HISTORY OF INDIAN HANDICRAFTS

Indian Handicrafts have been distinguished for their great aesthetic and functional value for centuries. In ancient times, the shilpis\(^1\) conceptualized the intricate designs and patterns, which were crafted painfully into the temples and the objects associated with them. Apart from the temples, other handicraft items too have gained immense popularity.

Handicraft items that were patronized by the Mughal royalty show a remarkable refinement of workmanship. In these crafts the designs were very often influenced by the court paintings and miniature art derived from Persian or indigenous sources. These designs are evident in the Indian carpets, brocades, papier machie, stone inlay and so on.
Traditionally, the artists prepared the designs on paper, which were subsequently executed by the craftsmen. The designs were assigned to different craftsmen according to their abilities and skill. Thus the designer or master craftsman visualized the complete design indicating the details of form, color distribution and proportion to be realized by various specialists.

The rules of iconography were written down in the ancient scriptures, namely the Shilpa Shastrā'. The master craftsman would first visualize the image in a particular representation, according to the rules of iconography laid down in the scriptures on stone craft, and prepare initially a model in wax or clay. This would later be cast by craftsmen, while the master craftsman executed the finer work. This combination of design ability and technical skills was a part of our craft tradition. There are however, many crafts where the craftsman both designs and executes the products himself.

Excavations have found inroads into very ancient times. Archeology has revealed the secrets preserved by the earth in its crust.
Excavations of tools help us understand the nature of production and the aesthetic standards of the period to which they belong.

The particular period and appeal of a handicraft item can be gauged from the number of industries, technique of production, types of goods produced and materials used. This state reflects the aesthetic sense of the people, curvature of objects, lines, space, light and shades. An examination of the visual arts, such as sculpture, paintings and terra cotta unveil the element of art. Not all crafts were produced for daily needs.

Tools used in Handicrafts today reflect the traditions of the early age, as old as the Stone Age. The rural and tribal artisans use processes and techniques inherited by them from their forefathers in the creation of their crafts. Though the tools used in that age were mainly for survival purposes, the making of these tools required considerable amount of skill.

The Stone Age man adopted the ‘hammer stone’ method to make flake tools. This require striking the mass stone near the edge at an angle of 120 degrees with the convex surface of a water worn pebble
selected as hammer stone. This was perfected and put to use in the making
of hand axes. Tools are a very important component of this art. This is the
beginning of the age long tradition of handicrafts.

The discovery of several spindles, and a piece of cotton
stuck to a silver vase, revealed that the spinning and weaving of cotton
was known to the Harrappans, nearly five thousand years ago. References
to weaving are found in the Vedic literature on the method of spinning,
the various materials used.

The foundations of the Indian textile trade with other
countries began as early as the second century BC. A hoard of block
printed and resist-dyed fabrics, mainly of Gujarati origin, found in the tombs
of Fostat, Egypt, are the proof of large-scale Indian export of cotton textiles
to the Egypt in medieval times.

In the 13th century, Indian silk was used as barter for spices
from the western countries. Towards the end of the 17th century, the British
East India Company had begun exports of Indian silks and various other
cotton fabrics to other countries. These included the famous fine Muslin
cloth of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Painted and printed cottons or chintz was extensively practiced between India, China, Java and the Philippines, long before the arrival of the Europeans.

Before the introduction of mechanized means of spinning in the early 19th century, Indian cottons and silks were hand spun and hand woven, a highly popular fabric, called the khadi. Fabrics that use mill-spun yarn but which are hand-woven are known as handloom.

Today cotton is an integral part of textiles in India. Nearly four million handlooms are engaged in weaving fabrics of nearly 23 different varieties of cotton.

