

# NOTES

## *Indian Clay Figures* *late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> Century*

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1

The museum has in its collection early 20th century clay figures from Poona. These realistic clay figures depict people of different Indian communities garbed in their traditional attire and engaged in their professions. Such clay figures were popular with the European tourists and were in great demand as early as the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> (Figs. 1, 2, 3)

The history of these clay figures runs parallel to the history of Company school paintings in India which were commissioned by the British East India company officials who came to India in 17th - 18th centuries due to company's expansion move in South East Asia. They travelled extensively and explored the country they had read about and saw exotic monuments, landscapes peculiar



2



3

flora, fauna, and people in colorful attires. To capture these images in absence of camera, they commissioned Indian artists to paint the images. These paintings are popularly known as Company school paintings.

The tradition of making clay figures was already there in India which were largely sold in fairs and places of pilgrimages. The British officials commissioned some of these artists and encouraged them to create realistic models of people of different Indian communities and professions.<sup>2</sup> Artists began adopting realistic styles to indulge the western tastes of the European officers, their new patrons. Such clay figures were created at Poona (Maharashtra), Krishnanagar (West Bengal) and Lucknow (Uttar Pradesh).<sup>3</sup>

The establishment of government art schools in Madras (1850), Calcutta (1854), Bombay (1857) and Lahore (1875) further increased European influence on the various arts and crafts including clay modelling. Henry Locke and John Kipling, headmasters of art schools and selectors for Indian art objects for international exhibitions, had considerable influence on traditional Indian arts and crafts. Art education in colonial India had a two-fold impact, on one hand it produced a class of professionally skilled artisans who would cater to the needs of the Europeans and on the other, it widened employment opportunities for local people.

The selection committee collected two sets of art objects, one to be preserved in local museums and the other for various international exhibitions.<sup>4</sup> Industrial arts exhibitions were held at Bombay, Madras and Oudh

presidencies. Local level exhibitions were held at Nagpur in 1865, Jabalpur in 1866 and Agra in 1867.

International Exhibition of Indian art along with the British colonies and other countries of the world was held in Calcutta in 1883–84. Miniature models of various crafts industries and fruit models, probably made by Krishnanagar clay modellers, were displayed in the Calcutta section of this exhibition.<sup>5</sup> The Bombay section of this exhibition displayed sculptures made by Bombay art school students and a collection of busts depicting different communities made in plaster of Paris modelled by a professional sculptor, Valla Hira. Here it should be noted that the art of plaster of Paris figures was introduced in India chiefly by Italian artists employed in art schools.<sup>6</sup>

The museum has some interesting busts and figures of plaster of Paris of this period (Figs. 4, 5, 6). The Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai also has such plaster busts

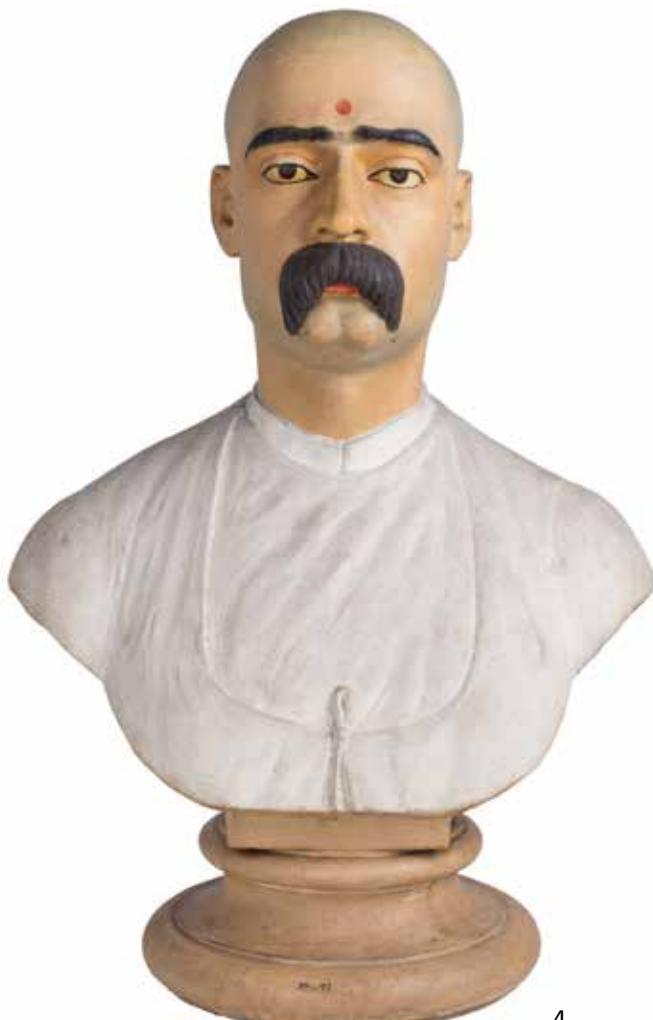


Fig. 1  
A Brahmin Couple, Clay, Pune, Maharashtra, India,  
Early 20<sup>th</sup> century CE, C - Ht: 32 cm, D - Ht: 28.5 cm,  
Coll.: CSMVS, An – 80 CD

