

Design Resource

Stone Carving - Mahabalipuram

The Skillful Crafts in Stone

by

Prof. Bibhudutta Baral, Antony William and

Aruna Kumari

NID, Bengaluru

Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/stone-carving-mahabalipuram>



1. Introduction
2. History of Monuments
3. Tools and Raw Materials
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Introduction

About the place:

Mahabalipuram is a small town in Kanchipuram district of Tamilnadu. It is located 60 Km away from Chennai. Mahabalipuram is also called as Mahamallapuram. This place has a great history for its traditional historical monuments. Stone carving in Mahabalipuram is famous for its 7th and 8th century art and architecture of Pallavas period.

Introduction:

Tamilnadu “The land of Temples” is rich in stone art. Mahabalipuram located 60 Km away from Chennai, is the main center for ancient stone carving. The Craftsmen belong to Viswakarma community which practices the craft. The carving style of this place is closer to the Kerala carving style as the region was once part of the state of Kerala. Red and black, white granites are available locally in Mahabalipuram. These stones are locally called as karuppu kal (black), Vellali kal (white). Granite is first stenciled and chiseled according to the determined lines. After carving the final product, the surface is smoothed and cleaned to achieve the shine luster. The products are the replicas of Hindu mythological epics. The rules of Shilpa Shastra are followed to carve granite stones. There are over 500 craftsmen involved in the carving.

The stone carving is also practiced in other parts of Tamilnadu like Mylaudy, Suchindram from Kanyakumari district and in Madurai district. Stone sculptures, small dolls, images of animals, agarbatti-incense stands and other decorative pieces are carved using soap stone, green stone, soft granite, Bijri stone, durki stone and marble.



The famous historical Shore Temple of Mahabalipuram - one of “seven Pagodas”.



An episode from Hindu mythological epic is carved on stone wall of temple.

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Skilled craftsman giving shape to the stone.



Carved Idol of Lord Hanuman.



Polished idol of lord Vinayaka with detailed ornamentation.

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Historical monuments of Mahabalipuram.



Closer view of tower of Shore temple.



Artisans with their finished products.

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Craftsmen engaged in carrying a piece of Granite stone for design work.



Keen interest required to achieve accurate carving.



Decorative granite statues and shell products at market place attract visitors.

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History of Monuments

The antique stone architecture of Mahabalipuram talks about the stone carving history of Mahabalipuram. The fascinating towers of famous “Shore temple” which is one of the “Seven pagodas” were constructed by King Narasimha Varman in 18th century during Pallava period. The five monolithic Rathas (chariots) are carved in granite and can be seen in pyramidal structures and are named as Dharma raja Ratha, Bhima Ratha, Arjuna Ratha, Draupadi Ratha, Nakul Sahadev Ratha. These Rathas are carved from one single piece of stone which is an interesting attribute. The world famous Arjuna’s Penance which is an episode from Hindu epic Mahabharata is excellently composed with great passion to represent classical essence. Dharma raja Ratha with its highly skilled carvings involves complicated decorative forms. The monolithic rock-cut architecture of Varaha cave temple is a testimony to creative imagination. All these monuments are the outstanding examples of Pallavas art and architecture and remarkable in Indian cultural heritage.



Ancient Shore temple at Mahabalipuram.



Unique carving can be seen on the towers of shore temple.



The five monolithic ‘Pancha Rathas’-five chariots.



Dharma raja Ratha dedicated to Dharma Raya-one of five Rathas is tallest among all.

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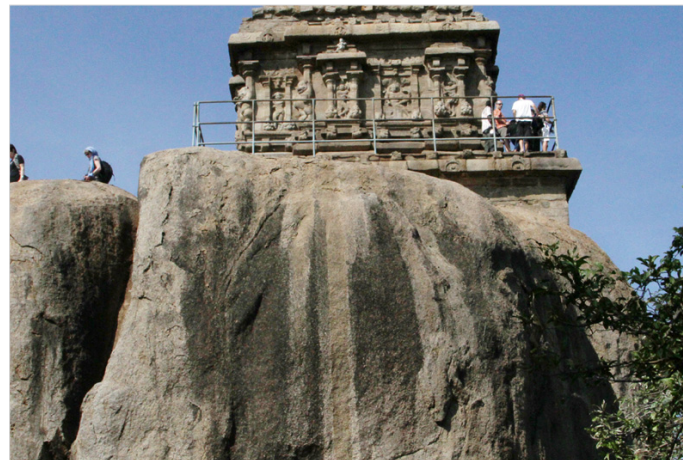
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Bhima ratha which is placed next to Dharma raja chariot.



