

Kandyan Art Association Treasure House of Dying Art

Posted on

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Has it ever struck you that there may be places of interest to the traveller that many a tout guide or travel agent will not take you to? And that they may not necessarily be the ones you can well afford to miss?

To the visitor whose sojourn in Sri Lanka is programmed from start to finish in a package deal, the **Kandyan Art Association (KAA)** may well be one of those 'forbidden fruits' of paradise. Yet to any visitor acquainted with the KM's story, and particularly to the admirer of traditional art and craft no visit to the hill capital of Kandy would be complete without a stop at this picturesque house-on-a-hill overlooking the lake, just around the corner past the Dalada Maligawa – the Temple of the Tooth Relic.

Founded in 1882, the KM is the oldest institution dedicated to the preservation and promotion of traditional Kandyan art, and the only one concerned with the exclusive patronage of that now rare breed – the traditional craftsmen of Lanka. On its homely verandahs, the visitor can observe at first hand, veteran craftsmen at work – one at a hand-loom deftly working the threads into a colourful design, another at a lathe, lacquering a wooden trinket box, still another chiselling exquisite design on a brass tray with effortless precision.

The Tools are primitive, the raw materials most humble, the products are probably the finest pieces of craftsmanship to be found in the country today. The articles turned out, which include silverware and gem-studded jewellery, are displayed for sale in the same building. The 300-odd craftsmen registered with the Association are the best in the region, and quality is the criterion for selection of individual items produced. The Association, however, has no truck with the world of commerce and industry, which tends to monopolise the tourist from the moment he

disembarks. If the KAA does not appear on the itinerary prepared for him by his travel agent, it is most likely because – to put it bluntly – it offers no bonuses or commissions to middlemen. The profit from price and purchase is shared by the craftsman and buyer.

It is not surprising that the Association refuses to bow to the laws of the marketplace. Warding off the corrupting influence of commercialism on the arts, is in fact among its objects, namely: “to preserve the purity and originality of Kandyan art work” and “to form a medium between the would be purchaser and the producer by which the former would be enabled to buy a guaranteed and genuine article, and the latter to find a regular and more remunerative market for his wares.” The Association pays the craftsman a reasonable price for his products, adding only a minimal amount to meet its running costs, thus making the genuine handicraft available at a price for which few other dealers would part with it. The workmen for their part are happy to supply the Association since they are generally assured of a better price than they would get from a less scrupulous dealer.



A myriad colours woven into traditional motifs of the Dumbara mats at the KAA.

The craftsmen of medieval times, besides making utility goods for the community, found permanent sustenance in the employment provided by the royal household and the aristocracy. The carpenters, turners, painters, silversmiths, goldsmiths, masons, blacksmiths, those who executed inlaying and ornamenting of locks, guns and knives, craftsmen of the royal armoury and others, were organised in guilds, and being “.... an integral part of the civil service, were rewarded with grants of state land, no less than soldiers and husbandmen”. This organic form of social organisation which prevailed till the 19th century was destroyed under British rule, to which the last bastion of the Kandyan kingdom succumbed in 1815. The abolition of the royal household and the decline of the aristocracy and the old temples meant that craftsmen lost their patronage. The process of disintegration was spurred on by the spread of western manners and customs, and the import of cheap, factory-made utility goods which replaced the handcrafted wares.

The formation of the KM was the first step taken towards reviving, protecting and

promoting Kandyan art after the decline which set in with the British occupation. It was launched by the Government Agent for the Central Province Sir John F. Dickson, with the modest sum of Rs. 250/-, made up of contributions from eight Government Agents besides himself.

At first the annual subscriptions simply paid for the services of the most skilled Kandyan craftsmen, and the articles made by them were distributed by lot among the subscribers. Later when the Association and its objectives came to be known better, orders were placed by other people. The work connected with the taking of orders and distribution of articles made, was conducted at the Kandy Kachcheri, (the provincial administrative centre) and to this day this informal link with the Kachcheri is maintained by the Association in its administrative affairs. The post of exofficio president has been assumed by each successive GA of the Central Province, with the Assistant Government Agent and Office Assistant to the GA functioning as Vice-President and Secretary respectively. Their services in fact constitute the only element of government sponsorship that the Association can lay claim to. The KM has also benefited from the personal patronage of the present president and prime minister of Sri Lanka, as well as that of former prime ministers.

