

Shilpa Kathaa from Selyn unveils the beauty of the humble mat

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An array of 76 weaving patterns were on display.

Shilpa Kathaa is an exhibition series initiated by Selyn that brings the story of Sri Lankan crafts into mainstream focus, first of which was Paduru Rata, which showcased the art and techniques of the decorated mat that existed in Sri Lanka for thousands of years.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

Photographs Menaka Aravinda.

The story of our crafts narrated through the Shilpa Kathaa exhibition series has given life to the art of the Sri Lankan traditional woven mat. Selyn, together with the National Crafts Council has embarked on a journey to educate the public on the rich heritage of crafts in Sri Lanka. 'Paduru Rata', the inaugural exhibition of Shilpa Kathaa, was held at the Selyn Flagship Store in Colombo 5, which featured a number of elaborate designs.

The paduru or the mat is a quintessential household ware in Sri Lanka for long as we remember. Women gave birth on mats, mothers worked on mats and no native festival was complete without the mat being used for various activities. Mat weaving from time past had been a female-driven craft, handed down from the grandmother who taught the intricate and dexterous weaving techniques to the granddaughter. So naturally, it was women who gathered the main natural resource - reed - from swamps and riversides, using a small curved knife known as *pan-kaththa*. Mats were woven generally for household use and to be gifted to the village temple. It is not unusual to see even today, devotees listening to Buddhist sermons seated on mats, while in the village, it is a common substitute for a bed and a handy piece for drying grains and seeds.

Like most often happens, mat weaving as an indigenous art that was confined to few areas in the country, in Jaffna in the North and Hambantota in the South. With time, in the midst of the trappings of modern living, was gradually declining and fading from mainstream weaving. The good news is that with Paduru Rata, scholars have discovered the existence of over 70 separate patterns of weaving, or *Ratawa*, which with state and private sector impetus may see a return to daily usage by preserving, empowering and promoting the craft of mat weaving, which in turn would spur an appreciation of a heritage that was ours for centuries. These weaving patterns were unveiled at the Selyn Fairtrade Store as part of the Shilpa Katha exhibition that showcased the stories of the island's crafts.

"While there are resources in libraries and online, although somewhat limited, I thought about the people who are not in the industry, and would love to learn about our crafts. Many ancient crafts being endangered, we thought about sustaining them for the future. It is with this in mind that Selyn with the support of the National Crafts Council initiated Shilpa Kathaa - the story of our crafts and reviving the local mat as the first initiative, will, hopefully generate an appreciation of the craft as well as the work that goes into it, while supporting the weavers by purchasing their products" said Selyna Peiris, Director, Business Development, Selyn.

Under the first program, 76 weaving patterns have been collected. They are intricate,

therefore, demand adequate skills with a lot of energy and agility to work on a mat that takes at least a month to complete. The process of preparation, from collecting the reed, to drying, washing and boiling in bundles to drying again, is also time consuming. While the health benefits of sleeping on a flat surface are well known, on the other hand, the raw material being from nature, together with the pigments that include herbs, ensures that their goodness seep into the reed in the process of boiling. Red, yellow, purple and black are the colors used in mats. Red is achieved through a combination of patangi wood (brazil wood), the leaves of Ayurveda medicinal plant *korakaha*, gingerly oil and other herbs, while the striking *katarolu* flower is used to make purple, *veni-vel* – a wild herb for yellow and gall nuts, which composes of ink, in black mainly, and *aralu* and *bulu*, which are popular herbs for Ayurveda medicine are combined for black, hence there is no question that the process is void of toxins. Once the reed is dry, the women begin their zigzagging on the floor, by hand, combined with attentiveness that makes the process mentally stimulating.

Nimal de Silva, Emeritus Professor, University of Moratuwa who has been supporting the Shilpa Kathaa project wants to promote the value of the craft among its makers, so that this skill does not lose its traditional usefulness over commercial interests. While the Paduru Rata project is recovering as many motifs as possible, there are 32 motifs identified under this project, among which are floral motifs, which are many, while other patterns include the swastika, water ripples, stars, clay lamps, crosses, circles and a plethora of geometric shapes. In addition, traditionally, animal motifs, such as intertwined swans are also woven into the mat.

Selyna Peiris said that Selyn intends to do what it did in reviving the handloom industry in other crafts as well, by way of taking them to the next level and empowering the people behind it. Like so many traditional crafts in Sri Lanka, the mat (*paduru*) has been a part of Sri Lanka's domestic spaces for thousands of years. While it may not serve its earlier purposes anymore, it is important that we preserve the aesthetics and techniques of it, so that we continue to uphold and cherish it as a heritage of a proud nation.

*Selyn, 113/1, South Circular Road,
Kurunegala. (+94 37) 223 1456; Flagship Store, 102 Fife Road, Colombo 5;
(+94 11) 259 6838; info@selyn.lk;
selyn.lk; opening hours: 10am to 7pm daily*

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