

You are here: Home » Supplements » Sunday Herald art & culture » Exchanging ceramic

## Exchanging ceramic tales

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Creative accent

**While Korean ceramic traditions have been flagrantly ethereal, Indian ceramic ware has always had its primal leanings on the functional, writes hema vijay, as she discovers the ceramic art histories of two countries as steeped in art traditions as India and Korea.**



The soft Virudachalam white clay enchants, inviting the onlooker — artist or otherwise — to smudge hands and knead shapes out of it. The Korean ceramic artists who have set up base in Chennai are delighted, both with the Virudachalam clay, and the site of the month-long Indo-Korean ceramic residency 'Earth Matters'.

Well, this workshop is happening at the strikingly green and enchanting old world ambience of Rukmini Devi Arundale's Kalakshetra Foundation, which is doing a great job in preserving and nurturing Indian art, from its vantage location close to the Chennai sea shore. With lotus tanks, hamlets and groves all around, as opposed to vertical complexes, this is a fine work spot for a creative artist.

This ceramic confluence, organised by the IICo Centre in association with the Arts Council Korea, the Kalakshetra Foundation and the Lalit Kala Academy, is a first-of-its-kind residency linking two countries as steeped in ceramic art traditions as India and Korea. The 12 ceramic artists — six each from India and Korea who are part of the residency are Jin Kyoung Kim, Jae Joon Lee, Jun-Young Jung, Kang Kyilung Youn, Kyung-Ran Yeo, and Pyon Kyu Ri; the Indian artists are Gayatri Apte from New Delhi, Hareesh V Malapanzavar from Bangalore, Rashi Jain and Sandeep Manchekar from Mumbai, Santanu Jana from Bhubhanu, and Shitanshu G Maurya from Lucknow.

"This is my first encounter with Korean art and the first thing I notice is that they are technically very, very, advanced," says Shitanshu G Maurya. "Their way of working, be it with clay preparation or firing, is totally different," he adds as he coils white clay to arrange them in spirals. Shitanshu likes to work with found material, with an accent on abstraction.

### The legacy

Clay, a primal material that links us to the earth, has long been the substrate that allowed mankind spread across continents to discover together that a thing of utility could also be a thing of beauty. Beginning from the three ancient kingdoms of Korea — Silla, Goguryeo and Baekje, Korean ceramic history has had a rich run, and the span of Korean ceramics included stylised statues of royal figures, guardians and horses.

Some art historians draw parallels of this with the intricately detailed, huge (sometimes as much as 15 feet tall and 15 feet wide), standing tenacotta horses called the Aiyamar horses, that can even today be observed at village entrances in Tamil Nadu, and regarded as the guardian gods of the village. Contemporary Korean ceramic art is very sophisticated, and revels in astounding elegance.

There are technical divergences; Koreans use electric or gas kilns while Indians use wood kilns, which has incited an atmosphere of suspense among the Korean artists. "I wonder what kind of effect this kind of firing will have on my clay," says Jin Kyoung Kim, a little anxiously. Even in Korea, her ceramic craft is regarded as novel and radical.

For instance, when we meet her, she is fashioning delicate, fragile looking, flower-like, flatish clay pieces, which she has shaped from clay rolled out like a roti. She is going to make about 700 to 1,000 such pieces and arrange them in a cross. "The method is not important," she says, and proceeds, "There is a timeless connection between clay and human emotions that can evoke a powerful response. The unique qualities of ceramic art can be brought to life when one remains faithful to the inner self instead of the mechanical pursuit of the perfection of form, or for commercial success."

Clear white surfaces and the simplicity and perpendicularity of the forms she employs are typical, and the interplay of form and space is a key element in her work, as is the use of negative space. She also teaches at a university in Korea. "The last time I came to India was four years back, to Delhi. This is my first experience of Chennai, and I love it here," she adds.

Meanwhile, Jae Joon Lee is getting ready a human figure that is all set to be a towering 10 feet tall structure. "This clay is strong and flowy, dries fast because of the atmospheric conditions here, and so working with it is quick," he mentions, and adds, "This work expresses the harmony of human nature and will have animal figure included in its structure." Lee favours huge open air sculptures, to which he sometimes adds dabs of paint. "This is my second time here. India is calling me, I guess," he finishes.

Kyung Youn Kang is another Korean artist who is fascinated by the Virudachalam clay. "The clay here is richer, and feels good," she says. Kang's female forms are dreamy, observant, exquisite and ethereally structured, recalling to the mind mythical structures of great wisdom, like mermaids and sphinxes.

### Divergences and confluences

Korean pottery is credited with introducing techniques like the use of the underglaze red under the green. While Korean ceramic traditions have been flagrantly ethereal, Indian ceramic ware has always had its primal leanings on the functional, though of course, from Indus Valley urns to Khurja pottery, Indian ceramic craft has earned a rich legacy. And then, Indian ceramic tradition has been predominantly hand-made or wheel-thrown, rather than molded and cast. The glazing material happens to be different too.

There are the aesthetic divergences, of course. Indian ceramics have an accent on using elaborate motifs, "Koreans like their forms bare and simple," Mumbai-based participant Rashi Jain explains. She adds, "I think Koreans work in a different rhythm. It is both methodical and sensitive, and they do it slowly too." Koreans treat the surface of clay very differently too. Pointing out to Jae Joon Lee's work, Rashi elaborates, "Look at the surface; it has so much textural variation to it."

Lee's human figures assumes complexity by the various layers of design on its surface, rather than by added motifs. "In Indian ceramic traditions, large scale work is rare," adds Guken Raj, who is in charge of the ceramics department at the Kalakshetra Foundation, where the residency is in progress. The only exceptions to this are perhaps the Aiyamar horses, or the huge functional urns that have been thrown up in archaeological excavations.

So, besides interactions, it was perhaps inevitable that this workshop sparked off some cross-cultural influences. For instance, Kyu Ri has adopted the Indian peacock motif, both in its engraved format and as figurine attachments, which she is adding on to the incense holders she is fashioning, besides handles and legs, typical of the Indian way.

Meanwhile, Rashi has used the form of exquisitely curvaceous Korean ceramic vessels, attaching to it the Dishi motif, which is commonly used in the South for warding off the evil eye. The residency has many fun parts too. For instance, after sculpting out forms, all the artists took off for a five-day visit to the temples of Thanjavur, while the clay dried to be fired later. Well, working with clay demands time, but gives it too.