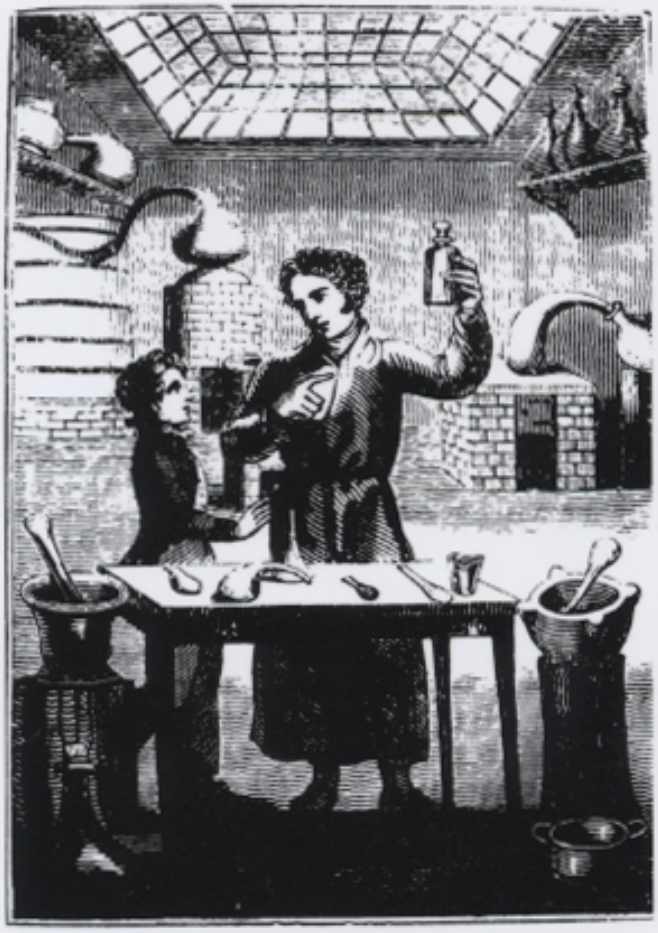
Tools And Trades History Society



The Chemist.

£2.50

Newsletter 111 ***Winter 2010***

A study of jewellery production in India: Part 2 : Jewellery, shops and workshops

Ana Caldas – Portugal
anacaldas3@yahoo.com

Like the Middle Age cities in East and West, in few places in India one finds the trades organised in particular streets. In Miraj, it's at the "Saraf Bazaar" that one finds the makers ("karagir") and sellers ("saraf") of jewellery. They are of family lineages, of Hindu heritage, and receive both Hindu and Muslim costumers. The most sought after are the "Mangal sutra", necklaces worn by married women (**photo 16**).

Made in silver and gold-coated, they are already exhibited in the shop but, for full gold, an order has to be made. The price might be 25,000 rupees (something like £ 300); gold-coated, its price comes to 500 rupees (about £ 8). The distinction of religion is made in the central medallion: half-moon for Muslims and the figure of a Goddess or a sacred letter for Hindu women. There's quite a variety of Mangal sutra to be worn in ceremonies. The inspiration comes from the models made in the state of Bengal; the drawings and patterns arrive in colourful catalogues, spread amidst silversmiths and jewellery shops.

Kolhapur is situated about 60 km from Miraj, and its urban structure follows the patterns of the Middle Ages. The centre of social and religious life, worshiped by Hindus, is the Mahalaxmi Temple, dedicated to Goddess Laxmi, wife of Lord Shiva. The dark stone temple is fully carved with feminine figures, playing and dancing; in their erotic bodies it is possible to see the magnificent ornaments of the neck, arm, wrist and anklets. Close to the temple, there's the long street of the Saraf and Karagir, the sellers' and silversmiths' road. This street is much more organized and huge than its similar one seen in Miraj. The city is known by its traditional jewellery, mainly the necklaces called "Kolhapuri Saaz" (**photo 17**).

