Siddig El’Nigoumi

Siddig El’Nigoumi is a man who stands at a cultural crossroads. As a Sudanese he is an inheritor of a rich mix of traditions of both Africa and the Arab world. A third major ingredient was added, that of the Western world, when he trained as a potter at the Central School of Arts & Crafts in London. All aspects can be traced in his work but it has taken many years to mature into the confident and distinctive ceramics that he now produces.

African potters tend to emerge from strong family traditions, the craft being passed on from mother to daughter or father to son, but that was not the case with Siddig El’Nigoumi. There was no family basis to the choice of his career, however, he retains an early memory of a marked childhood affinity for the properties of clay. As a boy he was educated in Khartoum but spent the holidays in a rural district by the White Nile where he recalls evenings passed playing by the banks of a pond modelled and shaping forms in the mud with clay. He also remembers how he and his friends discovered great decorated storage pots buried in the sand, evidence of an abandoned settlement. In a childish hope of finding buried treasure they broke the pots open thus destroying their finds. Years later he regretfully returned to the spot to discover the broken fragments. With hindsight he considers that these early experiences exerted a formative influence on his imagination.

As a young man he attended teacher training College in West Sudan specialising mainly in sculpture and later in calligraphy. When he was selected for further training in London, he welcomed the opportunity. Along with a group of fellow students from the Sudan he attended goldsmithing, pottery and painting colleges returning to Khartoum three years later with his British wife, as a teacher in the art college. It was the same time the teachers in Khartoum were mainly British and they taught the Sudanese students to make coffee sets, teapots and even casserole dishes in a country where ovens were hardly used in local houses. The irony was not lost on him. He soon set about changing the curriculum and considers that the cancellation of the periodical Pottery & Glass, a British commercial and industrial ceramic magazine, to be one of his first achievements. He encouraged the students to look to their own tradition for inspiration and organised visits to the ethnographic museum in Khartoum to study African art. Pots, weapons and wood carving. Here were shapes and forms that could liberate their ideas about ceramic forms.

Unfortunately working in Khartoum was not easy and improvements that the new young teachers had been to be essential for the college were slow in materialising. Disillusioned, in 1968 Siddig El’Nigoumi and his wife decided to return to settle Britain. Since then he has developed his work as a studio potter teaching part-time at Farnham College of Art.

In the early seventies he mainly produced stoneware, at that time probably the most popular technique for craft potters but even then he was interested in bringing together a strong African flavour. The dark brown surface was decorated with designs inspired by his homemaking and in particular African calligraphy, another craft in which Nigoumi excels. One plate entitled ‘Message to my Mother’ incorporated a bird design combined with calligraphy. The bird is a world wide symbol for the messenger, the words recall familiar places in the Sudan. Another plate draws on designs found in Sudanese house decoration in the Assuan area. The house decorating tradition more or less died out in the early seventies when the communities were forced to move away because of the construction of the Assuan Dam. The mud baked walls of the houses seemed an appropriate parallel with the clay of his plates and the powerful symbolic directness of the designs lent themselves admirably to ceramic decoration.

For Nigoumi the homesickness that he has experienced and the need to reappropriate memories from his past have proved a powerful source of inspiration. This has become even more marked in his recent works.

About 1978 he began to work in a red earthenware body decorated with scratched and sgraffito designs and burnished to a fine shiny surface. He stopped using any glazes, but began to introduce darker contrasting tones by using dark slip clay which enhances the effect of the scratched designs. Burning is a typically African technique although it is employed by American Indians and in other areas of the world. The surface of the clay is rubbed over with a smooth pebble or the back of a bent spoon to give a mellow sheen to the surface lending the pot a pleasurable texture in the hand.

Most African pottery is fired in an open bonfire with sticks, brushwood and dung-pots being built under and over the pots covering them completely in burning material. Firings usually only last a few hours and the close contact with smouldering matter gives the surface of the pots a blackened effect in places. Like so many potters Nigoumi admires the chance effects of firing, the happy accident that enhances the beauty of the pot. He has developed his own method of achieving this carbonised surface. After the pot has been fired he holds it over a torch of rolled newspaper (the cheaper tabloids are better because they contain more resin). When cool the loose soot is polished off but a warm black staining remains to give a more lively and harmonious surface effect very similar to that more usually seen in open-fired pots.

