



Samir Müller Painter of Clay

1 June – 24 September 2018

 **BANQUE
LIBANO-FRANÇAISE**

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Museum**

The Sursock Museum presents *Samir Müller: Painter of Clay* as part of a cycle of homages to artists featured in the collections of the Sursock Museum. This series of exhibitions is supported by Banque Libano-Française.

Since its founding in 1930, Banque Libano-Française has always demonstrated its support for the arts, culture, and the preservation of cultural heritage in Lebanon and beyond.

Banque Libano-Française is proud to support this series of exhibitions at the Sursock Museum, paying tribute to important artists in the history of Lebanese art. *Samir Müller: Painter of Clay* brings together ceramic panels, forms, and drawings by the artist.

With the support of Banque Libano-Française

Preferred wine partner Château Marsyas

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Cover

Enameled samples on which Samir Müller worked to obtain the desired color. The colors' formulas are written on the back (see back cover).

Samir Müller (1959-2013) was a painter who used clay for canvas, engobe for pigment, and his fingers for brushes. His ceramic paintings include abstract landscapes, dancing figures on globular vases, and urban scenes in which human silhouettes haunt the streets of Beirut. Adept at rendering both harmonious, almost perfect plasticity, and roughness where the material appears almost crude, Müller mastered earth and fire, presenting an art bordering on craftsmanship.

Born into a family of potters, Müller studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Toulouse, and under Jean Hury at the Lycée Technique Auguste Renoir in Paris, where he learnt the techniques of engobe, underglaze and overglaze decoration, and firing. Müller taught ceramics from 1997 to 2013 at the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK), the Académie libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA), and later at Notre Dame University (NDU) – Louaize. He also participated in several group exhibitions, including the Sursock Museum's Salon d'Automne (special mention, 1995; Sursock Museum Prize, 2009), the Sharjah International Art Biennial, the Beirut Decorative Arts Fair, and the Cairo International Biennial of Ceramics.

The Müller pottery

Samir Müller took his surname from his grandfather, Johann Müller, who left Swiss Germany in 1914 to take up residence in Mount Lebanon. Johann Müller built his first kiln in the Chouf region, at Nabeh el-Safa. Samir's grandfather was a potter and taught his son Georges the trade. Together, they set up a workshop and small pottery in Kahale, in a former "cowshed which had been used as a rest stop for those travelling down from Aley to Beirut," as Samir told *L'Orient-le Jour* in an article published on 26 June 2000.¹ The cowshed had a mud floor, a beamed roof, an oil-fired kiln and a wooden kiln of four meters in diameter, an old potter's wheel, and shelves full of plates, vases, and panels. The Müller pottery's daily production comprised clay cylinders of 25kg and flowerpots. It also sold clay to organizations and to wealthy individuals who practiced pottery. The Müller sons, Samir and Mounir, the third and fourth of four siblings, would pursue the family line of work: Mounir in the pottery, and Samir as an aspiring artist.

This heritage and know-how remained present throughout Samir's career and was particularly evident in his full mastery of the techniques of ceramics and firing, and in his attachment to the earth of Lebanon that he extracted from the region in which he lived and worked. An alchemist, Müller mixed ochre, grey and brown earth of varying degrees of richness in iron and feldspar, and plasticity, to move closer to achieving the desired effect. It was also his careful attention to firing that made Samir Müller a skilled artisan. Firing and glazing are delicate aspects of ceramic production and primarily a matter of testing and experimentation.

1. "La Logique de la forme. Samir Müller, fils et petit-fils de potiers d'origine suisse-allemande," *L'Orient-le Jour*, 26 June 2000. Article by Diala Gemayel.



Photographs: David Hury, 2011

In its pure state, clay is composed of silica, aluminum, and water. It is therefore white, but in nature, it contains iron oxide, magnesia or titanium, among other materials, which gives it various colorations. The clay is collected, kneaded, dried, then purified. The artisan tempers it with a degreasing agent (quartz, silica, etc.) to remedy its very high plasticity and a flux (vegetable ashes, feldspar, calcium carbonate) to reduce the fusion temperature. In this photograph, we see Samir Müller at work, preparing a paste for production.



