

Coconut Craft



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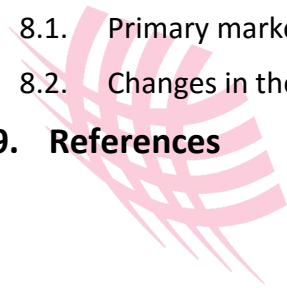
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1. Introduction

The craft of making decorative and utility products out of coconut shell and wood is mostly practiced in parts of India where coconut is grown in abundance. However in most of these areas coconut wood was or is still used as firewood and/or building material. Coconut shell has always been used as a cooking fuel and to make small multiple-utility bowls or serving spoons with simple bamboo joinery. However with the passage of time and the improvement in tools, people started making various other small utility and decorative articles by cutting coconut shell or by carving coconut wood.

2. Regions of Production

Coconut shell and wood craft is primarily prevalent in Kerala: in and around Calicut, Trivandrum, Attingal, Neyyatinkara and Quilandy in Kozhikode. Other states where this craft is practiced are Goa, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and a few parts of Bengal, Pondicherry and Tamil Nadu. Another instance of availability of coconut shell craft is in the tribal belt of Bastar where intricately designed patterns in white metal are inlaid in the shell and cut to make bangles

This craft is also prevalent in other countries such as Cambodia, Thailand, the Philippines, Java, Maldives and Sri Lanka.

3. Producer Communities

Traditionally, crafting objects out of coconut shell to make household objects was practiced by coconut farmers. They would scoop out the copra by making a neat hole at the top of the shell, and use the shell, which was the waste or by-product.

It is believed that as a craft, coconut shell/wood carving could have been experimented with by craftsmen from the Vishwakarma community in Kerala. Traditionally involved in sword making and carving wood and ivory, they may have tried out coconut wood and shell as well.

Coconut shell and wood craft has gained popularity only in the last few decades, and hence does not have a long history to boast of. However, a report mentions this craft being brought in from Iraq almost 900 years ago. It could be that the wood carving artisans from the Middle East and Persia were the first ones to try carving on coconut shell.

This documentation was carried out at Chaya Nisarga, an NGO based in Bangalore. Chaya Nisarga was formed in March 2000 with a 7-member committee. Its vision is to promote coconut wood and shell craft. The products manufactured are eco-friendly, natural and non-toxic.

Chaya Nisarga has a small production unit with a lathe machine and a vertical drilling machine. The coconut timber/shell is first brought here. The products are decided, the design is drawn on paper and the samples are developed in this unit. Any article to be made out of coconut wood is produced here since lathe is used.

The wood cut to size is procured from coconut plantation sites and the hollow coconut shell is bought from coconut growers. After the product is made it is distributed to various women who take up the finishing and polishing of the pieces at their homes. In case of coconut shell products the sample development is done at the in-house unit and any production is distributed amongst various artisan groups located nearby. In most cases a family constitutes a group with each family member involved in a particular job.

At times certain articles are produced at the in house unit and the finishing is given out to the groups. If there is any auxiliary process involved such as stitching or binding then in that case too it is given out to the groups. On completion, the goods are collected, checked, packed and sent to the buyer.

This documentation is divided in two sections. The first explains the craft of making products out of coconut shell; the second details the process of carving out products from coconut wood.

4. Raw Materials

4.1. Coconut shell craft

Coconut shell is bought from coconut growers and from farmers who scoop out the coconut for sale in the market, also selling the dried shell. The coconut is scooped out by making a small neat hole. Shells are available in different shapes and sizes. The price for a big round shell is Rs 10 while for a small one it is Rs 6.



Photograph 1: Coconut shell

The coconut shells are obtained from various coconut farms located in Tiptur, Tumkur and Hasan. Raw material is normally available easily. However coconut shell of a particular shape and size if required for an order takes a long time to collect. *(prices as in 2007).*

4.2. Coconut wood craft

Coconut wood is known for its spotted grain. This varies from one portion to the other even in a small piece, and this irregularity makes it unique and beautiful.



Photograph 2: Coconut wood

Coconut wood is obtained from 60 to 70 year-old trees which no longer yield fruit. The tree is selected by an experienced person who can gauge the texture of the wood by looking at the tree. The grains in the wood are determined by the soil quality and the geographical location.

In a coconut tree the usable timber is the portion between the inner core and the outer bark. This usable woody section is only 2" thick. The texture and quality of timber is not guaranteed and at times only the first 7 feet from the ground yield wood with grain. The timber is seasoned for two to three months. The seasoned timber is cut to size as per the product requirement. The current rate for coconut wood is Rs 1300/ft (*prices as in 2007*).

5. Tools

There are a few basic hand-held tools, which are listed below:

- Files: flat file, rounded file, circular file, triangular file
- Chisels
- Hack-saw blade
- Bow and bow blades
- Sand paper: No. 36,50,60,80,100,120
- Vernier caliper



Photograph 3: Chisels



Photograph 4: Files



Photograph 5: Pliers and bow cutter



Photograph 6: Hack-saws

There are few electric motor-driven machines that are used mostly for finishing and shaping:

- Vertical drilling machine: It is used to make small holes with precision on small coconut shells; to insert the bow blade; to insert small hooks in items like earrings; or to make holes in a button.
- Buffing machine: A small attachment is used in the same machine to polish the inside surface of a shell or a product and this process is called buffing.
- Sander disc: It is attached to the wood turning machine to smoothen the outside surface of the shell for making any product. This disc has a rough surface like sand paper.