Fig. 2  
A Parsee Couple, Clay, Pune, Maharashtra, India,  
Early 20<sup>th</sup> century CE, A - Ht: 32 cm, B - Ht: 27.5 cm,  
Coll.: CSMVS, An – 80 AB

Fig. 3  
A Marwari Couple, Clay, Pune, Maharashtra, India,  
Early 20<sup>th</sup> century CE, E - Ht: 30 cm, F - Ht: 27.5 cm,  
Coll.: CSMVS, An – 80 EF

Fig. 4  
Bust of a Brahmin, Plaster of Paris, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India,  
Early 20<sup>th</sup> century CE, Ht: 63.5 cm, Coll.: CSMVS, An – 72

## NOTES



5



6

Fig. 5  
A Bhil hunter, Plaster of Paris, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India,  
Early 20th century CE, Ht: 23 cm, Coll.: CSMVS, An - 78

Fig. 6  
A mendicant Brahmin, Plaster of Paris, Mumbai, Maharashtra,  
India, Early 20th century CE, Ht: 24 cm, Coll.: CSMVS, An - 77

depicting the distinct styles of traditional headgears worn by communities in Bombay Presidency (Fig. 7).

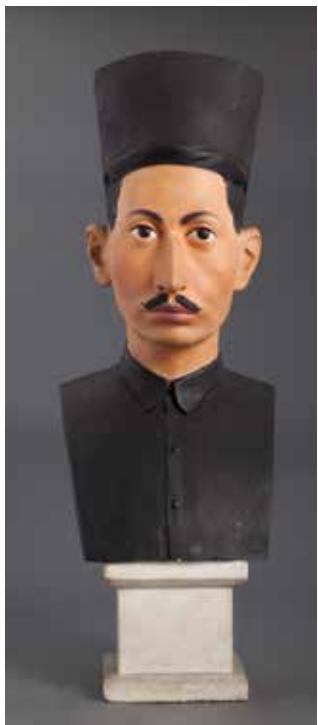
Another interesting feature of International Exhibition of Indian Art in Calcutta was the use of live models to break the monotony of the display. People of Garo, Khasi and Jaintia hill tribes were brought to Calcutta and used as live models by clay modellers, who worked during the exhibition. Jadunath Pal made these figures under the supervision of Sir George Watt.<sup>7</sup> He was a Scottish physician and botanist who is well known for six-volume Dictionary of the Economic Products of India of 1885 and official catalogue of Indian Art at Delhi, 1903. Realistic models of people from different races from North India were prepared for this exhibition under the supervision of a British ethnographer, Sir Herbert Risley.<sup>8</sup>

The first international exhibition held at Crystal Palace, London in 1851 saw increasing interests in the 'exotic' subjects. The clay figures from India representing Indian people, their life and culture were in great demand. These figures were not just souvenirs but ethnographic representations. Jadu Nath Pal (1821–1920), Paranchandra Pal (1828–1924), Bankeshwar Pal (1875–1924), Rakhal Pal and Ramlal Pal were clay modellers from Krishnanagar, Bengal whose works were recognized and awarded in most international exhibitions held since 1851.<sup>9</sup> The Melbourne International Exhibition of 1880–81 displayed Jadunath Pal's clay works that won him accolades. These clay works are now in the collection of Museum Victoria, Australia.<sup>10</sup>

The Amsterdam International Exhibition of 1882 had a row of native shops with life-size human figures. The Colonial and India exhibition held at South Kensington, London in 1886 displayed several Indian art objects and anthropological studies. Interestingly, this exhibition displayed 'native artisans'. Thirty-four men from Agra including sweetmeat makers, weavers, potters and few more were invited to London who demonstrated various crafts and professions. These men were inmates from the Agra jail who were trained in various crafts. This was the colonial initiative to impart craft training through various institutions like jails, orphanages, mission schools and industrial art schools.

