



## ITS ALL KALA

**SCENE 1: Bombay, 2006:** The “Harmony” show in Bombay, hosted by the vibrant Ms. Tina Ambani became an event that brought out some of the best Indian art and placed it in front of the common (and not so common) man. This show coincided with all the hoopla in the press about prices of Indian art going through the roof internationally ...and the new trend in urban India’s page 3 circles of investing in art.

On the concluding day, sitting with a few co-exhibitors was journalist, Gopal Mirchandani, who was jotting my thoughts for the Bombay Times. Along comes a flitty socialite who had been hovering around my "Leaf Platter" for the past two days. She started with, “You know Adil, I *love* your leaf platters; I may have bought one for myself too, but they are sooooo overpriced, fifty *thousand rupees each?!!!*” I politely pointed out how my collection of clay work was very reasonably priced in a room full of paintings, almost all of which were priced at lakhs of rupees, almost all of which were red-tagged on opening night. And to top that, many of these painters were not even “known”. To which the lady quipped “but dahlin’, those are *paintings*... not pottery items...*aapki plate toh sirf mitti hai...*”

Quite stumped by that, I decided to observe a moment of equanimity before I would put my foot into my mouth (as I usually do... and maybe am doing so right now too.) As if on cue, a painter friend of Gopal’s, quipped in, “This is where you potters lose out; ‘art’ is paintings, and what you do is ‘craft’. People somehow undervalue craft in India...” To this, Gopal quipped that in Sanskrit, there is no distinction between ‘art’ and ‘craft’ .... it’s all clubbed under the word, ‘*kala*’...

'*Shilpkala*' if you may ...which when literally translated, means 'art' anyways. "And you are all *kalakars*." This was news to me and left an indelible mark. Looking back at it, I realize this art-craft debate is a legacy of the British schooling system, where for years in school, we had an art/craft classes every other week. Art was where we *Painted*; craft was where we *made* something. Nice paintings were pinned up on classroom boards, nice paper-boats didn't stand a chance and met the bin.



**SCENE 2: NEW SOUTH WALES, 2007:**

Australian ceramist Paul Davis was awarded the prestigious Japan Foundation Scholarship, which enabled him to live and study in Japan for five years where he achieved the honour of being adopted into the 12th generation of the 500-year-old hereditary Hagi-yaki pottery studio in Hagi. Paul is driving me over to Sturt Craft Centre at Mittagong. The word "craft" in the Centre's name makes me relate the Harmony episode to him.

Paul explains the Japanese angle to art and craft. He says that in Japanese culture too, there is no difference between what "art" is and what it is not. Centuries of ceramic awareness in the Orient have kept the "craft" of the potter on par with any other medium in the art world. There is no differentiation at the school level too...."Which is where the problem starts", he says. "In Great Britain of yore, museums like Victoria and Albert were designed to cater to the elitist section of society. Patronage was directed towards art-forms like painting, sculpture & print-making, and this mentality quickly seeped into the education system of the British Raj.... permeating into the commonwealths of India and Australia."



**SCENE 3: AUROVILLE:** I too am guilty of passing this on to another generation. For years at Transition School in Auroville, I played 'art teacher', while another friend played 'craft teacher'. This was the structure, and I had to play along. This probably still goes on in most schools all over India today. A simple, innocent subdivision of curriculum is gluing itself to the memory of our genes and perpetuating a fallacy.... making two-dimensional "art" superior to something 3D. With this article, I am hoping to initiate dialogue. Maybe teachers need to reappraise the charmingly folded paper-boats in "craft" classes.

I should also mention that the leaf platter I did not part with at a discount, still looks happy and comfortable in my collection. Whether one calls it arty, or crafty, doesn't matter.

Yes, it IS *mitti*, and yes, it's all *kala*, one way or another, isn't it?



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