

Ceramic Art in Senegal

by Cleve Overton

Today in Dakar, Senegal, most teapots come from China, plates are from Taiwan, glassware from France; water vessels are plastic, cooking pots are aluminum, and flowerpots are cement or imported plastic. While I have seen a few wheel-thrown lamp bases in local shops, I have not, when traveling throughout the country, come across traditional potters firing open-pit kilns. Clay is used in housing construction, but potters are as rare as camel caravans to Timbuktu.

Consequently, when I saw a wheel-thrown pot at a gallery show in Dakar, I took notice. It was a large, red clay piece with majolica brushwork. The name on the pedestal, Almadies Ceramics, was the only identification.

A month later, I noticed the same name on a large wall mural of striking blue and yellow tiles at the French Cultural Center. It is very attractive and very practical. In a peninsula city subject to continuous sand-laden wind from the Sahara and salt-laden wind from the nearby ocean, painted signs are short-lived, and plastic signs soon crack and fade from the sun and arid air. Only kiln-fired tiles can be aesthetically pleasing and durable.

Then, at an international art exhibition in Dakar, I saw a ceramic mask about 3 feet long in yellow and brown glaze. The name on the pedestal was Mauro Petroni. Weeks later in the lobby of the Hotel Meridien President, I caught a glimpse of what seemed to be an exhibition of African masks behind glass. Once again, it was Petroni's work on display.

The masks were absurd, funny, strange configurations. Their attraction was due both to their familiarity and their deviation from reality. Clay, glazed or unglazed, as a medium, is familiar. African masks are familiar. But African masks in clay—these elongated faces of animals and/or humans in earthtone or brilliant colors—were unfamiliar. They seemed so African and un-African at the same time. It was a wonderful mixture of appealing elements.



A pyramid of earthenware pots marks the entrance to Almadies Ceramics near Dakar, Senegal.

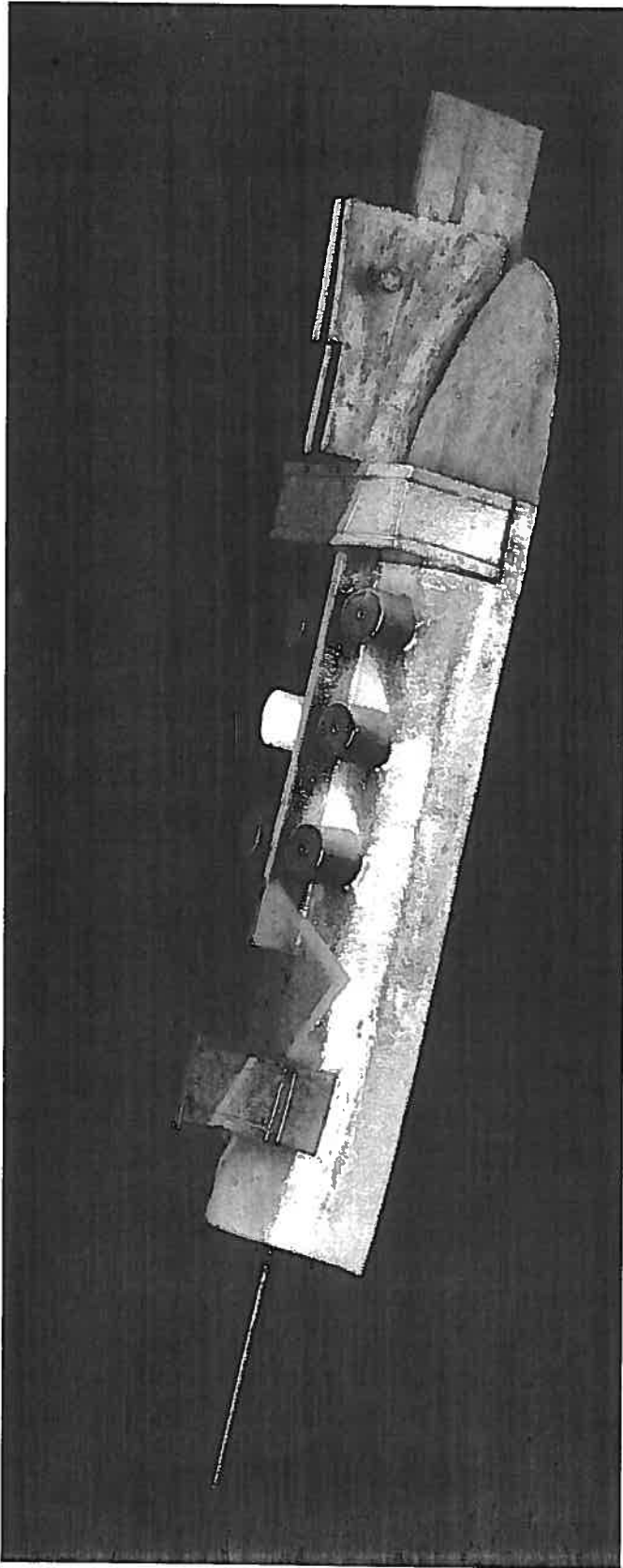
After many inquiries, I finally found someone who knew where the Almadies Ceramics workshop could be found—no address, only directions. One turns right at the lighthouse and continues toward the airport, then left toward the King Fahd Hotel Complex. When you see a 6-foot-tall red obelisk, turn left again. There is no road, just a dirt track, called a *piste* in French. Tire tracks veer to the right, ending at a gate with a

