



11. Clay Craft Chronicles.

Conversation with **Rajeev.B.R.**

Kalpa, Vol.04, 2023, pp. 70-73

Intent :

Artist Rajeev BR's works embody the blend of art, culture, and sustainability. As a skilled potter adept in wheel throwing and hand-building, Rajeev expresses his artistic vision influenced by cultural elements. Rajeev's role in the local art scene and adept navigation of market trends, balancing tradition and innovation, enriches the narrative in a straightforward exploration of artistry and eco-conscious craftsmanship.

In a recent exchange, a tailored questionnaire was devised probing into his artistic process and commitment to sustainable pottery practices. Rajeev graciously provided valuable insights into his techniques, cultural influences, and the choice of materials in his work.

What is your take on materiality and its importance in the field of art?

Clay is one of the most abundant and versatile resources on earth. My work is inspired by Indian Philosophy. The analogy of the potter, clay, and the pot, indicates a metamorphosis from formless into form. A potter transforms a lump of clay into a pot, hence giving it a shape and a pot can disintegrate back into being clay. This material aspect of clay has intrigued me. Clay is a forgiving medium and can be moulded into any form with the right skills. Working with clay has helped me improve my attention span and to be mindful and present. I think clay has an incredible impact on the mind due to its material nature

In the intricate world of pottery and ceramics, the foundation lies in selecting materials that form the core of artistic creation. What are the fundamental materials used in pottery and ceramics? Do you source your materials locally? How does using locally sourced materials affect the quality and character of your pottery?

Pottery has been one of India's traditional art forms. Pottery has existed for thousands of years. One of the earliest pottery artefacts discovered dates back to 20,000 years implying toughness and withstanding the test of time. Clay when fired to a high temperature of around 1200. C gives it a characteristic rock-like substance. This unique property gives its long shelf life when properly taken care of. Studio pottery and industrial production uses glazes which are a mixture of silica, aluminium, fluxes, and oxides which add character to the pots. Glazes are very important in my practice. One remembers a piece of pottery by its colour and texture rather than form, therefore the characteristics that meet the eye are vital.

Tools are highly indispensable in pottery. Carpentry and blacksmithery are interdependent with pottery as wooden and metal tools are used to craft a pot. A lot of the materials in our studio are sourced locally as much as possible. Clay is sourced from different parts of India.

At our studio, we prepare our glazes. I have also ordered glazes from abroad. However, the cost is high. It is much more viable to use locally available resources.

In the last decade, India has seen a tremendous increase in studio pottery. The number of people pursuing pottery is increasing. In India, traditional pottery has been limited to earthenware and not much stoneware or porcelain types of clay. The locally available materials have their attributes. Pure porcelain is available only in China and hence importing it is expensive. Its impact on climate change considering its carbon footprint poses a challenge. I also use dental tools in my practice, thus relying on what is already there. Twenty years ago, the Indian ceramic market did not even have the variety of materials we have. I can see an upward trend in the market. In my work, I have so far relied on locally available materials. However, I would like to see the decentralisation of technology and an increase in local production of ceramic materials that would help expand artistic expression.



Rajeev BR in his clay studio. (Photo : Yashas P S (@yashas_ps))

Following the previous question, could you explain the different types of clay you work with, and what distinguishes one type from another in terms of composition and characteristics?

Ceramics is a broad term and consists of three types of clay, the first being earthenware also commonly known as terracotta which is porous and can hold up to 25% of water. Hence water when stored in earthen pots tends to be cool.

The second type of clay is called stoneware which is less porous compared to earthenware which can hold up to 10% of water. Most commercially available crockery such as mugs and plates are made up of stoneware.

Porcelain represents the third major type of ceramics. When fired, porcelain will achieve translucency, which imparts it with a glass-like quality. Porcelain was a priced commodity in 16th-century Europe. Chinese porcelain cutlery was highly sought after by the aristocracy and royalty in Europe.

In my practice, I predominantly work with stoneware clay but I also have a fair bit of experience with terracotta and porcelain.

The art of ceramics, a timeless craft, is experiencing a resurgence in recognition and popularity in today's world. As this ancient practice gains modern attention, it's intriguing to explore how contemporary potters perceive this evolution.

a) How do modern potters perceive the revitalization of ceramics in today's world, considering its historical significance, and the increasing recognition it's gaining leading to mass production?

Studio pottery is still in its infancy in India. Access to essential information about sourcing raw materials, tools, and different techniques is a challenge, highlighting the burgeoning nature of this field and the potential for significant growth.

