

Design Resource

## Terracotta Idols - Vellore

The Black Clay Craft

by

Prof. Bibhudutta Baral, Shruti K. and Vijay G.

NID, Bengaluru

Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/terracotta-idols-vellore>



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## Introduction

Terracotta art is one of the flourishing arts since the times of the Indus Valley Civilization. Terracotta in India is considered spiritual as it incorporates the five vital elements like air, fire, earth, water and ether. Terracotta products have a lot of prominence in many states of India, which is practiced for more than the last three generations. The culture of Tamil Nadu is rich in its heritage from ancient times. Pottery is one of the traditional crafts practiced in India from ancient times. South India has several centers known for pottery.

Vellore is a district in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, which has a vast history in arts and handmade crafts. It is also a well-known place for temples and forts. The old and traditional craft even today has been practiced with great interest. A variety of beautiful products are made which are used for both household and decorative items.

The work is mostly done by male artisans. The craftsmen experiment with many designs according to the changes in the generation. Some particular products are made during special occasions and festivals. The skilled artisans handling the clay give a variety of shapes to the product according to their imaginations. The clay craft has been a livelihood for many people in Tamil Nadu, which is a major source of income. The uniqueness of Vellore Terracotta is the products are made using black clay.



Number of clay idols made and kept for drying.



Artisan involved in removing the prepared clay idol from the mould.

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Idol of Lord Vishnu colored with vibrant colors.



Image of the craftsman with his craft work.

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Artisan making designs on the idol.

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## Tools and Raw Materials

The tools and raw materials used for Terracotta idols are:

- **Clay:** It is used to make clay models.
- **Clay Mixing Machine:** : This machine is used to mix the clay and mud mixture for idol and pot making.
- **Plaster of Paris:** Pop is used to make the idol mould.
- **Filtering Mesh:** It is used to filter the impurities from the mud and clay.
- **Casting Powder:** It is used to make the mould.
- **Enamel Colors:** These colors are used to paint the finished idols.
- **Bamboo Sticks:** These are used as sculpting tools while making the idol.
- **Knife:** It is used to remove the excess clay.
- **Coir:** It is used to make the mould.
- **Grease and Kerosene:** The solution of grease and kerosene is applied to the idol before putting the moulding paste.

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Basic material clay used to make clay idols.



Plaster of Paris powder used to make the mould.



Tools used to engrave design on the clay.



Coir used in mould making.

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Mixing machine to mix the clay and sand into dough.



Dental casting powder used to make the mould.



Different types of tools used in idol making.



Solution of grease and kerosene is applied on the idol before putting the mould paste to avoid smudging of the design.

