A Charm Relinquished By Hand

Posted on

In and out… in and out… the needle went and slowly a beautiful pattern started to emerge, a blending of hues so beautiful that one had to marvel at the pair of hands that was able to create such exotic beauty. It is nothing but the wisdom of Hand Embroidery, learned and perfected throughout the decades, that rendered this exquisite pattern, which unfolded in a stark white cloth.

Words Krishani Peiris Photographs Prabath Chathuranga

Hand Embroidery is a craft that has been in existence for many centuries. Though the actual beginning is unknown, history reveals that this age old craft could be traced to the times of ancient China, Egypt and even beyond. Used as a form of embellishment, to increase the worth and artistry of fabric and clothes, in olden times, hand embroidered clothes were deemed as personifications of wealth and associated with prominent societal structures – such as aristocracy and religion – which acted as inspiration for many of the designs. Influenced by their own culture and society, each country’s embroidery had its own distinctive flavour – a weaving

of an elaborate story that bespoke of proficient times and cultural values. Sri Lanka too has embraced this beautiful art, which has evolved with time to encompass different elements, thus continuing, adding some zest to make it our very own.

Shirani Potuhera, one of the most leading hand embroidery artists in Sri Lanka, has been cultivating the art since 1982, with the aid of her supportive family and a group of 25 girls that has now dwindled to eight. She has successfully held exhibitions in countries such as USA, Sweden, Australia, Japan and Dubai, to name a few, and gained remarkable recognition for the impeccable adroitness that she has disclosed with her colourful hand done embroidery. Especially, on one such occasion in Denmark, Flora Danica – a prestigious hand painted porcelain luxury dinner service – showed much interest in implementing her hand embroidery with their designs.Shunning embroidery machines that would have made her more lucrative, she has chosen to painstakingly hand stitch her designs – as was done hundreds of years ago. “I really enjoy the process. My girls understand my expectations and they have never failed me,” said Mrs Potuhera elaborating on her small work force. Each leaf and flower, done by hand, captures even the slightest contrast presenting an unparalleled design. A very unique feature that sets Mrs Potuhera apart from many others, is her ability and skill to replicate the design on a tableware set. Catering to her clients wishes, she takes the requested design from the respective tableware and reproduces it in a tablecloth or mat, presenting a table that is unique in style.

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The work room set at the back of the house is a cozy little room, with girls sitting around a table chattering to their hearts’ content, while their hands with equal adeptness, continued to weave intricate designs. The soft blare of the radio, tuned without a doubt to their favourite radio station, sat in a corner adding to this homely atmosphere. Each had a role assigned depending on her skill – one was embroidering shaded blue and brown flowers onto a table mat using the long and short stitch, another was stitching the edges of a cloth using the buttonhole stitch, while yet another was working on a large tablecloth using the drawn thread method… so many different techniques that captured countless alluring patterns and designs.

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A table bedecked with exquisitely crafted tablecloths, table mats, cushion covers, doily sets, tea cosies and bun holders, decorated a corner enrapturing the mind that seeks splendour. Soft hues etched onto white clothing provided nothing but a feast to the appreciative eye. A tablecloth, bewitchingly done using the long and short stitch to shade the flowers pink and blue, another done in vibrant red and green colours to mark the season of Christmas, and still yet another worked with the shadow technique showcased the marvellous colour coordination and the elegant handwork accomplished. All of this handiwork is the amazing ability of Mrs Potuhera to match colours perfectly and to guide others in creating a beautiful piece of art. “I am not thinking just about the profit but about the creation, the joy of seeing something beautifully created,” said Mrs Potuhera.

The unique ensemble done using the shadow technique, proved to be a pleasant surprise as it was impossible to distinguish the correct side, as each side was neatly done, providing perfection throughout. A table set up to demonstrate the newest venture of Mrs Potuhera in an attempt to appeal to a wider age segment, displayed cloth tinged in soft greys and black. The cloth was painted by Mrs Potuhera herself, with a simple black and white embroidered pattern running along the cloth. Observing, all these designs it is easy to understand that the quest to make each piece perfect is by no means an easy task. Each stitch done with extreme care and attention to detail is important in the path of creating a quality design.

On and on the needle and the thread went… weaving in and out of the cloth, bringing to life a design that is like no other. A series of complex moves… circling the thread around the needle to make the French knot… ensues, to render an even more elaborate design.

After much effort and labour, the artisan finishes the piece, a small smile playing on her lips. All her hard work has finally paid off – in front of her, now lies a work of art that would leave any speechless with boundless admiration. Therefore, it is easy to ascertain that the enticing and elaborate nature of hand embroidery, even with the present forms of adornments, has not been dimmed to this day and will continue to shine, playing an important role in peoples’ lives for many years to come.

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