The Brasscasters of Dariapur, West Bengal

Artisans in a Changing World

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In the spring of 1988, Sri Haradhan Karmakar (Figs. 1, 2), a brasscaster from West Bengal, came to Philadelphia to participate in the Festival of India exhibit, Mahamaya, at the Fort of History Museum. During his stay, he came twice to cast his molds in the courtyard of The University Museum as a demonstrator for the Museum’s International Classroom program. At the same time, the Museum Applied Science Center for Archaeology (MASCA) began a project of documentation and research in Philadelphia which may eventually become a full-scale field project on traditional metalworking in India. This article reports the first results of that project.

Introduction

The members of the Dariapur Artisans Cooperative in Bardwan District of West Bengal (Fig. 4) are brasscasters by hereditary occupation. Working with simple tools and (except for brass) indigenous materials, they turn delicately decorated wax models into traditional eastern In-

Arts and Archaeologists:
A Special Section on the Study of Crafts in India

Observing a skilled artisan at work brings to the viewer an understanding that is both aesthetic and intellectual, and that is absorbed through avenues other than words. It is the way apprentices around the world have traditionally learned their crafts. For scholars, the study of material culture is enhanced enormously by direct observation. It can yield information on many aspects of technology, from the technical and material to the social and cultural, about which the artisans themselves may not be aware or be able to verbalize. Observing work in progress may lead to questions that otherwise might not have been asked, and broaden the range of possibilities to be considered by archaeologists reconstructing past craft activities and organizations.

Those who study the past do not have the advantage of being able to observe ancient artisans at work and to question them about what they did and why they did it and how their crafts fit into the rest of their lives. These scholars can, however, look at how similar crafts are being pursued today, and use that information to help them assess what they find from the past or to augment their general understanding of craft activities and their role in society.

Western scholars today are generally shut off from this way of learning on their home ground. In the United States, for example, hand-made items tend to be imported rather than made domestically; even in rural areas the traditional potter, the basket maker, the weaver, or the blacksmith is no longer a common part of everyday life. Among the shrinking number of places where pottery making and metal working still remain viable ways of making a living, India has attracted much academic (and popular) attention. The studies in the following special section are three examples of this recent interest in Indian crafts and craftspersons. All entailed direct observation of artisans, from the four corners of India, who in their homeland are makers of both ritual and utilitarian objects in terracotta and in metal.

The approaches used in the three studies are not all the same, however. While all of the authors are archaeologists by training, Reedy is also an art historian concerned with finding ways of resolving some of the unknowns presented by unprotected medieval statues in museum collections. Beaudry, Kenoyer, and Wright are archaeologists who have a special interest in the study of pottery, which for its abundance, preservation, and interpretive utility is the archaeological artifact par excellence. Horne works more directly in the present, concentrating on contemporary craft production and the role of specialists in a changing society.

Significantly, these three studies are all museum-based. Two originated in public programs and documentation, the third in the study of museum collections. It is becoming apparent from projects like those described here that museums of art, archaeology, or ethnography benefit greatly from adding an anthropographic component to the more traditional static display or public lecture upon which the dissemination of information has depended in the past.