

Para citar este artigo (ABNT):

VISALAKSHI, R. Sustainable design in craft revival and livelihood: case study of the kottan, the traditional basketry of Chettinad. In: *Cultura Visual*, n. 14, dezembro/2010, Salvador: EDUFBA, p. 89-??.

## **Sustainable design in craft revival and livelihood: case study of the kottan, the traditional basketry of Chettinad**

***Design sustentável na revitalização do artesanato  
e do modo de vida: estudo de caso sobre o “kottan”  
nas cestas tradicionais de Chettinad***

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### **Resumo**

Este estudo apresenta o uso e a prática de design responsável na revitalização e conservação, bem como os impactos e empoderamento das mulheres em uma vila, tomando por base o estudo da arte da cestaria de “Kottan”, em Chettinad, região sudeste de Tamil Nadu, na Índia.

### **Palavras-chave**

Design sustentável; artesanato; empoderamento; cestaria de Kottan; Índia.

### **Abstract**

*This paper presents the use of responsible and practical design in craft revival and conservation, its societal impact and empowerment of the village woman, taking for study the art of Kottan basketry in the Chettinad, region of Southern Tamil Nadu, India.*

### **Keywords**

*Sustainable design; craft; empowerment; Kottan basketry; India.*

Submetido em: 01/11/2010

Aprovado em: 10/12/2010

## 1. Introduction

When looking at making traditional craft a viable option for alternate employment, we need to take into consideration a variety of factors. The first step is to research the craft and look at the question of *why* it came about – availability of abundant raw material prompting a hobby craft, for personal, essential or ritual use, for saleable value, or a combination of all of these. Documentation plays a key role in craft survival and continuity – it is the surest way to guarantee the craft remains an option for use or revival. It ensures that verification is possible, and is crucial for design intervention.

This paper will focus on the particular example of the Chettinad Kottan, the palm leaf basket exclusive to this region to give an option of what can be done to ensure craft marketability through responsible and sustainable design practices. Chettinad is a cluster of seventy five villages around Karaikudi in Southern Tamilnadu, and the homestead of the Chettiars, a merchant community.

The origin and use of the Kottan in the Chettinad community is an excellent example of how a craft process evolves and emerges – the nature of the region provided the craft with its design inspiration, raw material, finish and purpose. The palm tree grows well in the dry region; the leaves are dyed in brilliant colours as a contrast to the dull landscape. The Kottan was woven by groups of women in the courtyards of their houses as a pastime. The baskets were used around the house as storage containers, at festivals and weddings rituals, exchanged as a symbol for the sealing of a contract, and given as gifts from a mother to a daughter as she left for her new home.

The frequent travels abroad by the Chettiar men-folk leaving their wives for long stretches of time might have been the reason for the Kottan emerging as a hobby craft. The passage of time saw a change in the lifestyle of the Chettiar community; the women started travelling with their husbands and no longer had time for the craft. They began using other alternatives to the Kottan for ritual and practical use. The craft was no longer taught by the mother to her daughter and in one quick generation, it faded out of use.

The Kottan revival's most crucial need was a new purpose for existence. When faced with this scenario, I started the M.Rm.Rm. Cultural Foundation the year 2000 to revive languishing crafts and culture of the Chettinad region and Project Kottan was its' first initiative. The Foundation is also actively engaged in the revival of other crafts of the region, each of which has a geographical uniqueness and is intrinsic to the culture of the area.

When looking at reviving the Kottan tradition, it was essential to analyze the marketability of the Kottan. Today's need is not for traditional baskets for ritual use, but we have adapted the Kottan into a line of gift packaging for festivals and wedding gifts. The biggest struggle was to find a new group of women who would identify with the craft. A year long training program was conduc-

ted by an octogenarian who had knowledge of the craft and the initial group of seven women were taught to process the palm leaf, splice it to size, dye it in the characteristic bright colours and master the nuances of weaving. It was necessary to look at the marketability of the Kottan and income generation at a realistic level. All expansion and training of new groups has been based on market demand.

