

Papier Mache: A Delicate art of Kashmir

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Abstract

Crafts and cultural traditions of Kashmir are deeply rooted. Here the crafts reflect, in equal measure, its history, landscape and way of life. The paradise on earth that is Kashmir has direct effect on its crafts.

Arts and crafts are a profound expression of the emotional life of the people anywhere. A close and living relationship ties land to the people and people to the craft and culture. This is particularly true of Kashmir. Here, changes economic, social and religious during many centuries are reflected in our arts and crafts. The creative urge of our craft persons have thus varied at different periods.

Jammu and Kashmir is not only home to the vast cultural and ethnic diversity but also the myriad arts and crafts that have been carefully nurtured for the centuries. A variety of motifs, techniques and crafts flourished in the land as the people from regions flocked through this beautiful place and many of the skilled craftsmen decided to settle amidst its charming abundance of natural beauty. With time, these arts have gained even more distinctiveness and today Kashmir is known for woolen textiles Pashmina Shawls, Embroidered suits, Kashmir Silk Saries, Papier Mache, wood Carving had knotted carpets and lot of other traditional crafts. Mirza Haider in his famous Tarikh-i-Rashidi says "In Kashmir one meets with all those arts and crafts which are in most cities uncommon, such as stone-polishing, stone cutting, bottle making, window cutting, gold beating etc. in whole Mever-ul-Nahr (The country beyond the river Oxus, that is, Khorasan) except in Samarkand and Bukhara, these are nowhere to be met with, while in Kashmir they are even abundant. This is all due to Zain-ul-Abidin.

Keywords: Kashmir, Arts and crafts, Papier Mache, craftsmen, Culture, Zain-ul-Abidin.

Introduction

The art of papier mache was invented in china in about A.D 105. Many substances like old rag, fishnets and waste were used to make the paper for the purpose of documentation or preserving

some essential records (documents).¹ The art of paper making remained with china for more than 5 hundred years. It was in the 6th Century A.D that the route between the Pacific Ocean and the Mediterranean were discovered which ultimately became the source of link between Arbs and China. It is recorded that during A.D 751 the Arabs occupied Samarkand. They took a number of Chinese prisoners with them from whom they learnt the art of paper making. Samarkand was suitable place for this art because it had sufficient raw-material and ad-equate water supply. In this background the art of paper making flourished in Central Asia in 7th Century A.D. From there it crossed over to Iran and then entered Kashmir during the reign of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin (A.D. 1323 to A.D. 1374). But there are still some traces such as a paper manuscript in Kashmir which date to 8th Century A.D.² This indicates that paper might have been introduced in Kashmir before Zain-ul-Abidin's period which is evident from the tomb of Zain-ul-Abidin's mother at Zainakadal Srinagar, where paper treated with glue has been used for fixing the tiles on the outer walls of the tomb.

Researchers have brought to light the evidence that the art of Papier Mache originated in Iran and was introduced, among many other arts, into Kashmir by king Zain-u1-Abidin. It has been recorded that the first batch of workmen came to Kashmir form Iran under the leadership of Aziz Mughal, the great grandfather of Safder Mughal. The firm founded by him "Suffering Moses" is still existing in Srinagar.

The word papier mache has been derived from the French word which means the moulded pulp. But in Kashmir it was known by its Iranian title "Kari Qalamdane". Here the Qalemdaie means a pen case. Initially this art was restricted to the preparation of pen cases only. The pen case was common among diwans (sacretaries) and other such persons. The craftsmanship, workmanship and the decorative motifs of these Qalamdans reveal that the preparation of these must have been commissioned by the nobles, diwans and kings. Also some craftsman must have taken in hand such hard job to produce the articles for the purpose of presentaion to the wealthy persons or high officials. The pandits of Kashmir valley being literate and holding official positions, kept the qalamdans with them which served them as a brief case. This might have been kept dithering as a necessity or as a fashion. Later on this craft was given the title of Kari-Munaqqash which is nearer to the meaning of Kari-Qalamdani. One of the masters of this great trade known to us is "Syed Turab", the last Qalamdan maker in Kashmir having died in 1875 A.D.

¹ Pandit Anand Koul, *Geography of the Jammu and Kashmir State*, Iqbal Publications, Lahore, 1987, p. 52

² Jonathan M. Bloom, *Paper Before Print: The History and impact of Paper in the Islamic World*, Yale University Press, London, 2001, p. 42.

In art of papier mache the important processes are:-

Preparation of moulds, application of colours and designing.

Preparation of Moulds and Pulp.

