

# Connecting culture

**FOLLOWING AN EXTRAORDINARY JOURNEY that led the KZNSA Gallery to the Middle East, artist Hendrik Stroebel opened 'Reconnect' in Dubai on the occasion of Dubai Art Week and Art Dubai 2013. Stroebel's exhibition invited audiences to look closely and be overwhelmed by the scope and craft of the beauty. It presented a spectacular worldview where ideas, influences and creativity collide; escaping categorisation.**

In June 2011, South African artist Hendrik Stroebel presented his solo exhibition 'Recollect' at the KZNSA Gallery in Durban, South Africa. The content of the work explored the pattern and texture of the Arab and Islamic world, as he portrayed the architecture, ancient history and people that so fascinated him on his travels. The artist's abiding interest in antiquity was literally woven into the images.

'Reconnect' opened on the occasion of Art Dubai – one of the world's largest contemporary Art Fairs, in Dubai in 2013. Stroebel's lifelong journey is quite literally returning 'home' to the well spring of the artist's inspiration.

In the 'Reconnect' exhibition, Stroebel skilfully utilised painting, drawing, embroideries and ceramics to create an exhibition of breathtaking beauty, underpinned by passion and dedication. His work reinforces the power of the hand-crafted: each item is witness to and speaks truth of the skill and dedication of those most precious elements, the human time and human care taken to make it. Stroebel's exhibition showed a constellation of ideas, emotions and the beauty that is truth.

Stroebel's work abounds with mysticism and symbols that give voice to the artist's vision and intuition, which clearly resounds with viewers. Most notable within 'Reconnect' is the eight-pointed star – a familiar shape made by overlapping two squares.

The roots of the eight-pointed star symbol relate to early astronomy, and it appears in cultures around the globe. The eight lines are symbolic of the four compass points, the two solstices and two equinoxes. Its universal symbolism is one of balance, harmony and cosmic order. Its pattern is also associated with religion, and with mysticism. It signifies both stars and humanity's earliest attempts to understand and communicate the order and unity inherent in Creation, nature's rule.

By the Middle Ages, the eight-pointed star became widely used as a symbol in Islamic art. It is called 'khatim' or 'khatim sulayman', the seal of the prophets. In this way, the khatam represents the highest virtues, namely: learning, community, faith, and love of beauty. It stands as a symbol of early astronomy, interconnectedness, and faith in the ultimate harmony of Creation.

To return to the theme of beauty, the exhibition reinforces that very particular aesthetic which is achieved through the combination of intellect and excellent craftsmanship. When these two are in harmony, the object takes on a life of its own, and Stroebel has succeeded in creating that alchemy which transforms the mundane into the magical.

[showcaseuae.com/artists/hendrik-stroebel](http://showcaseuae.com/artists/hendrik-stroebel)



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## Interview with Hendrik Stroebel

### How did you get started as an artist?

There were never any other options for me, it is part of my bloodline to do art, with both my grandmothers and a great grandfather that found artistic expression with their mastery of creative sewing and other related crafts. My mother did superb petit point embroidery, which informed my early childhood, and after school I studied art with painting as a major subject. Later on ceramics followed and my own freestyle embroidery that I now find as an ongoing artistic pursuit.

### How has your home South Africa influenced your work?

Durban, the city where I live in South Africa is a Port city on the shores of the Indian Ocean. It's very tropical and a rich cultural mix; African, Indian and European, it's also diverse and united by our legacies in architecture, cuisine, and music and different belief systems. Here also are wonderful examples of Hindu and Islamic temples/mosques, and it is this Eastern influence that influenced me and is still an ongoing pursuit with my travels to inform and enrich my artistic journey.

### What is your main inspiration?

Travel is my main source of inspiration that informs my work, and specifically Islamic countries. I have travelled five times to Turkey the journey from Istanbul to eastern Turkey, the Mediterranean coast, and the black sea. I have a great passion for antiquity and Turkey is a rich source of Greek and Roman sites, the great mosques and the remains of the Ottoman Empire with Iznik tiles, and the great tradition of Islamic ornamentation. I am totally in awe of the balance between architecture and decoration found in Islamic monuments. Egypt is also a great source of antiquity, pharonic and the sublime Museum of Islamic art in Cairo. I also travelled to Iran in search of Persia and found Persepolis, Arg-e-Bam, Kashan, Kerman, Yazd, Shiraz and Isfahan too, forever etched. I still draw on the inspirations of Persian carpets and the dazzling array of tiles that adorn much of the Islamic monuments (mosques). I also encountered this in Uzbekistan and the three glorious cities of Bukhara, Khiva and Samarkand. I travelled to Jordan to view Petra and Jerash and hopefully I can still go to Iraq and to Syria in a more peaceful time. I soak in all these elements and the daily

life and wonderful people that I have met, and all this is my source of inspiration.

