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Nabagunjara

An Exhibition on Handicrafts and Heritage Textiles of Orissa



(7th January to 22nd January 2004)

Introduction

Orissa is particularly noted as "a land of temples" and its great sanctity is reflected in the writings of early art historians, as in the case of James Fergusson who declares that "there are more temples now in Orissa than in all the rest of Hindustan put together." According to the Brahma Purana, the sages ask Brahma about the most excellent place on earth, that bestows virtue (dharma), love (kama), wealth (artha), and salvation (moksha), and that is the most excellent of all holy centres, Brahma's answer to this inquiry, which he claims to be an ancient traditional account connected with the Vedas, is Bharata – the Indian subcontinent.

In particular, however, he singles out Utkala (Orissa) and its four great religious centres: Konaditya (Konark, for the worship of Surya); Viraja (Jaipur, for the worship of Devi); and Ekamra (Bhubaneswar, for worship of Vishnu), considering those who stay there to be dwellers of heaven while the sites themselves yield worldly pleasures and salvation on this very earth.

Orissa has been comparatively little exposed to foreign invasions, cut off from the rest of India by ranges of hills with sea on one side and wild forests on the other. Consequently, the ancient monuments in this region are authentic and speak of the artistic ability of the people and their happy and contented life for ages. Free from extraneous influence, the sculpture of Orissa and other forms of art developed in their own way.

Orissa, famous all over the world for the beauty and craftsmanship of Konarak, Jagannath, Lingaraj and innumerable other temples, offers a striking selection

of decorative and utilitarian handicrafts. Visual manifestations of thousands of years of Oriya culture, these handicrafts embody the religious spirit of the land and reflect traditions which are still living through the creative imagination and the disciplined skill of generations of craftsmen.

The themes are mostly religious and are derived from cosmographic myths and legends. Wood, stone, horn, clay, silver, golden grass, metal – whatever is easily available is deftly transformed into objects of beauty by the nimble preserving fingers of the Oriya artisan of the handicrafts of Orissa, most notable are the appliqué umbrella of Pipli; 'patachitras' and papier mache masks, stone carvings, carved and painted wood work, palm leaf paintings of Puri; silver filigree jewellery and golden grass mats of Cuttack; 'katki' and 'tie-and dye' sarees of Sambalpur; Dhokra and clay toys of Mayurbhanj and Barapali; Lacquer-work of Navrangpur; Horn work of Parlakhimedi; and the flexible brass fish of Ganjam. Every handicraft exudes a charm of its own and a virginal beauty that has remained unspoiled by the ravages of time.

Flights of fancy, tempered with traditional ritualistic and religious fervour, together with a utilitarian view of aesthetic design these are the characteristics that go into moulding the eternal appeal of Oriya handicrafts.

The *Nabagunjara* exhibition displays specimen of a number of these handicrafts. A brief description of these crafts categories is given here.

Metal Crafts

Brass and bell metal craft

The brass and bell metal work is a traditional and major craft of Orissa practised in various parts of the state. The



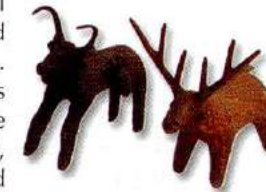
flexible brass fish of Ganjam, the brass figurines of Kantilo, the brass and bell metalware of Cuttack and Sambalpur and the 'cire perdue' art

metal castings of the Sithulias (Dhokras) are typical examples of Orissa's metal craft. The bell metal and brass utensils of Orissa are remarkable for the beauty of their shape and their rich exquisiteness. The articles made are household utensils and large vessels, as well as a few decorative pieces. Making of brass icons, a traditional craft, is now carried on by a few craftsmen living in Puri. A number of artisans work in metal-craft at Bainchua, Kantilo, Chandanpur, Balkati, Achutpur and Rajsinakhal and other places in Puri, and also in the districts of Cuttack, Ganjam, Sundergarh, Dhenkanal, Keonjhar, Bolangir, Mayurbhanj, Koraput and Sambalpur

Tribal metal craft

The brass and bell metal images, known as dhokra work, produced in the tribal areas of eastern and central India, are hollow-cast votive images reflecting the archetypal dynamism of a pre-historic tradition. The tribals of Orissa use the cire-perdue (lost-wax) method to produce vigorous ancestral forms and bowls.

Metal workers engaged in this craft are of two types- those residents in or near tribal areas, and itinerant casters called



dhokras, who move from village to village on bullock-carts and set up roadside foundries where they produce their wares.

