# HANDICRAFT Threading TALES

Posted on

Weaving, it appears, is much more than the creation of a pretty fabric. The body of work encompassing 15 years by artist and fabric technologist Chandramani Thenuwara showcases the intricacies of handweaving which she presented as a tribute to the handweavers of

Sri Lanka. This form of art, we discover, is an amalgam of thoughtfully selected colours, the dexterity of skilful weavers adopting varied techniques, technologies and inspired design. “This is why you need the designer and the weaver to work together – the weaver is skilled in the different weaving techniques but the designer must instruct the different colours, yarns and proportions,” says Chandramani.

Speaking of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the famous poet and philosopher who formulated the Goethe Colour Theory that has influenced her work, Chandramani says, “he is to Germany who Shakespeare is to England except that he was a scientist, as well. But being an artist his colour theory was wider and deeper.” Based on the theo- ry’s postulations, the fabrics display a presentation of colours, such as contrast- ing colours against black and the same colours against white, which result in vastly different visual presentations. Differences are also apparent by the proportions of the colours used. For instance black surrounded by a pre- dominance of spectrum colours was strikingly different from the very same colours vice versa. Thus these double weaved fabrics conveyed the colour theory in its application.

This particularly difficult weave among the collection demands ex- ceptional skill of the weaver. Here two fabrics are woven at the same time where the weaver is blind to the underside. A fabric design inspired by stained glass was one such double weave. This technique helped produce the dazzling colours found in stained glass. “If you have a colour vertically and insert a colour horizon- tally, then the colours will inevitably get mixed, but in the case of the double weave you can bring the back fabric to the surface or the surface fabric remains. This gives pure colours one underneath the other,” explains Chandramani.

Incidentally, a majority of the col- lection was drawn from encounters with the real

world. Kandyan fire dancers in the night were translated into combinations of red, black and white threads. White depicts the flare that burns white in the frenzied movements of the dance and the coloured threads fade into the black, as sometimes these colours would vanish in the night. This effect is created by tie dying the yarn where the tied sections of the thread do not get dyed. More of such intricate observations have been translated to the fabric; a wall hanging inspired by a lush buttress root tree seen at the Sinharaja Rainforest, a pattern of ascending gradations inspired by Moghul architecture and also a Vietnamese weave creating a “Diamond Twill Effect”.

One wonders – how are such complex visuals communicated to the weaver? The design motif that is to be repeated, how the threads are drawn through shafts, how to join the foot treadles to the shafts are all com- municated in diagramatic representa- tion on graph paper that the weaver can read. Accordingly the threads are placed in the loom and furthermore the designer provides the colours and the kinds of threads that are to be used. “It is a shorthand way of instructing the weaver,” adds Chandramani.

Having had access to particularly skilful weavers all over the country, working in government weaving workshops, Chandramani speaks of them and their unique ability to trans- late these diagrams into fabric with much fondness. Traditional weavers from the village of Thalagune in Udu Dumbara are famous for their Dumbara technique. “Students can enrol in a two-year weaving school certificate programme run all over the country by the Department of Textiles. Once they learn they come and work in production centres, and they understand the diagram on graph paper,” she further adds.

Although the various techniques of weaving can be found all over the world it is the overall appearance and the recognisable rich patterns that are unique to Sri Lanka. Most of these valuable fabrics have been gifted to the National Museum in Colombo as part of a contemporary collection so that they can be preserved and appreciated for generations to come. Technical notes have been written for each item so that textile design students can study them meaning- fully and hopefully create new fabric structures for Sri Lanka.