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Legacy of Timeless Indigenous Traditional Handcrafted Molela Terracotta Plaques Embodiment and Its Current Commercial

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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Abstract

This study explores the interconnectedness of the narrative artistic visual language of the unique indigenous Molela terracotta plaques crafting and the shape development method of Rajasthani popular folk motifs themed in hollow high-relief plaques, the interrelationship of the Molela plaque crafting art form with the terracotta pottery art of the Indus Valley Civilization period; and a detailed assessment of various dimensions was conducted to understand and document the flow of imitation across generations along with the continuity of this traditional art form till date. Being associated with the brief history of terracotta art, the researcher is aware of the diverse circumstantial conditions under which successive generations of craftsmen have always made new experiments the basis of innovation. The ultimate objective of this research paper is to

present the analytical nature of terracotta art practiced in various ways in different states of India from ancient times to the present time; also, the origin of this traditional handicraft form and the development of terracotta pots, plaques and other types of artefacts are also to be presented.

Key Words

Thala, Glazing, Dhawri Gond, Khargota, Bhopa, Tercotta.

Introduction

Molela, a small-sized village in Rajsamand district of Rajasthan is endowed with a heritage of various handcrafted traditional arts; where the terracotta art developed by the inhabitants of the Indus Valley thousands of years ago still remains relevant from generation to generation and is being practiced to suit modern tastes and with new design configurations. For centuries these clay crafters were limited to making a variety of specialized pottery and toys oriented towards daily utility; but for the last five-six decades, these artisans have been expressing their creative talent out of the box and by crafting unique terracotta plaques, they are showcasing their artistic proficiency. Terracotta plaques with figures of gods, goddesses and heroes of the local community in hollow high-relief form; the back surface of the base of these plaques is made flat in order to be mounted as a mural on the wall. Molela terracotta is a regional indigenous art form of crafting handmade plaques. Made as a flat surface, unlike the usual sculptures made elsewhere, the artisans of the clay crafter potter community who create these plaques intricately sculpt various popular themes inspired by local cultural-religious beliefs and day-to-day activities; and the natural terracotta look of these plaques, the bright vibrant colour scheme of the local favorite plaques and their design configuration is unique in itself.

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Continuity of Practice of Terracotta Art From Beginning to Present Day

The art of crafting various types of vessels, seals, figurines, toys and jewelry etc. using terracotta technique is thousands of years old in India and its roots are linked to the distant Indus Valley Civilization. Many archaeological references to remains of pottery and other artistic items from the Pre-Harappan and Harappan period are recorded in history and innumerable evidences are also preserved in various art museums. In the context of its expansion, development and innovation-oriented redevelopment, some scholars are also of the opinion that a version of this handicraft skill came to India through Persia; when Mongol warrior *Changez Khan* conquered China in 1212 AD. The artisans who came with this flow had mastered the art of making sculpture from the most ancient raw materials such as clay; and he demonstrated excellent technique in sculpting human figures. The third important phase of development of terracotta art emerged with greater maturity and sophistication during the '*Gupta period*', as a result of which human figures began to be carved with more delicate contours. Much evidence of this is still present on the walls of terracotta temples of that period; the temple of '*Bhitargaon*' located on the outskirts of Kanpur metropolis of Uttar Pradesh also confirms this. In the '*Shunga-Kushan period*' another new dimension was again integrated in the development of this art; the result of which was that the clay crafters of that period had acquired proficiency in craftinging very fine and extremely delicate ornaments of idols and terracotta idols started being sculpted with a high level of sophistication and greater morphological clarity. The continuity of the past of the terracotta art form continues to flow seamlessly throughout India in highly modified forms with regional tastes and identities. The crafting of Molella terracotta plaques is a moving link in the same series.

Etymology of Molela Terracotta Plaques

"*Molela Terracotta Plaques*" is basically a combination of three words; where '*Molela*' refers to the original identity of the village, where these plaques are sculpted, the word '*Terracotta*' derived from the '*Italian*' language which literally means "*Baked Clay*", i.e. raw artefacts prepared from clay in and after firing a kiln; their distinctive "*Colour and Rough Unglazed Textured Earthen Surface*" and '*Plaques*' refer to the indigenous technique of crafting hollow relief motifs from clay, which are developed by Molela artisans on rectangular and square flat surfaces of prescribed dimensions.

Practitioners of Molela Terracotta Plaque

For the past several centuries, practice of the unique terracotta art, especially the clay crafting techniques, has been practiced by hundreds of Prajapat or Prajapati or potter community residents of Molela village along with their families; who, based on his original innovative experimental creative approach and crafting skills, is continuously engaged in creating a vast range of highly captivating and variety oriented terracotta pots, home utility products and other decorative items.

Geographical Situation of Molela Shilpgram

'*Molela*', with a population of 4275, is a medium-sized model '*Shilpgram*', receiving the GI tag on 28 December 2015 for its eleven terracotta artistic products; which is geographically located near Banas River, 13 km away from Nathdwara tehsil headquarters of Rajsamand district and 49.9 km away from the tourist city Udaipur of Rajasthan state. Here the crafting of terracotta plaques is traditionally done as an ancestral art practice by skilled artisans of the potter community. These clay crafters are adept in the technique of crafting clay plaques and other types of artefacts; here hundreds of artisans along with their families are continuously engaged uninterruptedly in creating a huge range of highly captivating and variety oriented terracotta pots, household utility, decorative items and plaques based on their original innovative, creative skills and innovation. Developed as an ancestral clay craftsmanship since ancient times, the terracotta plaque art here seems to have an inherent charm due to its heart-touching nature and individuality; and customers come here from far and wide to buy it.

Expansion of Artistic Heritage

Among the diverse artworks of Molela terracotta art and panoramic clay plaques are more than fine artistic specimens; which represents the gradual flow of emergence of new terracotta creative art of India during the Indus Valley period and this tradition is still flourishing in its different mode in Molela village like in other parts of India. Molela terracotta art has remained an integral part of the local culture and religion from generation to generation through the region's vibrant cultural heritage, captivating timeless beauty and cultural relevance.

Aim & Objectives

The basic aim and objective of this paper is to study the traditional high relief style of timeless hollow terracotta plaques crafting process with the fusion of local people's preferences, relevant crafting topics, morphological configuration and method of preparation of traditional mineral colours, clay slip coating for glazing. The technique is to critically study and document the process of firing of clay art works in a kiln and the method of transforming baked terracotta plaques into vibrant multi-coloured hues as per local taste. At the same time, in accordance with the futuristic functional plan, new creative practices of creating by crossing the boundaries of traditions and optimizing experimentalism have to be considered and developed.

