In Search of Colors

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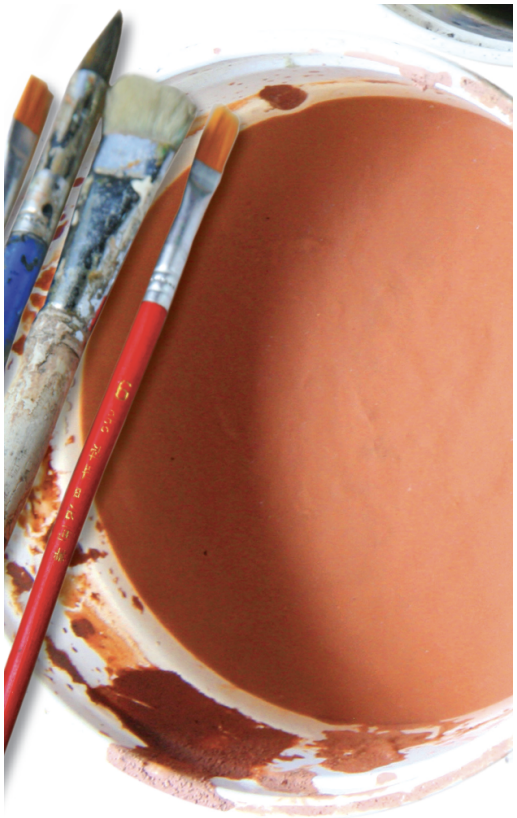
By Madhushala Senaratne Photography by Menaka Aravinda

Shades of red, brown and yellow stare back at me. The paintings are sober, yet pleasing to the eye. There’s drama happening here, drama born out of the story behind the colours – the artists’ search for colours in natural rock and soil.



Painters of yesteryear have sought raw materials from nature itself. Natural sub-

stances such as stones, clay, leaves, herbs, barks of trees, flowers and mud have been crushed, drained and it's matter used to obtain a rich variety of hues. The frescoes in Sigiriya were painted using natural or earth pigments, while the Kandyan painter also used pigments made from earth and vegetable substances. In painting murals, colours such as yellow, red, white, black, blue and green obtained from resins extracted from plants and other items found in nature were widely used.



The substances were boiled and processed in different ways to derive the necessary shades and colours. Yellow was made from the gum obtained by cutting the bark of a *Gokatu* tree, while *sadalin-gam* (Cinnabar) was ground and dissolved in water to derive red. The source for white was a type of white clay called *kiri mati*, also known as *Makul* clay. This clay, it was noted, mainly came from Makul caves of Maturata. Black was made by grinding *koholle* (a dried milk extracted from Jak), resins of *Hal* tree and *Kekuna* oil together, which were then mixed in old rags and burned in a vessel that was closed. The deposits were used as the pigment. The golden hue

seen in some paintings were obtained by grinding a mineral called *hiriyal* and baking it in fire. Not all colours were frequently used either. Blue was rare among the early painters, especially those of the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa era. Later, blue was derived by extracting the juice of the *nilavariya* leaves.

The colours thus obtained were also mixed with each other to form a range of different colours. For example, yellow and blue were mixed to form an emerald green. On rock and wall surfaces, colors were applied on a layer of plaster, which again was prepared using material obtained from the immediate environment. A mixture made out of coconut coir, bee’s honey and mud was used for the plaster by painters during the Anuradhapura era. A special feature of such paintings was that the earth colours could be preserved well and were long-lasting.



