

Lasanda Kurukulasuriya

A Tradition of Top Brass



In any handicraft shop today, the counter that is most likely to attract the customer's eye as he or she enters is the one that radiates the glow of wellpolished brassware. And among the most impressive items there, popular with tourists as well as Sri lankans, are the brass trays which come in all sizes, ranging from the pin-tray which is little bigger than a large coin, to the opulent piece which may be as big as a cart-wheel. Each will be decorated with traditional designs, befitting its size and shape, filigreed, embossed or engraved.

Speaking of brasswork in his pioneering documentation of medieval Sinhalese art, Ananda Coomaraswamy singles out the large brass trays made for the Kandyan Art Association as being among the "few purely Kandyan manufactures which continue to be made in considerable numbers and of good workmanship." They are described as "a storehouse of Sinhalese design, remaining almost entirely traditional in treatment" except for a Japanese motif of a large peacock with tail outspread, which is often introduced as a centre. Coomaraswamy adds that "the Kandyan brasswork thus still made is of better quality than almost any Indian brassware made for sale to tourists", and that the Kandyan Art Association "guarantees good work, and generally secures it, at any rate in brass, if not always in silver."

The other very popular item is the brass lamp, which again is made in various shapes and sizes, ranging from the single-wick pol-the/ pahana which can be held in the palm of a hand, to the traditional shoulder-high standing lamp, which has become an indispensable part of ceremonial occasions in this country, besides having become a fashionable drawing-room ornament. Depending on their size and design, ornamental lamps can be placed on the ground, or on tables or shelves, or suspended from chains.

Of the many handicrafts which went into decline from the 19th century onwards under the British occupation, brasswork appears to be one that has withstood the onslaught better than others. The craft still thrives both in Kandy and in the low country, and the skills continue to be passed on from one generation to the next. The problem if at all is that there are more brass workers than the market can absorb.

Like all other craftsmen, brass workers no longer enjoy the kind of state patronage which sustained the crafts in the days of the kings, and are now at the mercy of market forces. As a result of this vital difference, brought about by changing times, one finds that although there may be an abundance of brassware in the market, there are also wide disparities in the quality of work produced. Since there is a high demand for cheap products, low quality work is more in evidence, and the finer workmanship - for example that which involves intricate chased work - is clearly in decline.

Brasswork is of two types - sheet work and cast work. The two types of work are traditionally done by different groups of craftsmen. Items like trays, trinket boxes, betel and tobacco trays (heppu), lime boxes, filigree lamp shades, wall plaques, mirror frames and mountings of various kinds, belong to the former category of work, which is generally "hammered" - so that the design appears as if embossed on the reverse, and "chased" - i.e. engraved. The technique of making the designs stand out by hammering is also known as "repoussage". This is done after fixing the sheet of brass on a plastered board while the plaster is still hot. The engraving is done with amazing speed and precision which comes with sheer experience, and it is indeed a delight to watch the craftsman carry out this work. Afterwards the plaster is broken and the item removed.

Items made of sheet brass are bent, shaped and -cut as desired after softening the metal with the help of a blow lamp. (Hence these items are sometimes referred to as "wrought work"). The rich, multicoloured effect found in damascened work is derived by inlaying or overlaying the brass with silver or copper, or both.

The cast work is done by founders (lokaruvo) who make the heavy items such as lamps, bowls, spittoons, vases, images of elephants etc. out of molten brass shaped in a mould. For an item to be cast in brass -say a tall vase - a mould has to be first made out of crushed granite and clay. The clay is shaped on a lathe with a wooden rod driven through the centre. It is then covered with a layer of heated wax (which has to be as thick as the required girth of the finished product), again smoothed on the lathe and then covered over with another layer of clay. When this has dried, the wax is melted out through a hole, and the mould is heated till red hot and filled with the molten brass. Though the brass takes only a few minutes to and later assembled. With his experienced eye the craftsman makes these separate parts to fit each other perfectly, without taking measurements.

There has been no innovation in the simple tools used by brassworkers. The lathe, blow-lamp, hammer and chisels are entirely traditional. The only element of mechanisation adopted by some workers is the use of a polishing machine at the final stage.

Thus much human toil lies behind these objects of art that have become the symbols of gracious living today. The genuine piece further represents a distillation of artistic skill that has been perfected and passed down many generations, and which cannot at any cost be replicated in the numerous mass produced, machine made products which pass as handicrafts today.

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*Tattooing an intricate design on brass at the KAA by a craftsman attached to the centre.
(Suresh de Silva)*



*An intricately carved brass tray fitted to a wooden frame with elephant heads carved on its legs. — an elegant coffee table.
(Suresh de Silva)*



*Brass Buddha statues on display.
(Suresh de Silva)*