98533 - Sculpting with clay – what is and is not permissible

the question

I am an artist. Recently I became inclined to sculpturing from mud. I heard that it is haram. But I make it as a flattened drawing, just like a drawn picture. I would like also to know if engraving masjids and houses is as haram as engraving humans and birds?.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Sculpting with clay is one of the kinds of image-making, some of which is permissible and some is haraam. That which is haraam is that which shows images of animate beings, both humans and animals, because of the words of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) which were narrated by Ibn ‘Abbaas, who said: I heard Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) say: “Whoever makes an image in this world will be commanded to breathe the soul into it on the Day of Resurrection, and he will not be able to do that.” Narrated by al-Bukhaari (2112) and Muslim (2110).

As for that which is permissible, it is images of anything that does not have a soul, so it is permissible to sculpt images in clay of mosques, houses, trees and other inanimate objects.

The scholars of the Standing Committee said:

The focus of the prohibition on image making is images of animate beings, whether they are sculpted or drawn on walls or fabric or paper, or they are woven, and whether they are drawn with a quill or pen or made with a machine, and whether the image is of the creature as it naturally appears or whether imagination comes into play and it is made smaller or larger, or made beautiful or distorted, or the skeleton inside is shown in the picture.

The reason for the prohibition is that what is represented is animate beings, even if they are

imaginary images such as those that are drawn to represent ancient peoples such as the pharaohs and commanders and soldiers during the Crusades, or images of Jesus and Mary that are placed in churches, etc. This is because of the general meaning of the texts and because of the imitation of the creation of Allaah, and because it is a means that leads to shirk.

Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Azeez ibn Baaz, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Razzaaq ‘Afeefi, Shaykh ‘Abd-Allaah ibn Ghadyaan, Shaykh ‘Abd-Allaah ibn Qa’ood.

Fataawa al-Lajnah al-Daa’imah (1/696)

It is also not permissible to do sculptures with clay for places of bid’ah which people venerate inappropriately, such as places of worship and graves, and places of sin such as banks and theatres.

The scholars of the Standing Committee said: It is not permissible to make artistic three-dimensional images of the two Sanctuaries (Makkah and Madeenah) because they may include images of the people in the Haram in Makkah who are doing tawaaf and praying, and of the Qur’aan-reciters and others in al-Masjid al-Nabawi and so on, and because there is a green dome which would be represented in such images of al-Masjid al-Nabawi, and that may lead some people to believe in domes and venerate them and the people buried beneath them, which may lead to major shirk and other evils from which we seek refuge with Allaah.

Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Azeez ibn Baaz, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Razzaaq ‘Afeefi, Shaykh ‘Abd-Allaah ibn Ghadyaan, Shaykh ‘Abd-Allaah ibn Qa’ood.

Fataawa al-Lajnah al-Daa’imah (1/476)

In the Book of Allaah there is an indication that sculpting figures of animate beings with clay is haraam. Allaah says (interpretation of the meaning):

“(Remember) when Allaah will say (on the Day of Resurrection). “O ‘Eesa (Jesus), son of Maryam (Mary)! Remember My Favour to you and to your mother when I supported you with Rooh-ul-Qudus [Jibreel (Gabriel)] so that you spoke to the people in the cradle and in maturity; and

when I taught you writing, Al-Hikmah (the power of understanding), the Tawraat (Torah) and the Injeel (Gospel); and when you made out of the clay, a figure like that of a bird, by My Permission, and you breathed into it, and it became a bird by My Permission, and you healed those born blind, and the lepers by My Permission, and when you brought forth the dead by My Permission"

[al-Maa'idah 5:110]

The one who studies this verse will realize that the words "and when you made out of the clay, a figure like that of a bird, by My Permission" clearly indicate that it is haraam to make figures of clay in the form of birds – and other animate beings – and that what 'Eesa (peace be upon him) did was only done with the permission of Allaah, so both actions were done by the permission of Allaah: making the figure and breathing into it. The words "by My Permission" indicate that it was forbidden to do that even in the law of 'Eesa (peace be upon him).

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allaah have mercy on him) said, explaining that the Messiah is a slave of Allaah and a created being, not a creator:

1 – He made out of clay a figure like that of a bird. What is meant is that he gave it the shape of a bird, and this kind of creation is something that all people are able to do. One of them could make a figure of clay like that of a bird or any other animal, but this image-making is haraam, unlike that which was done by the Messiah, because Allaah gave him permission to do it. What is miraculous is that he blew into it and it became a bird by Allaah's leave. The miracle is not just that he shaped it out of clay, because that is something that anyone could do. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) cursed the image-makers and said: "The most severely punished of the people on the Day of Resurrection will be the image-makers."

3 – Allaah told the Messiah that he was only making the image and breathing into it with His permission, and the Messiah told others that he did that with Allaah's permission. Allaah tells us that this was one of the blessings that He bestowed upon the Messiah (peace be upon him) as He says (interpretation of the meaning): "He ['Eesa (Jesus)] was not more than a slave. We granted Our Favour to him, and We made him an example for the Children of Israel" [al-Zukhruf 43:59].

Al-Jawaab al-Saheeh (4/46, 47)

And Allaah knows best.