guard who simply waves you in past a small mountain of earthenware pots stacked evenly in a pyramid. Other odd ceramic forms lay scattered about, amid trees laden with mangoes and bananas. There is no sign or number.

Getting out of the car, I saw a blond child, about two years old, tossing water from a square clay pot onto a life-sized carved wooden head at the base of a large tree. On the head was a minia-



Mauro and Christine Petroni at the side door to their studio.



"Dionkolonko" mask, approximately 3 feet in height, slab-built earthenware, with bright orange and blue glaze, on metal stand, by Mauro Petroni.

ture drummer beating three drums. Farther on, a huge parrot in a cage let out a single "caw," perhaps to announce our arrival. His cawing, however, failed to rouse the dog asleep in the driveway. As my friend parked under a tree, I looked for a sign saying "Ceramiques Almadies," but instead found one saying "Barnum Ceramiques."

The door opened and a man with another child in his arms introduced himself as Mauro Petroni. His wife, Christine, was by his side. Despite our unexpected Sunday visit, they were gracious and welcomed us into their spacious workshop.

An artist's studio reflects the heart and personality of the artist. Petroni's was tempered and shaped by the fact that it is in Africa. A large mural lay on the cement floor. Measuring approximately 10 feet by 5 feet, it featured a marlin leaping out of the water. The mural was to be mounted on the outside wall of the Lagon II Hotel on Dakar's coast. I asked if it would be possible to watch its installation, and Petroni agreed, saying I should come early the next morning.

Thin, with a thick shock of brown hair and a steady eye, he often paused before responding to a question. Italian by birth, he speaks French, English and some Wolof, the most common language in Senegal, but says he is too lazy to learn to speak it fluently. His education in Italy was in political science, but his interest in fine art, music and painting led him to accept the offer of a friend to visit his pottery studio in



Local clay is crushed by hand, slaked in one of two open pits, screened, then sun dried to working consistency.

Senegal. When his friend decided to leave the country, Petroni could not resist the offer to stay and operate the pottery. He wanted to get away from the "usual" life in Italy. He had never formally studied ceramics, and had only observed and assisted his friend. That was 12 years ago. Today he attributes his success to his ability to balance his own creative energy, available technology, local materials, and the traditional and practical knowledge of his Senegalese assistants.

The workshop includes large damp boxes enclosed in plastic, a glazing area, a showroom, a large wooden kick wheel, worktables and a large gas kiln, all under a corrugated metal roof. Sections or "rooms" are partitioned by painted concrete-block walls several feet high and open at the top for ventilation.

There is a noticeable absence of machinery, and the most frequent sounds are the chirping of birds and children's laughter. There are no pug mills or extruders, no slab rollers or electric potter's wheels. Modern technology is represented by the compressor used for glazing and the French-built gas kiln.

Petroni has three Senegalese assistants—Ismaila Ciss, Ibrahim Sadio and Ousmane Faye—who pad about in flip-flops. His wife of five years is also an artist, and sometimes teaches at the French School of Dakar. She is especially adept at producing the colorful drawings and designs that are submitted as models to potential customers.

Petroni is his own agent and public relations manager as well, riding a 250cc Honda to reach potential clients within a 100-mile radius. His customers include Senegalese and expatriate businesspeople and diplomats. Often it takes two years from the time he signs a contract to the completion of the work. It is a time-consuming profession, often subject to the whims of the kiln, but he can produce up to five major site-specific pieces per year.

Mornings in the studio are pleasant, and the men are eager to demonstrate their work. A delivery of clay that looks like brown rocks is dumped in a pile, and the indigenous lizards quickly take up residence. About 8 tons of clay per year are broken up by hand, then put into one of two open slake pits. Green organic matter comes to the top after a



Ousmane Faye wedging balls of clay for a large mural commission.