### How would you describe your style as an artist?

The simple answer would be mixed media, the combinations of materials; ceramic, carved wood, bronze, embroidery and the souvenirs that I collect when I travel. For example, with the work 'Remains of Tamerlane' in the centre of the remade wooden oriental screen is a tiny painting that I bought in a souk in Bukhara, Uzbekistan. Turquoise ceramic Islamic amulets that I bought in Cairo are also included as references and adornments in the frames that become part of a work. I suppose I have a sentimental soul.

### How long does it normally take you to complete a piece of art?

There are different time spans for works that include handmade frames of either carved wood or ceramic, or a combination of metal insets. Processes are time consuming and the embroidery takes time. It requires immense concentration for the layers of 'glazing' with 1 or 2 threads, to achieve subtle effects. Clay is a much more immediate process and also more expressive, and I am intrigued with the different effects of glazes – this is always a rather elusive process as the outcome always has a surprise element. Some work takes years in the making and 'Iran Persia' took over a year to embroider.

### How did you develop a fascination with the Arab and Islamic world?

The inspiration started here in Durban with our own Islamic places of worship. The countries with the great legacies of antiquity are concentrated around the Middle East and Central Asia, and also happen to be Islamic countries, so the stimulus is diverse and the remains of different cultures are all mixed with the pulse of modern society.

### What was your experience at Dubai Art Week like?

It was a wonderful experience to be part of Art Dubai with a solo exhibition in the Showcase Gallery. The fact that I exhibited in the UAE and that the work found such a resonance there was wonderful. I was



01 Turquoise Domes Samarkand (2012): Embroidery with ceramic frame; 30 x 22cm

02 A section from Stars (2006 -2009): Glazed ceramic tiles; 19 x 19cm

03 Portrait, Alexander (2011): Embroidery with ceramic frame; 25 x 18cm

04 Marhaban (2000): Earthenware with glaze; 70 x 82cm

also informed of the broader aspect of contemporary art of the region and that Dubai Art is such an important global event.

### Can you tell us about the meaning behind the 'Reconnect' exhibition?

In 2011 my exhibition 'Recollect' opened at the KZNSA gallery in Durban, and this was the culmination of 16 years of work. An art Patron from Dubai saw the exhibition and purchased eight works. He also promised me an exhibition in Dubai, so after the KZNSA gallery teamed up with Showcase Gallery in Dubai, my exhibition 'Reconnect' opened during Art Dubai in March 2013. 'Recollect' was the ideas and images gathered from all the travels and 'Reconnect' is the work exhibited in Dubai as a coming together of what inspired so long ago a physical connection of the exhibition in an Islamic country.

### What creative processes went into making this art?

I have partially answered this, but I think I am an 'Orientalist' at heart, referring to artists that have travelled to the then-termed 'Orient' to be seduced by the exoticism and to also view antiquity in these 'Biblical lands'. I think of Jean Leon Gerome in particular, I have a definite interest in the crafts found in these Islamic countries, such as tiles, carpets, metal and grille work, embroidery, woodcarving and textiles, and have an affinity with these specialists of a great tradition that I absolutely revere and respect. The vistas, of the shimmering mosaics of the 'Registan and Bibi Khanyum' in Samarkand, the heaped up piles of Persian carpets in the old souk in Shiraz, the massive columns in Didyma Turkey and the date palms along the Nile are some of the elements that compel me to be creative.

### What's next for you?

I have been lecturing for almost 25 years now at the DUT University of Technology as ceramic lecturer in the fine art department, and will retire at the end of the year. I am always working and currently am working towards an exhibition for next year. I will travel as well, maybe to Morocco or Tunisia, but the great desire is Syria and Iraq.