Even within university settings, the absence of open academic or research centres dedicated to comprehensively studying India's diverse clay types and their potential application in response to supply



Intricately detailed clay pots by Rajeev BR. (Photo : Yashas P S (@yashas_ps))

and demand is evident. In my experience, there is a noticeable lack of accessible information on this subject. The revitalization of ceramics in India can be more aptly described as a process of reinvention, rather than a discovery, as pottery has remained an integral part of Indian material culture. Furthermore, pottery studios have sprouted across India both in rural and urban areas, contributing to the resurgence of ceramics in India.

b. In the context of ceramics' resurgence, how do potters balance preserving traditional techniques with embracing contemporary innovations to create unique and relevant art pieces?

In my case, clay serves as the cornerstone of my artistic expression. My work predominantly draws inspiration from the intricate motifs adorning temple walls, with a significant focus on the captivating Hoysala architecture. I transform these motifs into my designs by crafting moulds and replicating them on pottery. While traditional architecture predominantly employs wood and stone, my work underscores the unique significance of clay as a medium. The essence of my artistic practice lies in faithfully representing temple architecture through the medium of clay. I view clay as a powerful medium for narrating the rich tapestry of Indian history and mythological tales. Depicting temple architecture through clay has garnered recognition due to its innovative approach. While individuals can't possess entire temples, they can take home a tangible piece of history through these creations, offering personal fulfilment and a sense of ownership. It is the innate human curiosity and drive for innovation that have guided me on this unique journey, driven by a commitment to thinking beyond conventional boundaries and pursuing distinctive endeavours.



Works of Rajeev BR. (Photo : Yashas P S (@yashas_ps))

I've had the privilege of discovering the work of Japanese artist Hitomi Hosono, whose art is deeply rooted in nature and brings the natural world into people's living spaces. Based in the UK, her intricate creations delve into Japanese flora, exploring the philosophical dimensions of these elements. Her approach not only preserves traditional pottery craftsmanship but also infuses it with contemporary relevance, igniting curiosity about biodiversity conservation and fostering a deeper connection to nature. Inspired by Hosono's work, I've recently embarked on exploring the Japanese technique of Nerikomi. This stained clay technique involves creating intricate patterns that seamlessly extend from the interior to the exterior of a pot. My early experiences working with the indigenous communities in Gudalur, nestled in Tamil Nadu's Nilgiri district, were pivotal. Engaged in a botanical documentation project, I gained profound insights into the region's natural world. This encounter served as the foundation for my series "Floral Stories," comprising functional and decorative pieces, where clay became the medium to narrate these tales. In December 2023, I exhibited "Floral Stories" garnered significant appreciation, reflecting my endeavour to reinvent storytelling through the medium of pottery.

It is intriguing to notice the challenges some of the vernacular materials such as clay, stone etc compete for dominance as a preferred medium not just for artistry and aesthetics but even more as the core of the built component stressing today's need for "sustainability".

a) Let me begin by asking, How would you define sustainability and its applicability?

Ceramics production is energy-intensive, involving double firings at temperatures of up to 1200 degrees. In today's climate-conscious era, material usage demands heightened mindfulness. At Trayah Pottery Studio, we continuously explore avenues to minimise energy-intensive processes. We are continuously engaged in the process of developing clay and glaze recipes and techniques.

While fired pieces can't be reused as clay, we are finding innovative solutions. Collaborating with an architect, we repurposed broken ceramics into striking mosaics. Similarly, Tatva Ceramics, led by an NID alumnus, is pioneering sustainability in ceramics. They have experimented with powdered fired clay to develop new clay recipes. Certain tile industries in India also accept fired pots to create coloured pigments. However, these practices remain sporadic and lack the scale needed to address the climate crisis effectively.

Looking ahead, sustainability is imperative. I have thought of exploring solar power as an eco-friendly alternative to our current coal-dependent electricity supply for firing. While the US offers successful examples of solar grid implementation, such initiatives require resources, time, and research commitment. Studio pottery, though relatively small, presents an opportunity for innovation. Universities spaces should spearhead such research,

benefiting both entrepreneurs and the larger ceramics industry in India, given its significant tile and ceramics manufacturing sector.

b) In light of changing consumer preferences and sustainable practices, have these challenges led to a reevaluation of vernacular materials' position in contemporary design?

I've delved into terracotta as a cost-effective and locally abundant alternative in ceramics. Its lower firing temperature requirements have yielded promising results. We're actively experimenting with new recipes, albeit within the constraints of our small establishment and limited resources.