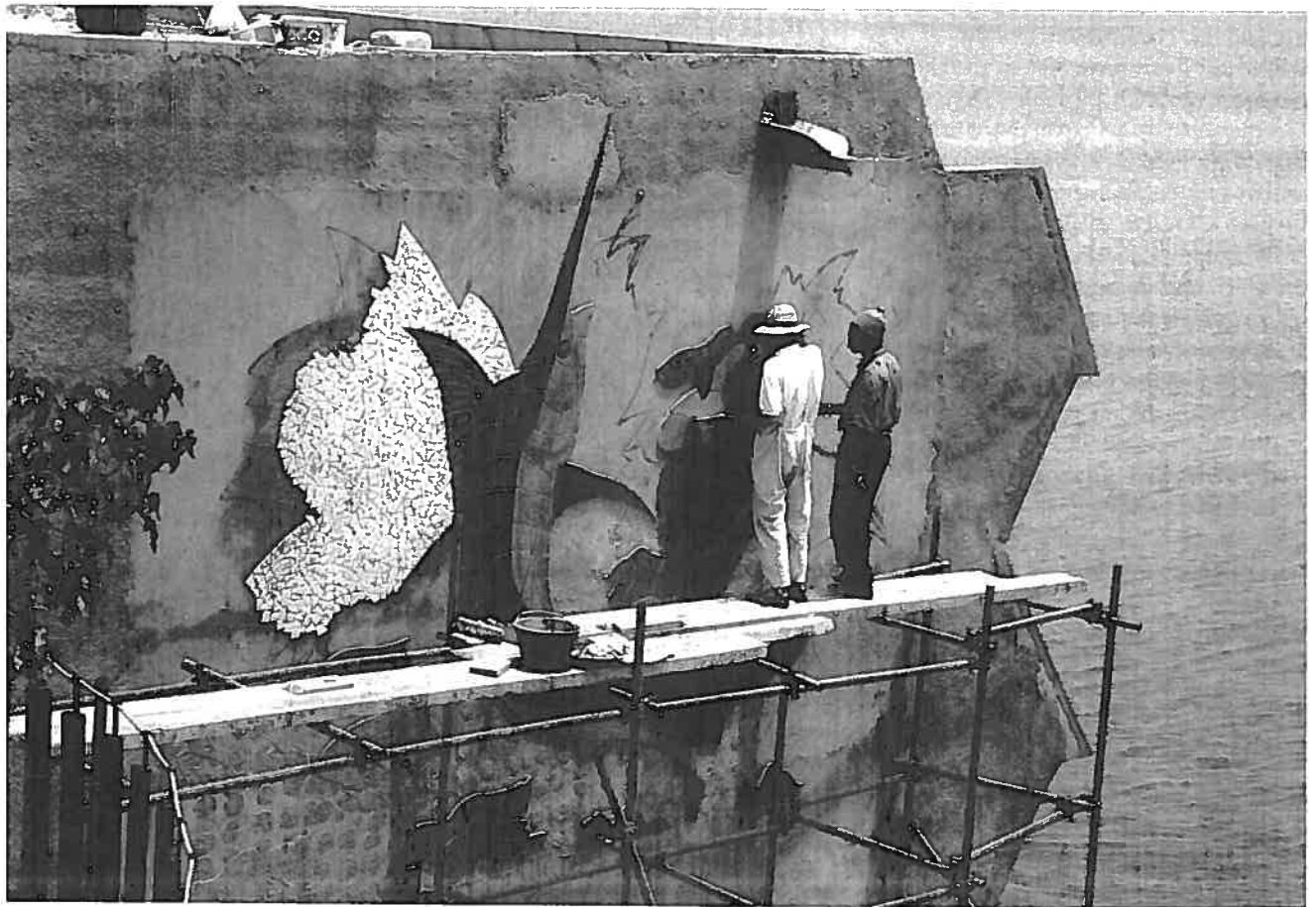
The mural design is cut from hand-pounded slabs laid on newspaper on the studio floor. Damp cloths covering the edges retard drying.



Cut into irregularly shaped sections, the mural is dried for 10 to 15 days, bisqued, then glaze fired.

week, and the clay is screened to remove the rocks, seeds, grass and sand. About 15% of the delivered load is discarded. The screened clay is then placed in a 10x10-foot pool of clean water and allowed to settle. After the hot sun has evaporated most of the water, the red clay is wedged and stored in plastic bags. Sometimes grog is added, depending on its intended use.

