The Craft Village: Heritage In The City

Posted on



A crafts shop in the village where various items are sold

As their expert hands wind their way around the raw material, whether it is a piece of wood or a plate of brass, they make their intricate markings that have passed down from generation to generation. They are the craftsmen at the Craft Village in Battaramulla, invaluably fashioning the cultural legacy of Sri Lanka.

Words Chamindra Warusawithana Photographs Indika de Silva

In a country that boasts of a voluminous history and a rich cultural heritage that spans across 2,500 years, the National Crafts Council plays the role of the guardian that preserves and develops the local arts and crafts, making sure they continue through relentlessly into the unforeseen future. In striving to preserve 19 sectors of handicraft ranging from clay work to masks, cane and Batik to leather and lacework, the Craft Village at Battaramulla is one of the Crafts Council’s most impactful initiatives.

As you enter the premises you leave the city behind at its large gates and are greeted by the welcoming shade of expansive trees. Scattered on acres of land are

little houses resembling those of a typical Sri Lankan village. In each of the little coconut leaf thatched mud huts sits a craftsman and his apprentices working away on their different objects d'art.

As I crossed the threshold to one that particularly caught my eye, I was greeted by an elderly man who welcomed me heartily into his makeshift home of crafts. As I began admiring his brass handiwork, he sat back down at his workshop taking two little tools worn from age and started working on a beautiful brass platter. Having admired his brass bells, ornaments and wall hangings among a host of other products, which included elegant reed ornaments and cane furniture that were attractively displayed at the stall nextdoor we slowly slipped out to visit the creator of Dumbara items.

He sat at his loom weaving an exceptionally colourful Dumbara wall hanging. His own walls were adorned with colourful pieces of art woven with his skillful hands. He was weaving another geometrically pleasing wall hanging adorned with vibrant patches of harmoniously contrasting colours. All his works of art were inspired by the age old Dumbara patterns; a legacy of the Dumbara region.

Each and every story of each individual craftsman is woven, sculpted, carved or coloured in the tones of their respective arts and crafts. The dainty lace work from the coastal areas of the Island bring with them the wonder of the quaint technique of knitting lace. Carved masks fascinate the viewer either by the powerful, exaggerated expressions captured in the details or with the droll expressions depicted on less imposing masks. Apart from the masks the Craft Village houses traditional arts and sculptures associated with thovil ceremonies.

On my ramble in the Craft Village premises, my feet invariably took me towards many more stalls. Musical instruments with violins, flutes and traditional Sri Lankan drums tempted me. *Sesath*: the majestic sun shades, which sheltered royalty decades ago, beckoned me with their curious motifs and red-brown shades. Exquisite rings, necklaces, bangles and bracelets flaunted their elaborate make and intricate designs. I mingled with the other visitors who had come to the village, greeting different yet equally wondrous items at each corner.

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There are 45 stalls altogether under 19 sectors scattered across the village, each displaying arts and crafts from various corners of the Island with craftsmen and

artists representing traditional artisan families. They have been given a space at the National Crafts Council’s Craft Village providing a market for their products as well as an opportunity for them to demonstrate their talents to the consumer, all at once, delightfully providing the visitor a chance not only to understand the intricacies involved in the making of traditional crafts but also to buy what they like.

The Craft Village is not just another place to sell crafts, it is a UNESCO heritage site where the artisans are provided proper training and awarded for the quality of their work. It is a village in the city, where various arts and crafts thrive alongside artists who come together to shape the cultural legacy of Sri Lanka with their expertise and hard work.

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