Samir Müller's studio, Kahale
Photo: Ghadi Smat, 2013

Potters mold clay paste using different techniques which can sometimes be combined to achieve the desired form. These included handbuilding using the coiling procedure, in which snake-like ropes of clay are wound around one another; wheel-throwing to obtain circular forms; or slip casting for the repetition of forms.

The clay is then left to dry at an ambient temperature – by slowly eliminating the water in the paste, the risk of cracking during firing is reduced. Decoration may be added during the molding, under the glaze, or using engobes (colored liquid clay). Once the clay has been fired, it becomes ceramic. The designation varies depending on the firing temperature. To make his stoneware, Samir Müller proceeds to firing in two stages: the first so-called “low fire” or bisque firing heats the object to 570 degrees Celsius and extracts its water; the second phase known as “high fire” involves firing the glaze at high temperatures reaching up to 1,250 degrees Celsius. The ceramicist must be patient because the process takes eight or nine hours. Next, the cooling phase lasts several hours and is carried out in a gradual, uneven manner to obtain the artist's favored effects of crystallization or sulphurization.

“For me, the logical shape of forms is round”

Müller aspires to a purity of form and advocates simplicity. Often circular in form, his ceramics bear the colors of nature, of the earth. For Müller, ceramics should exist within their natural environment and blend in with it. No sharp contrast of color is envisaged; his chromatic palette is rather made up of soft tones, almost split into half-tones. Müller advocated against disfiguring nature, stating, “Our art of pottery does not harm the environment, nor butcher the land, nor erase our society’s identity. We create beauty from dirt.”²

An accomplished technician, Müller can obtain forms that are 90% round – a veritable feat. Only a small orifice interrupts the almost perfect curve of the vase. The reason for its presence is above all a technical one: an air outlet is needed for the pottery to remain intact during firing. Müller creates a world of globular, generous forms that are closed in on themselves, like cocoons. Massive and mighty, Müller’s ceramics are monoliths thrown, modelled or sculpted by the artisan.

Sometimes, the clay loses its smooth appearance and more closely resembles the raw material. Müller’s unstructured ceramics question and confer a new rhythm upon the production of an artisan of flawless craftsmanship. In his almost abstract pieces, ranging from forms like hatching eggs, to boxes crowned with bird motifs, to towers with wide bases, to standing menhirs, Müller plays the sculptor and turns his back on the family tradition.

From the third generation of a dynasty of potters, Samir Müller respects traditional and industrial ceramic production but quickly looks to push his practice beyond the boundaries set out by his family. Conscious of the potential of the material, he seeks to experiment with it and obtain recognition for his art. His desire to belong to the contemporary Lebanese art world would lead him to participate in the Sursock Museum’s Salon d’Automne in Beirut on numerous occasions, and in international fairs (Cairo International Biennale of Ceramics, Zagreb International Ceramics Triennial).

2. Nisreen Sinjab. “Samir Müller, in touch with the earth,” *Limelight, Society Magazine*, July – August 1997.



From left to right

Couleur de feu [Color of fire], 2008

Glazed earthenware, 36×43 cm

Exhibited at the Sursock Museum's 29th Salon d'Automne, 2009

Untitled, 2008

Glazed earthenware, 26×34 cm

Exhibited at the Sursock Museum's 29th Salon d'Automne, 2009

Untitled, Undated

Glazed earthenware, 32×54.5 cm

Untitled, Undated

Glazed earthenware, 30×28 cm

May Müller collection

Photographs: Elie Abi Hanna



The paintings of Samir Müller

Following in the footsteps of complete artists, Picasso, who is at once a painter, sculptor, printmaker, and ceramicist, shook up the ceramics practice in the 1940s, in Vallauris (France).