Methodology

This is a descriptive research paper prepared, which was discussed on the basis of questionnaire by interviewing the artisans, who crafted Molela plaques through observation method to get detailed information about various authentic facts and step-by-step processes of clay crafting. During the discussion, an attempt has been made to understand in a factual manner the depth of almost all the dimensions related to this artistic creation from the artisans of traditional terracotta plaques. The questions were based on the lineage of the craftsman, historical facts of the art, crafting process, pigments and motifs. Purposive sampling method was adopted to select the sample. Multiple-visit, interview method along with documentation has been adopted. The sample size included family members of traditional potter community artisans from "Molela" village of Nathdwara tehsil of Marwar region of Rajasthan state.

Resource Person

Like most Indian traditional handicraft art forms, the 'Molela Terracotta Plaques' art form has been passed down from generation to generation, evolving as an ancestral art skill till today. Previously, square tiles depicting scenes of everyday life in the village were sculpted into a single large panel. From such high-relief hollow panels emerged the contemporary 'secular terracotta plaques'; and surprisingly gradually over time these plaques gave way to crafting traditional themes by combining deities, folk heroes and symbols belonging to various unrelated local communities together in a single panel. There would hardly be any family of the potter community resident of Molela village which is not associated with terracotta handicraft art. One of the pioneers of this craft style, "Bhagga Lal potter" not only practices this period on a daily basis; in fact, he has also been training his family members, curious people and art students in crafting terracotta



Figure 1: Renaud clay crafter Bhagga Lal demonstrating Molela plaques crafting.

plaques and other decorative artistic artefacts for decades. At their workshop in Molela village, I had the opportunity to observe and collect primary data on the step-by-step crafting process of these unique terracotta Plaques, the decoration and firing techniques of the finished products.

Orthodox Beliefs in Background of Origin of Molela Terracotta Art

Although the Molela village's clay crafters consider themselves the successors of the potter artisans of the Indus Valley period; but when did this terracotta art develop in this village; In this context, according to a legend prevalent among the local people, "Lord Devnarayan", the main deity recognized in the regional tribal communities, once appeared in a dream to a blind man among the ancestors of the potters, and in that dream Lord Devnarayan gave that man his Instructions were given to sculpt the statue. The man, despite his blindness, was the first to build the idol of Lord Devnarayan in Molela village, following the divine order of his community deity. As a result, blessed by his devotion, the potter's eyesight was miraculously restored; since then, the potters of Molela have been practicing this art.

Cultural Religious Relevance and Its Usefulness



Figure 2: Dhola-Maru in the center with the terracotta plaque including deities and local heroes popular in local communities (left) and the brightly coloured 'Dharmaraja' plaque including the crafter Bhagga Lal along with his son (right).

Mediums of expression like various creative arts, narrative, drama, dance, music, cinema, photography and poetry or Chitrakathi narrative storytelling of Maharashtra, Pattachitra display and reading of Orissa and Bengal, Phad Chitra and puppetry of Rajasthan, narrative based genres. etc., all reflect social customs, religious beliefs, cultural patterns, economic aspects, political situation, spiritual thinking and daily activities. In continuation of the above, Molela terracotta art and its integral part, the flat surface hollow relief plaques, are an extension of the age-old tradition of handicraft skills, also a major occupation and means of livelihood for the potter community of that village.

Inspiration for Creation of Molela Terracotta Plaques:

Molela terracotta plaques are a popular part of a regional traditional art form and have particular relevance among the Bhil, Gujar, Jaat, Gadriya and other local tribal communities in the border states of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, as well as in their own region; because these plaques are related to various revered deities and specific folk and tribal religious traditions social customs, they are carved using hollow high-relief technique on a specially prepared wet clay base of approximately one and a quarter to one and a half inches in thickness.

The plaque (Thaal) of “*Lord Devanarayana*” plays a central role among the deities revered by these tribes; he is revered by the Gurjar community as a hero and an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The clay crafters of Molela always crafted him in a heroic posture riding on a horse with a large arched moustache. He is acknowledged as a community protector; and who keeps traveling from village to village to remove evil. Similarly, the tradition of sculpting other folk and Hindu deities including Gogaji, Durga, Chamunda and Kali on the plaques is also followed. The unique terracotta plaques of Molela contain a rich and wide range of subjects depicted. Regional socio-cultural Heritage and creativity, which spreads a captivating glow, the variety of captivating themes crafted in these plaques and their social relevance are detailed as per Table No. 01 given below:

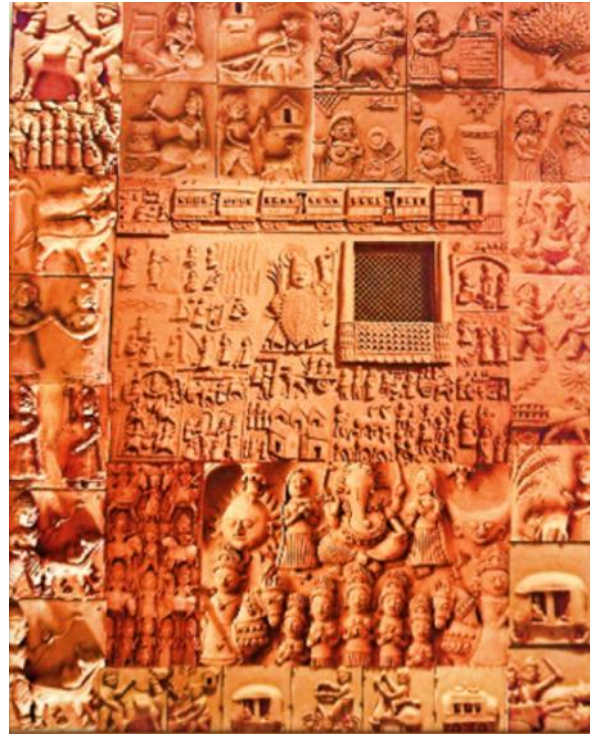


Figure 2: Crafting thematic variety oriented Molela terracotta plaques collection in collage form.




