Crystal Glasses that Kings Once Wore

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Raw and uncut quartz crystals at the workshop

A descendent of a family line of eight generations of opticians is keeping alive a heritage skill that once even served the royalty of the island.

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A legacy to remember – a replica of the spectacles the royalty and the commoners wore in the days gone by

As we searched for the residence of the famous optician who makes ‘crystal spectacles’ in the village of Kahambe in Pilimathalawa, we were led to a simple abode. After being warmly welcomed to his home and an informative conversation with C G Gunasoma, it was obvious that this was a family legacy that brings pride to

the motherland. It is a heritage that can be traced back to the times of kings. In fact, the King Buwanekabahu IV had been provided with spectacles by his ancestors when the king had found it difficult to read the inscriptions at the sites of the Gampola era. Back then of course there had been no loops like today to go around the ears and hold the spectacles in place. The eyeglasses were instead balanced on the nose with a thread at the centre secured around the hair bun. A replica of that ancient design was shown to us. It was quite a fascinating piece.

Today, Gunasoma continues this legacy, and is possibly the only optician in the country who makes spectacle lenses from quartz crystal in the traditional way. “I started helping my father at the age of five. I spent time after school at my father’s workshop, which helped me to learn the skill at a very young age,” he said, reminiscing his early days in the trade.

He still travels to Ratnapura and Sigiriya to buy quartz crystal and creates these glasses with tools that are more than a hundred years old. It was fascinating to learn that the tools used to polish the quartz crystal vary according to the age of the wearer and the contours of the lens. With no eye chart in sight, we wondered how he worked, and discovered to our amazement that eyesight was measured based on age and present vision, a system practised to date. However, as the lens making process is manual, a prescription makes it convenient for Gunasoma who must spend long hours to cut and refine the mineral. It is an art that takes over a week to complete.

As the shapeless mineral went under a device described as the ‘pattale’, we were reminded of the spinning wheel; a tedious process of cutting the quartz crystal to the size of a thin lens. This alone was a process of three hours. All along he kept applying a muddy paste made of quartz residue to help smoothen the mineral. Later was the task of polishing the crystal in circular motions on a granite surface, generally an exercise of three to four hours. Interestingly there were different sizes of granite ‘bowls’ that are used according to the age and requirement of the wearer. We were somewhat mystified by the unusual contraptions, as to us initially is appeared to merely be a wooden stump of the erabadu (Indian coral) tree. The stone that had gained shape by then, was rubbed along the stump in continuous motions to acquire transparency. The lens was finally ready for use when sunlight trickled through. The lens was flawless. This alone is a job of four hours. However, despite the timely process, he continues to carve lenses with passion in tribute to his ancestors, after all it was they who taught him the virtue of patience to achieve perfection. To realise that such great flawlessness is achieved within the confines of

an unadorned rustic shed is astounding. It is a welcoming place for all who want to know about this age-old art and many undergraduates and academics have been here to learn the ancient practice.

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While showing us the intricate process, Gunasoma explained the benefits of wearing spectacles made of quartz crystal that include reduced headaches and dryness in the eyes as well as a better chance of preventing cataract. Leftover quartz is used to make pendants, which are believed to protect the wearer from heart ailments.



For that final shine Gunasoma applies crushed quartz crystal to the wooden stump

Though desiring to embrace modernity, C G Gunasoma is adamant on remaining faithful to the traditions of his forebears in making crystal quartz spectacles. It is a legacy he upholds with great dedication, one that showcases the skill and talents

that existed in Sri Lanka during the times of kings.