In another building close to the central temple, I came across several workshops starting in the ground floor; as I said, few artisans work in the same space, doing different techniques.

A goldsmith I met works long hours sat on the floor, in a narrow space; his small table has a wood bench pins, a small scales, his Gods in postcard size, a light bulb always on (natural light is scarce); he only produces bracelets carved with sharp chisels (photo 18 and 19); the incisions done on the gold bracelet takes tiny strips off the metal. This goldsmith works out of costumers' orders; his catalogue is a box with bracelets, each one with different textures; it is from this catalogue that the client chooses, and then the piece is hand-made. In spite of looking simple, this technique asks for a very precise hand, and many years of practice. This

"karagir" has insisted with me to pay attention to his work, such was the pride he had in his profession.

In the same space, and in a large and high table, there's another goldsmith; he's a master of gold wrist pieces. I've seen him using the mouth torch for soldering (**photo 18**).

By the entry there are two small tables where two young artisans sit close together (**photo 19**).

They only make strings and medallions for the Mangal sutras necklaces. Often, for easy soldering of the pieces being built, these are temporary fixed to a paste – Plaster of Paris waiting for the soldering phase (**photo 20**).

Another area of production happens around an expensive area in Poona, named Koregaon Park. The several handicraft shops do need workshops to fulfil many demands; most of the pieces are necklaces, rings, bracelets, earrings and the like, having few connections to traditional patterns. Most of these pieces have an esoteric character, thought to have a positive energy that gives strength to the "chakras" of the human body, by means of the stones engraved. Such business is due to the existence of a spiritual community/ashram in the neighbourhood, which was started in the 1970s by Bhagwan Rajneesh, an Indian "guru". Many times the shop owners are the intermediaries between the wishes of the clients and the silversmiths. The variety of the models is mostly seen in the engraved stones or in the size of the pieces. This area of Poona is quite touristic and expensive, and the clients of the handicraft shops are mainly westerners. Some shops do sell quite a good amount of silver pieces, which are, afterwards, sold in the West; they promote another business for the client/reseller.

The connection workshop, designer and shop

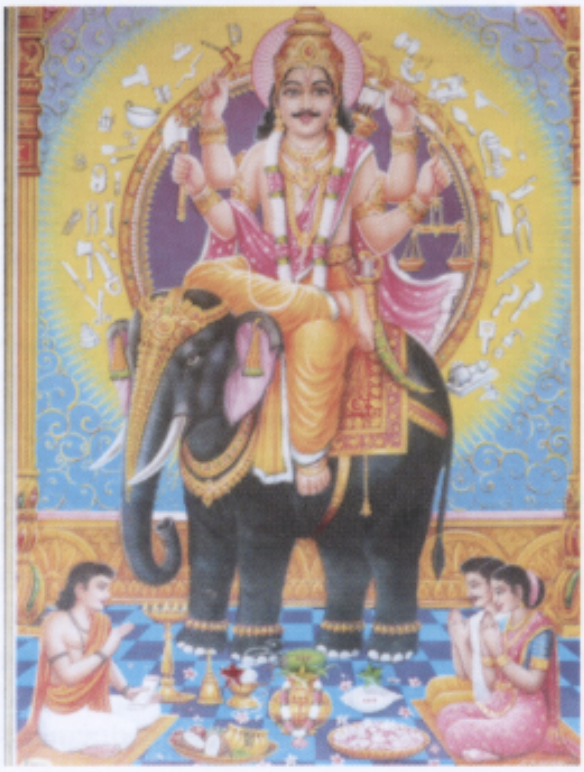
One of the aspects of the production is the making of models. At one of the shops, an employer had a degree of jewellery designer, and a good hand for drawing; he would show his sketches to the owner of the shop; the paper sheets had drawings made in pencil, in colour, and the places to engrave stones or add enamelling. This activity means he knew the expressive possibilities of gold or silver (this one is less used), and a whole array of the possibilities of the tradition, considering techniques and aesthetics; sometimes these possibilities have to turn into a contemporary and new language, that doesn't deny the Indian lineage. The owner of the shop gives the final approval, and the sketch is taken to the workshop's master. This one has to know how to read the sketch, and turn it into an unique piece, sometimes calling forth traditional elements; he may use high relief, filigree, texture, chiseling, stone engraving, detailed pattern-

ing, and the final piece may cost several hundreds of pounds.