Table No. 01






1. **Heroes:** These plaques often depict great Rajput community warriors in heroic manner, evoking their valor and role of community protectors.
2. **Local Deities:** The Molela terracotta plaques depict local gods and goddesses in very strong way; and such topics play an important role in keeping the community connected to the roots of its spiritual and religious beliefs.
3. **Routine Activities and Occupations:** Various everyday domestic activities such as cooking, cleaning grains by soup, milking milk, extracting butter, drawing water from hand pump, dung cakes making; and so on, along with scenes of farmer’s agricultural work, children engrossed in play, butter thief Balya Krishna, blacksmiths engrossed in metal work, potters activities and other rural occupations and modern transport resources like buses, trains and aero-planes, etc. are also crafted with great liveliness on the surfaces of terracotta plaques.
4. **Matronly Strength:** The range of subjects crafted in the Molela terracotta plaques is also richly engraved with plaques targeting various themes focusing on matriarchal strength and her resilient nature; which shows the important participation of half the population in the upliftment of society and family.
5. **Celestial and Witchcraft Elements:** Artisans often incorporate some symbolic elements of acceptance of the local community into the concrete subject matter of their plaques, such as depicting the *sun*, *moon* and *stars* as celestial elements. To protect the house from the entry of evil spirits and the evil eye of people; making of ‘*Najru-mask plaque*’ to be placed at the entrance of the house is also a very popular topic. Similarly, a ‘*Eent plaque*’ with the symbolic blessing gesture hand of Dharmaraja to receive their blessings on fulfillment of his vow; and after the crimination of a family member, a ‘*Panch-Mukhi Kalash*’ is also crafted to bring flowers (ashes of bones) from the funeral pyre and germinate ‘*Jabare*’ in it for the ritual rites.
6. **Farmers Activities:** In the wide range of subjects of Molela terracotta plaques, various agricultural activities are also given prominent place, such as the motifs of scenes ranging from sowing to harvesting of crops.

7. **Battle Scenes:** In the plaques sometimes combine battles and heroic exploits based themes from the Hindu epics; which evokes the spirit of ancient legends.
8. **Fabled Narrative:** Various mythological stories ranging from episodes from the epic Gita like Krishna lifting a mountain on his finger to stories from Gita, Mahabharata and Ramayana are also expressed in these plaques.
9. **Cult Oriented Themes:** Apart from the traditional interesting subjects, Molela potters also depict the relevant incidents of Jain and Buddhist sects and their religious founders with utmost devotion in their plaques like Laughing Buddha, scenes based on Jain Tirthankaras, etc.

Subject Oriented Thematic Configuration in Terracotta Plaques


Plaques of ‘*Dharmaraja*’ and ‘*Nagaraja*’ as prominent community heroes depicted in Molela terracotta plaques with bright multi-coloured colour scheme are more preferred in the regional communities in contrast to the aura of naturally occurring terracotta colour. Specific symbolic colours are used for the deities such as *blue* for ‘*Kaladev*’ and *orange* for ‘*Goradev*’. Some of the popular themes that are given priority are Rajput heroes, local deities, daily household activities, women empowerment, cosmic planets, various professions in rural areas, agricultural activities, war scenes, mythological stories based on Krishna Lila etc. All these tangible subjects are mentioned as per the following *table no. 02*:


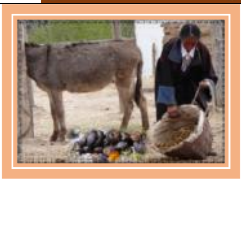


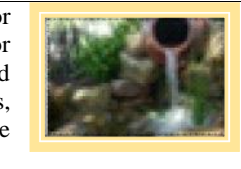


Sl.	Bodily Forms	Materialization Subject Enforcement Details
1.	Devanarayana	He holds an important status as a popular community deity of the Gujar tribe of Rajasthan and is depicted in high relief riding a horse, holding a spear and holding a lotus. In addition, a snake, a herd of cows, the sun, a man, a crocodile and a peacock are also depicted in the background of the plaque to show his overall personality; however sometimes, the curved hands are sculpted like the hood of a cobra as a symbolic representation of this divine incarnation. 
2.	Bhairavnath	The clay crafters of Molela, sculpture the deity of this community in two different images alternately, symbolizing the divine power of spanning the universal poles called ‘ <i>Kaalbhairava</i> ’ (Kala) and ‘ <i>Gorabhairava</i> ’ (Gora). His appearance is similar to that of Lord Shiva and he is depicted holding a trident in his hand. Similarly, Kaalbhairava is coined as a cunning and strong-willed personality; also in the background, offerings of wine and animal sacrifices are symbolically associated with his nature while Gorabhairava is considered to be of gentle and compassionate nature hence it is customary to depict him with a background containing offerings of sweets. 
3.	Nagdev	In local parlance, they are more popularly known as ‘ <i>Takaji</i> ’. It has been worshiped in India since ancient times. Traditionally, a central figure is added to this plaque; on either side of which many snakes are arranged in a group manner, and sometimes a twelve hooded deity figure is also carved.
4.	Mother Goddess	Skilled artisans of the potter community transform them into various incarnations as per the context of the scriptures; like <i>Durga</i> is depicted in the incarnation riding on a lion, <i>Chamunda</i> in the incarnation riding on an elephant, <i>Kalika</i> in the incarnation riding on a buffalo. Apart from this, in other incarnations she is also idolized as <i>Amba</i> , <i>Aawanmata</i> , <i>Sadumata</i> or <i>Hedamata</i> ; In each of these forms he is depicted holding a sword , a drum , a trident and a khappar , a bowl of blood , in his four hands.
5.	Tantra Sect	It is a cult that attempts to unite the contradictory poles of man and woman, but that effort turns into magic and mysticism. Potter artisans also sculpt plaques as per the requirements of this sect, although the demand for such plaques remains very limited.
6.	Bhopa	He is recognized as a ‘ <i>Priest</i> ’ among the local tribal communities. In this sense, the plaque of ‘ <i>Kala Bhopa</i> ’ is a black statue made in honor of the priests; and it is customary to change it every three to five years. 

