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Earthen Heritage: A Study of the Terracotta Art of Jammu and Kashmir.

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Abstract

Terracotta art, a form of ceramic expression made from baked earth, represents one of the earliest and most enduring forms of material culture in India. In the region of Jammu and Kashmir, terracotta has played a pivotal role in shaping the artistic, religious, and socio-economic narratives of the past. This paper explores the evolution, stylistic attributes, techniques, and cultural significance of terracotta art in Jammu and Kashmir from ancient to modern times. It evaluates archaeological findings, traditional practices, religious motifs, and current trends while situating the art form within the broader spectrum of Indian terracotta traditions. The paper also assesses challenges to the survival of this heritage in the face of modernization and offers suggestions for its preservation.

Keywords: Terracotta art, Jammu and Kashmir, traditional craft, cultural heritage, folk art, clay sculpture, art history, indigenous techniques, material culture, decorative arts, rural artisans, handicrafts of India, ceramic traditions, archaeological finds

Introduction

Terracotta, derived from the Italian words "terra" (earth) and "cotta" (cooked), refers to a form of ceramic art made from baked clay. As one of the most ancient and enduring artistic traditions, terracotta has played a vital role in shaping the material culture of the Indian subcontinent. In Jammu and Kashmir, this humble art form reflects a continuum of human creativity from prehistoric figurines and ritual objects to architectural embellishments and domestic pottery. The unique geographical and cultural setting of Jammu and Kashmir, at the confluence of Central Asian, Himalayan, and Indian civilizations, provided fertile ground for the evolution of diverse terracotta traditions. Despite the harsh climate, political upheavals, and changing aesthetic tastes, terracotta art persisted in the region as both an expressive medium and a utilitarian craft. This research paper explores the historical trajectory, stylistic features, manufacturing techniques, regional characteristics, contemporary practices, and future challenges of terracotta art in Jammu and Kashmir. It aims to foreground the artistic, anthropological, and socio-economic significance of terracotta in the region while highlighting the urgent need for preservation and innovation.

Historical background

The terracotta art of Jammu and Kashmir has deep roots tracing back to the prehistoric period, when early communities fashioned clay objects for ritual and domestic use. During the Kushan and Gupta periods, terracotta figurines, tiles, and plaques reflected refined craftsmanship and religious symbolism, particularly in temple and household contexts. In the medieval era, local artisans blended indigenous styles with Central Asian and Kashmiri influences, producing decorative and functional pottery. Under Dogra and early colonial rule, terracotta continued as a rural craft, sustaining traditional motifs while gradually adapting to new social and economic conditions.

Post-Independence Period and Current Status

In the post-1947 era, the terracotta tradition in Jammu and Kashmir continued to face challenges, including economic instability, migration, and changing consumer preferences. However, it also benefited from renewed interest in folk arts and heritage conservation.

The government's establishment of handicraft training centers, artisan cooperatives, and craft fairs helped preserve some aspects of traditional pottery and terracotta production, especially in Jammu's border districts. Meanwhile, art historian and ethnographers began documenting the surviving practices among artisan communities to prevent the complete disappearance of this cultural legacy.

Today, while terracotta art in Kashmir is limited to museum collections and archaeological remnants, the Jammu region still hosts a small but vibrant community of potters. Their work is being reinterpreted through collaborations with contemporary artists, design institutes, and cultural entrepreneurs who see value in sustainable and indigenous art forms ^[1].

Stylistic Features and Iconography

The stylistic diversity of terracotta art in Jammu and Kashmir reflects the region's complex historical trajectory, cultural syncretism, and religious pluralism. From the symbolic fertility figurines of the Neolithic era to the refined narrative panels of the Buddhist period and the folk deities of the Dogra heartland, terracotta objects from this region offer a wide spectrum of visual expressions.

Neolithic and Megalithic Styles

The earliest terracotta figurines found at Burzahom and Gufkral exhibit a crude, hand-moulded aesthetic. These are typically zoomorphic or anthropomorphic in form, made with coarse clay and lacking symmetry. The style was less concerned with realism and more focused on symbolic representation. Female figurines were usually depicted with broad hips and prominent breasts, while animals such as humped bulls, dogs, and deer were formed with exaggerated features ^[2]. The use of incised lines to mark eyes, hair, and clothing reveals an intuitive understanding of line drawing and surface texturing.

