TERRACOTTA ICONS OF MOLELA

Introduction

The village of Molela is situated 10 Kms outside of the small town of Nathdwara in southern Rajasthan, India. Any outsider, especially a foreigner, arriving at any village in India receives a noisy welcome, not the least of which is due to the large numbers of dogs permanently warning the villagers of the latest arrivals.

Molela is internationally known; mainly for its production of brightly painted terracotta plaques and figurines of the local deities and gods. These clay gods are installed in the temples of towns and villages. Deities and gods are often depicted riding on a horse, a bull, a pig, a dog and even a crocodile. Molela “peasant potters” descend from a tradition handed down, within families for over 5000 years and are today still satisfying a need for functional (water pots, cooking vessels etc.), decorative as well as religious ceramics.

A potter belongs to the many varieties of the Caste of Kumhar (potter) which in some cases have a close relationship with religious ceremonies. These potters farm their land, keep cattle and produce pottery on a large scale within their own tightly and hierarchically knitted family units. Some of them have been to Europe and regularly take part at International art fairs.

The family potter

Mr. Khemraj Kumhar, the head of a large family of potters (sons, daughters, daughter in laws, and grand-children) was himself one of four sons trained with his father; who was nationally known and respected as a terracotta-sculptor-potter. Outside of the house to the left of the front door is a large pile of clay the perimeter of which has hardened in the form of a solid block against which lean three unfired icons; their grey colour dissolving into the background mound. The clay is dug locally from a river bed, although this particular potter can afford to pay someone else to do this.

I was received courteously and taken into the house, the neighbours looking on with great interest. While many of these house-holds are related, there is intense competition between them.

Any visitor is a potential customer paying a much more reasonable price than that paid by the middle-men from the towns.

The court-yard is surrounded by a number of rooms on all sides. On the left hand side is one of the rooms where a group of young men squat around an older man on a mud floor, working simultaneously on 2 or 3 plaques in different stages of completion. Other rooms are full of finished items; among the large piles a wide variety of plaques and relief panels, toy figurines as well as the traditional utensils, waiting to be sent to towns as far away as Delhi.
The last 2 rooms further most to the right are roofed, open spaces occupied by a cow and a goat. These and a small plot of land still keep the family in contact with farming activities which have in recent years been reduced due to the high demand for their products. On the first floor there is a large open space which is filled with hundreds of finished items drying in the sun, waiting to be fired. The living quarters open onto this area.

Clays- Slips and Colours

Two main types of earthenware clays are extracted from a local river bed; a pure clay and a sandy clay.

The dry clay is beaten and then sieved with a wire mesh to separate the stones and other impurities. The soft, purer clay is used mainly for throwing the functional wares. It dries to a grey colour which after firing turns terracotta red / brown or even a lustrous black finish (if smoke- fired in a closed kiln).

When the clay is mixed with 5 -10% donkey dung it is ideal for building the plaques and other sculptural pieces. The impure clay, contains plenty of sand, is ideal for throwing the ”supporting - pots” (called Gher) used in the construction of the kiln, and fires to a light pink colour.

Nowadays, since the impure clay has far too much sand, Mr. Khemraj adds 25% pure clay. Slips (clay colours) are only used on the functional wares.

White slip is made from a white mineral known as Khadi. White colour is powdered Mica (quartz rich rock), turning a greenish white after firing.

Black is achieved by the mixing of carbon and water. The carbon is scraped from bread pans and burnt coconut skins. Slips are mainly used on the functional wares while the icons are painted with water colours after the firing.

Making the icons

Once the clay is kneaded and has the right consistency it is rolled out on the floor and cut into the shape of the backdrop (a domed rectangle) to which all the sections are attached.

These sections are themselves made separately using a variety of techniques: finger rolled (some coiled ), cut and incised to shape, stamped with a large variety of dies, thrown and even thin slabs pressed into prefired forms.

Items are even built onto thrown pots (some sculptures can be several meters high). The drying can take between four and fourteen days depending on the weather. Whenever possible the pieces are given a final baking in the sun before firing.

Gherr- The Kiln supporting pots

The Gherr and the water- pots used in the construction of the kiln itself are thrown on a solid sandstone disc wheel. Many pots are thrown thick and small and are beaten into a much
thinner and larger size, when they are in the leather-hard state, using an anvil (wooden bat), and a round stone on the inside as support. Ash is used as a lubricant during the beating process. The use of ash transforms the colour of Gherr into a light pink.

Stacking

Stacking and firing takes almost a full day to complete. Before stacking, the following preparations are made:

repairing of damaged pieces, the chopping up of the fire-wood, transport of a large number of the pots used for building the kiln as well as carrying the dried finished items from the roof to the sight of the kiln at the back of the house.

