

Dorothy Salhab Kazemi: Ceramics

Dorothy Kazemi passed away in the summer of 1990. Her work remains evidence of her sensuous talent for turning clay into language. Her students from BUC speak of her with a passion. She has taught them not to be afraid to work with the soil, and to feel what they do.

"The Islamic print is evident; the circle and the square; the Arabic calligraphy; the cross marking the symmetry; and the blue color which is an important element of Islamic art.

The art of Dorothy Salhab Kazemi is a harmony between Eastern and Islamic culture." (1) in her memory, one cannot but acknowledge the sensibility and sensitivity of her character and her soul illustrated in her art.

"Along with functional pottery, Dorothy created sculptural pieces that express a sensuous duality between nature and the human body. . . . In the undulating curves and indentations, in their soft and time-worn texture, the forms strongly evoke echoes of a primordial age when nature and man were one."(2)

I feel my way through, she said, Clay is a sensual material, and there is an interaction between me and the material which almost directs itself. I simply follow that interaction, from piece to piece, as I feel the forms. Some people say my work is erotic; they give it a limited definition that views eroticism with a narrow vision. For me, all life is an erotic manifestation. (3)

Dorothy Kazemi was the first Lebanese woman ceramist (4) . She said that, since childhood, she has loved "the feel of pottery, the round, full, voluptuous perfection of form born of clay and fired to the durability and texture of stone." (5)

Dorothy started out with an Associates of Arts from Beirut University College (BUC), when it was still Beirut College for Women (BCW). During her junior college years she traveled to Denmark for a student's summer course (6) . The trip was important in determining the path of her life later on. A great deal of that summer was spent seeing exhibitions of Danish pottery, ceramics, glass ware and making friends, which



Photograph of Dorothy Kazemi taken from the book of Helen Khal.

came easily with a sincere person like Dorothy. Reluctantly, she returned to Lebanon and made a transfer to the English literature department of the American University of Beirut to become a teacher on her parents wishes.

But pottery remained her greatest love and could no longer remain a private hobby. Dorothy went back to Denmark, in an attempt to make her dream come true. She was introduced to Gutte Eriksen, the well-known potter who worked with Bernard Leich. She managed to persuade Eriksen to teach her pottery. For a year, Dorothy worked, watching and learning to knead clay, to throw, pull, pinch, shape and to glaze and fire and glaze again.(7) Afterwards she attended an art school for two years in Copenhagen.

When she returned to Lebanon, she returned to teaching. But this time she was a professor of ceramics at Beirut University College (1971-1982). In her native village of Roumieh, she established her atelier and her wheel, where she prepared more of the sensuous pieces that were exhibited in various countries.

Hence, since 1964, Dorothy Kazemi held various exhibits in Copenhagen, Glaslow, Beirut and Damascus. Her most important solo exhibit was in 1975 at the museum of Modern Art in Copenhagen, where some of the pieces purchased by the museum are still on display.

Dorothy was not afraid to work with the earth. She wanted to know everything about it. Not only did she work with it to create erotic glazed pots, but she strove to know as much as she could about its rich archaeological mysteries. Hence, she participated in five archaeological researches in Syria and discovered the intimate link between history and the quality and techniques of pottery in the Middle East.

Most of all, Dorothy is remembered as hardworking and an especially kind, sincere, calm and genuine person. Her professors, students and friends acclaim and praise her soft character. They admire her peaceful serenity and speak of her with earnest nostalgia. To many of her students, she is a role-model. Her work is a clear reflection of her ability to elevate inner feelings and turn them into concrete, hard and beautiful shapes for the eyes to see and the soul to feel. •

(1) Translated from: Francoise Espagnet, "Dorothy Salhab Kazimi : Artiste Du Monde," *La Ceramique Moderne, Journal Technique -Artistic Periodique*, Janvier 1991, No. 343.

(2) Helen Khal, "Dorothy Kazemi" *The woman Artisit in Lebanon*, Beirut: Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, 1987. p. 141.

(3) *Ibid*, p. 135.

(4) Myra Mirshak, "Mrs. Dorothy Kazemi, First Lebanese Woman Ceramist," *The Daily Star*, Beirut, 1972.

(5) Helen Khal, *Ibid*, p.136.

(6)(7) *Ibid*