Brassware on the sidewalks

Posted on

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A display of ornamental brassware at a street junction at Kollupitiya, Colombo.

When driving along a street leading to the elite residential area of Colombo, take a turn and there you'll come across a glittering array of gleaming brassware displayed for sale on the pavement bordering the road.

These sidewalk vendors of beauty made from brass have become yet another addition to Colombo's pleasant surprises. It will be worth your while to make a brief halt, examine what they have to offer, have the brass to bargain with the vendors – they will enjoy the bargaining as much as you will – and pick up a memento of this resplendent land that will become an heirloom for generations to come. Despite the somewhat down-key biblical reference to sounding brass, this happy amalgam of copper and zinc has an extremely long life span and age gives it a patina that delights and intrigues. And what have the pavement brassware vendors to offer?

The first objects you will note are the lamps-from the tall, traditional, three-tiered

ones to the quaint, one-wick creations, each the one-of-a-kind product of an anonymous brass-smith with a piquant sense of the exotic and often the humourous.

The brass oil lamp has an honoured place in the Sri l.ankan ethos. It enters into many aspects of the religious and social life of the people. Buddhist temples boast of brass lamps that are centuries old. The massive masterpieces that adorn the Temple of the Buddha’s Tooth in Kandy are the highest homage in brass to the Compassionate One. As in that sacred shrine, so in the humblest village temple, the brass lamp finds a place of honour. Those lamps are not ornaments. They are living things receiving the heartfelt offerings of coconut oil brought in by devotees, and the flickering flames serve as a reminder of the transience of life. Whenever you enter a Hindu kovil you cannot fail to notice the prominent place that the brass lamp occupies in the sanctum. The pungent aroma that the lamp’s many tongues of flame waft throughout the temple becomes a part of the ritual.

Catholic churches use brass lamps to house the Eucharistic flame and at the Dawatagaha Mosque, one of Islam’s holiest shrines in Colombo, a big brass lamp, hoary with age, receives the offerings of coconut oil from the faithful who have come in supplication or thanksgiving. In social life, no function worthy of its name is begun without the lighting of the brass lamp by the big brass present. It may be a political pow-wow or a scientific seminar but the lamp must be lit first, and the bigger the lamp the better. But it is in family life that the brass lamp comes into its own, creating an intimacy that only Agni, the primordial Father Fire, can bring. A little brass lamp will burn through the night in a comer of the room where the mother and her new-born sleep to ward off the evil eye. The bride and groom will step from the poruwa, the ceremonially decorated marriage “throne”, at the completion of their pledge, to light a brass oil lamp as their first act together as man and wife. And when death comes, a brass lamp burning by the bier will say the final farewell. After you have studied the lamps you are sure to be enchanted by the variety of trays and wall plaques that are on display. From the giant, three-foot diameter tapestries in brass to the little trinket trays no bigger than your palm, each is the product of painstaking labour. The patterns are traditional, coming down from generation to generation through several hundred years, but you will find that each artisan has achieved a variation on the theme. The stylised animals that go round and round eternally on the outer frieze of these big circular trays each has its own whimsical movement and they prance their way into your appreciative soul.

Do not forget to ask the vendor to show you samples of the betel tray, known in

Sinhala as the heppuwa. The offering of betel to a visitor in a Sinhala or Tamil home is the ultimate way of saying “Welcome.” According to Rev. Father Marcelline Jayakody, one of the most knowledgeable of men on Sri Lankan customs, the “intoxicating, breath-perfuming, mouth-staining chew of betel was the soul of society and high breeding and first in protocol in ancient Lanka. It was brought to the visitor on a tray.”

This is the tray that you will see with· the sidewalk seller. It will make an ideal cake tray or an inviting receptacle for the assorted sweets and toffees you have to offer. Even without asking, the vendor will show you the brass arecanut cutter that goes with the betel tray. the betel leaf is chewed with slices of the nut from the areca palm and this cutter is used to do the slicing. The two arms of the cutter can take the most interesting forms. So, do not rush past the pavement brassware seller. He has much to offer, and among them you may find something you will come to treasure.

An ornamental brass tray typical of the beautiful brassware sold on the sidewalk.