7.	Dharmaraja	The deity of this popular tribal community is shown riding a majestic horse equivalent to the image of the royal seal and also combines intricate motifs with details such as cows, dogs, tigers and humans in the background. This plaque is painted in vivid colours like red, blue, green, yellow and pink to give it an attractive appearance.	
8.	Gangaur	It is one of the popular festivals of Rajasthan which is celebrated with great grandeur and enthusiasm and ritually worships ' <i>Parvati</i> ' and ' <i>Shiva</i> '. The plaque made for this purpose depicts Parvati as an ideal woman in a circular posture with open eyes. Girls, women and newly married women worship these plaques for a happy married life. Their bodies are painted mostly orange and blue and additional decoration is done with silver foil paper.	
9.	Dhola-Maru	They are named after a couple of lovers mentioned in many Rajasthani folk tales and legends; he is shown running through the desert on the back of a camel and is painted with light hues. <i>Maru</i> is held securely by his lover <i>Dhola</i> and the camel's neck is bent backwards to make it appear as if it is running fast.	
10.	Panch Devi	To depict the spiritual significance of the forces governing life in the rich cultural tradition of Molella terracotta art; in the ' <i>Panch Devi</i> ' plaque, the five elements of the universe namely air, water, fire, sky and earth are symbolically sculptured together on a single plaque like five goddesses.	
11.	Contemporary Theme	At present, great variation can be seen in the selection of subjects depicted on Molella terracotta plaques; because, now some young clay crafters have gone beyond the out of box of traditional subjects and have started sculpting various contemporary subjects on plaques as per the modern social interest like sexual activities inspired by the sculptures carved in the walls of Khajuraho temples, Laughing Buddha and many other topics related to his imagination.	
12.	Gauri Nritya	The embodiment of this dance in terracotta plaques is one of the popular subjects of Molella clay crafters; because ' <i>Gauri Nritya</i> ' (incarnation of Parvati) is a captivating form of religious dance; which is originated from the southern Mewar region in Rajasthan, India, and holds a special place in local cultural heritage and social harmony.	
13.	Panch Devi	Like the twelve most relevant subjects carved in Molella terracotta plaques such as Dev Narayanji, Pabuji, Tejaji, Gora Bhairon, Kala Bhairon, Vasuki, Bhopa etc., the ' <i>Panch Devis</i> ' are also depicted representing the five cosmic elements i.e. air, water, fire, sky and earth, in symbolic form, they are jointly depicted on a single plaque. This plaque holds a special place in the vibrant tradition of Rajasthan.	

Raw Materials and Tools












Table 3: Description of the raw materials used in the making of Molela plaques:

Sl	Raw Stuff	Description & Related Image
1.	Clay	Molella crafters Traditionally uses ' <i>muddy</i> ' coloured clay; which is mined from the banks of Banas River on Nathdwara Road, about 2 km from village. Each potter mines clay from a designated location based on his prior experiences. Similarly, for the sculpting of terracotta plaques, which are created for the purpose of combining them in the form of murals on the walls, it is considered better to use local ' <i>red clay</i> ' than the beige coloured clay. This blood coloured clay is also collected from the same Banas river; but it is collected from the shallow depth of the river. The special type of clay of the Banas river is completely suitable for the authenticity and unique identity of ' <i>Molella Terracotta Art</i> '.  <small>Figure 1, Soil obtained from local Banas River.</small>
2.	Red Ocher	Actually, when the artefacts created from raw clay are fired in furnace, then after being fired properly, they automatically acquire natural terracotta colour; but sometimes some Molella artisans also add appropriate amounts of red ocher like donkey dung and wood dust to the clay during the clay preparation process to give a blood luster to their products; which imparts a unique reddish-brown colour to the finished product.

3.	Clay Slip	Basically it is a solution of local clay having a special quality; which the Molela clay crafters call in their colloquial language as ' <i>Palewa clay</i> '. They use it in various ways in the creation of their artefacts, such as creating colours by dissolving various local minerals in its solution and to create a <i>silvery luster</i> on the artefacts; before baking their surface is coated with this clay slip (Palewa Mitti). However, artefacts made of clay automatically acquire their natural terracotta colour after being baked in furnish and this colour remains attractive and equally durable; but people of the local tribal community prefer to install brightly coloured idols in their homes and temples. To colour these idols, the artisans of Molela use self-made eco-friendly colours made from various locally available stones and minerals. Apart from the clay soil of the banks of river Banas and the red soil of the shallow area inside the same river, the artisans of the potter community of Molela also use ' <i>Palewa clay</i> ' from a place about 15 kilometers away from Molela village.	
4.	Minerals Used to Making of Pigments	They use this clay mainly in two forms like when they have to make artefacts with a shiny luster like greyish silver; so they apply a thin coating of Palewa clay solution over the artefacts before firing them in a furnish; and the second utility of this clay is that during the process of preparing colours, different colours are made by mixing it with appropriate amounts of different minerals, such as 'silver paleo' colour is made by dissolving Palewa soil in water. Similarly, when ocher (red clay) is mixed in this solution, red colour is formed. Apart from these, there are many other colours like bright red colour from vermilion, blue colour from indigo, sky blue colour from lumpy clay bought from the market, yellow ocher colour from Hirmich clay, white colour from mica (quartz rich rock) powder, and Black colour is made by dissolving carbon material collected from taba (bread iron pan) or powder of burnt coconut shells in water. However, now the effect of changing priorities of the times is being seen as the terracotta art artisans of Molela have gradually started using commercially available colours produced through chemical process in the market.	
5.	Foil	Molela terracotta votive plates are adorned with vibrant colour schemes and intricate designs. But now as per the modern taste, many a times customers from tribal community request the creators to transform the terracotta plaques into more attractive and flamboyant body; at that stage, to give a very shiny look to the votive plates, the craftsmen have started using very bright colours along with <i>silver</i> and <i>golden foil</i> at appropriate places.	
6.	Binding Substance	Donkey Dung Dried donkey dung is finely ground and sieved, usually adding an average of 10% powder to the soil; Which provides ideal stability as a bonding material to hold clay particles together to create panels and other sculptures. However, some artisans alternatively add a maximum of 20% donkey dung powder to the clay depending on the quality of the clay, their functional experience and their creation process. In case of non-availability of donkey dung, artisans also use horse dung as an alternative. This substance helps dissipate heat through the fillet, providing strength.	
		Wood Dust In clay artefacts, ' <i>wood sawdust</i> ' acts as a binder before they are fired; whereas during firing it serves as combustible material for the furnace. Apart from this, it also creates interesting texture on the surface of the artwork. Molela artisans sometimes also use ' <i>paddy husk</i> ' as an alternative to sawdust. This substance protects the artwork from thermal shock during firing.	
		Dawrigund ' <i>Dhawri gum</i> ' also known as " <i>Dhawrigund</i> " in regional colloquial language. This gum obtained naturally from the locally available ' <i>Dhawri tree</i> '; and apart from this, gum collected from the regional <i>Babul (Acacia)</i> or <i>Keekar</i> tree, which is commonly used as a binder substance. When preparing eco-friendly pigments of various colours, it's mixed in prescribed quantity to achieved intensity, shine and durability of colours on the surface of artefacts.	
		Water Water is used as a versatile substance in the creation of Molela terracotta artefacts; for example, it is used to make the soil flexible by soaking it in the ' <i>Kundi</i> ' (chamber or tank) and to obtain the required consistency by kneading the soil, donkey dung and wood sawdust or rice husk together. Similarly, during the process of creating artefacts, craftsmen also use water as a bonding substance to join together the separately made parts of an artefact.	
7.	Fuel	Both these substances are known locally as ' <i>Kanda</i> ' and ' <i>Wooden Chaila</i> ' (fire wood) of babul tree and are used as fuel materials during the kiln firing process of clay artefacts. First of all, before loading the artefacts created from clay into the furnace, a surface of rods is carefully laid out on an iron mesh fitted in the furnace chamber; which also provide a base to the artefacts and when the firing is started from the wooden channels in the lower part of the furnace, then the channels flow the heat evenly.	
8.	Ash Powder	It is basically obtained as a byproduct after complete burning of coal and wood in the furnace. Which is filtered through a sieve with fine pores and the ash powder thus obtained is then used as a separator material to be applied on the dye; When a motif has to be reproduced repeatedly with a dye, using raw materials allows it to easily separate from the surface of the clay in the process of taking an impression from the die.	