Daily work and religious practice

In India, religion is not a field aside of the day-to-day activities. In all the shops and workshops that I visited in Miraj, Kolhapur and Poona, the family lineage is Hindu. All the figures receive regular "pujas" (prayers of Hindu character) with incense and flowers. The religious believes are shown in gods' posters, in small or big size. These prayers are sometimes performed twice of trice a day, at sunrise and sunset, or at noon and night time. Somebody of the shop gets in charge by the icons' good looking. Incense sticks get alight, turn and move to all the corners of the shop; hands are taken into the smoke or over the flame of the candles, to receive the "darshan" (blessings) of the deities.
This ritual is the means that allows the devoted artisan to transcend daily earthbound routine and get in touch with the "Shakti" (power) of the Gods.

Amidst Hindu deities there is Vishwarkarma (**photo 21**), the deity that rules the craft of the silversmith. He has a function close to Saint Eloy, the patron-saint of the craft in the West. Vishwarkarma receives "pujas" as well, and few days of the year are dedicated to him; by then, work slows down, workshops are cleaned and get tidy, being the days of feast and rest.



Making connections amidst the symbolic and spiritual values of this cultural heritage and that of ours, to broaden and communicate the individual expression of the wholeness of the ornamented body

The ornament is also symbolic: there are visual patterns that have a translation in means of spiritual terms recognized by the society where they are a part of Jewellery keeps on depending on the magic/religious meaning that archaic societies, of agricultural basis, gave to motives taken from the environment; the drawings, whether stylised or realistic, of animals, flowers, planets, are pretending to mean good-will and good luck. At the same time, they are marks of belonging to a culture, that is, they give unity to a society, an identity of its own, being part of a body of social rules. Even with a specific social group, working full time in an industry, passing from fathers to sons – as it happens in the jewellery field –, and with a large part of hand work and traditional patterns, the aesthetics has still plenty of connections with an agricultural lineage.

It's from this centuries' old activity that one finds the roots of these patterns, to be understood as a language of symbols, breathing fertility, good luck, unity and strength – words linked to land work, crops and a desire of abundance. In archaic societies of farmers, magic interacted with religion, and thus we see a large number of deities as rulers of good crops, good business and the changes of the climate, as well as mind growth, health, happiness and culture. We must also consider the millenniums of business links, of artistic exchanges, myths and

discoveries in the Indian soil, and then a whole web to understand, where jewellery is part of it.

Religious architecture provides plenty of sculptures of feminine dancers, saints and deities; all of them have many varieties of creative ornaments. Many of these were photographed and drawn, and later on published; there are also illuminated manuscripts, in particularly of the Moghul times; whether men or woman, one finds these figures with jewellery ornaments. These several books allow understanding the extravagant "Baroque style" – let's call it like that – of this millenniums-old culture. Many shapes and aesthetics keep on being used in the jewellery making of our times, re-created and transformed by the vitality of anonymous designers and silversmiths. For a broad understanding, it was quite useful to research at the libraries of Poona (University and Deccan College); both have at hand many studies published in India (**photo 22 and 23**), and some in England. Considering Art History, I came to meet other written and visual sources, showing traditions and ornamental uses in many artefacts and architecture.

This experience of study and research in workshops had, many times, a return to Middle Ages of handicrafts where, in the same place and time, many different artisans worked, in a kind of inter-disciplinary meeting. Many workers of this craft are rather unknown, working in the shade without any privileges. Anyway, what most fascinates me in India is the idea that Hinduism assimilates other cultures, mixes along with them and creates new ways of expression in so many arts.