The Art of the Potter

Posted on

Photos: Suresh de Silva

Six months labour of the potter is one stroke to the man with a cudgel.

Earthenware pots and vessels are still used in great quantities in Sri Lanka despite the availability of aluminium and other metalware. From the earliest times, men have used the pliant smooth consistency of wet clay to shape a variety of objects. When baked at high temperature, clay not only retains its moulded “form but also becomes waterproof.

The village potter was an intrinsic part of older Sri Lankan society. A 15th century Sinhalese poem, the Janavasama or Chronicle of the People, lists a special caste of potterS’ whose sole function was to supply the village or feudal estate with its pottery requirements. The potter owed his piece of land to the king or feudal overlord. In return he supplied an agreed number of clay pots every year including those used for special functions such as weddings and religious ceremonies.

It was customary after a large feast where people of different castes partook of the meal to smash up the clay pots as it was considered unclean to reuse them. The potter also turned out clay tiles and bricks for the manor and -.vas responsible for keeping the roofs in good repair. If a large quantity of pottery was required, the landlord provided the clay and the kiln. Apart from his dues to the landlord, the potter was allowed to sell his wares or exchange them for other goods with people of the area.

In modern times, clay vessels are mainly used in the household for cooking, storing food and carrying water. This type of common pottery is usually devoid of any decoration and tends to be fashioned out of rougher clay. This ensures that the cost of pots 1s low and they are easily replaced.

The shapes and sizes of domestic pots vary with their function. The narrow-necked, spherical kalagedi pot is used for holding water. It can be carried comfortably against the hip and is. so common in rural Sri Lanka that a popular folk dance for women, the Kalagedi Natuma, has evolved from it and is still performed today.

The muttiya is a clay pot with a wide mouth that is used for boiling rice. It features prominently in local New Year celebrations where a pot of milk rice is the first meal to be cooked for the year. Another type of common cooking pot is the etiliya, a shallow pot well suited for prepanng curnes and sweetmeats. The koraha, a very large, shallow dish-like vessel, is used for soaking seed rice paddy. Korahas are also used for washing clothes and function as a bath for children in the villages.

An interesting array of pottery is turned out for use in Sri Lankan temples. Most

common is the small, flat pahana or lamp which holds coconut oil and a wick. Worshippers light dozens of pahanas and place them on special racks around the temple premises. Offerings to the temple, such as flowers and rice, are placed in large, wide-mouthed dishes called patras. A smaller version of the patra is carried by priests as an almsbowl.

Offerings of flowers are sprinkled with water from a spouted pot called a kotalaya. A rather intriguing version of this pot is one sporting twelve spouts around the body and decorated with cobras and other motifs. This is used in exorcism rituals.

While traditional pottery is still made in most parts of Sri Lanka, certain districts and towns have achieved distinction for the excellent quality of their craftsmanship and materials.

Colombo’s suburb of Kelaniya, which takes its name from the Kelani river flowing north of the city, is one area. It has a plentiful supply of good-quality red clay with a high iron content.

The Kelani pottery-maker has always been famous for his finely developed decorative style even in pottery that is used daily. The motifs and designs are obviously archaic and have been compared with the ornamentation found in Greek pottery. The designs are incised with a sharp instrument onto the clay water pots and cooking pots.

The technique of making pottery has hardly changed over the years. Very skilled potters both turn the wheel and mould the pots themselves, but it is more common for an assistant to keep the wheel turning so that the potter can work with both hands.

The pottery workshop 1s usually a shed attached to the potter’s home and his garden serves as the drier. A brick kiln, fuelled by firewood, occupies another shed. Each step of the potter’s work is done by hand including the final quality control check which is accomplished by tapping sharply the side of the vessel. The right ring of sound denotes a well-made piece.

Perhaps the most beautifully turned out examples of Sri Lankan pottery are the terracotta ware also made at Kelaniya. Terracotta requires the best clay mixed with the correct proportion of finely ground quartz or silica. For the pottery to be flame or oven-proof, a greater concentration of silica is used. After the clay has been dried

in the sun, it is mixed with water and kneaded until the consistency is correct for throwing on the wheel. The ball of clay is pressed with the fist and as it takes shape the fingers are used to mould the sides and the insides.

The potter’s assistant keeps the wheel turning without a break until the pot is fully formed. The rim is smoothed with a piece of wet cloth and then the pot is cut away from the wheel with a string passed under its base. The pot or vessel is left to dry once again until the clay becomes “leather-hard”. Any trimming of excess clay is done at this stage.

The distinctive red colouring of terracotta pottery comes from a special red stone called kabuk. This stone is ground into a fine powder and mixed with water to form a thick liquid. The red ochre is applied with a paintbrush in one quick sweep as the pot revolves beneath the brush. After more drying, the coating is polished with a blunt object: the pot is now ready for baking. The furnace is heated up slowly for the first six hours in the “slow-firing” phase. In the next six hours, “high-firing” takes place where the pottery is baked at about 750 ° C.

The expert potter monitors the temperature by checking the height of the flames, adding more wood when necessary through several openings in the base of the kiln. After the pots have cooled, they are ready for the final phase, the intricate incised ornamentation that is chracteristic of Kelani pottery.

A sharp instrument is used to scrape away the red coating, revealing the lighter clay underneath in precisely drawn floral and abstract designs. A medium-sized dish would take about two hours of slow, careful carving, which limits the number of pieces that can be worked on in a day.

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