Kondh metal images are unique in their originality and expressiveness, and certainly belong to the most important examples of tribal art in Orissa, comparable indeed to the finest examples of tribal art anywhere. Some are thought to help their owners acquire personal riches. But the greatest numbers of Kondh bronzes belong to the category of precious objects. These often very prestigious bronze figurines were formerly given to a daughter by her parents as a dowry.



Silver Filigree

The silver filigree of Cuttack, locally known as tarkashi, is noted for its delicacy and fine workmanship. Silver filigree is made of silver drawn into fine wires and foils, artistically joined together in a framework of extremely delicate designs. Filigree is distinguished from other ornaments and jewellery work by its superb finish, fine foils and texture,

and snow glaze. In the old days, the filigree workers of Cuttack supplied filigree items like rose water sprayers and candle stands to overseas traders. Traditional armlets, bracelets and rings of Mughal design are also produced in silver, in addition to pendants, chains, earrings, brooches and hairpins of high grade silver.



Filigree ornaments include necklaces, bangles, bracelets, armlets, earrings, hair-rings, perfume containers, dainty floral and leaf patterned purses.

Paintings

Pata-chitra

The folk paintings or patachitra of Orissa have a tradition of great antiquity. Currently, chitrakars or painters are to be found mostly in the village of Raghurajpur and in small hamlets near the Jagannath temple at Puri. The paintings depict major gods in the Hindu pantheon, familiar episodes in the Radha-Krishna legend, and Jagannath, the chief deity of the Puri temple. The 'patas' usually have mythological themes. Scenes from the Hindu epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana and stories from the Radha-Krishna legend come alive in these quaint illustrations.

A speciality of 'patachitra' is its indigenous quality –the 'chitrakars' (painters) prepare their canvas by coating it with a mixture of chalk and gum made from tamarind seeds. This mixture gives the surface a leathery quality on which the artist paints with earth and stone colours.



All the painters are descendants of those connected, one way or the other, with the cult and worship of the deities of Puri. There are two communities of painters, one called Dutta Mahapatra and the other called Chitrakara. As per the assignment of various sebas of the deities by the Raja of Puri, the Seba of painting the three deities after Snanajatra has been assigned to descendants of one family of Dutta Mahapatra. The right of Seba is hereditary and passes on from one generation to the other.

Thia Badhia is a type of Jatri painting of the Jagannath temple of Puri. Jatri paintings or pilgrim paintings originated and evolved in the temple of Jagannatha at Puri basically to popularise the cult. Traditionally these were used to be bought by the pilgrims visiting the temple all the year round. It was customary for a pilgrim visiting Puri to carry with him Prasad (offerings) of the Lord and a painted image or a painting, the latter relatively lighter, on the return journey. Although the jatri paintings widely vary in sizes, its theme almost remains the same i.e. the deities of Jagannatha, Balabhadra and Subhadra. Thia badhia is the total narrative painting that describes the deities, the temple and the town.

Chitra-Pothi : Illustrated Palm-Leaf Manuscripts and paintings

The word pothi is a derivative from the Sanskrit pustaka, and denotes a pile of palm-leaves with writings on them, which is strung on a cord through pre-bored holes in the centre and protected by a pair of wooden covers at top and



bottom of the pile. In Orissa, all writing was done on pothis till about the end of the nineteenth century and the State thus possessed a large number of such palm-leaf manuscripts.

Many families keep a collection of pothis near the household deities and offer prayers to these, though they are never opened or read. In many villages, there are 'libraries' of pothis in community houses and religious texts are read from these pothis, morning and evening, as daily ritual.

Though having many similarities with the pata-chitra, the

palm-leaf art developed its own rules and conventions and stood out as a distinct school. Writing of pothis was mainly done in Cuttack, Puri and Ganjam districts of Orissa, which had a tradition of literature. People of all castes worked as scribes, though traditionally it was the Karan (Kayastha), which was the caste of scribes.

Today, instead of manuscripts, the chitrakars are making painting and a black line drawing on palm leaves. The centrepiece of palm leaf has to be used. It is dried for four- five days and then soaked in water for two days. When dry, etching of drawing is done with a special tool called Nekhani. When the drawing is completed, a rag is dipped in black colour and rubbed over the palm leaf. The black colour is settled in the etched lines, the excess black colour is removed by washing the leaf in water.



Wood Crafts

Wood Carving

Carving and ornamentation of wood, a material that is relatively easier to work with and is available in innumerable varieties all over the country, is perhaps, the



most expressive of all crafts in India. Whether it is in architecture as in carving pillars, brackets, windows, doors – furniture, sacred images of deities or utilitarian objects from containers to combs, the vocabulary of wood carving has always been dictated by the grain of the timber employed. The wood carvers of Puri, Bhubaneswar and Raghurajpur, create beautiful idols, working in *Gambari* wood.

