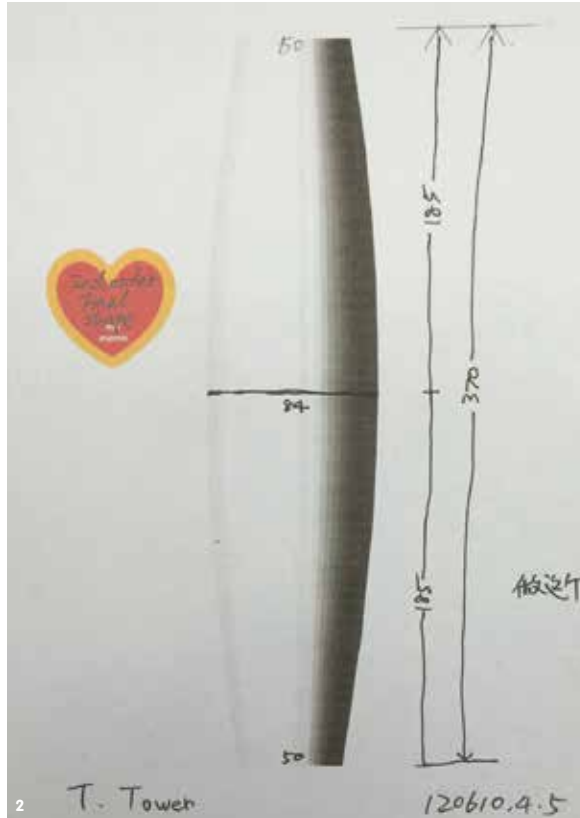
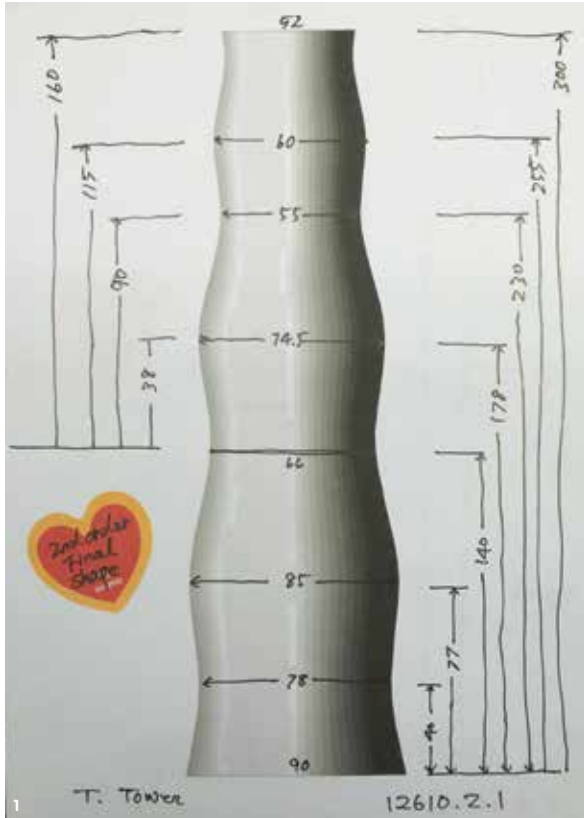


Monumental Vases



COLIN MARTIN EXPLAINS THE LOGISTICS OF FELICITY AYLIEFF'S QATARI COMMISSION, WHICH INVOLVED THE MAKING, INTERNATIONAL TRANSPORTATION, AND INSTALLATION OF THREE MONUMENTAL VASES.

When a member of the Al Thani Qatari royal family first saw a monumental porcelain vase by British ceramist Felicity Aylieff, at Chatsworth House, Derbyshire, in 2011, he knew immediately what might enhance the atrium of a fifty-one-storey building in Doha, Qatar. Tornado Tower (2008) accommodates offices, restaurants, public spaces, and an exemplary collection of contemporary art. Boldly decorated with brushstrokes of 'modern blue' cobalt oxide, the piece that caught his eye was acquired from an exhibition of vases 1.6 to 3 metres tall that had been made in collaboration with artisans in Jingdezhen, China, in 2006-7. Felicity Aylieff and Red House Ceramics Design Studio (founded by Aylieff, Japanese potter Takeshi Yasuda, and Baixu Xiong, in 2008) were subsequently commissioned to make and install three monumental vases in Doha. It took a year just to negotiate and agree the contract for the project, which was Aylieff's first large public commission. It was executed with support from Red House and used Jingdezhen artisans' expertise in throwing big wares.