## **2. The impact on society**

The Kottan has been adapted to suit contemporary needs and have been reinvented as lifestyle and fashion accessories with products focussing on both functionality and aesthetics.

When one looks at the societal impact of the kottans, it is necessary to analyze the same from two different levels. The levels of acceptance of the product line in the consumer market have a corresponding impact at the village level and the economic situation of the craftswomen and their families. The increasing demand for the Kottan has ensured that the current group is working to capacity, and slowly now the entire family has got involved in the craft. With their income matching that of the men folk and sometimes even more, the women have earned the respect of their village community.

Village sanitation and levels of education has increased significantly, and there are no school dropouts, with more of them pursuing higher education. An important point is that there has been a significant growth in the number of girl students, a previously infrequent occurrence. Those that have completed their education have found jobs, enabling them and their families to look forward to a better future.

The participation in various exhibitions has been a great source of confidence to the women. Where initially they were overawed at the prospect of stepping outside the confines of their village, they now travel with self-assurance to international exhibitions, manage their stall, make sales, hold accounts and attend workshops. They have learnt to calculate the price for their products including the overheads and they fix their own rates accordingly. They have been able to interact with craftspersons from other states and nationalities, and this has enabled them to gain a world view on handicrafts and the positioning of their own craft of Kottan making in relation to the former. The fact that they have received the UNESCO Seal of Excellence Award for handicrafts products in South Asia in 2004, 2006 and 2008 has been a further source of pride and self confidence.

## **3. Design ethics**

In a country like India, it is very difficult to trace the craft product back to the individual craftsperson. The M.Rm.Rm. Cultural Foundation has worked deliberately to ensure that the craftswoman gets her due for her work. The craftswomen are encouraged to add their names to their work thereby giving

them a sense of ownership and pride in her work. This also helps in quality checking. The product is also sold to the consumer with the name tag, giving the craft a personal touch.

#### **4. Responsible design and safety standards**

While designing, we make sure that the nature of the design does not have adverse effects on the craftswoman, the craft, the consumer or the environment. It is vital that the design does not allow for wastage of resources, time or money. From the ecological point of view, the craft does not cause any damage to the Palmyra tree; it is not affected by the removal of its leaves and continues to flourish.

Careful planning in production ensures that the same is practical and sustainable. Experimentation in weave design and colour by the craftswomen themselves, is encouraged to help them grow as an independent and self-contained group. The introduction of natural dyes and further experimentation by the craftswomen has produced a wide variety of shades as subtle as they are exquisite.

The women have been taught to use the raw material judiciously, and the wastage from the larger baskets is used as much as possible in smaller baskets and the jewellery line. As all the tools used are hand-held, there is no dependence on machinery and with the exception of the firewood used for heating the dye bath, nil power and fuel consumption is involved in the production process. Plans are underway to set up a dye house where the waste water from the dye baths will be recycled. Dyeing of raw material is done in bulk, as is the transport of finished goods.

Craft research, documentation and revival have been my passion and I entered this area with the sole purpose of resurrecting the traditional crafts of my hometown Chettinad. All of these years of working in this field have led me to realize that although craft revival is a noble intention to preserve tradition for posterity, it is the livelihood of the craftsperson that is of primary importance. The M.Rm.Rm. Cultural Foundation consciously works with women. It has achieved success mainly because of the diligence of the women involved in the project and the importance they place on education, health and hygiene. Although Project Kottan began simply as a craft revival project, it has emerged as a holistic and sustainable community development initiative with positive action from the women in the group.

In my work in Chettinad, I have found that crafts have a wonderful way of bridging communal and religious barriers that are especially prevalent in rural India. In order to work around the class differences in the many small villages in the area, a facility centre was constructed where all the women irrespective of their class or creed gather everyday to carry out their weaving, in spite of the option of working from home. There is a wonderful feeling of community as

the women share their joys and sorrows while their fingers deftly weave their futures in the bright colours of palm leaf.

**Acknowledgements**

This article was first presented at the conference Design and Craft: a history of convergences and divergences, held in Brussels, 2010. It was gently sent by author to be published at this edition of Cultura Visual.