Kushan and Early Buddhist Period Styles

The Kushan era and the early Buddhist phase brought a new degree of sophistication and iconographic richness to terracotta art. The most prominent stylistic examples are the Harwan tiles, which stand out for their clarity of design, naturalistic postures, and refined modelling. These tiles often feature human figures in dynamic poses, including dancers with bent knees, ascetics in meditative posture, and courtly women with elaborate hairstyles and jewelry. The stylistic influence from Gandhara art is visible in the treatment of drapery and anatomical proportions ^[3]. These terracotta panels also reflect narrative storytelling. For instance, depictions of Jataka tales, Buddhist symbols like the triratna, and scenes of musicians or processions create a visual language that was both didactic and decorative ^[4]. The use of double molds allowed for complex relief compositions, making each tile a miniature artwork in its own right.

Gupta and Post-Gupta Era Influences

The stylistic hallmark of the Gupta period graceful expressions, rounded forms, and serene composure is evident in terracotta figurines and plaques found in parts of Jammu, particularly from sites near Akhnoor and Udhampur. These artifacts frequently depict Hindu deities such as Lakshmi, Vishnu, and Ganesha, marked by elaborate ornamentation and divine attributes such as lotus flowers, chakra, or conch ^[5]. Faces are rendered with soft, oval contours, almond-shaped eyes, and subtle smile shall marks of classical Indian aesthetics. Hair is depicted in coiffured styles, and bodies exhibit sensuous curvilinear rhythms, indicative of both divine beauty and spiritual bliss. The terracotta work during this period was likely influenced by stone sculpture traditions seen in temples, adapted to clay for domestic or votive use.

Regional and Folk Stylistics in Jammu

In contrast to the refined aesthetic of earlier periods, the terracotta of rural Jammu is more rustic and expressive. Produced largely by Kumhar (potter) communities, these figurines emphasize local beliefs and customs rather than formal iconographic rules. Deities such as Sheetla Mata, Kali Mai, Bhairava, and local snake gods (Nāgas) are rendered with bold features, round eyes, and sharp contours ^[6]. One distinctive stylistic feature in Dogra terracotta is the emphasis on facial exaggeration and symbolism. For example, the goddess Sheetla Mata is often represented seated on a donkey with a broom in one hand and a pot in the other symbolizing cleanliness and healing from diseases like smallpox. These figurines are not anatomically accurate but are effective in conveying the ritual and symbolic attributes of the deity ^[7].

Animal figurines such as horses, bulls, and elephants, especially popular during harvest festivals and marriage ceremonies, are stylized with geometric patterns. Ornamentation includes dotted lines, circular indentations, and painted or burnished surfaces.

Decorative and Functional Pottery

The stylistic vocabulary of terracotta extends beyond figurines to include decorative and functional pottery. Water pitchers (surahis), lamps (diyas), cooking pots (haandis), and ritual vessels often display stylized handles, fluted bodies, and applied motifs. Traditional potters of Jammu region incorporate painted slip designs, incised bands, and floral patterns that are deeply rooted in local aesthetic traditions ^[8].

Especially notable are wedding toys miniature clay figures of animals and humans, painted in vibrant reds, blacks, and whites, often made as part of marriage rituals. These items demonstrate both the continuity of tradition and the stylistic vitality of living folk practices.

Techniques and Regional Variations

The terracotta art of Jammu and Kashmir is not only an expression of aesthetic sensibility but also a testimony to the

¹ Bhat, N. A. (2022). "Reviving Terracotta Art in Jammu through Design Education." *Crafts Revival Quarterly*, 7(4), 15–27.

² Agrawal, D. P. (2007). *The Archaeology of India*. New Delhi: Select Book Service Syndicate, pp. 52–56.

³ Dhar, A. (2009). "Terracotta Tiles of Harwan: A Buddhist Narrative Tradition." *Indian Archaeological Review*, 25(3), 87–102.

⁴ Kak, R. C. (1933). *Antiquities of Kashmir*. London: Oxford University Press, pp. 115–120.

