for weeks or months to grow thick and pliable. After that all you need to is take a piece of clay and mold it into the shape you want. This needs to be air-dried for a couple of days and then sun-dried for a few hours before it is baked in the furnace. When it is a completely formed and dried ware, you can paint it. After that dries, you cover it all over with a glaze which acts as a shine and a seal. This last addition takes days to dry. It's a long process.

It sounds exhausting. What inspires you to keep making ceramic?

It's just something I love. There's really no other way to explain it.

You are a working mother of three. How do you make the hours work?

You have to say I can do it, believe you can do it. Then your entire life will arrange itself around that central belief. I truly don't think any obstacle can stand in the way of that belief.



How do people react to your work and what would you say is the most rewarding reaction you've encountered?

People are beginning to appreciate it better now. It wasn't always like that but even when they're just looking at my work, I can sense a change in their attitudes. Something has altered in the way they see it. They used to be so dismissive, so nonchalant. I feel such joy when people are in some way affected by my work. They don't even have to buy it. If it speaks to them in some way or captures their thoughts and they share them with me, I would consider that the most rewarding reaction.

Eritrea Profile,

10/01/2023