Every member of the family, young and old, is involved in this work. Using a large storage pot at the centre, the kiln is built outwards in a spiral form. Once the central section of the kiln is wide enough, the largest icons are placed on top next to each other and held in place by 2-3 people.

The spiral kiln platform is then built further in stages as more plaques are added, the largest items leaning towards the centre and stabilizing the pile. Shards from kiln pots placed between the icons separate each layer from damaging the delicate details on the plaques next to them.

Once the largest icons are in place, hundreds of smaller icons and other items are placed on top, in between and around them. Over the mouths of the last row of Gherrs, large storage pots are put on their sides leaning inwards and providing a raised platform for further Gherrs. These round off the perimeter of the kiln. Lastly the whole pile is completely covered by shards. This keeps the heat within the kiln.

Firing

It is now 5:30 p.m. when the firing begins. Small fires are lit in the openings from all sides, adding fire-wood to regulate the build up of the flames. These are further fine tuned by throwing wood shavings into the openings.

As the pace builds up the kiln openings are filled with fire-wood and by 6 o’clock a more stable point is reached. After this stage the intensity makes it almost impossible to come close in order to feed the fire, which is why a large basket, sprinkled with water, is held in one hand, as shield. Three to four people, two at a time, feed the fire every 10 to 15 minutes.

By 6:15 the flames are at the centre of the kiln and small explosions are heard from within. Now the wind has pick up, threatening to spread the fire faster in one direction. A large thick cloth, held by two people standing on a side wall, reduces the wind. Someone’s hair catches fire as the intense activity continues and by 6:40 no more fire-wood is fed.

For the following 20 minutes long wooden poles are used to push the red hot char into the centre, breaking a few Ghers in the process. 7:00 o’clock and there are no visible flames anywhere; just a red glow under and at the centre of the kiln.
At 7:10 the kiln enclosure is cordoned off, using large cacti branches, to stop animals wandering in. Back at the house we (the men) celebrated with a couple of glasses of Indian whisky while watching an episode of our favourite Indian soap opera on a badly tuned black and white tv.

After treatment and painting the icons

During the firing some of the icons crack; often in the centre at the back. These are filled with a combination of ground fired clay, water and a glue (synthetic) called Fevicol. The glue is mixed with water and put on the narrower openings of the cracks, and in the larger cracks, the ground fired clay is used to fill the gaps. Finally the surface of the whole area is painted over with a liquid made with the prefired powdered clay mixed in water.

Before painting the icons they are covered by a white paint mixed in a gum and left in the sun to dry. There are some rules for the colours used; although every family has its own colour tradition. Water colours mixed with gum (dhawra) are used to paint the icons. The painted surfaces are covered afterwards with a varnish (zalla), which is made from a mixture of gum and spirit.

Lastly parts of some of the icons are covered with silver paper, beaten thin and attached on the still wet varnish. The item is left in the sun for up to a day for the cold glaze to harden.

Gods, deities and heroes

At the end of every January/ beginning of February (the harvest festival season) Mr. Kumhar`s house is invaded by a large crowd from the minorities (so called Tribals) of the Mewar region, and Gujurat. The crowd, led by, the Bhopa, a religious leader, arrive in Molela to purchase a number of icons.

The plaques represent local protective idols, heroes and saints such as Dharamraj - Dev Narayan and Pabuji (they are Rajput heroes), as well as the other more wide spread religious symbols (Gods): Ganeshji, Bhairava and Durga (mother goddess).

The selected icons are painted while the group rests at the house of the potter. On the completion of work the icon is held over the head of the members of the group who can number between 3 and 10 who walk back across the river Banas and then by bus to their villages, sometimes 100s of kilometers away.

On their arrival the icons are taken around to some of the house-holds in the village to bless the house and it`s occupants, after which it is installed at a Devra which is an open or semi-open field-shrine. Some of the minorities of Rajasthan and Gujarat perform blood offerings during the installation ceremonies, but these have been banned by the authorities.

The main local deity of Dharamraj was once a Rajput hero, and is said to ride through the village at night, on his horse, protecting the villagers against bad omens or accidents. 10 kms away from Molela is the town of Nathdwara which has the well known shrine of the god saint Eklingji. His shrine was moved and hidden in Nathdwara during the Moslem invasions from the north.
Many Rajput epic myths seem to originate from this period - e.g. the epic of Pabuji. The horse itself has a special significance all over India. The minorities of Gujurat, for example, make ritual offerings of terracotta horses in their hundreds at their shrines, to appease a deity or a god, to bless their families or even cattle with good health, a good harvest or solutions to any other problems.