

From the Ismay archive. by Alex McErlain

Sddig El Nigoumi 1931-1996



Press moulded dish, burnished earthenware, smoke fired. 1979, h 6cm w 27cm w 24cm

Photograph Phil Sayer.

Towards the end of the 20th century, smoke fired pottery became extremely popular. Most potters left their work plain and allowed the dramatic marks created through the firing process to provide the finish. However the inspiration for a lot of this work was traditional African pottery which is frequently decorated. Siddig El Nigoumi saw his dish forms as a vehicle to carry drawings or decorative marks and the subsequent smoke firing something to add interest rather than dominate the pot. El Nigoumi trained as a calligrapher in his native Sudan. His interest in mark making carries through into his pottery together with his calligrapher's skill which is apparent in the way he deftly handles a sgraffito tool.

This is a typical piece of his, burnished red clay, smoke marked, with scratched linear drawing reminiscent of a crossword puzzle. It is hard to distinguish a logical pattern at work and this is of course, the point. The dish appears to be filled with a simple chequerboard design but the system is irregular causing the viewer to try and work out what is going on. The dish is very tactile, as burnished pottery can often be. The sgraffito drawing invites fingertip exploration rather like a passage of braille. I tried to work out how El Nigoumi had constructed the drawing. It doesn't appear to have been made as a series of crossing lines as the lines are not always continuous. Perhaps he drew blocks of squares in series or connected individual units in some way. One square carries a drawing of a scorpion which he used as his signature, possibly a reminder of his home in the desert. Two beautiful freehand drawn lines contain the pattern within the softly rectangular form. A flattened rim and thin edge continue to invite the tactile investigation. Running a finger around the rim you sense finesse which carries through into the scratched interior. El Nigoumi smoked his work post firing, using lit newspaper, a technique sometimes called carbonising. The mottled smoke marked surface helps to emphasise the paler sgraffito marks. I was a little surprised to find some deep unintended marks in the back of the dish, probably caused by the edge of the hollow mould pressing accidentally into the clay, during the sgraffito process. The potter could have rectified these but chose not to, it must not have been important to him. The reverse of the dish is plain, burnished and has the date mark 79 scratched in.

El Nigoumi was born in the Sudan. He attended the art school in Khartoum to study calligraphy and this is where he also discovered clay. Later he studied ceramics at the Central School of Art in London and eventually in 1967 he settled in Britain. Unusually he made work in both unglazed smoke fired earthenware and in glazed stoneware. Ismay amassed seven of his works. In the archive there are a number of invoices and exhibition lists relating to El Nigoumi. The list from Bohun gallery (archive no 5859) shows how Ismay annotated these

lists to indicate the items he was contemplating purchasing and it appears the one with a cross mark is the one he eventually selected.



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