Painted woodwork

Painting on wood seems to be an ancient art and so also painting on cloth. The mystic bodies of the deities Balabhadra, Subhadra and Jagannath are painted. The



painting is redone every year after *snanajatra*. Painting is also done on the rathas during Rathajatra and on solapith decorations during various *Sebas* of the deities from time to time throughout the year. Cloth is mounted on wooden manuscript covers and painted. In the same manner painting is done on cloth mounted on wooden boxes called *pedis* given to the brides during marriage in rural areas.

A special charm of Orissa woodcarving is the blending of folk and classical forms. The wood carvers make a variety of decorative and utilitarian objects – toys depicting real and mystical birds and animals, dowry-boxes and bowls, images of god and goddesses and human figures. All these are carved with great skill and are beautifully painted in bright colours by carvers, most of whom are accomplished *Chitrakars* or painters as well.

Solapith work

This is an extremely old craft associated with festivals and rituals. Puri is famous for it and products like small statues of god, goddesses and temples, garlands, flowers, animals and bird figures, decorative hangings, headgears used by the bride and bridegroom in marriages.



Clay Crafts

Terracotta

Although the terracotta craft is widespread in the state, the terracottas of Barpali and Sonpur are especially noteworthy for their beautiful roof tiles and toys.

The potters of Orissa are kept busy supplying articles for daily use in temples and homes. The artisans of Cuttack produce statues and toys to meet the local demand at the time of festivals.

Terracotta is an ancient craft as pursued in Sambalpur and Balassore districts. Beneath wayside sacred trees or before village shrines, one may find clusters of clay horses and elephants- votive offerings made by people of the area for boons granted.



Lacquered work

The lacquered bamboo boxes and terracotta making is an old and traditional crafts of Orissa. The Navrangpur village of Karapat district is famous for this craft. Bamboo boxes and mats are covered with lacquer of different colours and shades, depicting beautiful folk designs, and are among the items that form a girl's trousseau. Artisans in this craft are concentrated in Navrangpur, Koraput district, with some families at Berhampur, and Dharakot in Ganjam district. In Baleshwar, Orissa, as well as



adjoining areas in Bengal, the *Shankhar* caste of lac bangle makers produce a heartening variety of lively

terracotta dolls and toys, lac-painted in bright, spirited colours. Birds, horses, animals, *raja-rani* or king and queen, *ladka-ladki* or boy and girl, are only a few such toys. Essentially used as votive offerings to deities, the human figures are wishes made by childless couples desperately praying for a child. The terracotta toys are also employed for ritual display in temples during important festivals such as *Holi*, *Shivaratri*, *Durga puja*.

Nowadays the artisans are making various types of products not only for villagers but also for city dwellers. Apart from traditional products, a new range of decorative utility products have come into existence.

Painted Terracotta

Cloth is mounted on earthen pots and religious themes are painted on them. These are used by a sect of *Vaishnavas* called *Bairagis* who have renounced all family life when they go for *vikshya* (collection of food for living). Such pots are still made at *Parlakimidi*.



Gobar Kandhayi

In Puri, and to some extent in Raghurajpur, there exists a tradition of making wonderful light weight figures, also known as *gobar kandhayi*, or "toys made from cow dung". The surface is then smoothed and painted, initially in base white, upon which the bright colours of facial and other details are added. Often such toy animals, with moveable heads, are also made in very large sizes.



Hand Crafted Textiles

Ikat techniques (yarn-resist)

This is the most important craft of Orissa with about 3 lakh weavers producing cotton, tussar and silk cloths. The



handloom fabrics of Orissa are famous for their rich variety of designs, bold and unusual patterns, vibrant yet subtle colours, unique tie & dye effects, and luxuriant texture. Localised mainly in Bargarh in Sambalpur and Althagarh in Cuttack, the textile weavers of Orissa have a supreme mastery of their craft. The Tie and Dye technique

of Orissa, called Ikat, is an old and intricate process of dyeing the yarn in segments to produce the desired pattern on the loom while weaving.

Patronised for generations by the local population of all social strata, the bandha or ikat industry of Orissa is represented almost entirely by two



weaver communities- the Mehers of Sonpur and Bargarh and the Patras from Nuapatna and Cuttack regions – each group having developed their own characteristic styles.

In Nuapatna there is an intriguing tradition of weaving slokas or verses from the Gita Govinda text on to the fabric known as 'pheta'. Each 'pheta' contained one sloka or verse woven into it. Today the weavers from the Patra community in Nuapatna continue to weave these traditional Gita Govinda fabrics.