Papier mache objects are mostly made in three dimensions for which different types of moulds are used. In early times these moulds were prepared from the clay by the artisans themselves. The moulds were allowed to dry fully in shade. In order to avoid any kind of damage such as cracks etc. the moulds were not exposed to direct sunrays or heat. After the commercialization of papier mache products, wooden and metallic moulds were introduced. For preparing pulp the most important ingredients and equipments are:-

A wash tub containing about 30 liters of water in which the waste paper and rags are soaked for some days. This material is later on pounded to the finest form and mixed with rice or wheat starch so that it is converted into a paste which later on is laid on a prepared base upto required thickness.³

Preparation/Process

During the early stages the method adopted for the manufacture of papier mache was very complicated. Small piece of paper were pasted with glue on a prepared mould. After drying of the first layer a second layer would be pasted.⁴ In this way several layers would be pasted one over the other upto the required thickness. After that, pieces of muslin used to be wrapped over it. This was followed by a wash of "Gutch" (White wash) and was left dry.⁵

Kashmir paper was made at Ganderbal, the place which is about 20 miles away from Srinagar towards the north, where water canal was available. It was made by pounding the old rags of cotton and linen with a little of hem under a water driven mill. During the period of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin the prepared pulp was turned into paper at Nowshera where the Vats were made for this purpose.

During the beating process caustic sods and slaked lime used to be added for bleaching and softening purposes. Some of the artisans used to avoid this process, because according to

³ P. N. Kachru, Papier Mache, in Jaya Jaitley edited, *Crafts of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh*, Mipin Publishing, Ahmedabad, 1990, pp. 121-138.

⁴ Moorecroft, *Travels*, II, p. 215-16.

⁵ Pandit Anand Koul, *Geography of the Jammu and Kashmir State*, Iqbal Publications, Lahore, 1987, p. 46.

them the costic soda would weaken the finished product. This process continued till early 20th century upto the time when mortar and pestle were in practical use for pounding.

The mortar non used for pounding of rags is made of lime stone. The pestle worked by a lever on a pivotal beam has a four sided iron head which falls on the rags and chops them as they are fed under it by hands. The pulp has to pass through three pounding processes during which each one tears it to smaller threads. After each stage the pulp is placed in a muslin cloth of about six feet length which is tied round the waists of two men and then dipped in the seam water for some time so as to wash away the dirt through this muslin cloth. Between two washings the pulp is dried up into slabs about 1" (one inch) thick and then kept in sunrays to bleach and dry. To get the slabs fully dried these are turned several times towards the sun. These washed, dried and bleached slabs are threaded/ tied and placed in a large earthen crocks water is added after sometime the pulp is made. The pulp thus obtained is powdered with the help of a mortar and the wooden pestle.

The next step of the process is to add the starch of rice or wheat to the powder and mix together so as to produce a thick paste carrying softness and sticky quality in it. Finally small lumps of this paste are made.⁶ Now the material is ready for the preparation of moulds required. First of all two or three layers of paper are pasted on the required mould called the "Vasal" by the craftsmen. After that several layers of the prepared pulp are laid on the mould (Vasal) layer upon layer by repeated slow process of drying and adding till the required shape and the thickness is obtained.

The unfinished art object is cut into required number of sections with the help of a small hand-saw, according to the design and shape of the mould. After removing the mould (vasal) from the prepared object these sections are rejoined with the help of thick glue. After the joint is properly secured the object is smoothly and gently rubbed with a file called "Kathwaw". After that it is wrapped round with thin muslin like cloth and covered with a coating called "Gutch". The gutch used is prepared by the old plaster of walls which is ground fine and mixed with glue and water. The surface is then smoothen by rubbing it gently with a piece of hard burnt brick called "Kurkot". Now small pieces of tissue paper are pasted over it with the help of glue. Finally a stain called "Astar" is applied to the same surface. This stain is prepared by mixing white powder with glue and water. After applying "Astar" pure product is ready for the final processing like designing and painting.

⁶ B. Taylor, *Travels*, p. 95

Elements of designing:

The important elements of papier mache designing are floral motifs natural objects, darbar (Court) scenes, battle scenes, hunting scenes and mythological stories. It was of his cleverness, ability and mastery of observing and reproducing the minutest details, light shade perspective etc. which brought the Kashmiri artist to the royal courts and high class workshops. He as well as his workmanship received appreciation through-out the world. It is the result of this ability and skill that papier mache reached its fame. This art of papier mache painting was not restricted to papier mache objects only but was also applied to wood carvings, window pannels, wall panels and even to ceilings which is evident from ceilings of Madin Sahib Mosque of 1444 AD. The ceiling of Shah Hamadan's Mosque at Srinagar and the baradari of Shalimar Garden of Mughal Period. Shrine of Dastagir Sahib (Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jeelani) at Khanyar represent the traditional art of Kashmiri artist.⁷ During the Mughal rule, most of the luxury items such as Qalamdan, makeup kit and scent cases used by the courtiers were all made by the Kashmiri artist.

