

THE ART OF LIFESTYLE

In traditional Indian society there was no sharp distinction between 'art' and 'craft'. The Sanskrit word shilpa has been used to mean skill, craft, work of art or architecture, design or decoration. A simple earthen pot used for fetching water from the well was as much shilpa as the stone image of the deity worshipped in a temple.

A mere glance at the vast range of objects used in the everyday life of India - from royal palaces to humble village huts - indicates that a tremendous amount of aesthetic feeling and perception, unified design concept, fine sense of decoration, purity of form, and highly advanced techniques and skills were utilised in making these objects. Had it not been so, how can one explain why a village woman would sit and embroider a single dress for herself or for her daughter for over five years or why a carpenter would inlay a few thousand pieces of ivory for use in wooden door for a palace.

A variety of rites and rituals are observed all over India on such occasions as: conception and birth of a child, initiation, betrothal, marriage, death etc. Moreover a large number of religious and seasonal festivals are celebrated. On all these occasions a paraphernalia of textiles and garments, vessels and utensils, games and toys, props and furniture are used.

For example, every wedding season, the artisans have traditionally worked on fashioning the objects of dowry for the young daughters of their village. These objects possess a certain charm because they were made with a tremendous understanding of customs and manners, beliefs and practices, feelings and relationships.

It is due to the inseparable dovetailing of rites, rituals and festivals of everyday life with craft-skills and traditions, that the latter have survived until this date without any other patronage or institutional support.

Revival and Development

With the introduction of industrialised technology and the resultant new way of life, the traditional craft skills and products fell into disuse. To give a new lease on life to the dwindling handicrafts situation in the country, the Government of India set up the All India Handicrafts Board in 1952. Due to the conscientious efforts of the Board handicrafts again became a way of life in many sectors of Indian Society. Regional Design Development Centres for handicrafts were set up at Bangalore, Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi where, apart from designing, research and development in techniques and raw materials are also undertaken.

Today the Indian Government's Office of the Development Commissioner for Handicrafts is engaged in the overall documentation, development, collection and marketing of handicrafts. The Crafts Museum, which functions under the Office of the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) has a collection of about 15,000 representative samples of the glorious traditions of Indian crafts.