Tools and Their Utilization

For crafting Molela Terracotta Plaque, the artisans use power operated tools in addition to self-made mostly indigenous and traditional tools. The details of these important instruments and equipment are mentioned in Table No. 04 below:

Sl.	Tool	Its Use & Related Image
1.	Pindi	A typical native multi-purpose tool called " Pindi ", carved out of round stone with grooves for holding in the hand, made especially for Molela artisans, plays an important role in the sculpting of the Molela clay plaques; clay crafters use it to perform a variety of creative tasks such as flattening and smoothing the clay, while making the base of a plate and such many similar other tasks. 
2.	Bhaldi	This is a versatile tool of the Molela potters; They mainly use it to create different types of designs and apart from this they also use it to scrape and clean the ' Patiya ' and ' Pindi '. 
3.	Paatri	Basically it is a rectangular wooden slab measuring approximately 6x12x1 inches, which the potter artisans of Molela pronounce in their local dialect with names like ' Paatri ' and ' Patiya '; and they use this indigenous tool for tasks like breaking large lumps of clay, leveling, beating and rubbing the surface of the base plate (Thaal) of Plaques and making coils from clay. 
4.	Wooden Beaters	These indigenous tools, locally made from wood and readily available in the market in various shapes and sizes are sometimes used by Molela clay crafters as an alternative to the traditional ' Patiya ' tool for break large lumps of soil and pulverize them. 
	Die	The artisans of Molela almost sculpt the plates by hand; But in the decoration of these plaques, there is a need to combine some decorative motifs like ornamental floral designs, animal figures, ornaments, domed pinnacles, weapons etc. by repeating them with frequency. To have symmetry in these motifs; Molela artisans make a die (Thappa/stamp) of the original motif from clay or pop, bake it (if made from clay) and transform it into terracotta and then reproduce the motifs from it and use them as and when required. 
5.	Strainer Sieve	Basically this is a type of multi-purpose Strainer. The potters of Molela pronounce this traditional tool as ' Chhalni ' in their dialect and they use it to filter the clay-water mixture to remove impurities like pebbles, stones, wood and grass pieces, roots of plants, etc. Apart from this, they also filter dried and ground donkey dung powder and wood sawdust to obtained fine powder of both materials. 
6.	Cotton Cloth and Sponge	Cotton Cloth In clay art, both cotton cloth and sponge serve important purposes and Molela potters use them as tools during sculpting. They commonly use cotton cloths to clean and smooth the surface of clay plates, to gently wipe off excess moisture when working with wet or fresh clay, or to smooth the surface of an artwork; use a damp soft cotton cloth. Additionally, they are used in the process of joining together pieces of separately formed clay or when assembling different clay components such as coils or slabs to form a structure; and also use cotton fabric to make the edges seamlessly consistent. Apart from this, many times the ear of molding the plates remains incomplete, then they cover it with a damp cloth during the interval of work again the next day. 
		Sponge In the clay crafting process, sculptors often use a sponge as a water control tool to absorb moisture from the clay. It serves as a useful tool for adding water to dry clay or removing excess water from wet clay, smoothing out rough edges and surfaces, as well as modeling work. 
7.	Clay Soak Pit	The potter craftsmen of Molela pronounce it by names like ' Kundi ' or ' Haudiya ' in their local language. Basically it is used in the form of ' Clay Soak Pit ' or ' Tank ', in which by keeping the clay soaked for a long time, it becomes soft, flexible and suitable for sculpting artefacts. 
8.	Brushes	Nowadays, most of the crafters practicing Molela art have started using brushes produced in factories and factories to paint the artworks; but many older craftsmen still make their own soft bristle brushes in the traditional manner from the hair of a donkey's neck, and hard bristle brushes, often from the hair of a donkey's tail. 
9.	Khargota	Molela terracotta artisans traditionally use it as a storage vessel by preparing colours and adding appropriate amount of water to it when required to colour the artefacts. They generally use dried coconut shells for this; which is pronounced as ' Khargota ' in its local colloquial language. 