For the basic methods of forming pots Nigoumi uses the western techniques of throwing for the hollow ware and making plates in plaster moulds. The shapes particularly of his hollow ware and deep bowls are based on Sudanese prototypes although not necessarily ceramic prototypes. In his studio he keeps a beautifully carved wooden bowl which he has re-used as a shape in his own smaller versions. The distinctive round bottomed Sudanese coffee pot which sits in the sand or in a bedded ring stand has also been incorporated into his production.

Although most of his ceramic forms are rooted in his African background and his decoration has a distinctive African flavour there is nothing narrow or doctrinaire about his sources. Like the Sudanese house decorators contemporary life, modern technology and recent events are all considered worthy subject matter. Nigoumi has no qualms about incorporating interesting decorative motifs into his work wherever he may find them. His plates,
especially, are given titles which indicate their origins. His design ‘Greenham Common’ incorporates the motif of the C.A.D., another has the three-legged symbol for the Isle of Man. Yet another is called ‘Spaghetti Junction’ or ‘Concorde’ dish. Among his most intriguing designs is the one based on African rock paintings with little figures running across the surface of the dish. His admiration for North African tooled brass work which abounds in intricate contrasts of matt or shiny areas has given rise to a number of designs including one called ‘The Great Royal Wedding’. This used a stylised Arabic inscription and Arabic date along with the form of the Union Jack creating a totally original mixture of cultural forms to commemorate a British royal wedding.

The history of art contains many fascinating examples of cross cultural influences, from the Portuguese soldiers represented in fifteenth century Benin bronzes to the delights of the strong Eastern flavour in Venetian architecture or indeed to the work of Bernard Leach himself who as a British potter owed such a debt to Japan and the Orient. In Europe, African ceramics have always been much less respected than the oriental tradition. The British potter, Michael Cardew did much to mitigate this view. Originally he went out to teach the Nigerians but many would say that he learnt as much as he taught. Even so unglazed earthenware has such close associations with roof tiles, drainage pipes and flower pots that its humble connotations have tended to deflect from its rich potential which is only realised in the more elaborate surface treatments that African potters have developed such as burnishing, carbonisation, or polishing with natural juices all of which give the clay a deep glowing radiance altogether different from the effect of glazing.

The work of Siddig El’Nigoumi is an enrichment of our own culture. Working in Britain he creates beautiful ceramics which draw their strength from other traditions and demonstrate exciting possibilities for clay too long ignored by Western potters.
Siddig El’Nigoumi

Gwr sy’n sefyll ar groesfordd ddailwyliannol yw Siddig El’Nigoumi. Fawr am y troid o Swidan mae’n ei ffeodd cymsgydd gyfoethog o draddodiadau Africa a’r byd Arabaidd. Ychwanegwyd tryddyd ei ffeodd bywysig, sef traddodiad celf y byd Gorllewinol, pan gafodd ei hyfforddi’n grochenydd yn y ‘Central School of Arts & Crafts’ yn Llundain. Gelir canfod pob un o’r tair eiﬂen yn ei waith, ond fe gymerodd hi ﬁnynhadaodd lawer i’w waith adeilfeddu i’r gerameg hyderus ac arbennig a gynhŷrhir ganedi heddiw.

Cynnyrch traddodiadol teuluol cryf yw grochenyddion Africa fel rheol, gwyra’r grefft ym cael ei dysgu gan fam i’w merch neu dad i’w fab, ond ni felly y bu yn hanes Siddig El’Nigoumi. Doedd dim syllfan deuluol i’w ddewi o awledigaeth er ei fod, fod bynnag, yna o dioglu ei fod yn arbennig o hoff o briodoleddau clai pan oedd yn blentyn pur ifanc. Addysgwyd ef pan oedd yn fachgen y Khartoum ond trauliau ei defnyddiau ar wyneb’r bresil’r ddwydd o hyd y brofer arnedig a gwyf yng Nghaeredigion. Garethodd yna gyfeillion ddod o hyd i jariau storion morwir, addurnodd, wedi eu cioddu ym y tywys, tyllanghai’r llyd i fod ym drifian pobl ar un amser. Yn y gothau plentynnodd o ddarparfed trysor trwyw y potiai i gael gweud eu cynyrrch. Ffynnyddodd o ddiweddarach, dychwelyddodd ym eraill i’r union fan i chwilio am y darnau dryliledig. O edrych bynnag yw mae’r ffordd o profiadau cynnar hyn weithiau bod yn dyylanedd ar ffurfion ddiwythynnol.

