

Kbach Decoration and Design

by Jake Allee

During my recent trip to The Kingdom of Cambodia, I had an opportunity to make work and interact with several Khmer potters at the National Center for Khmer Ceramics Revival (NCKCR) in Siem Reap. While there, I learned more about the approach to three dimensional surface decorations unique to the Khmer culture.

Kbach, a word from the Khmer language, is a term used to describe a wide array of elaborate ornamentation used in Cambodia for the decoration of architecture, woodwork, metalwork, stone carving, and ceramics. *Kbach* is not a set of design rules, but rather, a system of dividing space used by the ancient Khmers to create original compositions through the language of decoration. As any decorative language, *Kbach* is at its finest when its basic forms are utilized to create unique design

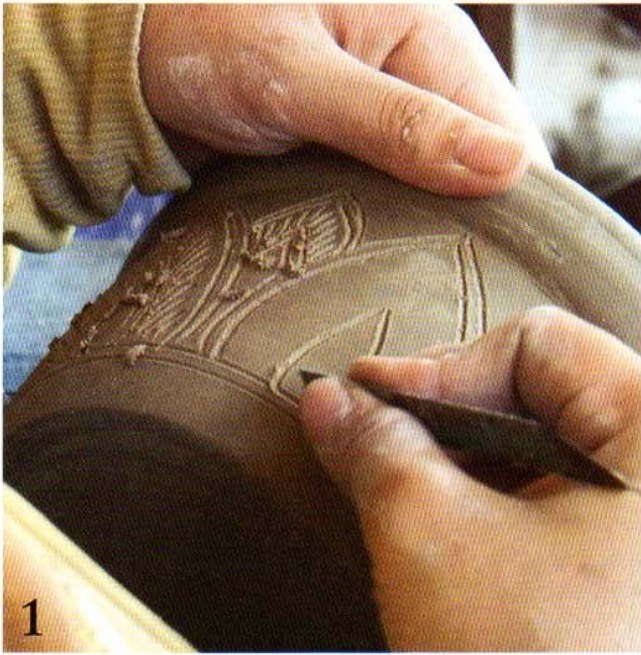
solutions as personal expression through the technical approach. Throughout Khmer history these approaches to ornamental design have been passed down orally through generations of artists. Within the *Kbach* approach, different styles are characterized by divisions that emphasize the subtractive cuts and spaces contained within the basic shape.

This approach can become very complex when viewing the final product and there are several different styles. I exemplify the basic format through four common shapes (see page 43). All of these shapes are abstractions of nature-based imagery and can be described in Western terms, however, we must remember that the names listed are related to Hindu and Buddhist symbolism.

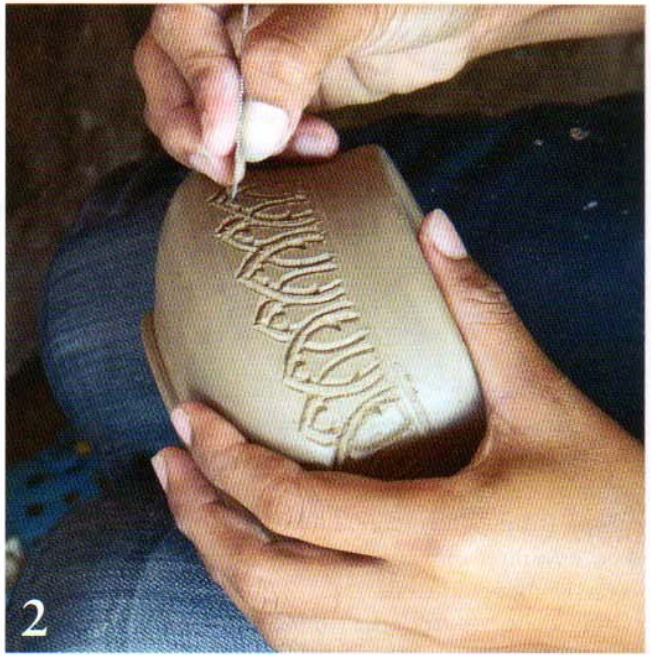
The basic incising technique demonstrated to me by the Khmer potters of the NCKCR employs the

Finished high fired piece from the National Center for Khmer Ceramics Revival.