The Glasgow International Festival of 1888 had displayed a miniature scene illustrating the Durga festival of Bengal and seventeen life-size ethnological models of aboriginal tribes.<sup>11</sup>

This study only discusses the clay figures from Poona, Krishnanagar and Lucknow which are of unique style and



7

Fig. 7  
Bust depicting headwear of a traditional Parsi, Plaster of Paris, Maharashtra, India, Early 20th century CE, Coll.: Bhau Daji Lad Museum

Fig. 8  
A woman from Chaitanya sect playing cymbals, Clay, Krishnanagar, West Bengal, India, Ht: 16.50 cm, Coll.: TAPI Collection of Praful & Shilpa Shah, A.05.68 (4)

Fig. 9  
A yogi, Clay, Krishnanagar, West Bengal, India, c. 1870, Ht: 12.70 cm, Coll.: TAPI Collection of Praful & Shilpa Shah, A.04.81

received international recognition in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### CLAY FIGURES OF KRISHNANAGAR (NADIA DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL)

The clay figures of Krishnanagar gained importance in Bengal under the rule of Maharaja Krishnachandra Ray (1710 – 1782). The clay modelers here were not the locals but they were either brought from Dacca or Natore by Maharaja Krishnachandra. They were settled at Ghurni, a suburb of Krishnanagar. Ghurni, located near river Jalangi (locally known as Khoray) provided them fine clay required for clay modelling. These clay modellers were brought primarily for religious image-making. However, European influence and patronage gave this art fresh impetus. Krishnanagar started creating realistic clay models that received international recognition.

Krishnanagar figures were created by modelling coils of clay collected from river banks over a metal armature. For finer features of the figure like fingers, clay was mixed with cotton wool to avoid breakage. The head was made by pressing clay into molds and figures were attached to clay bases via the metal armature. These figures were then fired in a brick kiln. Cracks that develop during the firing were filled with paper and glue. The figures were then

painted with natural pigments like indigo, turmeric, red ochre, charcoal etc., and finally decorated using hair made of sheep's wool, and pieces of cloth for dresses. These figures are notable for the realistic appearance and facial expressions.<sup>12</sup> (Fig. 8, 9)



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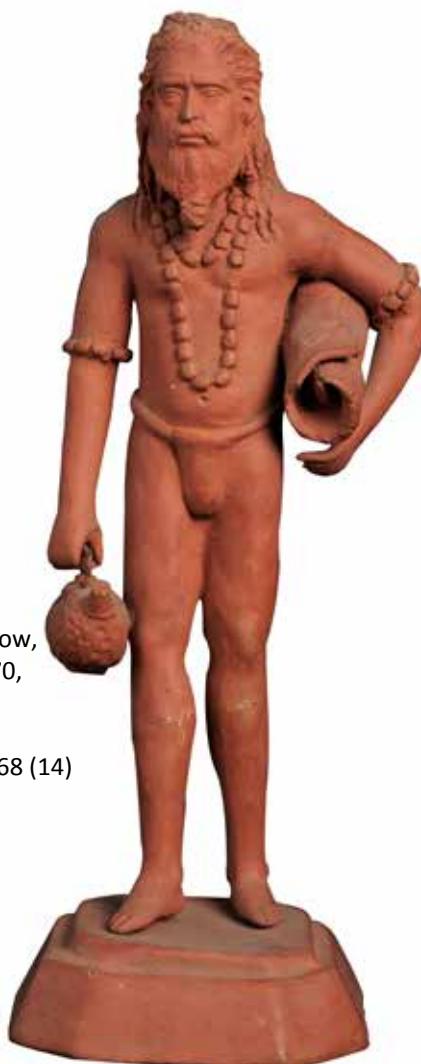
## NOTES



10



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12

Fig. 10  
Jeweller, Clay, Pune,  
Maharashtra, India,  
Early 20th century CE,  
Ht: 23 cm,  
Coll.: CSMVS, An – 80 K

Fig. 11  
A wood cutter, Clay, Pune,  
Maharashtra, India,  
Early 20th century CE,  
18.7 x 17.4 x 14.8 cms,  
Coll.: CSMVS, An – 81

Fig. 12  
A Sadhu, Terracotta, Lucknow,  
Uttar Pradesh, India, c. 1870,  
Ht: 19.05 cm,  
Coll.: TAPI Collection of  
Praful & Shilpa Shah, A.05.68 (14)

## POONA CLAY FIGURES

Poona in the Bombay Presidency was yet another centre of realistic clay figures. The Poona clay figures, much like the Krishnanagar ones, have superior finish and used pieces of cloth for dresses. T. N. Mukharji mentions that Bapuji Supekar, a jingar (a leather saddle-maker) and Kaluram Govandi (a brick layer)<sup>13</sup> first opened shops in Poona to sell their clay figures. Mukharji also mentions names of modellers like Tatya Vehvari, Sitaram Joshi, Daji Narayan, Sukhram Seth Sonar, Raghopant and Maroti Gurav. The CSMVS has a significant collection of these Poona clay figures of early 20<sup>th</sup> century depicting different communities.

