

## **Traditional Molela Craft of Rajasthan**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Terracotta crafts from Molela is an intangible cultural heritage that is being practised by local artisans for centuries. Over the years, Molela has emerged as a focal point in the art of making attractive votive plaques or idols of gods, with terracotta. In the form of plaques and statues, these icons are made from the red clay that is characteristic of the soil of the village. Owing to its close proximity to Banas River this art emerged in this area. Molela artwork is unique in itself due to the fact that in India terracotta plaques are made only here. The art has great ritualistic significance from the nature of plaques to its origin it is ritually inclined.

**Key Words :** Molela, Clay, Craft, Rajasthan

### **INTRODUCTION**

India is known for cultural diversity and traditional practices that mingle with modern lifestyle. Terracotta crafts from Molela is an intangible cultural heritage that is being practised by local artisans for centuries (<http://ichcourier.ichcap.org>). Molela, a small village of artisan located in Rajsamand district of Rajasthan State of India approximately fifteen to twenty kilometers from the city of Udaipur towards road to Nathdwara, the abode of Srinathji in Rajasthan, is home to a vibrant community of terracotta clay artists. The craft is said to have started around 800 years ago. Earlier the artisans only made plaques of gods and goddesses and would set them up at their particular Devra (temple). The plaques are semi 3D and are hollow from inside so that it does not crack while it is burned in the kiln. The artisans now have also started making terracotta tiles depicting different village scenes and little toys for kids (<https://www.behance.net>). Over the years, Molela has emerged as a focal point in the art of making attractive votive plaques or idols of gods, with terracotta. In the form of plaques and statues, these icons are made from the red clay that is characteristic of the soil of the village. While the early creations were originally cast as standing idols of local deities and various forms of the Hindu god Vishnu, today these figures are often mounted on tiles or plaques in multi-coloured or can have a terracotta hue, as is represented in the various temples in Rajasthan and Gujarat (<https://steemit.com>). The original inhabitants of Molela are the Mina and Bhil tribal's, who have adopted icon worship into their own tribal systems of worship. During the month of January, every year, these and other Tribal groups like the Gujars and Garijats, travel to Molela to buy clay plaques depicting the images of the Gods who have fulfilled their wishes. These tribal

groups replace these votive icons every three to five years, in gratitude for the blessings received (<http://forhex.org>).

### **History :**

Molela “peasant potters” descend from a tradition handed down, within families for over 5000 years. This traditional art form, passed from generation to generation through the sons of the family, evolving with each generation, still satisfying the need for functional (water pots, cooking vessels etc.), decorative as well as religious ceramics. The art received several laurels and has received geographical indication due to its local geographical origin. According to the folklores, a blind potter was summoned by God Devnarayan (Dharamraja) in his dream to make his clay sculpture. The next day the potter collected clay from nearby river and fulfilled the task. His sight was restored and from that day the clay craft stayed in the family of the potter and art travelled through generation. Thus Dharamraja on horse is dominant motif in terracotta.

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. 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 Gujarat, 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 (<http://forhex.org>). While the potters of Molela are known for producing religious idols, these terracotta creations are produced largely for the sake of enabling the creators’ livelihood.

### **Caste :**

A potter belongs to the many varieties of the Caste of Kumhar (potter) which in some cases have a close relationship with religious ceremonies. Prajapati community from Molela learned shape clay from their ancestors. 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.

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.

### **Motifs and themes used :**

In Rajasthan terracotta images of the mother goddess showed in various incarnations are broadly worshipped by the tribals. As Goddess Durga she sits across a lion, as Chamunda an elephant, mounted on a buffalo as Kalika or holding a weapon as Aawanmata. The serpent God Nagadev has been worshipped in India since ancient times and the images usually have a central figure bounded with several snake consorts. Another popular male deity the potters make is Bhairav represented by two images signifying the deity’s omnipotence-Kala Bhairav and Gora Bhairav, the dark and the fair. Bhairav who bears a distinct similarity to the Lord Shiva, holds a trident, a thunderbolt, a head and a nose. His mount is a dog and his image is installed in every temple with that of other gods and goddesses.

Molela is internationally known; mainly for its production of brightly painted terracotta plaques and figurines of the local deities and gods. Originally in Molela Craft, idols of local deities (god and goddess) and various Vishnu forms were more practised, these are often depicted riding on a

horse, a bull, a pig, a dog and even a crocodile. but with changing market demand, today the idols are often mounted on tiles or plaques to be decorated on the front entrance of the homes and buildings. These clay gods are installed in the temples of towns and villages in multicoloured or terracotta hued plaques. These days, the artists focus on contemporary subjects and scenes of local rural surroundings, mythological stories from Indian epics and historical narrations of the Rajput rulers of Rajasthan to depictions of daily household chores related to agricultural activities and butter churning; natural objects, such as the sun, etc. have also become popular themes.



