

The Sri Lanka Handlooms Emporium: A Handicraft Haven

Posted on

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The Elegance and exquisiteness of her handicrafts has earned Sri Lanka the reputation for fine craftsmanship. This skill dates back two centuries in time, to the days of the warrior kings who employed artisans skilled in creating masterpieces of art and utility from almost any indigenous material, ranging from soft clay to hard stone. Indeed, evidence of these crafts still exist in the form of intricate murals and etchings found in ancient rock temples, caves, and on dagobas. These ancient skills have been passed down through the generations. from father to son, and smith to smith within the trade, improvements in technique incorporated into the craft over the years.

Many such skills transmitted through generations, tend to die out eventually, having encountered snares and pitfalls within a changing environment. In the Sri Lankan context however, the Department of Small Industries has striven to husband these arts, by offering incentives to craftsmen producing items of high quality.

These incentives include buying handicrafts at prices attractive to the artisans, as well as the provision of training schools for instructing the local populace in the art of craftsmanship and thus streamlining production by dividing the labour involved.

The diverse method used in the manufacture of each item are both unique and fascinating, demonstrating the versatility of the artisans in using local material.

The handicrafts thus produced are housed in the spacious modern Sri Lanka Handlooms Emporium, which sells these items at a mere 25% above cost. As one enters the Emporium and pauses for a moment on the threshold, one is amazed at the variety and beauty of the handicrafts which meets the eye.

The handlooms for which the Emporium is justifiably famous, occupy pride of place. The high quality art lines -curtaining, sheeting, table linen and furnishing fabrics are chequered and striped in a spectrum of tastefully combined colours to please the most fastidious tastes and complement the most unusual interior decor. They are extremely popular in domestic as well as commercial establishments like hotels and offices, both for the durability and beauty. While the simpler designs are woven on the "flying shuttle" type looms; the more intricate patterns involving finer detail are woven on the more sophisticated "jacquard" looms. The Department of Small Industries has established a weaving centre in Polgolla which trains young women in the art of weaving, and supplies the Emporium with handlooms.

The weaving process is an exacting one, involving many stages of preparation. The yarn used is mostly local and is first dyed in the required colours before being wound on spools. Two types of dye are used -the vat dyes and the reactive dyes. The latter guarantees fast colours. If one passes a weaving centre during the drying process one sees the dyed yarn being sun-dried on racks, in colourful profusion. Once the yarn is spooled, it is starched, then steamed to make it resilient to chafing and breaking on the loom during the strenuous weaving process.

The weaving process is fascinating. The rhythmic quality of the weaver's movements as she deftly manipulates the loom while turning out handloom fabric, has a mesmeric quality. Alternative strands of yarn are systematically raised and lowered by the "Heddle frame" i.e. frame of the loom, while the filling yarns pass diagonally under one group of yarn, then over

the other. Metal played an important role in ancient Sri Lanka, both in the domestic as well as religious spheres. Many cooking utensils, water goblets and plates used in homes as well as the tiered lamps and offering trays used in temples were of metal. The hierarchy of metals correspond to the social hierarchy. Gold and silver being Royal metals, were reserved for the use of kings, while lesser mortals were limited to the use of the more inferior metals like copper and brass.

A gleaming array of wall plaques, ornaments, bowls, trinkets and jewellery in brass and silver brighten up a corner of the Emporium. Whether in traditional “Hansa” (Swan), “Monara” (Peacock) or stylized animal motifs or in more modern western designs, the degree of precision and skill involved is comparable to the best workmanship available anywhere else in the world.



Batiks are used for many purposes and are popular Sri Lanka souvenirs.

Oxidised brass giving a rosy or smokey sheen which never fades, is extremely popular with local as well as foreign buyers. The popularity of brass stems from the fact that it is pliant material of high quality which responds readily to being cast, cut or hammered in the “repousse” method.

Castings in brass are done whereby a wax model of the object is made, then covered with clay and baked, creating a mould into which molten brass is poured. The liquid then sets to the desired pattern. The method is excellent for casting objects like bowls, candlesticks and statuettes etc. The cutwork method is used in the decoration of flat items like wall plaques and trays. The artisan deftly etches the design into the sheet of brass, with sharp instruments. The finished product has a delicate filigree effect. The other method, namely the repousse method is not confined to brass alone. Here, the craftsman hammers out the design, the finished effect revealing a raised surface against a recessed background.

Displayed within glass cases are delicately wrought sterling silver rings, pendants, chains and bracelets, some inlaid with glittering semi-precious stones. Silver filigree ornaments too, the most famous amongst these being the gem-studded replica of the “perahera” elephant bearing the sacred casket, are also popular with the tourist. Most of these designs in filigree are strongly influenced by the Indian and Kandyan cultures. Artisans use a minute quantity of copper to give sterling silver the consistency required for intricate filigree carving, as silver in its pure form is liquid. Plated silver is less expensive and therefore more within the reach of the average tourist. Among the silver-plated items a richly carved coffee set studded with semi-precious stones sits in solitary splendour. Shelves of pottery, ceramics, woodwork and lacquerwork are artistically displayed. Pottery making is one of the earliest crafts known in Sri Lanka, and was an integral part of rural life. Pottery ranges from slender-necked water goblets and bowls of various sizes for domestic cooking and other household purposes, to quaint little single-wick oil lamps commonly used in temples.

Watching a potter at work is an interesting experience, as he throws the lump of finely kneaded clay on the revolving potter's wheel, and skilfully forms a beautiful vessel by shaping the mass with his hands. Dainty traditional motifs are etched with a sharp instrument or stamped with a dye on the moist clay. If a glaze is required, the pot is given a glazed coating before firing. Red-hued terra cotta pottery is created by painting on a red liquid made from the powdered “kabok” stone. Once the pot is formed to the potter's satisfaction, using a string at the base, in a single deft stroke, he separates the pot from the wheel. The pottery is next baked in a kiln made from brick or stone, and the end result endures a life time of usage. In contrast to the pottery of muted colours, lacquered bowls, ornaments and trinket jars form a riotous display of colour. The ‘lac’ liquid used is a resinous substance exuded by a certain tree, growing in Sri Lankan forests, as a protective covering when punctured by a beetle-like insect known as the ‘lac’ insect. This lac resin is collected and strained through muslin to ensure a fine consistency. The desired pigment is then mixed into the ‘lac’ before it hardens. Speed is essential in this work since the lac hardens swiftly. Two techniques are employed in lacquer work; “Beralu veda”, where the ‘lac’ is applied with a stick, while the object spins on a lathe. Heat caused by the friction melts the ‘lac’ into the object, making the colours fast. “Niyapotuveda” so called because the human fingernail is used in this method. The lac is drawn into a fine thread whilst still soft, laid carefully in the design desired, over a single background colour. The thumbnail is then used to work out the details.



Ornamental ware in silver and brass.

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Interior of the Sri Lanka Handlooms Emporium.