Most of the work is slab built. Petroni directs the construction according to the project's specifications, each slab requiring a precise thickness. One man pounds the moist clay into rectangular wooden forms, then draws a piece of wood across the top. Next, he removes the wooden sides, lifts the slab and places it on a rack. Dozens of these slabs are then placed side by side on newspaper on the concrete floor and joined together as a large flat square. An image is then drawn on the square, taking into account the 5% to 10% shrinkage. The edges are covered with damp cloths until the piece can be carefully cut into



A dramatic setting required dramatic installation of this Petroni mural; sections were lowered from the roof down to workers standing on 30-foot-high scaffolding.

smaller, irregularly shaped sections—as many as 600. Each piece must be numbered so that the work can be reassembled in the correct order. Drying takes 10 to 15 days. The bisque firing will take 10 to 12 hours.

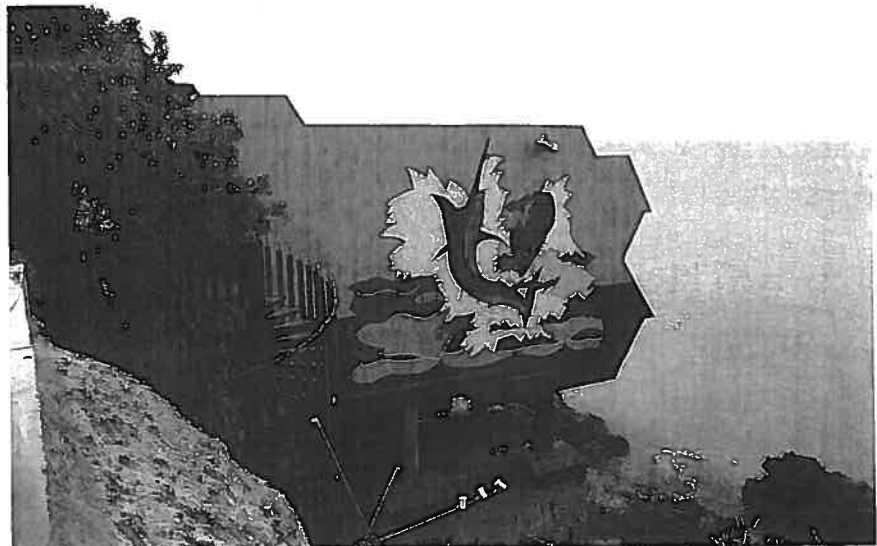
The steel-jacketed downdraft kiln has 14 burners (7 on each side); it burns bottled butane because propane, which Petroni prefers, is not available in Senegal. Petroni rarely uses cones, but the kiln is equipped with two pyrometers. Temperatures range from 940°C [1724°F] at the top of the kiln, where glazed ware is placed, to 960°C [1760°F] at the bottom.

After the bisque firing, the sections are reassembled for glazing. All the glazes are high-gloss recipes imported dry from Italy. Receiving shipments from overseas is expensive and complicated in this part of the world, and the glazes are treated as the precious commodity they are. Water is added and the glazes are applied by spraying or brushing. The glaze firing takes 10 hours. Afterward, the sections are reassembled, inspected and boxed for shipment to the installation site.

The large ceramic mural of a blue fish leaping out of the water and a man in a small boat nearby reminded me of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. Dozens of boxes were placed on the roof of the Lagon II Hotel and Restaurant, to be lowered down by rope and pail to Petroni's installation man, Talla Mbaye; he stood about 30 feet above the splashing waves of the Atlantic on a one-plank scaffold that perched precariously on the rock below. The adhesive also comes from Italy. After the installation and grouting were completed, the hotel owners and Petroni conferred to decide on the exact shade of blue paint to be applied to the wall surrounding the mural. The entire installation process took 26 days.

Mauro Petroni is not a talkative man, although he waxes philosophical when the mood is right. His murals can be found throughout the city in hotels, banks, hospitals, mosques, private homes, cultural centers, restaurants and even a fitness center. He moves comfortably from making these large graphic and abstract murals to platters, vases and masks.

Much of his work is inspired by Af-



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The showroom at Almadies Ceramics; all the workshop "rooms" are partitioned by painted concrete-block walls left open at the top for ventilation.

rica. The elongated clay faces, so reminiscent of African wooden masks, are the most striking example. He calls them "Dionkolonko," a Serere word for something bizarre, twisted, indescribable. The Serere language is one of the local languages spoken in Senegal, and the word can refer to people or animals.

Petroni has a personal relationship with his Dionkolonko faces, which he creates spontaneously as the spirit moves him. He described the relationship in French, which is a more comfortable language for him. As he constructs each

one, he has an apprehensive moment when he peers at it intently to see if it resembles him, then he places it reverently among the others. He says, "I take pleasure in seeing their numbers grow little by little in a spontaneous blossoming; as a whole, their forms resemble nothing and everything, an unconscious mixture of the known and unknown."

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