

The Inspiring Art of Pottery

Posted on



Fine craft of pottery on the Sakaporuwa

The 'Sakaporuwa' spins in rhythmic twirls while Sittamma delicately moulds the pile of raw clay into an artistry of a clay pot and thus, a work of art is born.

Words Hansani Bandara **Photographs** Damith Wickramasinghe

Nestled in the rural heart of Sri Lanka, hidden amidst nature's endearing beauty is Waddakkarawewa, a close-knit village famed for its artisans of Pottery, which is also home to Sittamma.

Making earthenware has been the sole bread and butter earner of these villagers for generations. Stacks of finely crafted pottery neatly arranged in stockpiles in front of houses are a common sight that greets anyone who strolls down the narrow pathways of the village.

Sittamma—one of the senior potters in the village—has spent all her life sculpting the complexities of the temporal world to pottery through which she finds peace.

“I have been doing this for as long as I can remember. I was 15 when I learned to make these—if I remember correct—and that was in the 1970’s,” says Sittamma while she turns the sakaporuwa or the turning wheel. Her wrinkled face brightens up as the shape of a pot slowly emerges while the wheel of the sakaporuwa continues to dance to the movements choreographed by her hand.

Making of pottery by no means is a smooth sail. The clay to make earthenware has to be collected during the dry season when the tanks dry up. Despite the jarring journey, potters in Waddakkarawewa go all the way to Wairankulama tank to get clay. During these times villagers help each other in collecting clay since hired labour costs more. Once extracted from the beds of tanks, the clay is made in to balls for easy transportation and sufficient amounts of clay for a whole year are collected.

After the collected clay is brought to Waddakkarawewa and the magic begins. Clay, mixed with sand and water is left for seasoning for two to three days. The seasoned clay is then sliced with a bicycle spoke wire to remove grit, dirt and roots. Followed by slicing is drubbing of clay which is usually done by treading or by a machine to further smoothen the mixture. The mixture is then kneaded by hand to make sure no air pores are left in it. The content of air pores in the mixture averts the outcome of a quality end product. Sittamma by instinct knows the right amount of seasoning required for clay to be moulded on the sakaporuwa—a trait she has cultivated and mastered through decades of experience in pottery.

The sakaporuwa or the turning wheel is about 2.5 feet in diameter. It is fixed onto a central metal pivot, which is fixed to a metal socket that keeps it firmly fixed onto the ground. Sittamma places a ball of clay at the centre of the sakaporuwa and starts moulding it with both hands taking regular intervals to give a spin to the turning wheel. Thus the form and the mouth of the pot is shaped. Sittamma gives the finishing touches to the rim of the pot using a strip of wet cloth and you get to see the blissful sight of a clay pot just taken out from the sakaporuwa. The bottom of the pot is kept open to be finished later. Then the pot is kept for drying in the shade for about half a day’s period. This can take up to a month’s time during the rainy season.

The bottom of the vessel, which is unfinished, is done with a wooden bat-shaped instrument and a smooth stone where the Sittamma holds the stone inside the vessel and pats the vessel with the wooden bat from outside until the opening at the bottom is gradually closed

as clay is fused across at the bottom. The patting still continues until there is an even spread of clay and thickness throughout the pot. The shaped pot is then kept to dry for about a day before it is inserted into the kiln.

The right amount of dryness of clay is also a key factor in pottery. If the pots are not dried to the correct extent, pots could crack or break once they are put inside the kiln. The kiln is a small hut-like enclosure where there is a covering of clay and tree leaves up to three to four feet with an opening in front to insert firewood.

Sittamma gives the finishing touches to the rim of the pot using a wet strip of cloth and you get to see the blissful sight of a clay pot just taken out from the Sakaporuwa

Once the pots are packed inside the kiln, the firing has to be done gradually. First the pots are smoked using coconut husks for about a day before the actual firing begins. The temperature of the kiln rises gradually as more and more firewood is inserted. The pots are left in the kiln for about half an hour before the fire is put out. The kiln is left to cool down followed by the breaking of the dome where pots are packed.

To me it all seemed like fine art as I took a pot and held it. A grin drew on Sittamma's face when she said, "Now it is ready for the Puttalam market."

