

February 13, 2014

# MUSHMINA ARTISAN PROFILE OF THE DAY: OUR MASTER METALSMITH, AHMED.

Master metalsmith Ahmed El Guerche works closely with handmade fashion label Mushmina’s creative director Katie O’Neill to create the Sahara jewelry collection that is a signature of the accessories line. Ahmed grew up in the mountains outside of Ouarzazate, Morocco’s famous film capital renowned for its striking cinematic landscapes and the setting for such films as *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Gladiator* and *Babel*. Ahmed, lead metalsmith for Mushmina, is recognized for creating pieces that are as eye catching as the arresting surroundings of his childhood.

Ahmed is of Amazigh (Berber) descent, the indigenous people of Morocco. The Berbers are known for wearing jewelry as an expression of tribal identity. Berber jewelry, which is always made of silver, is noted for its beautiful and intricate enamel work and is a definition of status in the culture. Characteristic pieces are often etched with protective and tribal symbols, use vintage coins, and incorporate red and green glass stone. Berber women wear silver fibulas—triangular brooches or pins, and head decorations as a symbol of their wealth in rural society.

Ahmed learned jewelry making and metal work as a young apprentice as he studied under a master metalsmith for five years when he moved to Tiznit, the silver capital of Morocco to establish himself. Mushmina learned about Ahmed from a Peace Corps volunteer who recommended him to Katie and her sister/co-founder Heather because of his outstanding skill in creating collections with mixed metals and his undeniably strong work ethic. The collaboration, which began in 2009 has been a success and although Ahmed and Katie are thousands of miles apart, the two creatively inspire each other. Katie sends Ahmed sketches of shapes and ideas for new jewelry pieces and Ahmed then adds his own spin, which can include unique Berber etching, swirl designs or a completely new take altogether. It’s common for Ahmed to work through the night to finish orders and his work is so appealing the orders keep pouring in. His dedication has paid off. Morocco’s Ministry of the Artisanat, which serves to promote and support the artisans and craftspeople of Morocco, nominated Ahmed for top artisan in 2012 and he participated in an artisan expo in Morocco’s capital, Rabat the same year.

Ahmed, who started with a small workshop in his home, has since moved to an atelier space where he employs a number of people to help fill orders—sometimes even calling on his brother AbdelWahed to assist. Although Ahmed doesn’t have a formal education, he is a quick learner and embraces technology to advance his work. He uses the Internet, email and digital images to interpret Mushmina’s orders.

As is common in Morocco, Ahmed lives in a mixed household in the southern town of Tiznit with his wife Aisha, daughter Hind (11), and son Soufian (7) and his brother and his family. He’s a man who is always moving. He enjoys biking to work and when he is not busy in his workshop he likes to go running. Katie and Heather take the ten-hour trip to visit Ahmed in Tiznit at least once a year where he warmly invites them into his home to share a lemon chicken tagine and mint tea. Not motivated by money, Ahmed is quick to remind the two sisters that he only works with people who are ‘nishan’ (serious) and whom he wants to do business with. So, it’s a good thing he likes Katie and Heather. The three manage to converse during these visits despite a language barrier. Heather is fluent in Arabic but Ahmed uses a fast spoken dialect that is a combination of Moroccan Arabic and the Berber language that is known as Tashelhit. When words fail to get the message across, the visually oriented group relies on photos and drawings to communicate.

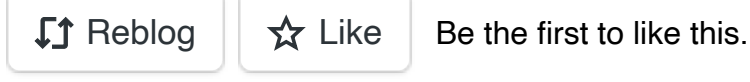
Ahmed’s latest collaboration with Mushmina is the Spring 2014 collection of etched bracelets, cuffs, and pendants. The collection features pieces in silver, brass, copper, and filigree and each is a modern interpretation of Ahmed’s traditional craft. Ahmed also incorporates wood inlay, which is often seen in Tuareg jewelry. Each piece is decorated and in a touch characteristic of Ahmed the back side of items he crafts are often etched in as he can’t stand to see anything look plain or unfinished. The culmination of the collection is truly collaborative as Katie adds her unique touch and finishing to Ahmed’s pieces for modern appeal.

To Learn more about Morocco’s Berber culture, there is a wonderful new Amazigh Berber Museum in the famous Jardin Majorelle in Marrakech <http://jardinmajorelle.com/ang/introduction-to-berber-culture/>

-From “A Window to Morocco Series” – By Heather O’Neill and Yvonne King.



SHARE THIS:



Leave a comment

## LEAVE A COMMENT

Write a comment...

Comment