The Rig Vedic literature being religion based describes mainly such objects of art and crafts as were directly or indirectly associated with the religious rituals. Though, the artistic inclinations of our ancestors are not revealed, we can peek into their life-styles. The ancient objects were at times described in terms of the supernatural to create awe towards them.
The main types of vessels, pots and pans referred to in Rig Veda are many. The general term used for pot in the Rig Vedic literature is Patra. It soon acquired a generic connotation and began to be used for pots of all specifications.

The most popular material used for making vessels, specially those meant for offering sacrifices and worship, was wood, while clay pots were made for domestic uses. References to metal pots too have been found. Leather too is mentioned as having been used for making vessels.

Rig Veda remains silent on the various techniques in the making of these vessels and other objects. But it does have references of different materials in use. Ironically, wooden vessels in those days were used to drink and store alcohol. But they were also considered auspicious as they were used to perform yajnas.

Besides wood, metallic vessels were very popular, and ornaments and vessels were made out of these. Interestingly, the scriptures also mention the use of gold and silver. Earthen ware being the simplest
to make, failed to make it to the scriptures because wood was considered auspicious and metal exotic.

Indian sculptures flourished in the 3rd century BC under the Buddhist religion, especially under the Mauryan emperor Ashoka, who had embraced the religion. Around 85,000 stupas or dome-shaped monuments, with the teachings of Buddhism engraved on rocks and pillars, were constructed. The famous Ashoka Pillar at Sarnath in Madhya Pradesh, attracts scores of visitors around the year. The sacred wheel of law or the dharmachakra is symbolic of the first sermon that Buddha delivered at Sarnath. The lion depicted in the same has been adopted as part of the national emblem of India.

The Great Stupa at Sanchi has finely carved gateways Buddhist legends and life-styles of two thousand years ago. It is fifty-four feet high and is surrounded by a stone railing and four elaborately carved gateways on each side. The gateway relief depicts tales of Buddha’s incarnations, his life as a prince, and his moment of enlightenment, his sermons and his worshippers.
Though, Buddhism deplored idol worship, this was an inevitable change as the popularity of Buddhism spread far and wide. To emphasize his divinity, this human form was depicted with features like a halo around the head, the dharmachakra engraved upon his palms and soles of his feet, and the lion throne representing his royal ancestry.

These Buddhist statues, exhibiting a serene Buddha, with a glowing face are awe inspiring with their sheer size and excellent craftsmanship.

The handicrafts in this country form an important part of our rich cultural heritage. The handicrafts have now got partially submerged under the rising forces of modern industrialization with its higher mechanization. We are losing not only an ancient heritage but also a most essential element in our social composition.

Before the beginning of the Industrial Revolution of England, the East India Company concentrated on the export of Indian manufactured goods, textiles, spices, etc., to Europe where these articles were in great demand. The Industrial Revolution reversed the character of India’s foreign
trade. Tremendous expansion of productive capacity of manufactures resulted in increased demand of raw materials for British industry and the need to capture foreign markets. As a first step attempts were made to restrict and crush Indian manufactures. On the other hand, efforts were made to commercialise agriculture so as to step up the export of raw materials. The Indian textile handicrafts were the first to be hit. The decline of the industry started a chain reaction leading to the speedy decline of other handicrafts. The process of decline of handicrafts was accelerated by the development of means of transport.

Exports also contributed to the growth and development of our country. Planned development over the last five decades had resulted in rapid transformation of India export structure. From the position of an exporter of basically primary products and few industrial products, viz, textiles, spices, etc., India has emerged as an important exporter of a fairly diversified basket of manufactured items.

The transformation of India’s external sector from an importer of manufacturers to an exporter has also been a significant achievement. There has also been considerable diversification as far as
individual products are concerned, in spite of which the narrow base of India’s exports continues to be the most important weakness of India’s exports.

The focus of Indian exports still continues to be on goods manufactured by urban industries like engineering goods, textiles, gems and jewellery etc. Though there is great emphasis for export from small and medium scale industries, the thrust given for viable and profitable areas like Handicrafts is much less, than what it should have been. This is evident from the fact that though our Handicrafts are highly appreciated and valued abroad, our export statistics give a very grim picture in this regard.

