# The Art of the Potter

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“Six months labour of the potter is one stroke to the man-with the cudgel”
(Old Sinhalese proverb)



*Practiced hands mould the shape of a pot on the wheel.*

The art of pottery in Sri Lanka, as in other parts of the world, is an ancient one. 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 permanently but also becomes waterproof. Earthenware pots and vessels are still used in great quantities in Sri Lanka despite the availability of aluminium and other metalware. The village potter was an intrinsic part of older Sri Lankan society. A 15th century Sinhalese poem, the Jana vamsa, or Chronicle of the People, lists a special caste of potters whose sole function was to supply the village or feudal estate with its requirements of pottery. 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 was 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 is low and they are easily replaced. The shapes and sizes of domestic pots vary with their function. The narrownecked, 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 preparing curries 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 also functions as a bath for children in the villages. An interesting array of pottery is also 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 alms bow 1. The 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 clay cooking pots and ceremonial vessels are still used in modern Sri Lanka, the art of clay tilemaking has fallen into disuse. Fine examples of the old style of tile-making and hanging can still be seen crowning the tops of temples in the Kandyan districts. Unlike the curved tiles used today which are of Spanish origin, these tiles are flat, tapering to a point at one end. The tiles are arranged in such a way that they form attractive patterns. Another uncommon tile is the eaves tile, a highly ornate, leaf-shaped tile which is hung along the eaves of the roof. While the flat tiles are sometimes ornamented with simple lines and grooves, eaves tiles display embossed animal figures such as the lion and the goose, two common animal motifs in Sri Lankan art. In the past, a law forbade the use of tiled roofs by anyone other than the king and the highest-ranking nobles. Although no such restriction applies today, not many can afford the ornately decorated and arranged tiles of the old aristocracy. 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 craftmanship and materials. Colombo’s suburb of Kelaniya, which takes its name from Kelani river flowing north of the city, is one such 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.

“He takes with the right hand the balls of clay One by one and sets them on the wheel; With the left hand he turns it
With the right hand he moulds
Knowning the size and shape he presses down”

The technique of making pottery has hardly changed from this account in an old potter’s song. Very skilled potters both turn the wheel and mould the pots themselves bu it is more common for an assistant to keep the wheel turnings so that the potter can work with both hands. The pottery workshop is 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 example of Sri Lankan pottery is the terra cotta ware also made at Kelaniya. Terra cotta 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 cutaway 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 terra cotta pottery comes from a special red stone called “kabuk”. This stone is ground into a fine power and mixed with water to form a thick liquid. The red ochre is applied with a paint brush in one quick sweep as the pot revolves beneath the brush. After more doing, 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 characteristic 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. One of the most skilled terra cotta potters working in Sri Lanka is a woman, Aglin Rodgrigo of Kelaniya. Both a craftsman and a teacher, Ms. Rodrigo specializes in pottery which combines old designs with modern functions. Apart from the traditional water pots, jugs and bowls, she also turns out plates, cups and dishes which lend themselves to modern living. Many of the intricate designs which she carves into the tall vases that are so impressive are her own but inspired by archaic patterns that have been passed down through generations of potters. Ms. Rodrigo works at home in her backyard in couple of homely-looking work-sheds assisted by young apprentices. Her pottery can be bought at major handicraft shops, as are the work of many other skilled potters of Sri Lanka.



Taking the finished pots to the village fair. The pot on the left is used to wash and sift rice. The one against the hip is for carrying and storing water. The one below is used to cook rice.



A family of potters. the husband and wife practising a skill coming down many generations