CONTRACT STIPULATIONS The contract identified production stages and liabilities, particularly installation of the vases in Doha. (Breakage is an obvious risk for ceramic pieces that big.) It also stipulated that at least one of the three vases should be 4.5 metres high, which – given that porcelain shrinks by about 20% when fired – meant that the unfired vase should be

about 5.4 metres high. Despite her experience in 'working large' and firing porcelain at 1350°C, Aylieff initially thought that might not be possible.

Other considerations were the use of cobalt oxide (which originated in Iran) and the incorporation of patterning traditionally used in Middle Eastern ceramics to reflect the region's cultural heritage. 'I was given a free reign in all aspects of the design and, in this respect, it was "dream" commission,' says Aylieff. 'The forms and decoration of the Doha installation respect Islamic traditions regarding non-representational art.' Four full-size prototypes were made, as well as the three vases for the final installation.

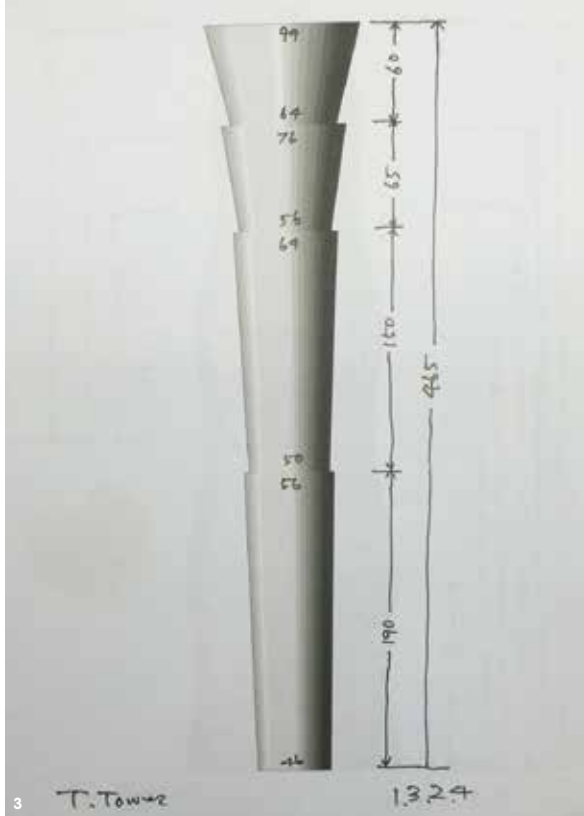
TACKLING THE CONSTRUCTION Aylieff's designs for the monumental vases involved making individual sections, each about 1.5 metres in height, with their connecting points designed as a lid fitting, which required extraordinary technical precision in their manufacture. Each section was created from a series of thrown elements luted together before drying, trimming, and firing. Her designs provided a greater freedom to work with scale and made it easier to move, crate, and ship them, but also meant that the structural stability of the assembled works had to be ensured by other means.

Yasuda, who acted as the project's structural engineer, designed the steel armatures used to support the vases internally, which were manufactured in Jingdezhen by local metal workers and welders. Each vase has a central steel pole, made from segments of 6-inch steel pipe connected with collars, fixed to a 2cm-thick, 34cm-diameter steel plate. Six

1 Measured drawing: Undulating vase, H300cm, Ø90cm (base), Ø52cm (rim)
 2 Measured drawing: Cigar-shaped vase, H370cm, Ø50cm (base and rim), Ø84cm (midpoint) 3 Measured drawing: Telescopic vase, H465cm, Ø46cm (base), Ø94cm (rim)
 4 Trial assembly of sections of the telescopic vase, in courtyard at Red House Ceramics

Design Studio, with Takeshi Yasuda on right-hand scaffolding 5 Felicity Aylieff standing alongside the telescopic vase, in courtyard at Red House Ceramics Design Studio 6 Trial assembly of sections of the telescopic vase, in courtyard at Red House Ceramics Design Studio

Next page 7 Installation showing the telescopic and undulating vases and scaffolding 8 Installation showing the cigar-shaped and telescopic towers positioned on black granite plinth 9 Fitting together sections of the undulating vase



bolts were used to fix each plate onto a solid black granite pedestal weighing 1.5 tons. The strength of the vases' interior poles stopped any sideways movement. Downwards compression and stability were created by positioning a steel plate a few inches below the rim of the vase and screwing it onto the top of the vase's central pole.