Additionally, some of our colleagues are devising innovative climate change solutions. My artistic pursuit, centred on redefining temple architecture through clay, is deeply rooted in vernacular aesthetics. While European pottery leans towards Greco-Roman designs, my focus is on incorporating Indian aesthetics into ceramic art. This entails exploring the distinctive shapes and forms found in India. I view this approach as a celebration of the vernacular, infusing it with new life and meaning within the realm of ceramics.

c) How has this sector managed to retain its relevance, and have there been any distinctive strategies employed to re-establish its significance?

The rapidly increasing number of studio potteries in India stands as a testament to the growing relevance of ceramics to the public. People are increasingly drawn to pottery not only as a creative hobby but also for its therapeutic benefits, providing a means to explore their creative boundaries. This surge in interest shows the promising potential of this field.

Considering the economic landscape, as India's economy continues to thrive, there's a rising demand for luxury items like ceramic home decor. People are eager to enhance their homes with ceramic pieces. This expanding market further emphasizes the relevance of ceramics.

Affordability and a growing consumer base have bolstered ceramics' significance. Within India's art community, numerous artists utilize social media platforms such as Instagram to showcase their work. Events like the India Art Fair in Delhi have featured ceramic artists. Numerous cities are hosting potters' markets where studio potters display their work. The Indian Ceramics Triennale is another event to watch out for.



Works of Rajeev BR. (Photo : Yashas P S (@yashas_ps))

d) Could you provide examples of instances where pottery has reasserted its dominance as a favoured medium, whether in art, design, or architecture and how has this influenced perceptions of its value?

While pottery has its drawbacks, including fragility and brittleness, it cannot be claimed as the dominant choice. Metals, given their durability, lightweight nature, and sturdiness, are often preferred over pottery. However, the renewed interest in ceramic cutlery can also be attributed to the increased affordability. This resurgence indicates that pottery holds a significant presence and appeal in the market.

e) How do you consider yourself as an ambassador of change in the growing ever-evolving field of pottery in arts and crafts?

To my knowledge, few have melded history, architecture, and clay into tangible art forms. This unique approach positions me as a bridge between the past and contemporary expressions, harmonizing traditional art forms with modern applications. During a recent encounter with a faculty member at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad (NID-A), it became apparent that my work using the sprig technique is a rarity. The reactions and responses my work has evoked in people affirm its ability to instigate change and create ripples of impact, serving as a source of reassurance for my artistic journey.

As pottery evolves in step with modernity, so do the materials and techniques that shape it. In your opinion, what has been the role of technology as a discipline as well as an application in moulding better designs/products?

I share a mix of awe and concern surrounding the advent of artificial intelligence, much like many others today. The presence of 3D printers, which can conjure intricate and detailed designs is impressive. However, I firmly hold the belief that human creativity and intelligence are

irreplaceable, and AI is a product of the human mind. While there are certain designs that AI can mimic, it cannot replicate the unique touch of the human hand. Undoubtedly, AI offers cost-effective ways to produce art, and emerging technologies like 3D scanners hold promise for the future. Yet, there is much that remains unknown, with ongoing technological advancements in ceramics, not only in their application but also in the production processes.

Lastly, how would you encourage and inspire young minds to actively participate in and contribute to your captivating world of artistry, ensuring that this cherished art form continues to thrive in the hands of the next generation?

I am relatively young in my journey, having started just five years ago. Surprisingly, my background as a dentist, coupled with my engagement in public health practice alongside pottery, often catches people off guard. I believe that the ability to multitask is inherent in all of us, and perhaps that's why I've been able to manage both roles effectively, garnering some visibility along the way. I believe the work should speak for itself, and recognition should be given where it's due. I draw inspiration from numerous artists and the world around me, which fuels my creative drive. If my work manages to ignite inspiration in someone else, it brings me immense satisfaction and a profound sense of accomplishment.

Interviewee's profile :



Rajeev B R

Rajeev B R is a dedicated ceramic enthusiast and an accomplished potter. With hands deftly skilled in the art of clay manipulation and a profound passion for the craft, he adeptly transforms raw clay into exquisite, finely crafted ceramics. His journey in the realm of pottery serves as a remarkable testament to the transformative power of human creativity upon humble earth substances. The journey into ceramics began serendipitously in 2018 when he embarked on a pottery course. Drawing from past experiences in high school and a career in dentistry, he swiftly decided to pursue an intermediate-level course at Trayah Pottery Studio in 2020, merging dental dexterity with artistic inspiration to forge a unique artistic identity.

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