Whereas traditionally Patra weavers from Nuapatna specialised in bandhas of pure and tussar silk and the Mehers of Bargarh wove mainly cotton ikats, today the



bandhas of Orissa are poised on the crossroads of change. Rigid distinctions no longer exist as division of skills and specialization has entered ikat production in many villages. Some specialise in tying and dyeing while neighbouring villages buy the dyed yarn to be woven into saris. In the realm of design, traditional motifs, once confined to one or other weaver group, are now borrowed and redesigned

by both communities. Weavers who once wove only saris for local usage, now produce yardage, scarves, linen, etc. for urban and export markets.



Applique' work

Applique is an old Orissa folk art originating in Pipli, a village of Puri district. The craft is also practised to some extent in Puri,

Barpali, Khalikote, Kanchna and Chikti, in Ganjam. The brilliant applique' work of pipli village is known for its folk character and vitality. With an artist's eye, the pipli tailors deftly stitch motifs of elephants, peacocks and flowers on a cloth back-ground, to form harmonious and colourful patterns. Originally religious in impulse, temples were the main patrons of the craft, and even now traditional umbrellas, canopies and trasa (fans) are widely used by them. With changing times, however, applique' work has been re-oriented to suit modern tastes, and is now a growing industry.



Stone crafts

Stone Carving

The stone carvings of Orissa reflect the grandeur of a rich past. This art has been developed over the centuries by craftsmen who are descendants of the great builders of the famous temples. From soapstone and 'Kochila' (a hardstone) the stone carvers sculpture smaller replicas of Lingaraj and Konarak temples and the figures on the temple walls, with superb finesse.

In Pathuriasahi at Puri there are stone carvers as skilled as the master builders of Konarak, Bhubaneswar and Puri. The stone carvers of Puri still fashion stone into objects of rare beauty.



Apart from traditional stone carvers there are other settlements of craftsmen at Mangalpur near Balasore who made beautiful stone utensils and utility items. Most of the turned utensils are made from a semi-hard grey stone which takes a beautiful dark polish. Even today the bowls, plates, and glasses made from this stone are notable for their sensitive line and texture. Artisan families living at Puri, Bhubaneswar, Lalitgiri, Khiching Boulagadia, Dharkakot, and Mathura make their living through stone carving.



Carving

Ivory carving

Ivory Carving is one of the oldest crafts in India as may be inferred from epics and treatises, and archaeological remains. The Brihat Samhita, a classical treatise, mentions ivory as the best material for bedsteads, an inscription at Sanchi refers to a guild of ivory carvers in the city of Vidisa while excavations at



Mohenjo-daro and Taxila have revealed fine Ivory needles and hair pins. The discovery of caskets at Bamian with exquisitely carved friezes of human figures points to an ancient tradition in this craft. Travellers records of India's export trade with the Roman Empire mention ivory carving as one of the most important commodities of export.



A variety of articles are produced in Orissa at places such as Bhubneswar and Puri. This area has a distinct style of carving.

Horn work

Orissa crafts are well known for their delicacy of design and dynamism of form. The craftsmen of Puri, Parlakhemedi and Cuttack skilfully fashion horn into fragile-looking birds and animals, combs, ash trays, pipes and other decorative and utility articles. At Parlakhemedi in the district of Ganjam, the craft was established under the patronage of the local rajas in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Most of the artisans engaged in this craft are highly skilled and are capable of giving various shapes to animal horn obtained mainly from buffaloes and cows. While horn has traditionally been used for producing utility items like combs and tobacco pipes, animals like cranes, crabs, prawns, elephants and fighting bulls, as well as ash-trays, cigarette cases, pen stands, etc. are also being made.



Nabagunjara



Crafts Museum, New Delhi

Senior Director and Staff
of the Crafts Museum
Cordially invite you to

“Nabagunjara”
An Exhibition on Handicrafts
and Heritage Textiles of Orissa

Special Attractions:

Demonstration cum sale by craftspersons
and performances by folk troupes
Display includes Objects from
Orissa State Museum, Bhubaneswar

On view from 8th to 22nd January 2004
Daily from 10 AM to 5 PM
(Monday closed)

Crafts Museum, Pragati Maidan, New Delhi

Inauguration by

Shri Navin Patnaik
Hon'ble Chief Minister of Orissa

on Wednesday, January 7, 2004 at 3.00 PM

Shri S. B. Mohapatra
Secretary (Textiles), Government of India
&

Dr. Subas Pani
Development Commissioner (Handloom)
Government of India

will be the Guests of Honour