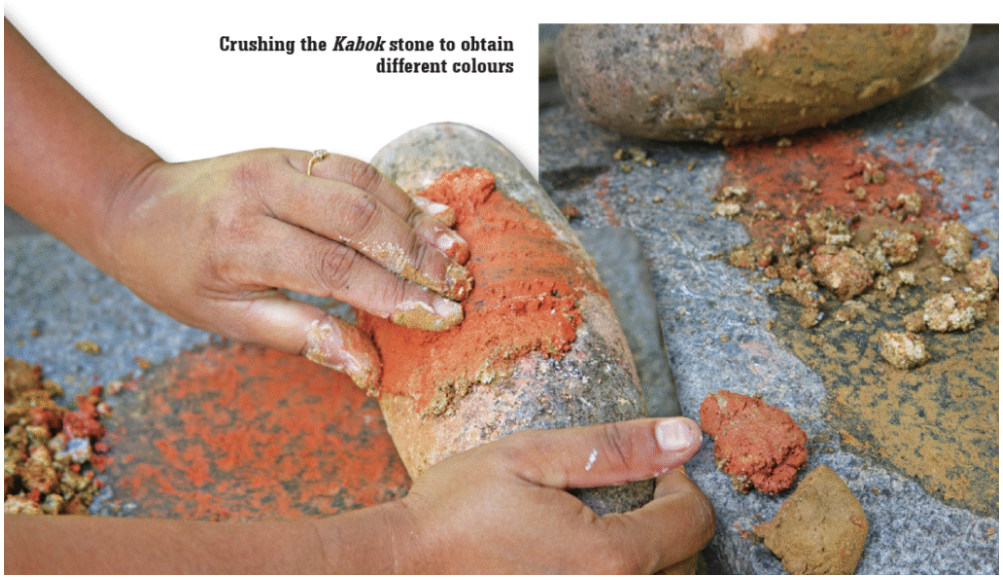


Late artist Pushpananda Weerasinghe was a pioneer in reintroducing this type of art in modern times. Looking at some of his paintings, a sense of calmness gripped me. They reminded me of drawings of an era gone by. The colours used add a natural and earthly touch to the paintings. Vibrant and expressive, these earth paintings bring to life the calm village scenes, the magnificent elephants, and the traditionally dressed woman, evoking feelings of pride and delight. Weerasinghe looked no further than his immediate surroundings for colours and often used different stones to make colours, grading them from white, yellow, dark brown to black.

The Kabok stone was crushed to obtain a range of reddish hues, explains the late artist's daughter, Udeni Weerasinghe, pointing to the different shades of red that are visible in his paintings. The stone itself is such that it presents an assort-ment of colours to the discerning artist such as reddish orange, dull yellow and white. Each of these shades were identified and crushed to form separate colours.Amongst other colours thus made from earthen sources was black. Shell charcoal, obtained from coconut shell was crushed, mixed with water and drained. The residue was used to form the pigments. The source for blue for this artist was *yabara*, a type of stone, largely found at a blacksmith's forge. Leaves from trees were used to create green and where *kiri mati* was rare, emulsion was used for white. A stone grinder

was often used by the artist to crush the material while a blender was used to mix the crushed substance with water. To ensure that the colours were durable and lasted longer, the sub-stance was mixed with chemifix, a type of glue.

Different shades were obtained by mixing colours such as red *kabok* stones, which, when combined with *kiri mati* gave a lighter shade of red, while adding white to the *yabara* created a different shade of blue.Weerasinghe first began this type of art as an experiment. Often on the search for colours, he would collect various roots, sand and stones, bring them home, create colours and paint a picture, recalls his daughter Udeni Weerasinghe. The stones and sand would differ in colour and texture from place to place. *Kiri mati* was found near paddy fields, while rocks of differ-ent shades of red and yellow can be found nearby a well. Once, during a visit to World’s End, the artist was enthralled by the rich golden hue of the sand found there and he promptly carried home a sufficient amount of sand to use in his paint, Udeni says.

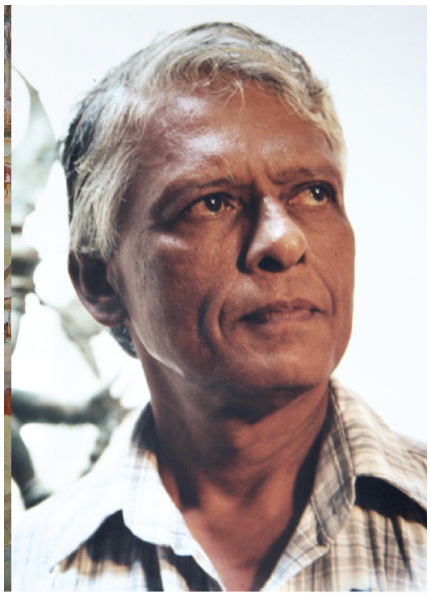


Crushing the *Kabok* stone to obtain different colours

The earth colours used to bring to life the figures and the lines that adorn each painting tell a tale of its own. Using material from nature, artists have created paintings that have lasted for centuries, and looking to the past, the search for colors continues.



Pushpananda Weerasinghe's painting done using natural or earth colours



The late artist Pushpananda Weerasinghe