An elephant and lion sculptures placed very next to Nakula-Sahadeva ratha.



The temple is situated adjacent to old light house at Mahabalipuram.



The closer view of sculptures adorning towers of shore temple.

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Figures of deities are carved on the walls of Rathas.

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Tools and Raw Materials

The stone is turned into beautiful pieces of sculptures. Different types of traditional tools are used in stone carving process. Sometimes, the automated electric drills are used while making large sculptures. Types of Stone are classified according to the texture and nature of the stone. The carving technique varies as per the texture. Rough granite stone is carved with heavy chisels, hammers and with automated tools. But for soft texture soapstone is easily carved by scooping.

Stones available in Mahabalipuram:

1. Black granite.
2. Red granite.
3. White Granite.
4. Soapstone.

List and Details of Tools and Materials:

1. **Boiling water and chemical:** These are used to treat the stone as it whitens outer texture of granite stone.
2. **Chisels:** Wide edged and point edged chisels- 'Uli' are used to carve the stone.
3. **Hammer:** It is used for hammering.
4. **Sand paper:** It is used to polish the surface of the stone.
5. **Red oxide solution:** The stencils are drawn on the surface of the stone using red oxide solution, before carving.
6. **Palamunai uli:** Chisel used to level the surface of the stone.
7. **Water:** Water is sprinkled continuously to avoid heat generation.
8. **Oil:** It is applied to the stone as it gives characteristic black color and smoother surface.
9. **Cutting Machine:** Different types of automated cutting machines are used to cut the bigger stone blocks.
10. **Scales:** These are used for measurement.

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Automated cutting tool used to cut the granite stone evenly.



Chisel and hammer plays major role while carving the stone.



Another automated tool used to obtain sharp/polished facial expressions of an idol.

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Making Process

The artisan first decides the required design to be carved from the stone. The block of the stone is first cut into appropriate size. A stone of desired shape is taken and leveled with a chisel called 'Palamunai uli' locally. Then the dimensions of the figure are marked with red oxide solution on the slab. The unwanted edges are removed by chiseling with chisel and hammer. Rough carving is made based on the rough sketches on the surface of the stone. The major carvings are done using the chisel and hammer to attain the desired figure. Water is sprinkled frequently to avoid heat generation during carving process. After rough carving, the detailing and minor carvings are made using sharp edged and pointed chisels. The ornamentation and the detailing design are done by scraping the stone with pointed chisels. Once the product is ready, the surface of the stone is polished by rubbing it with sandpaper. The carved stone is then treated with water and chemical. This is done to smoothen and whiten the stone. Sometimes oil is also applied to obtain the typical dark color for selected products according to the requirement.



The big block of stone is first cut evenly.



Stone is marked as per the required measurements.



Reference sketch is made before carving.



The design is being marked on the flat surface of granite stone.

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Marked design is highlighted with red oxide solution.



Artisan initiated the carving as per the marked design.



A detail of hand is being carved with power tool.



The outer surface is smoothed after rough carving.

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Depth is obtained by minute and detailed carvings.



Different types of sharp edged disk blades used to carve sophisticated designs.



Few other embellishments are made by chiseling.



Idol is now ready for polishing.

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Work environment at artisans place.



Artisan engaged in carving leaf motif.



The edges are sharpened to get fine finishing.



Sharp point edged chisel helps to achieve beautiful facial expressions.

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Sand stone is rubbed on the surface of idol to obtain smooth surface.



The idol is washed and coated with oil to get glossy look.

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Products

The elaborately carved temples of Mahabalipuram show the excellence of stone carving as a decorative and devotional art. The traditional craftsmen continue to carve masterpieces of mythological figures, Human figures, images of gods and goddess, Idols for worship, figures of animals, scenes of Hindu epics, different poses of lord Vinayaka, mounts for deities. Essential kitchen implements like wet grinder, grinding stones, statues of leaders, letter stones, Icon of Buddha are also produced.

The magnificent sculptures portray the expertise craftsmanship and also the stone carving history of Mahabalipuram. Every aspect of stone carving is highly attention paid and artistic based. The basic stone is transformed into legendary pieces with elaborated ornament work and detailed facial expressions which gives life to the stone. Few art pieces and lamp shades are interestingly made of stone with Jaali work.



Idol of goddesses carved to cater the surrounding temples.



Idols of deities in different poses.



Welcoming idols are mainly used at entrance of the temples to greet the devotees.



Stone grinders are kept for marketing.

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