Considering the rapid pace of social change that is visible everywhere, the Association's capacity to survive with vigour is truly remarkable. It is now being expanded into a cultural complex that will include a roofed open-air theatre, a museum, library and restaurant. The secret probably lies in the unstinting dedication to its objectives on the part of its office bearers down the years, and all those associated with its activities. The present Manager and Assistant Manager count no less than twenty years in service.



The glittering brassware in the showroom of the KAA attracts foreign admirers.

It remains today one of those very rare places in Sri Lanka where the local customer can rest assured he will be treated with the same courtesy as the more prosperous foreign customer; where the articles sold in a context where handicrafts have often become just another industry and where "marketability" is the chief criterion of production, the Association's objectives have been in constant jeopardy. Referring to the tradition of Sinhalese art that still finds expression in the work displayed here, oriental art historian Ananda K Coomaraswamy has said: "It is the only true

art discoverable in Ceylon today. In a few years it may be gone forever.” That was written at the beginning of this century, and indeed today the truth of that gloomy prediction is quite evident.

A recent visit to the KM confirmed that the era when people could practise these ancient skills for a livelihood, was into its last generation. The older workers said that their children would not pursue the craft of their forefathers, and were seeking more lucrative avenues of employment. One of them indicated that his son might practise the craft in addition to whatever other employment he found; another said his daughter had learnt the craft, but not his sons.

The articles turned out are displayed for sale in the same building. In a little room to the left is a glittering display of brassware, silversware and jewellery. Customers can take their pick from this treasure-trove, no matter whether they are looking for an investment running into a couple of thousand rupees, or a souvenir within a hundred. The items in brass and silver include intricately engraved trays of all sizes, dishes, tea-sets, framed mirrors, lamps, filigree lamp shades, trinket boxes, wall plaques and a variety of ornaments. The jewellery is in sterling silver, some pieces elaborately filigreed and studded with gems, others more simple in design. There are also necklaces, ear-rings, bracelets and pendants made out of the ever-popular Sri Lanka stones. (these too are set in silver).

If visitors can stop feasting their eyes on this dazzling array for a moment, they will notice a room on the opposite side, containing handicrafts of a different kind, with a more rustic touch. On the shelves here, the colourful lacquer work in wood vies – rather unsuccessfully, one might say – with the expertly hand-carved, unvarnished items. These include ash-trays, trinket boxes, walking sticks, wall plaques etc.

Samples of the well-known Dumbara weaving can be seen in the form of mats (made out of the fibre of the “hana” plant which grows wild in the Dumbara valley) and cloth, which according to one elderly weaver, is still spun by them on a loom of the type that was used in ancient days. The items include linen of various types – table-cloths, bed-spreads, dusters etc., bags and wall hangings. The designs though somewhat stereotyped, have a certain rustic charm. One also finds embroidered cloths and flags.

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Given the exclusively caste-bound character of most traditional motifs, it could be inferred that if these highly specialised skills cease to be transmitted from father to son, they will most certainly die out altogether as modes of subsistence. One can only hope that they will survive in some subsidiary form. While it may not be possible today to share in Coomaraswamy's romantic nostalgia for that feudal, caste-conditioned age, one cannot help but mourn with him the passing away of a precious part of an artistic heritage that will soon be effaced for ever. Something by the name of a 'handicrafts industry' may continue to thrive, and the objects produced may contain elements of traditional design, but being of semi-factory origin, their artistic value, if any, would be greatly diminished.

So if you are a little weary of the tailor-made package tour that whisks you from one historical site to another, give yourself a break and explore Sri Lanka – on your own for a change. It may be well worth the trouble.



Ebony elephants, mahogany receptacles, wooden figurines and walking sticks on display at the showrooms of the KAA.