Wood and the Wood Worker

Posted on

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Most flights from Britain to Sri Lanka are timed for early morning arrival at Colombo airport. After a long overnight journey there is a dawn glimpse of Southern India and then the descent to Colombo. The density of trees on this approach can really be appreciated. Thick jungle in the north is followed by spaced coconut palms which seem to stretch endlessly inland from the edge of the golden sandy beaches. From the air, Colombo and the airport seem little more than a clearing in the dense greenery.

During my time in Sri Lanka I saw great numbers of trees and the many uses to

which they are put. One, the Bodhi tree, (Ficus religiosa) at Anuradhapura, the ancient capital in the north of the island, is venerated. It is the oldest historically documented tree in the world, grown from a branch of the very tree under which Buddha attained enlightenment. The history is romantic. The tree certainly looks old, if not particularly attractive, and has been provided with considerable supporting crutches.

However, there are many more varieties which grow on this tropical island, more than a thousand in fact, of which approximately 100 are used for manufacture. I found the sight and growth rate of the Giant Bamboo (Deudrocalamus giganteus) fascinating. Of all the bamboos this is the largest, growing in excess of 100 ft. with stems 10 in. or more in diameter. The young shoots grow at the phenomenal rate of a foot a day. Some visitors make their mark in the morning, and l::y their return in the afternoon they can measure 6 in. or so of growth. My guide’s enthusiastic description made me feel that if I concentrated hard enough for a minute (or an hour) I would actually see it growing!

Bamboo is used quite extensively for building and scaffolding, as well as for chairs, plant pots, water spouts and umbrella stands. I saw plenty of fine examples of the skilled use of bamboo in shops, houses, restaurants and hotels. It is strong and straight, and working it consists mainly of cutting to length and shaping by hand when wet, rather than the use of tools. It requires little by way of finishing. The hardest of the Sri Lankan wood is ebony. Ten hardwoods used extensively for furniture and woodcarving are (with their relative hardnesses): king ebony, ebony (100); rosewood, coconut, gammala, kumbuk (90); teak, mahogany (80); jak .and satinwood (70).

Woodcarving workshop

In the course of my travels I met Mr Piyaratne, proprietor of a shop and factory in the town of Arangala, about 100 miles north of Colombo, and my interest in woodwork stimulated his own obvious enthusiasm to show me every detail of woodcarving and furniture manufacture. One is immediately impressed at the craftsmanship displayed very openly in a quite literal sense by the carvers in the front workshop. It is a large shaded area constructed from tree trunks and thatched with branches and palm leaves. In no sense does it match the British sense of a workshop and is more akin to the ‘dark Satanic mills’ of Blake’s Victorian English factory scene. Half a dozen men work at a long bench, often sitting crosslegged on top of the bench showing great dexterity in the use of their feet as well as their

hands. I watched one man reach for a chisel with his food and deftly lift it to his hand as he worked. Feet are used in place of a vice. With concern for health and safety I asked if there were many ‘industrial accidents’ but the response was laughter that I should even ask. Certainly they all seemed to have their fingers and toes. Not surprisingly, there is no formal training away from the workplace. There exists a very informal hierarchy of apprenticeship. whereby the sequence of cuts, carving and furnishing are learned and perfected so that despite such individual attention that the system demands, each piece is the same as every other.

Although woodcarving is now primarily a sideline which has expanded to meet tourist demand for souvenirs, I was most interested to hear from Mr. Piyaratne that some designs go back hundreds if not thousands of years. The seated Buddha is to precise measurements. I was shown a design book dating from the rum of the century containing an acknowledgement that it was reprinted from a very much earlier collection of drawings and instructions. The book was interesting as a work of art in its own right. On a more practical level Mr. Piyaratne showed me a piece he had made from a single piece of wood which demonstrated six stages whereby a prepared block of wood is progressed to the final Buddha for sale either in his own extensive shop, or through trade outlets to shops in Colombo and elsewhere. I selected at random a carving ready for sale and compared it, by the use of calipers, with the drawing in the book. It was, as I expected it to be, precise from every angle and measurement.

Other popular items include elephants, bowls and boxes. The turning of bowls is carried out by the use of a small turntable more like a potter’s wheel than a woodworker’s lathe. Some bowls were carved in ovals rather than circles by the even simpler process of holding and turning the wood with the feet and gouging it to shape by hand. Patterns were enhanced by inserts made from porcupine quills. I am not certain as to either the ethics or the law on the use of any part of animals in such manufacture or, perhaps for ourselves, the importation of such pieces, but they are certainly attractive, and made entirely from natural materials.

Elephant models follow the conventional curved shapes, or simplistic square an representations, brightly and skilfully decorated and are most attractive ornaments. I was hopeful that this design might date back to the primitive art of an earlier civilization. Eagerly I wanted to consult the library of design books, but this time my imagination proved wrong. They were a modern design which sold well, and were cheap and easy to make. Practical, yes, but less romantic than I had hoped. Certainly the process of straight vertical cuts with a chisel using the lower palm of

the right hand as a mallet was quickly learned by the new apprentices.

Furniture production

Leaving the woodcarvers to their task, their chatter and their laughter. I moved inside to watch the furniture production side of the business. Veneered chip-board has not yet reached this island and a combination of natural woods, low overheads and plentiful, cheap labour provides labour-intensive production of excellent, strong and serviceable attractive pieces. Everything is made to order, and the requirements, designs, and finish are discussed with Mr. Piyaratne, with samples and of course the design books to hand. I saw beautifully finished dovetails, mortise and tenons, and half-housing joints skilfully cut by hand and a perfect fit. My complimentary and appreciative remarks almost led to some finished pieces being dismantled much to the owner’s consternation, but he and I were able to curb such excess and no damage was done. Panels for use in wardrobes, cupboards and sideboards are carved and this operation was done painstakingly by women, with British tools much in evidence. How nice to see familiar Marples gouges and chisels so far from home. How refreshing, too, to see people with such job satisfaction, in the pride they revealed when showing me chairs, beds cupboards, etc, either under construction or completed and waiting delivery.

Delivery is usually included in the contract. Mr. Piyaratne was quite willing to quote a price for England, but I did not take him up on that offer. I suspect that transport costs would way exceed the manufacturing cost In the island vans and lorries are used but, when touring elsewhere, I saw many instances of a native, barefoot, carrying a newly-made chair on his head, with nothing in sight to indicate where he had come from or where he was going. Another group, with a heavy wardrobe on a handcart, passed in the other direction. Some deliveries must take days, but the cost is low, and time seems unimportant.