HANDICRAFTS OF KERALA

Kerala has the tradition of making beautiful handicrafts with ivory, bamboo, palm leaves, seashells, wood, coconut shells, clay, cloth, metals, stone etc. Handicrafts in Kerala are mostly hereditary occupation. Many handicraft classics can be seen in palaces, old heritage homes, museums, etc. The artists are experts in making beautiful flower vases,
ash trays, ornamental plates, jewel boxes, miniature boats, elephants, idols, kathakali masks, embroidery works, etc.

Handicrafts have evolved into a small-scale industry in Kerala. The making, domestic selling and exporting are increasing and now there are many institutes giving training in Handicrafts.

The Handicrafts of Kerala, noted for their uniqueness in style, perfection, elegance of design, form an invaluable part of the life stream of Kerala culture. The craftsmen of Kerala have made the most skilful use of the raw materials without sacrificing the requirements of aesthetics and thus made their rich contribution to the life of the community. With Bell Metal casting the craftsmen of Kerala produced a variety of images of gods and goddesses.

Aranmula Metal Mirror deserves special mention in the bell metal industry of Kerala. The mirror is made of an alloy consisting of ten parts of copper and 5.50 parts of tin. It is oval in shape and a standard
mirror is about 6 inches in length and 50 inch thick and has a handle by which it is to be held. The artisans of Aranmula who have practiced this art all these years kept it almost as the family secret.

Koftgari works, Wood Carving, Marquetry in wood, Ivory and Buffalo horn Carving, Screw Pine Mat Making, Bamboo Reed Weaving, Palmyra Leaf Weaving, Kora Grass Mat Making, Rattan or Cane work, Embroidery and Lace Making, Lapidary work, Granite carving, Coconut shell carving, Lacquer work, Cotton map making, Toys and Dolls, Jewellery, Coir Products, Musical instruments manufacturing are also some of the important handicraft making activities of Kerala.

Woven Textiles: The severe plain white with gold band for border and a similar one on the pallu is typical of Kerala, known as karalkudu.

Embroidery: Kerala produces beautiful embroidered liturgical vestment in traditional designs. The main vestments are flowing robes, stoles, cloaks, surplices, etc. Men mostly do this.
Crochet Items: Kerala produces crochet items like lace, caps etc in local designs like elephant, bamboo and coconut tree.

Carpets and Floorings: Kerala has an old tradition in carpets and had at one time attained considerable distinction for every striking carpets in wool and silk. The new attempt is to use Coir.

Wood work: Kerala has many splendid samples of sculptural carvings in temples as well as in churches. Kerala also produces ancient statues of Hindu deities, animals, figures of women, bookstands etc.

Ivory Carvings: Kerala has won great renown as center for ivory carving. It has specialised in figures of deities and animals.

Mat weaving: Kora grass mats have attained exceptional excellence in Kerala. The processed grass is colored and woven into animals.

Horn work: The most common items made from horn is the comb, jewels, flowers, animals, birds, etc.
Shell work: A variety of coconut shell articles like bowls, vases, flowers, rosewater, sprinklers, tea coasters are made in Kerala. Conch shell works are also very famous.

Metal Ware: Kerala is the hometown of bell metal. Its famous Urlis (cooking vessels), Varpu (cauldron), Velaku (lamp), KindiQ'ug), jewel boxes, etc are world famous.

Stone ware: Kerala is rich in granite which is largely used in structures and image making, icons, house hold articles, etc.

Theatre crafts: Masks and Head gears (Kathakali) of Kerala have a high degree of popularity. The traditional costumes of Ottamthuilal, Rasalila, Kathakali are in great demand.
REFERENCE:

1. Temples of Kerala : Shilpis (P. 120)

2. Temples of Kerala : Vedic (P. 3)