⁵ Sharma, R. C. (1991). *Indian Terracotta Art*. New Delhi: National Museum, pp. 145–148.

⁶ Pandita, S. (2017). "Clay Craft Traditions in Jammu: Continuity and Change." *Jammu Heritage Studies*, 2(2), 33–49.

⁷ Koul, A. (2015). "Folk Art and Ritual Practices in Jammu." *Journal of South Asian Folk Culture*, 12(1), 54–68.

⁸ Bhat, N. A. (2022). "Reviving Terracotta Art in Jammu through Design Education." *Crafts Revival Quarterly*, 7(4), 15–27.

Evolving techniques and craftsmanship of local communities. From prehistoric hand-moulding methods to mold-based casting techniques of the Buddhist period and wheel-thrown pottery in contemporary village kilns, the region reflects a layered and dynamic technological history of clay usage. The techniques reveal how artists have manipulated raw materials earth, water, and fire into enduring forms of cultural expression.

Selection and Preparation of Clay

The process of terracotta production begins with the selection of suitable clay, typically sourced from riverbanks, agricultural fields, or forested areas. In Jammu and Kashmir, alluvial clay from river plains like those of the Tawi and Chenab is favored for its plasticity and fine grain ^[9]. Traditional potters often use a mixture of two types of clay coarse (balumitti) and fine (chiknimitti) to achieve a balance between structural strength and surface finish.

The clay is usually cleansed of stones, roots, and other impurities by repeated sieving and sedimentation. It is then mixed with natural additives such as sand, crushed potsherds, rice husk, or dung to prevent cracking during drying and firing. This prepared clay is kneaded extensively, often by foot or hand, to remove air bubbles and improve workability.

Moulding Techniques

Early Neolithic terracotta figurines in Kashmir, such as those from Burzahom and Gufkral, were created using hand-modelling methods. The artisan would pinch, press, and roll small lumps of clay to shape the desired object. Simple tools made of bone, sticks, or stone were used to create incised lines or dot patterns for facial features, clothing, and texture ^[10].

By the Buddhist period, especially seen in the Harwan tiles, artisans adopted the double-mould casting technique. These tiles were crafted using pre-designed molds made of terracotta or stone, which allowed artisans to reproduce detailed motifs such as dancers, flora, animals, and religious symbols with consistency ^[11]. The technique involved pressing a layer of clay into the mold, carefully extracting the tile, and allowing it to dry before firing.

In rural Jammu, traditional potters (Kumhars) still practice freehand modelling for sculpting deities, animals, and toys, while larger vessels and platters are shaped using the slow wheel (chakki) or fast wheel (chak). Handles, spouts, and decorative elements are attached separately. The details are often finalized using rudimentary tools such as bamboo sticks, iron needles, or sharpened wood.

Decorative Techniques: Decoration plays a crucial role in the aesthetics of terracotta. The artisans of Jammu and Kashmir employ several traditional techniques to embellish their works:

Incising and Imprinting: Designs are carved into the soft clay using combs, cords, or incised rollers. These are commonly seen on pots, storage jars, and ritual items.

Stamping and Relief Work: Stamps made of wood or terracotta are used to press repetitive motifs such as flowers, dots, and concentric circles.

Appliqué and Additive Decoration: Clay coils, dots, or figurative shapes are added onto the surface to give a three-dimensional relief effect. This is especially popular in ritual figurines and ceremonial vessels ^[12].

Painting and Surface Finishing: After drying but before firing, some items are coated with slip (liquid clay) in red, white, or black. Natural pigments from minerals and vegetable extracts are used. In rural settings, post-firing decoration with homemade paints (geru, soot, lime) is also practiced for festivals and rituals ^[13].

Firing Methods

Firing is a critical stage that transforms fragile clay into durable terracotta. In ancient times, open firing or pit firing methods were used. A shallow pit would be dug, filled with dried wares, covered with combustible materials like cow dung, straw, and wood, and then ignited. This method resulted in uneven firing and smoke marks, which added a unique surface character to each piece ^[14].