Ceramics has often been considered a minor artform, and still suffers from pejorative associations, such as “applied art” and “decorative art.” Ceramics are above all functional and everyday objects, but because of Picasso and his work at the Madoura studio in Vallauris, a glorious fusion was to be witnessed between the practices of painting and sculpture, which signaled the end of the gulf that had hitherto existed between artists specialized in a single practice. In the work of Picasso, the often-distinct divides between pottery and artwork, and between artisan and artist, fade away. Looking at the work of Samir Müller, one might easily imagine that these old divides were not far from his thoughts, nestled between his presence at the family studio and his training at a Beaux-Arts academy. His plates made in the Kahale studio quickly became a medium for his creativity, as he diverted the primary function of the objects. Müller decorated his plates with calligraphic arabesques, buffaloes, rabbits, and birds, in the same vein as Picasso did in Vallauris. In 1997, Samir Müller would reveal: “I did not feel encouraged to return to work in Lebanon after completing my studies in France because I felt that ceramics weren’t appreciated here.”³

Through his ceramics, Samir Müller also proclaims himself a painter. What could be termed illumination, either a painting or drawing done by hand aimed at embellishing a ceramic piece, is certainly the most delicate of tasks. The artist is sometimes surprised by the deceptive colors of the final piece, as the ceramicist’s palette is not revealed until after firing. When painting with engobes and enamels⁴ one can only imagine the result, which is not always satisfactory. If the enamels are fired too quickly, bumps or bubbles can form. Müller plays with this feature and enjoys the “braised” effect applied to some of his decorations. Müller would sometimes enjoy cracking or chipping the enamel in his pieces, in the style of the Egyptian ceramicist Nabil Darwish (1936-2002), whose work he appreciated.

Unlike paintings on canvas, where colors can change over time and depending on preservation conditions, on ceramics, a permanent color and brightness is obtained. It is unsurprising therefore that ceramics have been used since Antiquity to first decorate palaces, then places of worship, such as the glazed bricks of the Ishtar Gate (Iraq) or the Palace of Darius I at Susa (Iran), which date to around 580 and 500 BC.

3. Nisreen Sinjab, *ibid.*

4. An engobe, or slip, can be distinguished from an enamel by its clay content. An engobe is a diluted clay coating, sometimes mixed with a coloring oxide, vitreous to varying degrees, which is applied to a piece that has already been fired. Enamel, also known as glaze, is a vitreous layer applied to a ceramic surface in order to harden it, render it watertight, and decorate it according to the chosen oxides (cobalt, copper, iron, tin, lead).

A chiefly Eastern tradition, ceramic wall tiling from the 9th century can be found in Tunisia decorating the *mihrab* (dated 862) of the Grand Mosque of Kairouan, at the Ilkhanid Palace of Takht-i Sulayman (around 1270) in the north of Iran, and in Turkey at the famous site of ceramics production at Iznik from the middle of the 15th century onwards. Perhaps unconsciously inspired by this skill in wall decoration and by a contemporary iconographic repertoire, some Lebanese artists have carried on the tradition in Beirut, such as Dorothy Salhab Kazemi (1942-1990) who decorated the inner courtyard of the Farah Commercial Center in the Hamra district in 1972 with a six-meter long ceramic mural composed of 330 tiles.⁵

In Samir Müller's works, decoration continues across tiles, assembled as if to form a blank canvas on which he would draw, and affix his signature, just like in a conventional painting. In 1989, only a few years after obtaining his diploma in ceramics from the Académie des Beaux-Arts de Toulouse, Müller created painted pieces depicting both classical and abstract subjects. Müller can be considered a painter whose canvas is clay, whose pigments are engobes, and whose brushes are his fingers. He draws on themes of the ancient Mediterranean, particularly Egyptian ones, but updates his compositions to touch on recent events in Lebanon. His paintings depict urban landscapes in which human silhouettes haunt the streets of Beirut. It is a Beirut unlike that of postcards; Müller's panels are reminiscent of war photography by the likes of Patrick Baz and Aline Manoukian. This vision of Beirut is as grazed, raw, dry, and sanguine in color, as his ceramics.