#### **Clay preparation :**

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, some artisans suggested to add some portion of pure clay. Typically the women do the hard work of getting the clay ready while the men make the murtis and decorate them (<http://www.industries.rajasthan.gov.in>).

#### **Technique of making plaques and figurines :**

The plaques are made on a surface made with dried donkey dung , sun dried and then fired in kiln. The addition of donkey dung and rice husks enhances the material’s pliability and tempers the clay. Squatting on a mud floor, the potter begins the task of making the votive plaques. The entire process is done by hand without using the mould. The slabs or tiles are made first, with the help of a pindi, which is used for pounding and flattening the clay. A pindi is made of rounded stone with a

groove at the top for holding it. The clay slab is then smoothened using a small flat piece of wood, about 1 foot by half a foot and approximately 1 inch thick.

The design and the line work on the clay is done with the badli — a small flat chisel-like instrument made of metal. Both ends of the badli are used, one end for drawing lines and patterns on the clay, and the other end for making holes. Holes are made on the slab to remove the air which is trapped otherwise the product might crack during baking process in the fire. The figurines are formed from another piece of flattened clay and finally these crude shapes are joined onto the surface of the plaque. The figurines are built and refined through a combination of hand and finger gestures that involve squeezing, punching, and cooling actions. From time to time, drying periods are allowed to avoid any collapse of the figurine. Later, details are added and the figurines are embellished with thin coils of clay. If the final colour of the figurines is terracotta, the red geru is mixed with glue and is used to cover the figurines before the firing. Firing could happen as often as once a month or once in six months, depending on the season and the orders. The figurines are made to stand in an open kiln, which is covered with pieces of broken pottery, to which wood is added slowly to keep the temperature constant. The artisan knows that the right temperature has been reached by the height of the flames. After the firing, bright watercolours are used to decorate the freshly baked figurines.

#### **Colouring of Plaques :**

The clay is locally collected from Banas River and the colors used are natural mineral colors. The clay slip is called Palewa and it attains different colors when mixed with natural colors. Slip (clay colours) is prepared by applying a mixture of white stone powder and glue with a cloth. Seven colors have been traditionally used for generations—blue, yellow, green, orange, red, peach, and black. For lustrous glow they use Jala, which is lacquer coat. Natural vegetable gum extracted from tree is used as a binder. If the final colour of the figurines is terracotta, then red geru is mixed with glue for use. Originally these were made from natural pigments, but now they are mostly bought commercially. The color is then applied, and the linear details are added with black carbon taken from the inside of cooking pots. Slips are mainly used on the functional wares while the icons are painted with watercolours after the firing.

#### **Getting order and mode of payment :**

The terracotta images and signs of Molela, near Udaipur, have gained appreciation in big towns and even abroad. This attractive craft has survived down the year because of the religious feelings of the tribals and the rural population. The journey to Molela, to pick up the idol, bless it and take it back for an installation ceremony is an detailed custom, guided by the subconscious mind of human sociology. These terracotta decorations are in great demand from local buyers in the month of January. The art is popular among the tribes who worship the local deities. Bright natural colors are used for depiction of God, the color blue signify Kaladev (the dark God) while Orange signify Goradev (fair God) (<http://www.natverkstan.net>).

During winter periods, the production of religious deities increases to cater to the demand of the local tribal communities (*adivasis*) who visit Molela to buy plaques of popular figurines which include the gods and goddesses worshiped by them in the fairs. The crowd (*adivasis*) 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 craftspeople's take orders at home and also display their wares there. Once sold, the figurines are carried away by the buyer on his head, in reverence to Gods. Payment for these figurines is usually made in the form of money, cloth, grain, and other offerings depending on the custom of the temple of the buyer. Intricacy of work and size together determine the price of the figurines.

#### **Demand of the crafted products :**

The demand for a potters' work tends to be seasonal new vessels and votive figurines are needed at festival and harvest times. This art is season confined, winter is suitable for making these plaques because in summer the clay cracks. The craftspeople turn to agriculture to sustain themselves in the lean months.

#### **Conclusion :**

Molela is the only village in Southern Rajasthan, India, with active families of terracotta artists. Some of the artists have earned prestigious awards like Padmshree and other state and National level Awards.

Though Internationally renowned, the terracotta clay work of Molela is also facing threat due to modernization. Establishment of new brick industry near the village is cause of great concern for these artisans, as the red clay, that is necessary for the potters' artwork is basic raw material for these industries also, which in turn may develop crisis of red clay in near future.

Governmental intervention with increased efforts to popularize and widen the market demand for the terracotta plaques of Molela is very much needed to sustain the livelihood security of local artisans of this age-old craft of pottery.

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