Photograph 7: Vertical drilling m/c



Photograph 8: Buffing head



Photograph 9: Sander disc

6. Process

6.1. Coconut shell craft

The craft production process for the shell craft is as follows:

1. Choosing the right shell for the product that has to be developed.
2. Scraping the surface of the shell with files to clean the husk on the shell, thus making it smooth.
3. The shell is cut open with a hack-saw, the cut determined by the shape and size of the product to be made.
4. Smaller portions are cut from the hemispherical cut open shell with a hack saw. The shape to be cut is drawn on the inside of the shell and the bow blade is inserted through a small hole. In case of a complicated design, for example if a piece of jewelry is to be made, a photocopied paper stencil is stuck on the inside surface of the shell and the design is curved out using a bow blade. If a circle is to be cut then a paper stencil is made. This is stuck on the inside surface of a cut portion of a shell, the bow blade is inserted and the circle curved out from the shell. Smaller elements are cut and stuck on to the main piece for ornamentation.
5. After a shape is cut out, the edges are made smooth by filing or by sanding with sand paper.
6. This process is followed repeatedly till the finish is satisfactory.
7. After the article is made small hooks are attached if required. This is done by drilling a small hole and sticking the metal hook using a strong adhesive such as Fevikiwik.
8. In case of a bigger object such as an ice cream cup or a bowl, the whole shell is used by cutting it as per the required size. Various designs are engraved in the shell using a file.
9. After the object is made it is sanded with sand paper till it is smooth. It is then polished with bees wax. Alternatively, if a glossy finish is desired, it is given a coat of synthetic varnish. If the surface is to have a dark finish then it is painted before the varnish coat is applied. The inside of the object in this case is first rubbed with sand paper to get the desired smoothness and then it is buffed on the machine. No varnish or bees wax is applied on the inside if the object is to hold foodstuff.
10. The piece is dried in the sun.



Photograph 10: Cleaning the husk on the shell



Photograph 11: Buffing the shell



Photograph 12: Marking the design and cutting it out using bow cutter



Photograph 13: Cutting out smaller pieces using hack-saw



Photograph 14: Various designs cut along stencils



Photograph 15: Finishing the edges



Photograph 16: Attaching hooks using adhesive



Photograph 17: Fixing the hook



Photograph 18: Finished earring

6.2. Coconut Wood Craft

The craft production process for the wood craft is as follows:

1. The design is sketched on paper with measurement details.
2. Wood is placed in the turning machine. In case of small products such as pen holders/candle holders, three to four products are carved out from a piece of timber and the whole piece is put on the turning machine. After the outside surface designs have been carved for all the pieces, the combined piece is removed. Individual pieces are then cut and put again on the turning machine to scoop out and create the hollow inside.
3. The artisan marks the design areas by measuring with a scale and holding a pencil at that point against the rotating wood. He then holds an assortment of chisels, sand paper and files against the rotating timber to carve out the designs and to create the shapes for a particular product.
4. At each stage sanding is done to make the surface smooth. Finally buffing is done for the inside surface in case of a hollow product or serving bowl. Small pores, which are characteristic of any wood, are filled with a paste of Fevicol and saw dust and then filed/sanded.

5. For hollow products such as pen holders / candle holders / bowls, the individual pieces are cut from the main block of wood and the wood from the inside is scooped out.
6. If a photo frame is to be made then the wood is first sanded and filed and the members of the photo frame are cut in a photo frame cutting machine. This cuts the wood with an angle to make the frame. The inclined cut is joined with the other member using Fevicol.
7. The inside portion is buffed on the machine and if the product is to hold food no other finishing coat is applied.
8. A coat of varnish is applied and dried to give a shine to the product. For any product in which foodstuff is to be kept only bees wax is applied.



Photograph 19: Wood put on turning m/c and being cleaned, smoothened



Photograph 20: Marking the design



Photograph 21: Carving the design using a chisel



Photograph 22: Flat chisel being used to cut the piece



Photograph 23: Using fine chisel to give the detailing



Photograph 24: Manually sanding the piece



Photograph 25: Coating the piece with synthetic varnish



Photograph 26: Finished candle stand

7. Uses of the Product

Coconut shell products

- Basic jewelry such as ear rings, ear drops, pendants and necklaces.
- Key rings, bowls, ice cream cups, spoons with a coconut wood handle.
- Car seat covers, pen holders, coasters, place mats and buttons.

Coconut wood products

Desk-top accessories and small lifestyle products: photo frames in different sizes; candle stands in different shapes and sizes; paper knives; paper weights; visiting card holders; mobile stands; napkin rings; tooth pick holders; salt and pepper sprinklers; chop sticks; spoons and forks; serving bowls; walking sticks and batons. Recently step railings have been developed and other furniture such as chairs and tables are also being thought of for development in near future. Some jewelry is also developed, such as bangles and hair pins.

8. Miscellaneous

8.1. Primary market

Coconut shell and wood articles are mostly sold in the domestic market through various craft exhibitions organized by the government and by support organizations such as Dastkar, direct supply to state emporia and to corporate houses.

Some of the articles are exported to markets such as the US, Europe, Australia and the Middle East.

Particular products such as brass-inlaid coconut wood products like hookahs, snuffboxes and nut bowls are popular with the Arabs.

8.2. Changes in the craft

Over a period of time this craft has grown from merely producing decorative items to producing many contemporary lifestyle products and furniture.

This can be attributed to the fact that more and refined tools are being used nowadays. Earlier hand lathes were used, while now machine lathes are used. This has greatly increased the scope. Similarly, the machine drill has made precision drilling possible, thus enabling a perfect and well-finished product. From being completely manual, the craft has developed and adapted the use of some simple machines, while the judgment and skill of the artisan still decide the look and beauty of the product.

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