



Divine fusions and nature inspire Bidriware magic...

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Leo Tolstoy had said, 'Art is not a handicraft. It is the transmission of feeling the artist has experienced'. One will agree with this, after witnessing the sheer skill and passion the artisans of Bidar portray in doing their black-metal magic. The profound intensity they associate with every single Bidriware could be seen in their eyes when they told us with pride about their Art - on how they convert an alloy of Zinc and Copper into blackened handicraft inlaid with thin sheets of pure silver.

Bidriware dates back to 14th century C.E., originating from the township of Bidar (then, a part of erstwhile Hyderabad state), during the rule of the Bahamani Sultans., Bidar in Karnataka is still the only town that manufactures the unique metal-ware. Bidri is a beautiful but painstaking craft characterized by intricate geometric and floral designs, in-laid in gold, silver or brass on to a matte-black or glossy surface. This craft is kind of Damascene work and its striking inlay work makes it most sort-after by visitors and an important export handicraft of India. Prized as a symbol of

wealth, it is world famous for its sleek and smooth dark colored artifacts, with precise eye-catching designs. Over the years, a Bidari colony has evolved in the town of Bidar, which we visited recently, only to come back mesmerized. 'All art is but imitation of nature' they say. Though, unsure of what role nature had to play in Bidriware, we were sure of another lingering thought, 'Black and beautiful... that must be Bidri!'

Fusion of Heritage

Local craftsmen believe that a few centuries ago, the craft was brought to Ajmer in India from Iran and Iraq by a nobleman Khaja Mohinuddin Chisti. Later, an Iranian craftsman, Abdullah-bin-Khaizer brought it to Bijapur, Karnataka. Very impressed with his work at Bijapur, the Bahamani Sultan invited him to work on decorating his Bidar royal palaces and courts. According to some accounts, Khaiser joined hands with local craftsmen and gave birth to Bidriware.

Though Iran is the actual home of this craft,

the Bahamani Sultans and local people nurtured it further. They found that a particular type of soil found only in Bidar was unique, having special chemical properties in making the molds for their objects. It could help in converting a silver zinc metal to a black metal by following a process. And after creating many artistic treasures, when the Iranian craftsmen's contract was over, the Sultan induced them to stay back in India and teach the koftgari (later came to be known as Bidriware) work to his artisans. A true portrayal of fusion of the Iranian and Indian heritages, the marvelous creations emerging out can be seen at the artisan's humble abodes or colonies. What started off as a handicraft for producing exquisite Bidriware for Nawabs and Noblemen has attained global fame today. Yet years later, it is interesting to learn that no particular tools or scientific methods are used today to find out the right kind of soil. The artisans go looking for the soil in parts of Bidar and inside the fort; and taste the soil for a characteristic sharp taste, to determine the right one. Maybe Taste is the best judge. Heard of wine or

tea tasters, but soil tasters?

Artisans and their Work

The smile on the enthusiastic and overworked faces of the craftsmen did quite hide the effort involved in producing each Bidriware, initially. But after understanding the process, it would be a gross understatement on their skills if we merely summed it up as a 'complex Process'. Each of them worked with indomitable spirit and a dedication, staring hours into a small piece of metal ware. They made use of principles of Chemistry and Science which we usually think belongs to the forte of the literati.

A National award winner artisan we met desired that we see their art and demonstrated it so vividly. Process requires six stages of production and four different kinds of artisans to complete the process; the molder, the designer, engraver and the inlay artist. After getting the surface smooth of the mold, he poured a solution of copper sulphate on the article to darken it temporarily for engraving. The transformation was so immediate that it left us in awe. He used a few engraving tools to cut the intricate but delicate tapestry of design into the metal. The inlayer then took over the piece to do inlay work of silver, brass or gold. Many women work as inlayers.

After this stage, comes the magic of the Bidar soil! Mixed with ammonium chloride and water, this soil is made into a paste. Small articles are directly dipped into the paste, while large articles are heated and the paste is rubbed on its surface. The paste has no effect on silver, but it renders the zinc alloy body into a deep characteristic black patina. People believe, this process involved in the blackening of the Bidri articles gives the water stored in it curative and medicinal properties. Finally, he rinsed off the paste and the design stood out dramatically. The shiny silver was resplendent against the black surface as he held the article in the air, like an award-winner would. We saw the triumph in the artist's eye having created a Bidriware! Yet it's a pity that such talented communities still under-sell their work and barely make ends meet. For us, it was a hard decision to figure which design was better for buying so attractive that we came back with a sample of each type of wares. The mystery of the black patina has not yet been fully solved though it's a subject for many ongoing researches. How the



ancient craftsmen developed such intricate chemical procedures is difficult to imagine. Nevertheless, few crafts around India employed the Damascene technology like the Tanjore metal work that consisted of soldering and wedging of silver patterns and figures of deities on copper vessels.

Contemporary Twist to Bidri

With the passage of time and the advent of a new age, the modern twist to Bidriware is simply stunning. The earlier Bidri designs were patterns such as the Asharfi-ki-booti, stars, vases, vine creepers and poppy plants with flowers. They had Persian Roses and passages from the Quran in Arabic script. The shapes and decorative motifs of articles changed. Articles of daily use such as Cigar boxes, candle stands, letter openers, ash trays, cuff links, key chains, fruit bowls to name a few began to find favor with the buyers. Creativity requires the courage to let go of certainties. Some Indian designers are certainly taking that path. Taking the lacquer work, stone inlay and Bidri work

from traditional Indian handicraft they adapt it to create a breath-taking final product. A selective combination of Old Persian motifs together with designs adopted from Ajanta frescoes signifies contemporary Bidriware. Folk motifs have also found their way into it. While the artwork flourished in Bidar and Hyderabad for centuries, other parts of India practice it today, like Purnia in Bihar, Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh and Murshidabad in West Bengal. Artisans are becoming increasingly innovative by the day. Craftsman Wasif gave a new twist to the traditional craft when he replaced the Zinc-Copper alloy with a common, but good quality iron sheet, while retaining the delicate beauty and contrasts of the silver work.

Undoubtedly, Bidriware is yet another proof of the great ability and prowess of Indian master karigars or artisans to assimilate a craft of foreign-origin into India's heritage!