There were no systematic workshops established for papier mache art. The word Karkhana was basically borrowed from Iran and was brought to Kashmir by Mughul rulers who established first Karkhana here in Kashmir. Later all these Karkhanas received royal patronage and artisans started leaning this art in a systematic way from the great traditional craftsmen (Ustads). After receiving sufficient knowledge these trainees would establish independent Karkhanas and this tradition continues till to-day, though under a different level of governmental patronage.

Colour

Generally the function of the colours applied is and even was to protect the article from any kind of damage and then to decorate the same in order to catch the eye of a customer. The colours heretofore, used to be obtained from natural sources such as minerals and most of these used to be imported from Iran and China. Blue, green and white used to be imported in original form whereas the black, red and others used to be extracted from minerals.

In order to produce long lasting products and earn name and gain the foreign market the Kashmiri Craftsmen preferred and used the mineral colours and avoided use of chemical pigment (colours) because the natural (mineral) colours would not loose their fastness after a long time which means these colours would at least remain fresh for a period of more than fifty years and would fade atleast after fifty or sixty years of use. The colours would not loose intensity, strength

⁷ G M D Sufi, *Kashir*, Vol. II, Light and Life Publishers, (New Delhi, 1974), p. 576-77

etc., even if the objects were kept in direct sun light or in water for days.⁸ The process of preparation of mineral colours was very painful and labourious. Firstly the minerals were tied in a sack/bag of cloth and moistened with water and then were roughly beaten or broken. This broken wet material used to be grounded into a paste on a flint and paste was dried into fine powder over a long drying process of charcoal fire. Finally this powder was mixed with glue and water was added slowly. But here the main thing to be noted is that this material is rigorously stirred till a fine colour in the shape of mixture is obtained. One must know that the pots used for these colours are purely handmade clay pots (red and black) with glazed inner sides. Before use these pots are being thoroughly dipped into water so that they absorb no more liquid which will create a great loss.

The brushes used for papier mache art are different from those used by painters, artist etc. In papier mache various types of brushes are used for different works. The bristle of the hair of goat, cat and ass are set in handles of feather (quills) by means of silken thread. Inferior bristles are a cut and trimmed up. Special brushes are prepared for use in varnishing and they are not supposed to be used in water colour or dipped into water etc.

According to Mr. E.B. Havell a well known art critic "art is a moral and intellectual educative force." The Kashmiri artist has great natural aptitude for development of ornamental designs etc. He has the beauty and skill of a true artist. If encouraged, he can give new life to his art.

Keeping this in view the last Maharaja of Kashmir Sri. Ranbir Singh had established a technical institute under the supervision of an expert named F.H. Andrews. He offered a training programme to craftsmen to promote their power of observation and reproduction correctly. All this was done with the hope that the craftsmen would preserve and develop this beautiful art so that this country would be envied by the lovers of art and beauty and they would buy the items of this exquisite handicraft.⁹ Not only this the real goal was that this beautiful valley becomes a 'paradise' for connoisseurs.

Objectives and Methodology of the study

- To analyze the History of Papier Mache Industry.
- To study the challenges of Papier Mache industry.
- To study the different steps involved in the Papier Mache manufacturing process in Kashmir.

⁸ Pandit Narain Koul Bamzai, *Cultural and Political History of Kashmir*, Vol. II, MD Publications, New Delhi, 1994, p. 491.

⁹ Walter Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*, p. 379-80.

- To study about how rich artisans give their best to improve the quality of the craft.

The present study is purely based on secondary data. Secondary data includes both quantitative and qualitative is collected from different sources, including books, reports, research papers, newspapers, magazines, and websites is used for the purpose of study.

Conclusion

New technologies and manufacturing techniques is posing a big threat to this industry as it is slowly dying. The mache carving and artists preferring other jobs has stated to pose a hurdle in letting this art and craft work revive. It caters more to the premium luxury sector with price being high.

Interesting on how such marvelous artwork and crafts exists in our country without much of our knowledge. Let's spread the word, celebrate the artwork and the artists behind it.

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