

In praise of Ladi Kwali



Kwali: photo WA Ismay, courtesy York Museums Trust (York Art Gallery) | Das: portrait © Jareh Das

JAREH DAS



The Nigerian potter inspired generations of makers, says the curator, who is celebrating her legacy in a new exhibition

When I was a teenager growing up in Nigeria, the famous potter Ladi Kwali (1925-1984) was often mentioned in the schoolroom, but I knew little about her. It was when I moved to England that I became fascinated with her. While working at Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA), I discovered ceramics by British studio potters including Michael Cardew, who led me to learn about the Abuja Pottery Training Centre in central Nigeria. Cardew was employed by the British colonial government to set up this pottery to cater for an emerging Nigerian middle class; Kwali joined in 1952 as its first female potter, initially as a student and then a teacher.

While doing research for MIMA, which has a large collection of studio pottery, I read about Kwali's water jars – beautifully proportioned, big-bellied pots decorated with scar-like incisions often depicting birds, insects, lizards and geometric shapes. These vessels would originally have been used for the storage of water or grains, but new materials and firing techniques transformed them from functional to decorative objects. They have moved from a world in which they would have been used daily, to being designed purely for display.

Kwali combined the skills she learned at Abuja – throwing, kiln-firing and more – with coiling techniques from her native Gwari region. I'm inspired by the way she straddled the Nigerian and the British studio pottery contexts, moving from the matrilineal traditions of her ethnic group to a hybrid approach. There's something compelling about this transition between cultures. She handled it with such grace, versatility and style.

The more research I did, the more I realised how central Kwali was to the ceramics scene of her time. An older generation know and respect her work, but younger people aren't engaged with that history. The central aims of my show *Body Vessel Clay: Black Women, Ceramics & Contemporary Art* (until 24 April at London's Two Temple Place) are to demystify Kwali for those who know her, introduce her to a new audience, and explore Gwari making traditions – while placing her in the context of three generations of Black women working with clay. Her tableware and vessels sit beside pieces by Magdalene Odundo, who she taught in the 1970s, and work by a new generation of artists. I want to highlight the importance of Black women to the history of pottery. twotempleplace.org

Above: the potter Ladi Kwali at work incising patterning into a water jar