

Udai lal Kumhar an Indian Artist.

I first meet Udai at the 2003 International Ceramics Festival in Aberystwyth where he was one of the guest demonstrators. I had been planning to visit India later that year and arranged to be in contact with him nearer the time I was to be in Rajasthan.

Udai's family has been living and working in the small town of Molela, 50kms north of Udiapur in southern Rajasthan . His family has been practising the tradition of making terracotta plaques of the popular Hindu deity for the past 15 generations. Udai began his apprenticeship at the age of 10, under the guidance of his father , and it is the custom Udai's son Mukesh will follow on in the craft when he has completed his education at the village school.

Molela is known in the area as a potters village, with about 30 families from the Kumbar caste . It produces a range of pottery goods from devotional plaque to large panels depicting rural village scenes, and smaller items such as , temple hand bells and domestic ware. The main customers for the religious goods are the tribal peoples of Rajasthan and Gujarat , who are the Garasia , Bhil, Meena , and Rajput groups. January is the chosen month for them to make the long journey , which takes 10 days by bus or by walking, covering the several 100 kms from their homes to Molela , to collect new plaques for their village temples and shrines. On the journey they will be accompanied their Brahmin priest to guide them in their selection and to consecrate the purchase before the return journey back to their villages .

The goddess Durga, usually depicted astride a lion or a horse carrying a trident and a drum is the most popular choice . She has the power to remove many obstacles and restore good harvests and health which is so important to these rural people. Also popular is the Takaj plaque, depicting a 5 to 9 headed cobra . Death from a snake bite is common amongst villagers when they are out tending to their fields . The Takaj are to be found in the temples to appease the serpents and are used as part of ceremony to cure a snake bites . The snake is not regarded with total fear , and there are regions of India where each house keeps a resident snake as without one a house would be devoid of good luck. Snakes are protected in the compounds of many temples and a snake hole in the roots of a tree is a hallow site where the Takaj are often placed .

The style of using relief work in the portrayal of the deity has it's origins back in a local myth that the first practitioner of this method was a partially sighted - potter working in Molela . Legend has it that he was visited by the god

Dharamraj in a dream and who told him to make a “murti”

(sculpture) .The potter answered the god .“ Because my sight is poor , how can I do such work ? ” to which came the reply from Dharamraj. “ I am standing behind you ! Just open your eyes and see the shadow of my figure.” The potter opened his eyes and saw the shadow of Dharma , and then returned to his workshop and began to make the “ murti” of , the tradition of which still continues today in Molela.

Two local clays are used in the production. One is Nada, a coarse black clay with a high sand grog and the other is Alu, a finer grey clay used for throwing. The two clays are mixed together at a 50- 50 % ratio with the addition of 20% dried and sifted donkey dung which will help disperse the heat through the plaque and lessen the thermal shock during the firing. Udai mixes the two types of clay together , adding the dried donkey dung into the mixture along with the water. He then proceeds to wedge the clay with his feet , followed by kneading it by hand into a round ball ready for use . The kneaded clay is taken into the courtyard of his workshop and he works on the floor surface which has been dusted with dried donkey dung .The clay is then flattened and smoothed using a bevelled wooden tool until it is a 1 ins thick slab. The shape of the plaque is then cut out , followed by the assembly of the top pelmet and sides. He then forms the outline of the horse which Durga is mounted on using a coil of clay . The body of the horse is a rough shape of thin flattened piece of clay, which he now pinches onto the outline form. The figure of Durga sitting astride the horse, is then added using the same method as above . The finer details are now included , these being the harness and decorations along with the facial features of the rider. The finials which have been thrown earlier in the day are now added . They are thrown on the hump of a block wheel , which is turned by a stick placed in a socket , to propel the wheel . The whole process from clay preparation to the finished drying stage will take Udai 1hour 30mins to complete. In everyday practice at his workshop he would have had the clay already prepared for him by one of his staff and his task would be just to make the plaques.

The panels are left to dry in the workshop courtyard before they are stacked ready to be fired in a circular open kiln made from brick called an Awara. The kiln is 5feet in height, by 6 feet in diameter with 4 stoking ports around it’s base. The work is loaded onto steel bars which are supported on brick piers leaving a 2 foot fire chamber below which can be fuelled from the ports. Thirty panels at a time can be fired in one firing ,and packed around the top and in any narrow spaces are placed smaller items such as clay lamps and temple bells . The kiln is then sealed with three layers of pottery shards , from

redundant water pots, to a depth of 3 layers . It is then fired for approximately 6 hours to a temperature of between 600/700 degrees Celsius. To begin with the kiln is stoked with dry corn stalks and cobs. This is followed by cow dung cakes , to initially warm the it through . After 2 hours of gradual warming the fire ports are stoked more vigorously with larger pieces of timber . A slow and steady increase in temperature is achieved, until the pottery shards covering the kiln start to turn to a carbon black colour . Once this stage has been reached , the kiln is now fully warmed through, and larger lengths of timber can now stoked, until an inferno is now burning in the fire box . The cover of the kiln slowly changes to a glowing red over the top indicating that the maximum temperature has now been reached. It is then left over night to cool down before being unpacked in the morning.

Alongside making religious plaques, Udai also produces large highly detailed panels showing traditional Rajasthan village scenes such as weddings and every day rural life in a narrative form.

Udai lal Kumhar is available for demonstration work and exhibitions of his craft and can be contacted by e- mail at gulabchandra@hotmail.com

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