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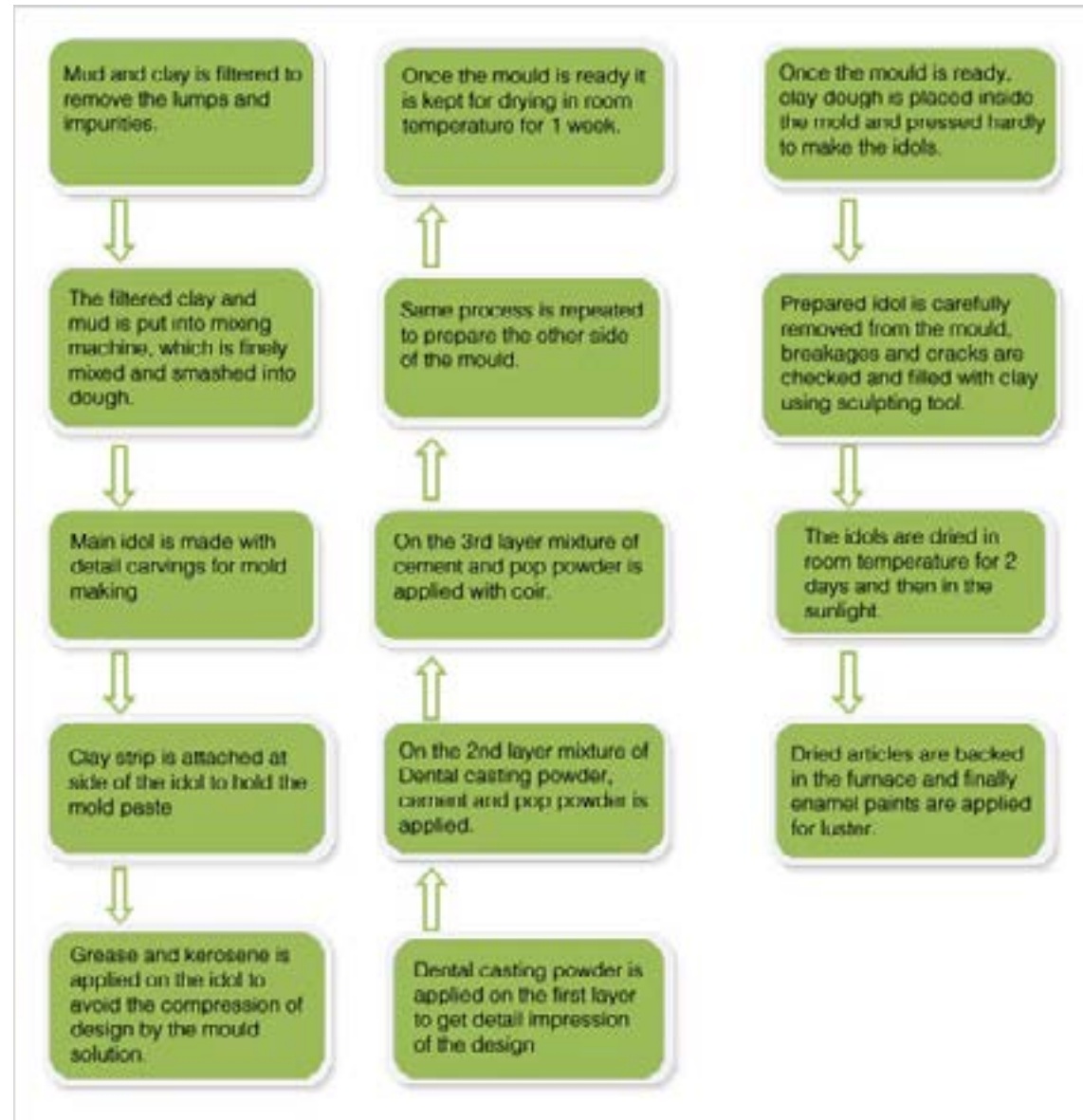
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## Making Process

The making process involves 3 steps as under:



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Clay Making



Mould Making



Idol Making

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## Clay Making

The clay used for pottery is usually found on the riverbed. The clay found here is black in color, which is why Vellore pottery is famous as Black Pottery. The dough clay is the mixture 1:3 quantity of mud and clay. One fourth of mud and three fourth of clay is filtered to separate out stones, mud lumps and other impurities. The filtered mud and clay is put together and water is sprinkled on it. The soaked clay and mud is put in a mixing machine where the mud and clay is finely mashed into a soft mixture of clay used for pottery. The machine is brought from Chennai. The process is continued three times to enhance the elasticity of the clay. The prepared dough is covered and stored to retain the moisture. The clay is now ready for idol and pottery making.



Clay is the basic raw material used for idol making.



Clay is filtered to remove lumps and other impurities.



The filtered mud and clay is put together.



Water is sprinkled on the mixture and soaked for a while.

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The soaked mixture is put in mixing machine.



The machine smashes mixture turning it into a soft clay dough.



The process is continued three times to enhance the elasticity of the clay.



The clay is again kneaded finely with legs to enhance the elasticity of the clay and stored in room temperature.

