

Lakpahana: Spotlight on Traditional Craft

Posted on

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Situated in the heart of Colombo 7, down Race Course Avenue, in a spacious bungalow, overlooking wide stretches of well-manicured green lawns, flowering trees, and neatly laid out gardens is LAKPAHANA which means the “light of Lanka”. It is an exclusive house for the handicrafts of Sri Lanka, which form part and parcel of the magnificent culture and history of the island. It is the marketing outlet of the National Artisans’ and Craftsmen’s Association.

After years of working to open a State Handicraft emporium, Mrs. Siva Obeyesekere, an energetic sponsor of the revival of the ancient arts and crafts of Sri Lanka finally achieved her goal in the early 1960’s. Invigorated by the success she had with LAKSALA she opened Lakpahana in 1973. Mrs. Obeyesekere, dressed in a simple local voile Sari, spoke with enthusiasm of her brainchild to “Explore Sri Lanka”.

“The Association is a non-profit making organisation. We help all crafts people to perfect and improve the traditional crafts and styles. Raw materials are made available, and loans are arranged when needed, through Banks. At the moment 367 crafts people market their crafts through Lakpahana regularly”.

A wide selection of handicrafts of Pottery, Precious Stone and Silver Filigree Jewellery, Metal ware, Woodwork, Masks and Drums, Lacquer work, Musical instruments, Horn work, Lace embroidery, Batiks, Rush and Reed ware, Cane and Bamboo work, Shell crafts, Handlooms, and Coir work are all displayed under one roof – for the local shopper as well as the foreigners who appreciate these lovingly executed hand-made pieces of skilled craftsmanship, (often making fine pieces of art).

At the entrance of an open verandah, you are met by a collection of hand – thrown

pottery -decorative, heraldic animals and birds, a variety of goblets, vases and garden ornaments.

The glittering brass ware, silver ware, copper ware, silver-plated ware and burnt bronze articles are mostly with traditional designs – trays, ornaments, lamps, candle-stands, and utility items for the home.



Ebony figurines and porcupine-quill boxes on display at Lakpahana.

The jewellery showcases sparkle with Sri Lankan gems, set in silver and carat gold fashioned into bangles, rings, pendants, necklaces, earrings, anklets and bracelets. Traditional jewellery such as the “Gedi Mala” (chain of large beads). Hansapurruwa (design of entwined swans) and chunky Kandyan bangles lay side by side with tortoise shell jewellery from Galle. Horn & ebony, jewellery inlaid in silver is a new line of jewellery on sale.

Rush and Reed v.,,are created by the villagers as a cottage industry – colourful Dumbara mats which make excellent wall hangings, tapestries, fans, hats, baskets, bags with delicate coin purses, boxes and containers of woven leaf could be used as utility items as well as ornaments.

Lakpahana encourages its craftspeople to perfect the designs already available and to draw inspiration from temple murals and ancient artefacts.

An eye catching collection of readymade clothes embroidered with intricate and colourful stitches of drawn thread work, appliques and smocking, as well as multi-hued batiks, styled into clothes for all ages hang on display, tempting the most discerning shopper. Cushion Covers and Linen – all hand embroidered with traditional designs are a delight for the home.

‘Just as much as we look for export markets, our own people must patronise our crafts. The best incentive a craftsman has is when his products are appreciated by his own people.’ said Mrs. Obeyesekere, “Exhibitions and sales help to develop crafts and to bring out the best in a craftsman”.

The object of Lakpahana has always been to give them a feeling of stability, to give them hope and help them build on the traditional skills. When specially requested, we open a crafts village at Lakpahana as a special welcome to conference and convention visitors. There the craftsmen will be at work, and an exhibition of the best hand-made pieces will be on display and sale. As a fitting reward for their excellency in handicrafts Lakpahana was awarded the 'Vishwakarma Award' for 1986.

Preparations are being made for an exclusive lace exhibition which is to be held next month (January '89) at the Lionel Wendt Hall.

"I enjoy working with the simple unsophisticated folk in the villages said Mrs. Obeyesekere. "My future plan is to establish a Crafts Museum. This is to check the export of antiques and artefacts which go out of the country. We hope to be able to pay a reasonable price to these owners who need to sell them."

Mrs. Obeyesekere recalled how when she launched her work to revive once dying crafts she had to visit far out places. in search of craftspeople who had presented the ancient skill, handed down through generations.

"It has been a rewarding experience" she said, "to revive an almost extinct craft and make it worthwhile for the craftsman who had till then been eking out a living doing the work he has spent a lifetime learning".

The lamp which is the symbol of Lakpahana, is indeed symbolic of the light shed on the lives and work of the rural craftsmen, their wealth of skills, and the new life now given to a once dying tradition in arts and crafts.



Rush and reed woven intricately into mats boxes and trays. Suresh de Silva.