

He stood behind the only work desk in an almost bare room creating remarkable 'Kashi' design (hand painting of tiles and pottery) on a life-size vase. Every stroke of his brush was effortless but meticulous. His five sons were also executing Kashi work on smaller products, sitting on a palm mat in semi circle in front of him. The walls of the room were dotted with dark blue colour spots where the artists (Kashigars) test their brush, by habit I think. Numerous framed merit certificates, photographs of representative designs, and cuttings from newspapers were hung on the wall behind the desk.

This was my introduction to Ustad Muhammad Alam, the best living 'Kashigar' in Multan Pakistan. During my frequent visits to this room over a period of time, I saw him creating delicate designs on every thing from tiles to tea sets and learnt more about the ancient art. He creates images that help define our cultural identity. His work is a deep source of aesthetic pleasure and forms the bases of our heritage. They are also collectors' delight and are marketed with potential to appreciate. Last time I went to Multan, I had the fortune to see his new masterpiece: five feet eight inches high vase made by two complete camel skins. It is simply marvellous.

The origin of Multan City dates back to antiquity. The history of Multani arts and crafts also goes back to medieval period. Kashi work, the hand painting of ceramic products, is an important art for which the city is famous the world over. The use of foliage or branches and leaves and superb richness if colours (mainly blue) in Kashi work is an evidence of Persian influence. As Persian arts themselves have been under Chinese-Mongol influence, therefore, some historians are of the view that Kashi work had originally come from Kashghar, China. Over a period of centuries, Multani Kashi work has matured and developed a unique and distinctive style of its own.

The art has survived for centuries through generations as its 'trade secrets' like composition of colours were zealously guarded by a handful of artists and their families. Artists like Ustad Allah

Saving a medieval art

ASGHAR JAVED warns that the beautiful artwork called Kashigari is becoming extinct

Aziz Ahmed and Mian Rahim Bux were great 'Kashigar' in the past and have left lasting work in the field. Their work has lent immortality to the art.

In 1853, during a limited excavation on Qillah Kohna Qasim Bagh, Alexander Cunningham found glazed tiles made in Multan in about 900 A.D. The highest quality Multani tiles have been used in shrines, mosques and other important buildings ever since. The shrines of Shah Yousaf Gardezi, Shah Rukn-e-Alam, Ali Akbar, Mosque Nawaban, shrines of Uch and Talpur Tombs in Sind are classic examples of tile work. Lately, Akhtar Abbas Bharwana (ex Minister Punjab) has used the tiles from Multan at his house in Jhang. Kashi work on the walls of shrine of Hazrat Haqani, Sawi Mosque, Shrines of Abdul Latif Batai and Sachal Sarmast (Sind), Eidgah Multan and Lahore Museum is very distinctive and of a fine quality.

Blue pottery of Multan is at display in prestigious President's House, Prime Minister's Secretariat, Pakistani cultural missions abroad and British Museum London. Foreign tourists and private collectors love to buy vases, vessels, planters, and cookie jars and table lamps with hand painted Kashi designs. World Bank team has also visited the institute and shown keen interest in conservation and development of the art. But, sadly, "locals are not very attracted to these products. Tea set costing rupees 1200/- does not find very many buyers in the local market", says the Project Director of the institute.

The process of making Blue Pottery and tiles has undergone many changes with the development in technology. Gas furnaces with controllable and uniform temperature are being used for



of wood and dung cake fire. Clay is being procured from Mansehra (NWFP), Tharparker (Sind) and Gujrat (Punjab) instead of local red clay. Mixing of raw material as per the formula, grinding, kneading, filtration, moulding biscuit firing at the temperature of 800-850 degree centigrade, Kashi work and glazing at the temperature of 1200 degree centigrade are all necessary steps in the process. The special blue colour prepared from Cobalt Oxide and Copper Oxide is a special technique and distinctive feature of the Kashi work. The art has evolved into a far more sophisticated process today.

Among the various arts that are practiced in Pakistan, Multani Kashi work has attained a higher state of refinement. There is always a room to bring into the art new innovations, endow it with fresh spirit and set the science as its guide. Assistance can be sought from international agencies like UNESCO and World Bank. The range of possibilities in the field of ceramics is very vast. The whole world can be our market.

Kashigari is a hand painting of ceramic products (commonly known as Blue Pottery), walls and other items like leatherwear and furniture. Dedicated artist who is

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working for the development of this medieval art, Ustad Muhammad Alam started learning Kashi work from a renowned Kashigar of his time Ustad Allah Wasaya at the age of seven. He started it as a career but now "I practice it as an art through which I communicate," says the artist. "Kashi work is my commitment and passion. I am working on new designs like Special Kashi, New Kashi, China Kashi, Bamboo Shoot, and Corner Flower designs that will reflect my own sensibilities," he explained. He is also introducing different colours that are far removed from conventional blue.

The Kashi art has survived for centuries through generations as its 'trade secrets' like composition of colours were zealously guarded by a handful of artists and their families. But, Ustad Muhammad Alam has taught Kashi art to over 40 talented youth. Some of his students are executing Kashi work on furniture items and camel skin ornamental products whereas a few are working in Saudi Arabia, Italy and other foreign countries. "I have executed Kashi work in the house of (late) Actor Sultan Rahi in Lahore and presently I am working on Timber Market Mosque in Multan," says Ustad

Muhammad Alam.

Works of Ustad Muhammad Alam have been exhibited in many cities in Pakistan as well as abroad. He has represented Pakistan in World Crafts Council on the eve of SAARC Conference held in Sri Lanka where his work was greatly admired by the delegates. Sri Lankan President awarded him a Special Appreciation Certificate. BBC and Pakistan Television have aired a special program on his illustrious work. But, sadly, "my work has not been acknowledged locally," says Ustad Muhammad Alam. Regional artists, even in this digital age, are deprived of modern facilities of communication like television, radio or the national newspapers. They have to work harder at getting exposure at national and international level. "Living away from cultural capitals deprives us of prominence and even due recognition at national level", says the artist.

Among the various arts that are practiced in Pakistan, Multani Kashi work has attained a higher state of refinement. There is always a room to bring into the art new innovation, endow it with fresh spirit and set the science as its guide. Assistance can be sought from interested international agencies like UNESCO and World Bank. The range of possibilities in the field of ceramics is very vast. The whole world can be our market. So far only four entrepreneurs have come up in private sectors that are working with the help, technical assistance and advice of Institute of Blue Pottery Development Multan. Punjab Small Industries Corporation established this Institute in 1985 to save the art from extinction.

Much more can be done in the field. The noble art should be introduced as a subject in institutions like Government College of Home Economics, National College of Arts, and Institute of Pottery (Shahdara) Lahore. The efforts of local Kashigars should be co-ordinated at national level. The work of senior artists - the visible record of our heritage - should be preserved and a 'Kashi Museum' should be established in Multan. Private sector should also come forward and invest in this field. This can only happen once government helps in finding new markets ■