Art of the Dumbara Weaver

Posted on

Some call them stereotyped, to others they have a rustic appeal. Critics notwithstanding, Dumbara mats have of late rustled their way into any mats have of late rustled their way into arty drawing rooms and plush hotel suites, discovered anew by the designer industry. The attraction for decorators and designers is no doubt in their low cost, as much as the distinctively local flavour they bring to an interior. Some may scorn these tapestries for the naivety of their designs, but this, in fact, is where their beauty lies.

Quite at home in the world of today’s high fashion, the Dumbara creations are of ancient origin. The art of weaving is as old as civilisation and the story goes, that when prince Vijaya , the legendary founder of the Sinhala race first set foot on this island he found Kuveni, the native demon-princess, spinning a the foot of a tree. Even if the story cannot be verified, there is no doubt that nature’s bounty in the form of a variety of reeds, rushes, palms and fibrous plants, has been the source of a countless number of domestic requirements of rural households from earliest times. Roofs thatched with palms, mats made of rushes, cloth of cotton, ·baskets of cane, ropes, bags, hammocks and a host of other utility items have been obtained at little or no cost with the application of a little skill and ingenuity. The demand for Dumbara mats today however, is more on account of their artistic and handicraft value than for their utility.

The mats are made from the fibre of Sisal hemp (Agave sisalana) known as ‘hana’ by those who work it. The pliable woven fibre is also used to make ladies’ purses, cushion-covers, letter-racks, table-mats and the like, which tourists buy as souvenirs. Still the most• popular is the typical mat, which is generally used as a wall-hanging.

The oldest and largest community of Hana workers live in Henawela, a village in Pahatha Dumbara, in the Kandyan region. People in this area also make mats, baskets, boxes etc. out of rushes (‘Hevan pung’). Unlike in the past the rushes and hemp are no longer readily available in the immediate vicinity of the village.

According to the weavers the hemp is brought from 20-30 miles away. After the inundation of part of the Dumbara valley under the Victoria dam project, the rushes, which used to grow in abundance there, are now obtained from as far afield as Amparai, in the Eastern Province.

Along the approach road to the village, bundles of the long, pointed green leaves of the hemp may be seen being transported to the weavers' homes, which are also their workplaces. For those who live here, the process of mat-weaving is literally child's play. At the house of H. G. Kiriya – a weaver for twenty years -a child demonstrated how the green leaves are scraped against a 'kekuna' log with a wooden tool (ge valla), to obtain in a matter of minutes, the white fibre, which is then washed and strung out to dry in the sun. Kiriya explained that only the fibre from the green leaf can be used for mats, although the fibre from the dried leaf is sometimes used to make rope. Family members also helped spin the fibre on a spindle (idda) into the long strands required for the warp (i.e. fibres used length wise).

The weavers' children don't have to be specially taught how to weave. There is a loom in the house, and the craft has been practiced for generations, so they acquire the skill quite naturally. Yet the outsider cannot fail to be impressed with the ease and speed with which the experienced craftsman, sitting cross-legged on the woven part of the mat, picks out designs on the liim with a weaver's lathe (vema) that looks like a giant wooden needle. The weft (the fibres used cross-wise) is drawn through the warp with this instrument and then driven home. The loom itself is very primitive.

Bags for all – in different designs and shapes woven by the Dumbara mat weavers.

Attractive letter cases and folders produced try the Dumbara weavers.

Colourful creations try the Dumbara mat weavers decorate walls – with designs of elephants, deer and birds.

The designs woven into the mats are made up of traditional Sinhalese decorative motifs that have been used by craftsmen for generations. They may depict birds, elephants, deer, cobras, flowers or trees, often combined with other patterns which have regular names. When the weaver sits down at his loom he may not have any idea of the design he is going to produce. He composes it as he goes along, instinctively combining colours and motifs for harmonious effect.

People often wonder why Dumbara mats are never more than about two feet in width, and why their colours are limited. The width is determined by the length of the hana leaf which limits the maximum length of the fibre obtained from it. Although some of the fibre is spun out to be used lengthwise, the fibre used cross wise is not spun, therefore the mat is of limited width. Larger mats might perhaps be made by sewing two or more smaller ones together.

As for the colours, these have traditionally been derived from plant extracts which have provided a limited range of hues. Part of the fibre is not dyed and is used as it is (white). Today even the older craftsmen are making use of at least some artificial dyes, which they say save them the labour of making the dye and in some cases, are more long lasting. These may have expanded their range of colour combinations, but ‘dye-hards’ will agree that the plant dyes are not only more natural in appearance – combining well with the texture of the raw-material – but also subtler in hue. The availability of a variety of colours has not necessarily produced a better selection of mats. The most striking creations are often worked in just two colours.

Some of the colours still obtained from natural sources are black and ochre. If the fibre is to be dyed ochre, it is soaked in an extract of pounded “Bulu” (Terminalia beleria) fruits. The traditional method for dying rushes and fibres black, is to soak them in the Bulu extract together with some muddy water from a paddy-field. The lower oxide of iron in the mud combines with the tannin in the rushes or fibre, to form tannate of iron. Yellow has customarily been obtained from young fruits of the Kaha (Bixa orellana) or Veni-vel (Coscinium fenestratum), and red from Patangi (Caesalpinia sappan) wood. Nowadays artificial dyes are used to get these colours, as well as blues, browns and on rare occasions even the seldom-used green. Experimentation with traditional techniques (though this may sound like a contradiction in terms) has produced interesting results, as H. G. l.apaya, a veteran weaver from Henawela proved with a new dye he had made using an extract of Teak leaves. The dyed fibre was a sophisticated, dusty shade of pink. Serendipity indeed! But this is probably an exceptional case. The majority of craftsmen, driven

by pressures of finding raw materials, markets etc., would sooner resort t short-cuts than pursue creative experiments. Badly hit by slack periods in tourism, the weavers of Henawela don’t have an easy livelihood. They have little besides the patterns they weave, to colour the simple fabric of their lives.

Room Tidies and wall hangings by the Dumbara weavers.

Table mats of varied shapes and designs have a distinctive traditional flavour. (Suresb de Silva)