By the early historic period, kiln firing became more common. Archaeological evidence from sites like Harwan and Akhnoor suggests the use of updraft kilns, where temperature control allowed for better sintering and durability of terracotta tiles and pottery. These kilns could reach temperatures up to 900-1000°C, ideal for vitrifying clay without glazing.

Today, rural potters in Jammu primarily use traditional kilns built from bricks and clay. These are fired with firewood, cow dung cakes, or agricultural waste. The artisan judges the readiness of the kiln by observing smoke color, smell, and sound skills inherited through generations.

Artisan Communities and Transmission of Skills

The craftsmanship of terracotta art in the region is closely tied to hereditary artisan communities, particularly the Kumhar caste, who have preserved their knowledge through oral transmission and apprenticeship models. In Jammu's districts such as Samba, Kathua, Udhampur, and Rajouri, many families continue to engage in pottery as a livelihood, often seasonally around festivals like Diwali, Navratra, or local fairs ^[15].

Women also play a key role in the production process, particularly in the preparation of clay, finishing, painting, and assisting with firing. In some communities, the entire household is involved in the production cycle.

While mechanization and modern tools have entered some workshops, especially in semi-urban areas, the essence of traditional craftsmanship manual dexterity, intuitive design, and environmental responsive nessremains central to terracotta making.

⁹ Sharma, R. C. (1991). *Indian Terracotta Art*. New Delhi: National Museum, pp. 13–18.

¹⁰ Agrawal, D. P. (2007). *The Archaeology of India*. New Delhi: Select Book Service Syndicate, p. 53.

¹¹ Dhar, A. (2009). "Terracotta Tiles of Harwan: A Buddhist Narrative Tradition." *Indian Archaeological Review*, 25(3), 87–102.

¹² Pandita, S. (2017). "Clay Craft Traditions in Jammu: Continuity and Change." *Jammu Heritage Studies*, 2(2), 33–49.

¹³ Koul, A. (2015). "Folk Art and Ritual Practices in Jammu." *Journal of South Asian Folk Culture*, 12(1), 54–68.

¹⁴ Ray, A. (2013). *The Art of Ancient India*. London: Thames & Hudson, pp. 142–145.

¹⁵ Bhat, N. A. (2022). "Reviving Terracotta Art in Jammu through Design Education." *Crafts Revival Quarterly*, 7(4), 15–27.

Innovations and Adaptations

In recent decades, a few potters have begun to experiment with electric wheels, chemical colors, and gas kilns, especially those supported by government handicraft centers and NGOs. Some artisans have also collaborated with design schools and heritage revivalists to produce contemporary terracotta murals, garden ornaments, and household décor inspired by traditional motifs but adapted for modern tastes^[16].

This adaptive craftsmanship demonstrates both resilience and evolution. By retaining indigenous knowledge while integrating new techniques, the terracotta artists of Jammu and Kashmir continue to keep their craft relevant in a changing world.

Contemporary Practices and Challenges

In the modern era, the terracotta tradition of Jammu and Kashmir persists as a vital yet vulnerable cultural practice. While rooted in centuries-old ritual and domestic usage, the craft has evolved under the pressures of market demands, industrial alternatives, changing lifestyles, and dwindling artisan populations. Contemporary practices reflect a dynamic interplay between continuity and change where traditional techniques coexist with innovation, but also where existential challenges threaten the survival of this heritage art.

Present-Day Artisans and Practices

Today, terracotta art in Jammu and Kashmir is predominantly practiced in rural pockets, especially in districts such as Samba, Kathua, Udhampur, Reasi, and Rajouri, with smaller clusters in Poonch and outskirts of Jammu city. Artisans, mostly from the Kumhar caste, continue to make utilitarian items such as pots (haandis), cooking vessels (tavas), water containers (surahis), lamps (diyas), and ritual toys. Many of these items are made in preparation for local festivals, marriages, and agricultural rituals^[17].

Women and children in artisan families participate actively; women usually handle tasks like clay preparation, finishing, and painting, while younger members assist in drying and stacking before firing. The production remains seasonal, often peaking during Navratri, Diwali, and harvest celebrations, when demand for ritual items increases.