VASE ONE One vase, 3.5 metres high, is cigar-shaped, formed from two sections increasing in diameter from base to midpoint, and then diminishing again to its top. Its convex shape and internal armature contrast with the external armature of Tornado Tower and its concave silhouette. The vase is decorated with stylised motifs derived from Middle Eastern culture, with some of its details drawn and carved on a greatly magnified scale. One leaf-shaped carving is 1.5 metres in length, wrapping around the girth of the vase. Aylieff's aesthetic preference for low relief, referencing Assyrian carving, had the practical bonus of not adding significantly to the mass of the vase's form, thereby reducing firing problems. The considerable scale of the carving confers a boldness to the work. Its printed and painted linear background appears as a filigree, softening the outline of the carved imagery. This vase is unglazed and the soft sand colour of the high-fired body references the colour of the local stone and environment.

VASE TWO A second vase (3 metres high) has an undulating silhouette, which was again formed from two individual sections. Its surface is patterned with a combination of glazed, unglazed, and print decoration, using layered geometric drawing and photographic prints, which draw on Middle Eastern history via pottery shards and the region's contemporary



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10 Felicity Aylieff using Chinese brush to paint the telescopic vase with different concentrations of cobalt oxide pigment
11 Cigar-shaped vase (detail showing carved leaf-form)
12 Undulating vase (detail showing hand-drawn and painted patterning)
13 Felicity Aylieff standing alongside final installation of three vases in Tornado Tower atrium
Photography Courtesy Red House Ceramics Design Studio

Felicity Aylieff is an artist working in ceramics and a senior tutor at the Royal College of Art, London. She is represented by Adrian Sassoon Contemporary (www.adriansassoon.com/contemporary/ceramics)
Artist acknowledgement Mr Wu – 'Jingdezhen Zhen Shang' big ware factory,


San Bao, Jingdezhen, China, for their expertise and support with some aspects of this project
Email aylieff@btinternet.com, felicity.aylieff@rca.org.uk
Web www.aylieff.com
Colin Martin is an Australian writer and collector who lives in London

architectural structures. Unglazed sections create a secondary pattern of decoration on the surface. This vase unites the overall composition of Aylieff's Doha composition, aesthetically 'bridging' between the unglazed, carved decoration of the cigar-shaped vase and the glazed, brush decoration of the towering third vase, which stands 4.6 metres tall.

VASE THREE The telescopic third vase *Blue*, with segments flaring gently outwards as its height increases, was designed so that joins between its four sections would not show. Boldly decorated with brush strokes using three concentrations of cobalt oxide, the resulting graduated tones of blue provide depth to its design, with the darkest blue strokes providing 'structure' and anchoring the design. 'I wanted it to be fairly straight but not "lifeless", flaring out like an Egyptian column,' says Aylieff. 'The larger diameter of its rim makes its base appear smaller, assuring that its massive porcelain structure is elegant.'

ASSEMBLY & INSTALLATION Aylieff oversaw a trial assembly of the installation, in a courtyard outside the studio in Jingdezhen, in wintry conditions at the end of 2012.

In early 2013 she, Yasuda, Xiong, and four Chinese assistants travelled to Doha to install Aylieff's three vases in the tower's atrium. Subsequently, their client expressed a preference for the vase sculpture to be raised on a plinth rather than stand directly on the floor, so the installation was demounted and stored while a suitable black granite plinth was designed and made.

Aylieff's installation was erected in its final form in late 2013. The logistics of forming three towering pots in sections, decorating and firing them, shipping them from Jingdezhen to Doha, and assembling them on-site were considerable. Working across European, Chinese, and Islamic cultures was not without its challenges; however, Aylieff's monumental installation evokes architecture, transcending both functional and sculptural ceramic forms. 



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