Picasso is quoted as saying, "Ceramics functions like etching. The firing is the printing process."⁶ This proves to be a contradiction in the case of Samir Müller. Despite being involved in serial production as a potter within the family business where everyday wares were reproduced almost infinitely, and despite having learnt lithography, printing techniques and therefore reproducibility, he seemingly however never took on a printer's mindset when decorating his pieces. Through his ceramics production, Müller makes a painting emerge from its ceramic setting. These ceramics panels are unique, each signed by the artist.

5. Irene Mosalli, "Dorotheé Kazemi : Une fresque murale façonnée au tour," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, Beirut, 7 September 1972.

6. Pablo Picasso, cited by Pierre Daix, *Dictionnaire Picasso*, Robert Laffont, Paris, 1995, p. 171.



L'éclat de la matière [The material glow], 2008
Glazed earthenware, 42×48×15 cm
Sursock Museum Prize, 29th Salon d'Automne, 2009
May Müller collection
Photo: Elie Abi Hanna



Untitled, February 1989
Glazed earthenware, 32×54.5 cm
May Müller collection
Photo: Elie Abi Hanna

Samir Müller: A brief biography

1959: Samir Müller is born in Ayn Zhalta, in the Chouf region of Lebanon. His father and grandfather, who was of Swiss-German origin, were both potters. His grandfather had built a kiln and artisanal workshop at the beginning of the 20th century, firstly at Nabeh el-Safa, then at Kahale, on the road to Damascus.

1978: Müller enters the Académie des Beaux-Arts de Toulouse and studies fine art, including drawing and sculpture. In 1980, he begins ceramics classes in the Academy's workshop and learns lithography. He graduates in 1983 and participates in several group exhibitions in Toulouse, in addition to completing a large mural project at the Lycée St. Orens, near the city of Toulouse. A few years later, in 1991, he completes his ceramics training with Jean Hury at the Lycée technique Auguste Renoir in Paris.

1989-1995: The most prolific and inventive period of Samir Müller's career, during which he produces most of his decorative panels, as well as large spheres with complex engobe and enamel decoration.

From 1997 and until his death, Müller shared his passion, teaching ceramics at the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK), the Académie libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA), then at Notre Dame University (NDU) – Louaize.

Samir Müller passed away in 2013.



Portrait of Samir Müller
Photo: David Hury, 2012

Exhibitions

Solo exhibitions

1983

École des Beaux-Arts, Perpignan

1987

Lebanese German House, Jounieh

German Cultural Centre, Kaslik

1992

Les Cimaïses Gallery, Beirut

1994

Alice Mogabgab Gallery, Beirut

1997

L'Adresse Gallery & Café, Beirut

2002

Convent of Saints Pierre and Paul, El Aazra, Kesrouan

2010

Balamand University

Group shows

1986

Ballouneh Public Park

Galerie Bekhazi, Achrafieh

1988-89, 1991-92, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1995-96, 1996, 1997-98, 1998-99, 2000-01, 2003-04, 2004-05, 2005-2006, 2008, 2009, 2010-11, 2012

Exhibited his work in the Salon d'Automne, Sursock Museum, Beirut

(Special mention, 1995; Sursock Museum Prize, 2009)

[editions 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 29, 30, and 31]

1995

Sharjah International Biennial

Salon des arts décoratifs, Beirut

1996, 1998, 2000, 2002

Participation in the Cairo International Biennale of Ceramics

1997

Zagreb International Ceramics Triennial

2008

Center of Arts and Crafts, Byblos

2013

Mtein Museum of Arts, Mtein

2014

Xperimental Art, The Venue, Beirut



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