10.	Furnace	This is a very important plant for the Molela clay crafters and they call it “ <i>Awada</i> ” in their regionally spoken language. Each craftsman as per his requirement; kilns of permanent, temporary and movable type in circular, rectangular, square or domed shape and operated on wood-fuel, diesel, gas or electricity, for firing artefacts and plaques made of clay; to transform them into durable and terracotta form, they set up kilns at their respective work sites.	
11.	Potter Wheel	Generally, the artisans of the Molela terracotta potter community prefer to use the wheel in a very limited way when they need to shape the pottery; whereas terracotta plaques (they call them “ <i>Thala</i> ” in their colloquial local language) are entirely hand crafting by shaping the clay by hand using coiling, pinching and slab-making methods. They not only depict local deities in these plaques; rather, story-oriented narrative scenes are also depicted as a series of rectangular or square plaques.	
12.	Thread	In the creation of experimental creative clay artefacts, threads give rise to immense possibilities and play infinite roles. It always remains relevant in the making of every beautiful artefact, configuration and creating different types of heart touching and panoramic textures; but as far as the terracotta plaques produced by the potter craftsmen of Molela are concerned, they use thread in their sculpting only to a very limited extent. Although when they create some other types of art works with chalk (potter-wheel), they definitely use the thread as a “ <i>cutting tool</i> ”, while cutting away the bottom of the art work from the wheel of the chalk.	
13.	Jute Sack	In molding of Molela clay plaques, the clay needs to be aged and conditioned before it is used; for this purpose, Molela craftsmen, like other clay crafters, use jute sacks to regulate the excess moisture of the filtered clay-water solution. Apart from this, they also often use them for storing and transporting soil. The porous nature of jute sacks allows controlled moisture exchange. When it is not available, they often use thick cotton cloth as an alternative.	
14.	Water Pot	Water is used as an extremely important ingredient in the execution of clay sculpture and is used at every stage of creation such as soaking the clay, clay preparation for molding, leveling the clay, creation of various parts of the plaque, attaching various parts to the plaque surface or working on the chuck; and to keep it during the creation of the plaque, Molela potters often use wide mouthed self-made terracotta vessels. Molela crafters, in their local language, call this vessel for storing water as “ <i>Ghada</i> ”.	
15.	Broken Pottery	These pieces serve a specific purpose during the firing process. These are made by loading the clay artefacts into the kiln and before firing, they are set one above the other in such a way that the excess heat and smoke escapes freely. These pieces act as a protective layer, helping to regulate heat distribution and prevent direct contact between the plaque and the flames. Additionally, the pieces contribute to the overall insulation of the kiln, ensuring uniform heating and controlling temperature fluctuations.	

Creation Process of Molela Terracotta Plaques

The process of crafting terracotta slabs has *eight most important steps*, namely preparing the clay, creating the hollow-relief work, drying the clay plaques in shade and then in the sun, sanding, loading the clay artefacts into the kiln, unloading, colour preparation and painting of backed plaques; whose details are as per the following table no. 05:

Sl.	Process	Execution & Concerned Image
1.	Clay Cleaning Process	The artisans of the potter community of Molela mine two different types of clay from the shallow depths of the Banas River near their village and its banks to sculpt terracotta plaques; They collect as per their requirement at their respective workplaces. When they have to create plaques; So several days in advance, we take out the required amount of soil from the stock, grind it in big lumps using a <i>Pindi</i> or <i>wooden beater</i> and keep them soaked in “ <i>Houdiya</i> ” (Kundi) for several days. When the soil becomes smooth and soft, then it is thickened by adding water to it. After that, it is filtered through a fine mesh filter over a <i>shallow Kundi</i> or <i>drum</i> to remove pebbles, stones and other types of impurities. Finally, a cotton cloth or jute sack is spread on the ground and the filtered solution is spread over it. After some time, when its moisture is used up and the soil takes the paste form; Then it is united and made a lot.
2.	Step by Step Clay Preparation Demonstration	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The process of kneading/wedging clay by artisan of Molela terracotta Plaques (Pic. 01 & 02). 2. The process of preparing a thin layer of dried and sifted donkey dung by sprinkling it on the floor (Pic. 03). 3. The process of laying a lump of clay flat on the floor (Pic. 04). 4. The process of levelling clay by crushing by feet on the floor (Figure 05). 5. The process of smoothening the soil surface using the typical local wooden tools ‘Pindi’ and ‘Patry’ (Pic. 06 to 08). 6. The process of sprinkling water to smooth the clay surface (Figure 09). 7. The step by step process of smoothening the surface of the clay with the wooden native tool ‘Patry’ (Pic. 10 to 15).