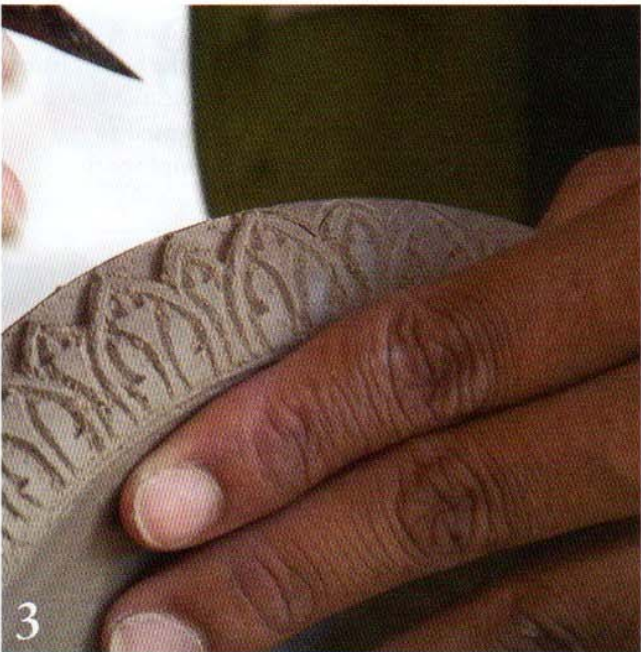




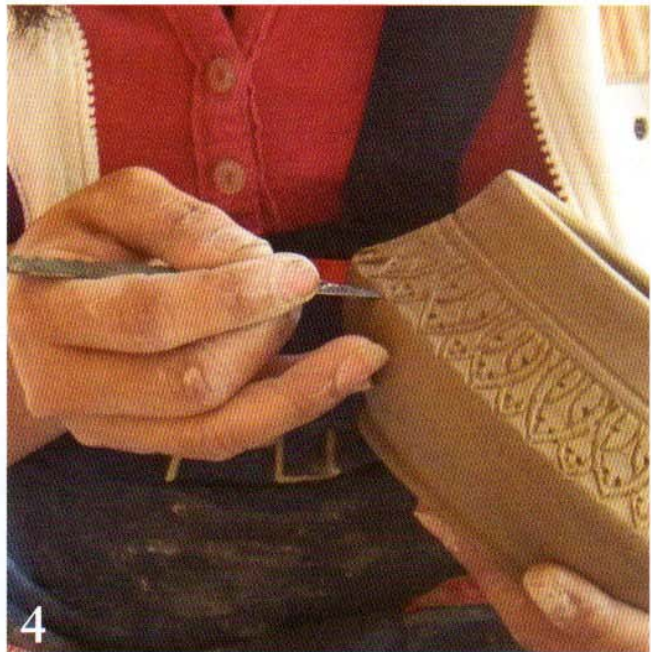
1 The first incisions are expressed with the corner of the Khmer knife.



2 The lotus motif develops within the subdivision of the basic shape.



3 The sharpened knife tip is used to define each lotus petal and further accentuate a repeating pattern.



4 Nara quickly makes the side angled cut rotating the piece with each completed piece of clay removed.

use of a single, all-in-one tool. This tool is made very simply by cutting down a hacksaw blade to a length of 6–7 inches. One end is left square while the other end is cut at an angle and is sharpened like a knife. An X-Acto blade works in lieu of the altered hacksaw blade, but it doesn't express the ingenuity and effort to recycle possessed by the Khmer potters. For lack of a better term, this will be referred to as the 'Khmer knife.' With this tool and a small set of loop tools of various shapes, you can create very complex bas reliefs in the Kbach style.

Throw, Design, Carve

Throw a refined form. The form is kept simple so that it does not conflict with the elaborate incising on the surface. A horizontal line is created on this form to provide a border that will act as a guide line to contain the incising. Take note of the edge created in the side profile of the form. This edge acts as another guide for the *containment* of the incised pattern. The protruding side profile allows for more emphasis of the decorative technique through side angled cuts into the design area.

During the leather hard stage, the basic lotus motif is repeated using the guide lines of the established horizontal marks on the form (*figure 1*). Create the design by scraping with the corner of the square-cut edge of the Khmer knife. The character of the mark is dependent upon three factors: pressure applied to the tool, the amount of grog in the clay, and the moisture content of the piece.

An underlying set of lotus petals is scraped into the pattern thus dividing the motif through continuity and implied line (*figure 2*).

Continue to emphasize the relief of the design by cutting into the clay, following the outline of the design with the sharpened edge of the knife. Make the cut progressively shallower towards the exterior tip of the lotus petal (*figure 3*).

Turn the pointed edge of the Khmer knife at an angle so that the flat face of the metal lines up parallel with the surface of the piece (*figure 4*). Angle the knife 1 or 2 degrees more into the clay to make a thin, horizontal cut on the same plane as the clay surface. Connect the previous outline cuts and remove the newly released piece of clay.

Repetition of this final step completes the design. Create stylization and refinement of the basic incising technique by rounding the corners of the geometric pattern and adding curves to the initial dividing lines within a given basic motif. The combination of these basic motifs leads to exponential possibilities with this type of formal adornment. As in all decorative techniques, the combination of speed and accuracy leads to a “fresh” un-labored look. This spontaneous look is one of the virtues of historical Southeast Asian ceramic pieces.

The extensive use of Kbach in Ankor period (9th–13th century) utilitarian ceramics from Cambodia was not common; however, many examples of Kbach on architectural ceramics associated with temples during this period still exist. After the shift of political power to the Southeast during the 13th century, widespread use of high-fire glazes in the region began to decline. The majority of the ceramics produced in Cambodia after this point were low-fired and incorporated more physical surface decoration techniques as described here. Similar decorative techniques can be seen on Cham influenced Vietnamese jars from the Ly and Tran dynasties. The combination of Kbach decorative technique and high fire glaze at the NCKCR ushers in a new era of traditional contemporary ceramics currently being produced in Cambodia. ■

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Right: Un-restored door to the Ankor Wat entrance showing the basic shape of division and development of designs in the sandstone.

Design motifs



The frontal lotus petal shape.



The fish egg shape.



The lotus petal shape as viewed from the side, which is also called the goose tail shape.



The Chan flower shape; this motif is the most basic example of combining these shapes to create more elaborate motifs.

