

CRAFTING HARMONY:

The Art Works of Jumana Sayegh

by Laurie King-Irani

A harmonious blending of materials, ideas and influences characterizes the art works of Jumana Sayegh. Her arresting multi-media pieces, which cannot be accurately described as either paintings, sculptures, tapestries, or pottery, since they combine elements of all of these genres, link east and west, urban and rural, tradition and modernity. Perhaps this harmonization of diverse and sometimes contradictory themes is not surprising, given the artist's childhood experience of living in more than one cultural context. Sayegh, who now lives in Cyprus with her two young daughters, grew up in Beirut in the 1960s and 1970s, the daughter of a Palestinian father and a British mother, both of whom are respected academics.

Sayegh remembers being drawn to colors and shapes as a small child. Her early fascination with patterns and colors gradually developed into a strong desire to explore the arts seriously. At the age of fifteen, Sayegh took her first formal art class—pottery lessons—at the Beirut studio of the Iraqi artist Nuha Al-Radi. Soon afterwards, while she was still a high school student, Sayegh took a pottery course at Beirut University College (now LAU) with the late Dorothy Al-Kazemi. Sayegh's delight in the texture and possibilities of clay convinced her to pursue further studies in the Fine Arts. "I suddenly realized that studying the arts would be very tempting for me. So, my mother made all the necessary inquiries at the British Council concerning the different art courses available in Britain. She also managed to convince my father that this was a serious course of study, at the end of which I would obtain a B.A."



In 1974, Sayegh began her university studies at Hornsey College of Art in Britain, where she had been accepted to begin a one-year foundation course. The following year, she began a four-year program of intensive study at Middlesex Polytechnic, where she focused on three-dimensional design, specifically ceramics. Sayegh also studied metal-working, woodwork, and photography while taking required courses in art theory and art history. Sayegh recalls these years fondly as a time of freedom

to explore creative possibilities with the help of generous and caring teachers who endeavored to give their students a solid grounding in the basics of art. Over the years, Sayegh has come to appreciate the importance of such a thorough educational background, and advises any talented young artist to take courses in various art media. "I believe an artist needs a basic foundation course, and preferably a specialization in a particular field, to allow the student to learn and experiment in an art environment before setting up his or her own studio."

After marrying a journalist and moving to Cyprus in the early 1980s, Sayegh began working in her own ceramics studio, where her fascination with clay grew and deepened. "Although I had many opportunities to work in other media while at art college, clay was my preferred medium. Clay combines so many different stages: the initial soft stage when you can make whatever shape you want by using a variety of techniques, such as slab, coil, or wheel-thrown pottery. Then there is the leather-hard stage, when you can stamp the clay, mark it, in-lay it, or incise and cut bits out to make intricate patterns. The dry stage is useful for sanding down unwanted areas. Finally, there is the firing stage, which, although quite nerve-racking, is also exciting and unpredictable."



Sayegh indicates that the greatest influence on her work has not been the creations of other artists, but rather, her travels throughout the Arab world, particularly Egypt, Yemen and Tunisia, where she has found inspiration in traditional architecture, arts and crafts. Her work shows influences from a variety of folk art media, not just pottery, but also textiles, jewelry, kilims, and architecture. The warm colors, earthy textures and rhythmic patterns of traditional arts and crafts are distinguishing characteristics of Sayegh's work. "One aspect of my work which has been increasingly interesting to me for several years is making pieces inspired by architecture; my aim is to build a whole village out of these house-facades that have balconies, windows and doors, and sometimes even stairs. Another theme in my work is closely associated with traditional village life and the textiles of the Arab world, particularly Palestinian embroidery and woven materials, such as kilims. I enjoy mixing textiles with ceramics both for the combination of colors and for the combination of textures. The softness of the textiles accentuates the hardness of the clay, and vice versa. Ideally, I would like my art works to convey a sense of harmony by merging clay with fabric. Color plays a key role in my work, especially in communicating emotions. We all experience different ideas and emotions when looking at a piece of art. If a person responds to some aspect of my work, be it the shapes, the colors, or the textures, that in itself is gratifying to me."

Since her art work combines work-intensive and time-consuming media, such as fired ceramics and highly detailed embroidery panels, Sayegh cannot produce enough works to exhibit every year. She tries to exhibit every other year, and is pleased that she is able to sell

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about half of her work. Her greatest challenge as an artist is being able to devote the required attention to both her work and her children following her recent divorce. "My role as a single parent definitely interferes with the time and energy I need to dedicate to my studio work. I work in the mornings while my children are at school; but if they have to stay home due to an illness, then I cannot put in the same amount of hours or concentration."

When asked whether the themes and media of her work reflect her gender, Sayegh suggested that they do. "I suppose my gender has influenced my artistic expression to some degree—the scale of the work, for instance. I tend to produce small, detailed pieces and I shy away from large constructions. As for my choice of colors and my mixing of textiles (embroidery) and ceramics, people tend to label my work as being 'decorative' and thus, 'feminine'. It is hard to imagine what sort of art I would produce if I were a man. Perhaps the house facades, but maybe not the embroidered pieces, although there are men who embroider and work in textiles, but their scale is usually larger and their work more abstract. Looking back at my college days, I can't recall too many differences in the ambitions of male and female art students. Most of us planned to set up our own studios, produce either exhibition or commercial work, and a few wanted to teach."

Sayegh feels that art can and should have a role beyond the studio, gallery or museum. In addition to adding beauty to our lives, art can also affect our social and political worlds. Sayegh's recent pieces featuring the flora and fauna of the Mediterranean Sea bespeak a concern with

ecological issues and a subtle warning about the increasing pollution of the waters and shorelines of the Mediterranean. If the dangers of this pollution are not checked, we may some day live in a world in which the Mediterranean's sea life will be visible only in museums. Sayegh related that "art, when used correctly, can play a powerful role in influencing social and, to a certain extent, political structures because of its visual impact on people. Images projected to a wide audience can make a stronger impression on the public than words can; images remain in the mind a lot longer. For instance, in January 1994 I saw a poignant exhibition of photographs taken mainly in Somalia and Bosnia by three professional photographers who lost their lives in Mogadishu in 1993. Those photographs commanded our attention because they offered rare glimpses into the minds and the hearts of the subjects. We could suddenly understand the events, the despair, the horror, or the hope of a people suffering the brutality of war or the terror of mass starvation. These pictures caused a reaction and elicited compassion around the world. This illustrates how the art of photography can be both informative and meaningful, even to the extent of influencing or altering social and political structures."

Although Sayegh's work does not explicitly address dramatic political issues or pressing social questions, its refreshing naturalness, startling mix of materials, and engaging moods immediately catch the viewer's attention, encouraging him or her to ponder anew the magic and comfort of harmony in a world of discord.