3.	Clay Kneading, Mixing & Preparation Process	To prepare terracotta plaques, the artisans, due to non-availability of local Banas river soil, mixed both types of soil obtained from places called “ <i>Nada village</i> ” and “ <i>Aloo Khera</i> ” near Molela village with 10 to 20% dried and sifted donkey dung. Using appropriate amount of water, they are fused together. Clay rafters call these soils “ <i>Nada soil</i> ” and “ <i>Aloo soil</i> ”. First of all the clay mixture is kneaded well with feet and hands respectively; then this lump of clay is spread on the ground levelling it and the process of levelling is repeated again and again as required using water and tools like Pindi and Pata. After this this wet sheet of clay is cut into rectangular shape with the help of an iron frame (stencil or measuring scale). This smooth slab of approximately 15 mm thickness is used as a base in the process of manufacturing various types of sculptures and especially plaques.
4.	Base Creation Process	The base of the Molela terracotta plaque is called ‘ <i>Thal</i> ’ in the local dialect. To give it shape, a base of about 15 mm thickness is prepared by flattening a lump of kneaded clay with a typical native round shaped tool called ‘ <i>Pindi</i> ’ made of stone. After that, with a wooden tool called ‘ <i>Paata</i> ’ or ‘ <i>Patry</i> ’, the earthen lump is leveled by sprinkling appropriate amount of water and its surface is smoothed to the extreme condition, and now the ‘ <i>Thaal</i> ’ (base plate) is given its final shape with a locally developed iron tool called ‘ <i>Bhaldi</i> ’, similar to a knife attached to the upper face of a spear to scrape off excess clay or cut away the edges; and to ensure measurement, a rectangular frame (firma) made of flat iron strip is used. In this way the plate or base becomes ready for making the hollow relief form; and in the next step, the base or plate of the Molela plaque is often decorated with a border called ‘ <i>Doli</i> ’. For this, the rolled coil is smoothened and pasted around the plate as a border by applying water as a binder and then flattened with the <i>Paata</i> tool. Preparing borders on the base plate before crafting various figures helps the clay crafter to determine the internal joint measurements and proportional sizes of the clay figures.
5.	Designing of Main Body	In this step, first of all the clay is rolled like a lump and converted into a thin flat slab. Subsequently, strips of appropriate size are cut to form different parts of the body of the deities or other main characters and then the various parts of the figures are respectively developed with the relief technique and then pasted on thin slabs; it is glued by roughening it with ‘ <i>Bhaldi</i> ’ tool and applying water binder solution. The unique feature of the Molela plaques thus carved is that they remain light in terms of weight because the main figures of the gods and goddesses are made in such a way that their inner part remains hollow and firm. 
6.	Subsidiary Features Adding Process	At this stage of crafting, on a plaque base; apart from the doli (border line), the main parts correspond to well-planned arrangements of popular themes like the nine incarnations of Durga, Dashavatara, Nava Griha, Shrinathji, Gauri Nritya (a popular religious folk dance of southern Mewar), scenes from Ramayana or everyday village life are combined with local characteristics. After some time, when the clay of the crafted figures becomes a little hard, then at that stage; aesthetically oriented geometric patterns, trees, animals, birds, decorative motifs and floral designs besides structural details of the figures like face, hands, nose, ears, eyes and feet etc. are cast with the help of coiling and slab casting techniques. 
7.	Decoration	Finally, when the basic sculpting work is completed, elaborate decorations are done with the help of Bhaldi tools. The wide tip and sides of this tool create large lines, skirt folds and various geometric patterns; whereas the backend of this tool is used to create fine details of iris and other similar shapes. 
8.	Step by Step Crafting Process Through Pictures	Transferring the firma of predetermined measurement to a flat base of wet clay (Pic. 01). Cutting wet clay into square shape using a firma (Pic. 02). Rolling technique of clay for coil formation to create the outline of the plaque (Pic. 03). Clay coils fixing method to create outline of the plaque (Pic. 04, 05 & 06). Process of preparing the base for creating handmade hollow shapes and designs (Pic. 07). The process of independently making various parts according to predetermined configuration and attaching them to the base plate (Pic. 08). The process of making hollow shapes from wet soft clay by placing the fingers of the hand inward (Pic. 09). Process of shaping various parts on plate (Figure 10). The process of sculpting ornaments, characteristic features and other decorative details into figures (Pic. 11). The process of sculpting complex details into shapes with the help of the native tool ‘ <i>Bhaldi</i> ’ (Pic. 12 to 16). 
9.	Drying Process	After making the plaques from clay, they are finally dried thoroughly in the shade for seven to nine days depending on the weather and in the sun for another two to four days; because properly drying the fillet before cooking is a very important process. If there is moisture left in the plaques made of clay, there is a possibility of them bursting when heated in the furnace.
10.	Sanding Process	After thoroughly drying plaques or other artefacts made from clay and before baking; if there are some distortions left in any art work, then to remove them, the surface is levelled by rubbing it with sandpaper of appropriate number from 180 to 250.

Figure 1. Step-by-step process for creating hollow-relief plaques.

11.	Furnace Loading Process	To properly fire the dried plaques, they are loaded one by one with great care into a traditionally constructed circular shaped kiln. The potters of Molela call this kiln ' <i>Awada</i> ' in their regional dialect. During the process of loading the artifacts into the furnace, a layer of dung cakes is placed over a mesh of iron bars in the furnace; than, the artefacts are loaded on top of it, layer by layer. After that, to control the temperature, the furnace is sealed from the top with broken pieces of terracotta pots. Some artisans have now started using furnaces operated by electricity, diesel or gas instead of traditional furnaces.	
12.	Firing and Unloading Process	Typically, furnaces have a vent for burning babool (acacia) wood chips as fuel; but the potter craftsmen of Molela make four to five vents (mouths) around the lower part of their kiln and burn pieces of wood in all the mouths and keep firing for 4 to 6 hours. To baking the plaques made of clay properly, a very slow fire is lit initially and after 15 to 20 minutes when the furnace becomes slightly hot; then the intensity of the fire is increased in a controlled manner and the temperature is taken to 1,000 °C to 1,150 °C (follow table no. 06). In a typical native way, craftsmen estimate the temperature in the firing kiln based on the colour of the flame, such as when the colour of the flame turns blue, it indicates that the desired temperature range for thoroughly baking the plaques has been achieved. Similarly, when dark black smoke suddenly comes out from the top of the furnace, it indicates that the plaques or other artefacts have been baked properly and have acquired their natural terracotta colour. Similarly, when dark black smoke suddenly comes out from the top of the furnace, it indicates that the plaques have been baked properly and have acquired their natural terracotta colour. After this stage all the vents of the furnace are closed by placing bricks and applying wet soil on top of it; after that in the next day, when the furnace cools down, the baked plaques are carefully taken out of the furnace.	
13.	Cooling Process	After the plaques or other creative artwork have been completely fired in the kiln; The fire is stopped and its vents are sealed and the furnace then takes a minimum of 5-6 hours to cool down naturally.	
14.	Repairing Process	While baking the artefacts in the kiln, sometimes cracks appear in some of them. To repair these, the potter craftsmen of Mulela prepare a paste by dissolving terracotta powder in water to fill it in the big size cracks; whereas for smaller sized cracks, they just use a mixture of glue and water.	
15.	Colouring Process	Contrary to regional tastes, most buyers from other places prefer Molela terracotta plaques for their original and brilliant reddish-brown colour, while people from local communities, who buy these plaques for installation in their shrines; their topmost priority and choice is to purchase colourful plaques. Of the series of Molela terracotta plaques of various types, the most important ones are ' <i>Devanarayana</i> ' and ' <i>Nagaraja</i> ', which are painted in vibrant colours in keeping with the preferences of the local people, of deities accepted in some local communities. However, the plaques of many other deities are depicted using specific colours symbolically determined to identify them; Like blue colour is used for ' <i>Kaalbhairav</i> ' and orange colour is used for ' <i>Gora Bhairav</i> '. Traditionally, to colour the plaques, the artisans themselves refine and use colours from natural stones and minerals found in the area. Although now most of the artisans have started using synthetic colours. Potter artisans also prepare various colours by mixing different stones and minerals in Palewa clay as per requirement. For example, red is prepared by adding red ochre to a mixture of Palewa and water. Apart from this, ' <i>Dawrigund</i> ' (local vegetable gum) is also mixed in the colour solution as a binder to make the colours durable.	
16.	Jala Coating Process	After colouring, finally the plaques are given a coating of locally available eco-friendly ' <i>lacquer coat</i> ' to give them a glossy finish; which the artisans call " <i>Jala</i> " in their local colloquial language. Due to community religious belief, the craftsmen consider it prohibited to use commercially produced chemical varnish on these votive plaques of religious nature, hence prefer coating of Jala.	