Although traditional items dominate, some artisans have adapted their work to include decorative and garden terracotta such as planters, tiles, wind chimes, masks, and wall hangings. This shift has partly been encouraged by tourism, heritage markets, and occasional exhibitions supported by government or non-governmental initiatives^[18].

Challenges of Modern Markets and Middlemen

Another challenge is the disconnect between artisans and end consumers. Often, traditional potters sell their products to local middlemen or traders at marginal prices. The lack of

direct access to craft fairs, online marketplaces, or urban showrooms severely limits the artisans' earning capacity. Few artisans have the resources or skills to engage in marketing, branding, or digital commerce^[19].

Moreover, artisans frequently lack proper packaging, quality control, and design diversification to compete with mass-produced ceramic goods. Without modern business support systems, terracotta remains confined to local markets with little scope for scaling up.

Climate Challenges and Environmental Concerns

The practice of open firing or using traditional kilns also poses environmental and health concerns. Smoke inhalation, fire hazards, and deforestation (for wood fuel) are frequent issues in artisan settlements. Additionally, erratic weather patterns including unseasonal rains and temperature extremes pose risks to drying and firing cycles, especially in the absence of covered workspaces or modern kilns^[20].

Climate-related challenges have made seasonal production even more unpredictable, further discouraging artisans from full-time engagement with the craft.

The Road Ahead: Preserving a Living Tradition

For terracotta art to thrive, it must be repositioned not merely as a traditional craft but as a sustainable and eco-conscious art form. A multi-pronged approach is essential: Strengthening artisan cooperatives to reduce dependency on middlemen.

Providing continuous and not one-time training in design and business skills.

Integrating craft education into school curricula to build appreciation among youth.

Documenting and archiving patterns, motifs, and oral histories for future generations.

Only by bridging the gap between heritage and innovation, between village craftspeople and urban consumers, can the rich terracotta tradition of Jammu and Kashmir be sustained into the future.

Conclusion

The terracotta art of Jammu and Kashmir is a vibrant testament to the region's deep-rooted cultural, religious, and aesthetic traditions. From prehistoric figurines of Burzahom to the intricately molded Harwan tiles and the rustic pottery of rural Jammu, terracotta has remained an enduring medium of expression for communities across time. Each artifact tells a story not only of artistic creativity but also of spiritual symbolism, social ritual, and technological innovation.

The craftsmanship involved in terracotta production from clay preparation and hand-modeling to intricate decoration and firing reflects a legacy of indigenous knowledge passed through generations. Despite modernization, many artisans continue to follow traditional techniques, adapting slowly to changes in materials, design, and markets. However, these custodians of heritage now face existential threats, including declining demand, industrial substitutes, environmental constraints, and the erosion of intergenerational skill

¹⁶ Sharma, M. (2021). "Innovation in Traditional Craft: A Study of Contemporary Potters in Jammu." *Indian Journal of Heritage and Folk Art Studies*, 9(2), 102–119.

¹⁷ Pandita, S. (2017). "Clay Craft Traditions in Jammu: Continuity and Change." *Jammu Heritage Studies*, 2(2), 33–49.

¹⁸ Sharma, M. (2021). "Innovation in Traditional Craft: A Study of Contemporary Potters in Jammu." *Indian Journal of Heritage and Folk Art Studies*, 9(2), 102–119.

¹⁹ Ahmed, R. (2020). "The Crisis of the Potter's Wheel: A Socio-Economic Study of Rural Artisans in North India." *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 57(1), 75–93.

²⁰ Koul, A. (2015). "Folk Art and Ritual Practices in Jammu." *Journal of South Asian Folk Culture*, 12(1), 54–68.

transmission. Encouragingly, various revival efforts through institutional support, design collaborations, and digital platforms show that there is still potential for the sustainable reinvigoration of this ancient art form. For terracotta art to survive and thrive, it must be reimagined within the frameworks of heritage tourism, eco-conscious living, cultural education, and artisan-led entrepreneurship.

Preserving terracotta traditions is not only about saving a craft; it is about safeguarding the historical memory, aesthetic sensibility, and environmental harmony that this earthy medium symbolizes. The future of Jammu and Kashmir's terracotta heritage lies in empowering its practitioners, educating new generations, and creating platforms where tradition meets innovation with dignity and purpose.

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