Similar to Krishnanagar, Poona clay figures were also made of fine clay and mixed with cotton to avoid breakage. Different parts of the figures were hand modeled separately and joined with wooden pegs and clay paste. The complete figure was then attached to a wooden base. These figures were sun-dried and then painted with mineral colours and in some cases pieces of cloth were used for dresses, turbans etc. Occasionally body hair was added.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly the accessories indicating the professions of the figures were made from materials in actual use in the professions, like the paper bundles in the hands of a clerk, wood cutter with a bundle of wood, a metal needle and thread in the hands of a tailor, all tools used by a jeweller (Figs. 10, 11).

Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai, has several clay figures in its collection that depict the people, lifestyles, occupations and culture of Bombay of late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The models were made at the museum probably by local artists in early 1900s. However, these figures do not have the finished look of the Poona clay figures.

#### LUCKNOW CLAY FIGURES

Lucknow artists were particularly good in modelling clay figures depicting every day scenes, and models of fruits and vegetables. Unlike Poona, Lucknow clay modellers did not use actual hair, pieces of cloth or other accessories for the decoration of the clay figures. Though this made them more durable, but they lacked the expression seen in the Krishnanagar and Poona clay figures, and were cheaper also.<sup>15</sup>

These figures were created using a special type of clay produced in Lucknow. The process involved tooling and carving the clay rather than actual molding. The figures were modelled when the clay was in a ‘green stage’ (a stage between wet and dry). Sir Watt mentions in his 1903 Delhi exhibition report that the Lucknow clay modellers have neo classical, Italian style fluidity to their dress.<sup>16</sup> The Italian style and technique adopted by Lucknow clay modellers is attributed to General Claude Martin (1735–1800) a French soldier who visited India in 1751. With his skill, hard work he became the richest European in Lucknow. Martin had purchased a mansion known as Constantia in Lucknow. In 1780 he commissioned local sculptors to create stone and stucco figures in Greek and Italian styles for the mansion and its garden. The European impact is seen in the red ochre-coated small human figures which resemble Italian terracotta.<sup>17</sup> (Fig. 12)

Of the three places discussed here, Krishnanagar and Lucknow artists still continue to create clay figures. Over a period of time, the materials that are being used has changed, particularly the colours. Artificial colours are being used in place of natural colours and the use of molds to create stock images has increased. Besides, the quality of production and expressiveness of the human figures has declined. The production of Poona clay figures has completely stopped for reasons unknown. It can be due to lack of demand, patronage or excessive use of plaster of Paris for mass production.

#### END NOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> T. N. Mukharji, *Art – Manufactures of India*, 1974, Navrang Oriental Booksellers & Publishers, New Delhi, p. 62.
- <sup>3</sup> Sir George Watt, *Indian Art at Delhi*, 1903, The Superintendent of Government Printing, Calcutta, p. 89.
- Rustam J. Mehta, *The Handicrafts And Industrial Arts of India*, 1960, Taraporevala’s Treasure House of Books, Bombay, p. 91.
- G. C. M. Birdwood, *The Arts of India*, 1886, The British Book Company, Lamotte street, Jersey, Cl. p. 222.
- <sup>4</sup> Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, objects, histories – Institutions of Art in colonial and post – colonial India*, 2004, Permanent Black, Delhi, p. 70.
- <sup>5</sup> Soumitra Das, *Jadughar – 200 years of the Indian Museum, 1814 – 2014*, 2014, The Director, Indian Museum, Kolkata, pp. 78, 84.
- <sup>6</sup> T. N. Mukharji, 1974, p. 74.
- <sup>7</sup> T. N. Mukharji, 1974, p. 63.
- <sup>8</sup> *The Indian Museum 1814 – 1914*, 1914, The Trustees of the Indian Museum, Calcutta, pp. 15, 25, 26.
- <sup>9</sup> T. N. Mukharji, 1974, p. 59.
- Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The making of a new Indian art – Artists, aesthetics and nationalism in Bengal c. 1850 – 1920*, 2008, Cambridge University Press, New York, p. 70.
- <sup>10</sup> <https://collections.museumvictoria.com.au>, accessed on 18/1/8.
- <sup>11</sup> T. N. Mukharji, 1974, pp. 60, 63.
- <sup>12</sup> Susan Bean, *Image Makers of Bengal in ceramics monthly*, 1990, Professional Publications, Columbus, Ohio, p. 32.
- <sup>13</sup> *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, vol. XVIII Part II, 1885, Government Central Press, p. 202.
- <sup>14</sup> *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, vol. XVIII Part II, 1885, Government Central Press, p. 203.
- <sup>15</sup> T. N. Mukharji, 1974, pp. 71, 72.
- <sup>16</sup> Sir George Watt, *Indian Art at Delhi*, 1903, The Superintendent of Government Printing, Calcutta, pp. 89, 450.
- <sup>17</sup> Madhu Trivedi, “European Impact in Awadh (1765-1856)” in Editors: Ahsan Jan Qaisar & Som Prakash Verma, *Art And Culture - Endeavours in Interpretation*, 1995, Vol. I, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, p. 40.