Comparative Firing Temperature Ranges

Comparative firing temperature ranges desired for firing of clay and porcelain crafted vessels and creative plaques in a conventional kiln and the details of the result obtained from it such as production cost, sculpting style, texture and acquired colour are as per the following table no. 06:

Type	Cost	Firing Temperature Range	Sculpting Style	Typical Finished Texture	Acquired Colour of Products
Earthenware	Affordable	1,000 – 1,150 °C	Versatile	Rough	Acquired natural reddish-brown colour
Porcelain	Higher cost	1,200 – 1,450 °C	Intricate details and refined finishes	Smooth & translucent	According to the colour-scheme as before firing in the furnace

Fading Molela Terracotta Art

However, Molela terracotta plaques are still prized at home and abroad; but in the race of modernity, local relevance and demand for products is continuously decreasing. As a result, the number of artisans practicing this laborious art is continuously declining; because by being associated with this business, they do not get adequate financial support in return for their hard work. About 150 families of the potter community reside in Molela village, but in reality now only 25 to 30 families seem to be trying to keep this traditional art tradition alive. Many artisans are forced to do farming along with creating terracotta art to supplement their income. The matter of concern in such a circumstantial environment is that now very few people of the younger generation are interested in learning and practicing this ancestral art. Another dire problem faced by these artisans is that at present they are facing acute shortage of core raw material like clay due to many brick kilns being established on the banks of river Banas.

Apart from the above, one of the biggest challenges faced by these clay crafters is that terracotta plaques are of extremely fragile nature, due to which transporting them from one place to another for sale becomes a difficult and challenging task. Therefore, taking them out of the village and selling them is a risky task. Interviews with artisans revealed that when they try to take their artworks to other places for exhibitions or shows, so that 20-40% of the products get broken and destroyed.

As a result, the famous Molela terracotta art seems to be gradually moving towards extinction in the near future; and if such a situation persists, then surely this centuries-old wonderful traditional art form of India, which nurtures a unique cultural practice, religious beliefs and community customs, will remain just a story.

Current Scenario of Molela Art

In earlier times, the demand for this handicraft was only seasonal, during the limited period of harvest festival, that too once a year, apart from local residents, buyers from Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh came to buy new pottery and votive plaques. When I discussed the ancient and present status of this profession with Mr. Bhagga Lal, a skilled terracotta craftsman from Molela, he told that a few decades ago this art was limited to making only earthen pots and toys etc. Buyers often purchased some utensils for domestic use; whereas local farmers used to come throughout the year to collect utensils and terracotta 'Dolchi' for domestic use, because they installed traditional irrigation equipment in their wells or ponds to irrigate their fields, which is known as "Rahat". To drain water smoothly, a series of terracotta Dolchis (small size and round shaped terracotta pot like vessels) were first attached to the circular chain or rope of this agricultural machine. These Dolchis, being fragile, often broke; that is why farmers would come to potters throughout the year to replace broken Dolchis and in return, when the harvest was ready, they would give a certain amount of grain as remuneration to their designated potter. That practice has now ended, so now most of the artisans have taken up farming or some other



Figure 5: to draw water, a wheel with a chain of dolchi is installed in the well along with the operating device (01), the water level at the well depth (02), the structural design of the dolchi employed on the wheel (03 & 04).

profession to earn money in their free time. However during my stay in Molela, I observed the current situation and also discussed with many local clay crafters; on that basis, I can say that at present, most of the currently practicing artisans have established permanent modernized sales outlets in their homes or markets and also workshops for continuing craft work. At present, a positive aspect oriented towards life transmission in this traditional art form is that now the attraction of people towards Molela terracotta plaques is increasing again and they are now decorating the walls of their urban residences, offices, Government buildings, hotels, restaurants etc., and now they are happily using these plaques for the decoration purpose; and as a result, in a departure from tradition, domestic and foreign buyers come and buy there almost throughout the year.

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Figure 6: an interview with renowned Molela clay crafter Mr. Bhagga Lal Prajapati regarding the process of sculpting terracotta plaques at his workshop.

In the above sequence, for arranging smooth travel from Udaipur to Molela village to collect the primary data focused on this research paper, as well as the artisan who has been keeping the heritage of ancestral terracotta handicrafts alive with innovative creativity for many generations, Mr. Bhagga Lal Kumhar. I would also like to express my special gratitude to *Dr. Suraj Soni* for his active support in making my interview possible and to *Mr. Vikas Kumar*, Research Scholar, Department of Visual Arts, M.L. Sukhadia University, Udaipur, for providing assistance in cinematography and recording during the same time. I am deeply grateful. Finally, I would like to express my special gratitude to *Prof. Hemant Dwivedi*, Dean Faculty of Arts, M.L. Sukhadia University, Udaipur; due to which this entire work of survey of Molela plaques crafting technique was possible without any hindrance.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Molela village in Rajasthan is a breathtaking and delightful place to visit, being a craft centre; which is especially known for its traditional hollow type of high relief terracotta plaques. The sculptured plaques here appear to present a unique tableau of various thematic Indian culture, ranging from plaques of community deities with regional relevance to scenes of Hindu mythology, rural life, daily activities and wild animals. When we focus on the method of assembly of figures carved in terracotta plaques, configuration of form, aesthetic fusion, execution of spatial localize characteristics and refinement of their crafting technique; so it seems that

giving eye-catching physical appearance to a narrative meaningful visual experience on the surface of wet clay is akin to the development of a unique art form of plaque as a unite of big sized wall mural. In conclusion, this means that sculpture in the form of terracotta plaques and high-relief murals both evolved from creatively sculpting into physical form a three-dimensional visual on an essentially two-dimensional surface; this is the specialty of this traditional and unique clay crafting technique in itself.

The above two methods of clay crafting are different from each other technically and in terms of the material used. From Indus Valley to contemporary Indian terracotta sculpture techniques, creators have been fusing styles, treatments, debates, thought streams, languages and theories of different schools from realism to futuristic as per the contemporary need. There are four widely used techniques of clay crafting such as the construction materials of coil, slab, throwing and slab as well as the more recent use of computer programming controlled and automated '**3D printing technology**' to create images and shapes. An innovative production medium has emerged and is widening its scope. Which certainly facilitated the development of figurative beauty by giving it a new impetus; but this technology can never match the skilled artisans in original construction. But craftsmen like Molela will also have to be aware of new technologies and consider their proper fusion.

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