Yn yr ifanc aeth i goglegi hyfforddiant o ddarnogaeth yn Ngorllawin Swidan gan galonbwyntio’n hyn yr ifanc o ardalen ar gynhŷrhir ac ym ddiweddarach ar gynhyrchu. Pan gafodd ei ddewi i dderbyn hyfforddiadau pleichiach ym Llundain, derbyniodd ei gwyf ym llawer ym mynd i Nghaeredigion. Ymddangosodd yng Nghaeredigion ac y tro yn iawn ei atal a thradodiaddd ym Llundain a dychwelyddodd ym mis bynnag ym Khartoum a ddeuai a chynhŷrhau.

Yn Nhormelyn Prydeinwyr yr oedd y rhain oedd yr ifanc o’r traddodiad Siddig El’Nigoumi a’i wragio i Brydain o fwy ym 1968.

Ers hynny mae wedi datblygu ei waith fel grochenydd siwadiac ac mae’n dysgu yna amser yng Nghaeredigion ym Prifysgol Bangor.

Yn y safledegau cynnar crochenwaith celed oedd ei brif gynnyrchwyd, dyna mae’n dabyg oedd y dechreu hwyf poblogaidd yr ymchwil crochenyddion cryf a’r byd. Oedd yr hyn y bwyd hynny roedd naws Africuraidd cryf ynodwaith ei waith. Addurnodd ymweinio brown trwyw i’w chwech i chwech ei ddathlu. Oedd yr hyn y bwyd hynny roedd naws Africuraidd cryf ynodwaith ei waith. Addurnodd ymweinio brown trwyw i’w chwech i chwech ei ddathlu.

Yn y safledegau cynnar crochenwaith celed oedd ei brif gynnyrchwyd, dyna mae’n dabyg oedd y dechreu hwyf poblogaidd yr ymchwil crochenyddion cryf a’r byd. Oedd yr hyn y bwyd hynny roedd naws Africuraidd cryf ynodwaith ei waith. Addurnodd ymweinio brown trwyw i’w chwech i chwech ei ddathlu. Oedd yr hyn y bwyd hynny roedd naws Africuraidd cryf ynodwaith ei waith. Addurnodd ymweinio brown trwyw i’w chwech i chwech ei ddathlu.

Caiff yr hyn wyaflaf y crochenwaith Afiricanaidd eu tanio mewn coled eirinog y gyda chi, lwyd wedi ei phlygu, nes cael disgulchodd addfediad ar awenybed y gwaith sy'n gweuned cydio ynddo y brofadi plleserus.

Crochenwaith Afiricanaidd eu tanio mewn coled eirinog y gyda chi, lwyd wedi ei phlygu, nes cael disgulchodd addfediad ar awenybed y gwaith sy'n gweuned cydio ynddo y brofadi plleserus.

Dulliau syllaenol Nigoumi o lurio potiau wy' r technegau gorllewinol o 'daffu' ar gyfer ceunawdu a mowidiau plast ar gyfer plattau. Ar y sylfaenau o Swatan, ac nid y sylfaenau ceramiq o angenheiriau, y sylfaenol yr flurfau ei ceunawdu a'i bowiau ddefnyddiol ym rebenyn.

Er bod yr hyn wyaflaf o'i flurfau ceramiq wedi eu gwraiddio ym un cefnogwr Afiricanaidd, a bod cais Afiricanaidd ar ei addurniau, does dim byd yng Nghymru gan y ddiancianolaid haearnail ynglŷn â'r flunolau. Fe yw achos addurniwyd ym Swatan ystyr bywyd cyfleo, technegau fawndod ac ddefnyddiadau ddefnydd o gyd ym mynegwydd. Os oes yr enw gwreiddiol a phrifddig yr yr oedd wedi ei seiliedig ar gwaith ym rebanyn Afirica, lle gwerein flurfau bychain fel pe fferch oedd a phrifddig yr yr oedd wedi ei seiliedig ar gwaith ym rebanyn Afirica.