

Indian Ceramics, Form and Aesthetics : a Review

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Introduction

The foundations of three-dimensional arts are subject matter, content and form. In other words, it is about what we, the artists and the audience are talking about, what the artist has to say about the subject and how the artist uses the designs to say it. Ceramics has and more specifically pottery in Indian sub-continent has an ancient history. It is the most iconic element of regional art. Ancient Indian ceramics exists in a number of styles and exhibits a wide variety of regional variations throughout the centuries. Persian and Mediterranean influences have altered the methods and designs of both utilitarian as well as purely aesthetic pottery styles of ancient India.

Origins

The known origins of Indian ceramic art date back more than 5000 years from wheel-made fragments and vessels that have been found from the people of Indus Valley Civilization. The earliest forms of pottery, according to some, were mostly utilitarian; that is for purely practical functions. These include vessels for food storage, human remains, cups and utensils. But ceremonial sculptures have also been uncovered from Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro as early as 3300 B.C. Brightly-coloured iconic figures and ancient Indian deities are some of the oldest and most famous pieces of terracotta style.

Functional Pottery (Variation in Form)

One should also take into account variations in form while discussing pottery. Ceramic objects made since Neolithic times have included figurines and sculptures, lamps, brick walls, roofing, decorative tiles, granaries, feeding troughs, chimney pots, molds for foods, crucibles etc. In India, ceramic objects were disposable materials like today's paper, Styrofoam or Polystyrene. In some parts of India pottery was thrown away either as a measure of hygiene or by religious doctrine, or both. Geography and climatic considerations are responsible for many form variations. The pottery of alluvial or silty red clay zone is of

very direct nature with little scope for excessive manipulation. In areas with abundance of plastic clay, pots of more fluid nature are found. More complex forms are permissible. Different forms thus emerge in high altitudes than those at sea level. This again is due to another reason, variation in firing methods.

Pots are shaped according to climatic conditions. In a hot country like India, water is a precious commodity to be stored. These pots have narrow neck and are of bulbous nature to conserve more water. The bigger surface area gives space for condensation of the outer surface to keep water cool inside. Strainers and insect lids are used over pots for obvious reasons. The ways and means of preparing and serving food and drink have also had their effect on form development. Pots for cooking and serving grain or meat and even beer for drinking vary in shape and size. Religious associations also have a profound influence on form development. Thus pots were made for fertility rites, deflowering of young girls, ritual libation vessels for the pouring of wine or oil, usually over sanctified grounds for temples and shrines of many oriental countries. They also make pots for funeral rites. With gradually changing role from utility to contemplation at certain periods of history, pots of certain cultures attained a glorified role and were made expressly to be looked at. Often they were endowed with spirituality and generally were universal feminine symbol, the womb of the Great Mother, shelter, protection, preservation, nourishment, and fertility, giving or offering.

Indian pottery and sculptures are truest to nature in the directness and simplicity of forms and their adaptations to use and also purest in art. The unglazed rude earthenware, and brown, yellow or grey, made in every village and the historical glaze earthenware of Madura, Sindh and Punjab are worth mentioning. The water pot made by throwing in a wheel is called the Kumbh. The man who makes it is called Kumbhakar. Another name for potters came to be known as Prajapati, creator of forms and toys, after a name for Brahma, the mythical name of the God who made man out of clay. The practice of pot making in remote villages which was sold in exchange for the produce of the fields still remains in remote villages of India. The replicas of pots in pieces, 1500-2000 years old as also on wall-paintings of caves are present in certain areas of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat etc.

Aesthetics

Aesthetic value of Indian ceramic art was essentially derived from Persia, Egypt, China, Japan and Korea. In India various earth colours were used. The white, brown and black for decoration, were done by crude brushes made of horse hair. Mention should be made of the terracotta toys and heads of the Gupta period. The terracotta of Birbhum as a folk art, preserve the usage and living and dress of the period. The use of terracotta in architecture

has great aesthetic and historical value as seen in the remains of terracotta in temple and other monuments of various districts of Bengal, Orissa and down South. The use of bright colours in pottery came mainly from Persia, who had the secret of making copper turquoise blue when they conquered Egypt. Egyptians made this colour about 500 B.C., as glazed clay beads and tiles were made in this colour. Rich copper green, golden brown and dark turquoise blue in tiles are derived from Persia. When Pathan kings began building their mosques and tombs in the vicinity of Delhi, they employed workmen from Afghanistan to make plain coloured blue painted tiles. Muslim Pathan potters started making glazed pottery such as martbans, jars for pickle and jam, surahis, hukkass, stands, bowls etc. These are widely found in Peshawar, Delhi, Gujarat, Lahore, Ajmer, Multan, Khurja, Hyderabad and Lucknow, as also in Kashmir, Chunar, Agra and Gwalior. The motifs and designs of Iran have direct influence on glaze work of Sindh and Peshawar. It uses rich golden brown texture and the turquoise colour. In Agra 'chini ka ranza', now in ruins, has tiles in brilliant colours.

Glaze gives the tiles and vases a pleasure to the eyes. This glaze technique was used more effectively in China, Korea and Japan. Indian ceramists have adopted this technique from these countries. Skilful artists decorate their pots and tiles by 'sprig' work. Ceramic crayons are also used for beautiful casual effects. It is well known to all ceramists that the use of oxides of various metals in right proportions brings about the rainbow colours that we see in ceramic objects today.

A quest to look for the indigenous Indian elements into the ceramic form and aesthetics has brought about art forms with opposite characteristics, iconic references and enchanting imagery. In India, certain ceramists have emerged with drive to translate its venerable traditions into a contemporary language. Making, breaking and re-making of form and aesthetic principles has occurred over the years to give ceramic art in India and the world at large a concrete dimension.