

Woven Beauty of Cane

Posted on

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Driving through the provincial highways in Sri Lanka you will see local handicrafts displayed in wayside stalls, arranged to catch the eye of the traveller. Basket and cane ware shops at Weweldeniya (wewel -cane) near the town of Warakapola, line the Colombo -Kandy Road, one of the most picturesque roads leading to the central hills. Intricately and artistically patterned cane chairs, baskets, containers, boxes and other utility and ornamental products of varied designs are made by local craftsmen here, where it has been a cottage industry for generations and given the village its name. Sri Lanka boasts of a variety of craftsmanship, coming down through the years, and handed down from father to son, preserving high standards of skill, encouraging originality in design. Each area of Sri Lanka has its own speciality and style of craft. There are immense varieties, so often scattered around that many people remain unaware of the diversity of the hand made treasures of the Sri Lankans.

From the Wattiya (shallow tray) the devotees use for carrying flowers to the temple, to the many items found in a Sri Lankan kitchen such as the Kulla (winnow). kiri gotte (strainer) and plenty of shallow 'Kuudas' or baskets used to store foodstuffs and in the preparation and cleaning of food, they occupy an important place in the Sri Lankan home. Cane containers have been used from the ancient days among Sinhalese and Tamils for storing sweetmeats and for carrying food on a journey.

Cane is used from birth to death – from nursery items such as baby cribs, baby baskets, storage baskets and carrycots of various shapes and sizes. Ornamental bed heads, racks, pot holders, many items to beautify the Sri Lankan home are very much in voyage. A cane stretcher used to transport the dead by the Muslims is known as Sandak.

Basketry is a functional . Heavy baskets made of cane (also known as rattan) are used for hauling produce, grain, chickens and other goods. A special type of woven

basket, the 'Kuruniya' is used to separate the chaff from the grain. Baskets are used in several industries-gemming. to locate the precious stones by washing the gravel from the pits and riverbeds. Fish vendors and vegetable vendors at the market place or visiting homes carry their goods in large open baskets.

More delicate and artistic basketry is also popular. The village of Kalutara is another well known rattan ware centre in the island. It has a Basket Hall where the weavers may be watched at work. Stalls well-stocked with cane items line the main road to Kalutara.

Cane furniture originated in India as they are light, cool and can easily be cleaned, which makes it ideal for the tropics. At first popular, chiefly in Britain and Holland, cane chairs spread gradually to other European countries in the course of the 18th Century, but their use did not become widespread until the whole-sale importation of Malayan rattan began in the 19th century. Basketry is one of the oldest and most widespread crafts in the world and ancient techniques used thousands of years ago are still practised today. There seems much in common between the basket making instinct and the nest building of birds and perhaps the most primitive basket known is the grain basket of the Mohave Indians of North America. The American Indian's basket making was a woman's art. Basketry has been said to be "the poetry of Indian women". Baskets were connected with Greek and Roman religious life where they were the receptacles for offerings to the Gods. The Romans were known for their wicker furniture and Pliny tells us that they and the Etruscans 'reclined upon couches of willow'.

Rattan or cane palms (*Calamus Rotang*) are climbing plants which trail along the ground or climb the trees in the jungle and swamps of tropical countries. The best cane comes from Malaysia and Indonesia, and grow to the great length of 200 to 600 feet. The average bark is covered with prickles which make gathering of the cane difficult. The branches are severed with axes, the workers wearing a covering on their heads to protect them from the prickles. The branches are then allowed to remain hanging so that the sun will loosen and shrivel up the sheath or outer bark which facilitates its removal. This is done in an ingenious manner.

A notch is cut in the side of a trunk of neighbouring tree and through this the cane is drawn which, removes the outer bark. Then they are cut into lengths of 12 feet to 30 feet, and tied up in bundles and graded into their various sizes and qualities. Pulp cane is made from the first qualities of cane -a fine glossy surfaced cane. Contradictory to its name the centre or core of the rattan is tough and fibrous and

not at all pulpy. These are washed to bring out to its best advantage the beauty of the silicated surface and highlight its quality. Then the leaf ridges are smoothed down and the cane split into strips with knives. The outer surface is split into strips. These are used for rattaning the seats of chairs and binding, the thicker cane base is ingeniously fashioned into furniture, utensils and containers. The cane is never worked dry. It is constantly kept wet or else its pliability will be lost. The cane strips are left to pass through water before they are used and kept wet when it gets dry while working with it. Strips of cane woven round the stakes in different patterns are known by different names such as randing, waling and slewing.

A final polish is given to the articles with French polish or varnish to enhance the colour of the cane and for durability. Sixty varieties of the cane palm is recorded in Malaya. It is also found in West Africa. In Sri Lanka it grows at Ambalangoda and Polonnaruwa areas. Cane furniture has always been popular in the Sri Lankan homes. The tourist hotels and specially the five star hotels have chosen cane items for their lobbies and general decor. Sun loungers on the verandahs, settees covered with colourful cushions, couches and easy chairs, coffee tables expertly inlaid with glass and wood are found in plenty. The 'Kulle' or winnow made of cane which is used in the paddy field as well as the kitchen is an ancient utensil used amongst the Sinhalese. The 'Kulu netuma' is a dance performed by women depicting the work of winnowing and stowing the rice harvest. It is an item in harvesting festivals.

Kalutara is 45 kilometres from Colombo on the Galle Road and Weweldeniya about 53 kilometres from Colombo on the Kandy road. These are two places to watch the craftsmen at work and for purchasing, items from a wide selection of cane ware. However any handicraft shop in the towns stocks a collection of cane items for shoppers. Handloom Emporium at Bamabalaptiya has an attractive collection of rush and reed-ware. Orders are undertaken on cane ware or other handicrafts at most of these sales outlets in the city.



Peacock Chair – one of the many ornamental creations in Rattan on display at a wayside stall of a cane craftsman.



A lounge chair – done in rattan a popular piece of furniture in hotels and Sri Lankan

homes. Photo – Fred R. Malvenna.



Weweldeniya on the Colombo – Kandy Road is known for its many way side stalls selling cane artefacts. The village gets its name from an old tradition of cane craftsmanship. Photo – Fred R. Malvenna.