

## Brass Enamelling : The Fading Art of Jaipur

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Look at a lump of brass; hardly anyone would find it attractive in the form it is; except, of course those few who are interested in its commercial value. However, after it undergoes the transformation in the dexterous hands of an artist it becomes a charmingly attractive piece of interior decoration even to those eyes who are more accustomed to Modern, Pop, Op or Junk art forms. An artist? Yes, indeed, that is what he should be called, overlooking the grim fact that he is a daily wage worker or at best, euphemistically called a craftsman (Figs.1-2).

Through his expert hands the lump of brass just underwent the well known processes of melting, moulding, chiseling, filling coloured material in the etchings and baking. The instruments too are simple furnaces, moulds, hammers, chisels



Fig.1



Fig.2

and multi-coloured enamel/shellac sticks. But how he controls the process and uses his instruments for a tangible manifestation of his vision is responsible for this beautiful artistic creation.

The brass used is in the form of sheets or ingots. Popular shapes given to it are vessels of different sizes and shapes as well as circular, oval or rectangular trays and dishes of various dimensions. After giving initial shape the real job begins. Before engraving is commenced a hard pad is provided by filling shellac in the vessels of lesser thickness in order to prevent any deformation. The engraver then uses chisels of different shapes and sizes. The other tool he uses is a hammer, which is nothing but a balanced piece of wood roughly one and a half feet long and one inch square with one tapered end. Depending on the line he wants to draw he holds a selected chisel in his left hand, puts it on the brass surface and starts lightly hammering it with the wooden stick. Hours of delicate strokes with this hammer and chisels in his skilled hands and a rare combination of concentration and patience conclude the first step of laying down the foundation for producing an exquisite decorative piece.



Fig.3

Once the basic engraving is done, the underside shellac coating is removed and the surface is cleaned. The fine but dull engraved patterns are brought to life by heating the engraved portions locally and mildly and painstakingly melting in the different coloured enamel sticks. The process comes to an end with soft buffing and the resultant piece is a delight to eyes. Depending on the finesse of engraved patterns and selection of colours

this piece can be sold at prices ranging from a few to few thousands rupees.

The radiant coloured leaves, petals, flowers and other motifs are arranged in optically stimulating intricate geometric patterns (Fig.3). If some good pieces of enameled brass are displayed in an art gallery or exhibition the viewers are sure to feel as if they are amidst scintillating pieces of



Fig.4

Op art. Approach a round plate with coloured designs and the enameled pattern will give an illusion of movement; look at another piece and it would appear to be single coloured but



Fig.5

as you approach it you will find it to be constituted of close tones of the colour formed by recognized motifs like flowers, leaves, petals and the like giving an illusion of just one colour (Figs.4-6).

The metaphysics of Op art is



Fig.6

said to be the cult of efficiency; the same is true for brass enameling as well. Looking at these pieces one can hardly give credit for the origin of Op art to the modern artists or the one century old New England ladies who practiced it as a home craft. Op art does not seem to have come to existence only as a reaction to the USA's two post war artistic revolutions - Abstract Expressionism and Pop - but it had sprouted somewhere in the Orient amongst the famous carpet makers of China and brass enamellers of India. The only thing the USA's artistic revolutions seem to have contributed is giving a name and a new definition to this ancient Oriental art.

Whether or not brass enameling can be considered as Op art can be best left to art critics and tracing back its origin to the art historians and antique collectors. What exists in Jaipur is not originally local. Some expert brass enamellers were brought to Jaipur from somewhere in Uttar Pradesh by Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh of Jaipur who also founded the School of Arts and Crafts here. Bringing the teaching and training of arts and crafts under one roof of state patronage brought about a healthy interaction between the two fields. This mutual exchange honed the skill of talented artistes of fine arts to create exclusive works and fine tuned the vision of talented craftsmen to produce charming artistic pieces of their respective craft. Since then this art has passed through many ups and downs depending on the rise and fall of patrons, who were mostly rulers of states or the capitalists with aesthetic bent.

In the late sixties and early seventies the increasing interest of foreign tourists, which induced some of it in our countrymen too, had made the demand of enameled brassware manifold. This demand certainly benefited the state financially. However, as regards the art and the artistes are concerned it proved to be a slow poison. It became a trade and went fully under the control of business community, who in order to cope with the demand and the competition started mass producing the cheaper and conventional decorative goods having least artistic and, what is more important, creative value in them.

As in other fields the unbridled commercialization has created economic disparity between artistes/craftsmen and business people. The inevitable result is

that the few very good artists left, who were paid liberally only because they were fine engravers, rusted in absence of needed patronage to nurture creative talent. Those who are earning their bare livelihood are considerably new in the field and are not artists but mere skilled workers in income brackets defined by quantity they produce and not the quality.

It is now rather difficult to change the mental attitude of the old masters of this art in the changed circumstances. They cannot be reminded of their creative talents; the poor fellows do not have enough time to think of artistic creativity. The struggle to make two ends meet confronts them and forces them to concentrate only on what they have been doing for past few years. The new comers are very few in numbers for obvious reasons. For the same reasons they do not have enough initiative or time to hone their finesse in engraving what to say of creative pursuits.

The prevailing education system in present day India has not left this field untouched. Like many others these artistes are also opposed to let their offspring enter their traditional family occupation. They prefer them to be graduates and end up as clerks rather than to depend on this hard earned money and that too after years of training and practice.

After the end of feudal support to arts and crafts post integration of princely states in the republic, government took many steps towards supporting arts and crafts by launching academies and other such organizations at central as well as state levels. However, in spite of all these efforts the results have not been as encouraging as expected. Except for some bright spots appearing when dedicated individuals were at the helm of some particular organization, the gloom continues; thanks to the snail's pace of the bureaucratic set up and its notorious red tape as well as wide spread corruption.

In the field of crafts national award for Master craftsmen was instituted by the office of the development commissioner (Handicrafts), earlier known as the All India Handicrafts Board, in the year 1966. It has been an annual feature ever since. The award aims at giving an incentive to the traditional craftsmen for their artistic skill, imagination and craftsmanship. Selection for this National Award is

done on All India basis. The awards are not restricted state-wise, nor are these confined to particular crafts. However, care is taken by the central selection committee to avoid repetition of an award to the same craft year after year. Numerous other commendable steps have also been taken by the government like establishing of National Handicrafts & Handloom Museum, but by the time the resultant flow reaches the grass root level it is reduced to a trickle at the most.

Though these efforts are inspiring, they are hardly encouraging in practical terms looking at the rare availability due to number of crafts practiced. Some radical thinking, innovative attitude and pragmatic approach are required to change the scenario. Something like what has happened to *Khādi* in recent years.

The only way to stop brass enameling from perishing as an art form appears to be giving it recognition as a fine art. The recognition should be on tangible grounds and should come from all sides. Like a hoarding painter has scope of graduating to be an artist, a brass enameller should have a scope of graduating from an artisan to an artist. An individual who chooses painting as his career has hopes that some day his work will catch eyes of critics and art connoisseurs to be benefited in pecuniary terms as well as fame. At present, in spite of all his skill and efforts, a brass enameller does not get more than what is fixed by his employer. And about fame, he still will be known as a skilled worker not as an artist. The way things are going, the day is not far when brass enameling as an art will only exist as a subject for antique collectors. The beginning of the end has already started.

Artists in the Paris' Group of Visual Research define an artistic phenomenon as 'a strictly visual experience on the level of physiological, not emotive, perception.' Why not then this dying art be recognized as one of the fine arts and not left to the mercy of some commercial houses.