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## Mould Making

A master idol piece is first made with facial details/features with proper measurement to prepare the mould. The mould is 2inch thick and consists of two parts to form one idol. Reference designs of the idol are taken from sources like photos, books, Internet, calendars or newspapers. Once the idol is prepared, a flat strip of clay is joined to the idol to hold the mould paste. Solution of Grease and Kerosene is applied on the idol so that the mould mixture doesn't dominate the design. The mould is divided in three layers.

In the first layer mixture of dental casting powder is used. This casting powder is used to get detail impressions of the idol in the mould. After the first layer is dried, mixture of twenty percent of cement and seventy percent of pop (plaster of parish) and ten percent of dental casting powder is applied. On the last layer coconut fiber is dipped in the mixture of cement and pop powder is applied.

After the mould is dried to an extent, the supportive clay strip is removed using a knife. The same method is repeated to prepare the other side of the mould. Before making the other side of the mould a thin layer of soap is applied on the edges of the one side finished mould, so that the either side of the mould doesn't stick to each other. The prepared mould is kept in room temperature to dry almost for a week.



Artisan makes the required idol with detailed design.



A base of the mould is made adjacent to the idol.

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Sidewalls are made with clay to hold the mould mixture.

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Artisan making the sidewall for the idol.



Artisan places the sidewalls firmly.

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Mixture of grease and kerosene is applied to avoid smudging of design.

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Solution of dental casting powder is prepared for the mould.



Artisan applies the casting paste on the idol.



The first layer of the mould consists of casting powder solution.

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The second layer is filled with the mixture of dental casting powder, Plaster of paris (pop) powder and cement.



The third layer consists of cement and pop solution which is applied with coir.



One side of the mould is kept to dry.

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For the other side of the mould, artisan carves the design.



Soap is applied on the sides of the prepared mould to avoid sticking either sides of the mould.



Sidewalls are made and attached to prepare the other half of the mould.

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Same process of molding is repeated to prepare the other half of the mould.



Excess material is scraped out.



Once the mould is dried it is removed.



Clay is removed from the prepared mould.

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Prepared mould is kept to dry in the room temperature for a week.

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## Idol Making

More than 200 idols can be made by one mould. It differs by the quantity it can hold. The minimum order is given for 150 pieces and maximum above that it differs from place to place.

To make the idol, first pop powder is sprinkled inside the mould as it helps to avoid contacting with the clay while removing the clay model. After that clay is rolled into strips and placed inside the mould. The two clay filled moulds are joined and pressed to fix the corners of idol. After the model is ready it is carefully removed from the mould. The artisan checks for the breakages and fills the cracks with clay pieces. The shape and details of the model are also checked and corrected using the sculpting tools made of bamboo. The prepared idols are dried in room temperature for two days to avoid the cracks. On the third day a mixture of red mud called as Mand locally and water is applied on the dried idols and kept in the sun to dry for 2 to 3 hours. This red mud mixture is visible only after the articles are baked.

Artisan starts the work 3 to 4 months ahead of the festivals. He works for many hours a day just before festival times, as the orders will be more at that time.

When all the clay models and idols are dried it is taken to the furnace to be baked. Baking process is done to strengthen the clay products. The baked articles change its color from black to brownish orange because of red mud mixture applied as mentioned earlier. Once the articles are backed they are painted with enamel paints. The artisan also makes paper mache only in the summer time, as it needs high temperature of heat to dry.

The price range starts from 10 Rs and exceeds Rs 1,000 depending upon the size and details of work. These products are transported to markets in other parts of Tamil Nadu like Chennai, Madurai, Salem, Coimbatore and Trichi. People from other states also come to buy articles from here. During festival times, the sales of Vellore terracotta products are high.



Pop powder is sprinkled on the mould.

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Clay is set in the mould to make the idol.



Artisan spreads the clay neatly and firmly to set it in the mould.



Base of idol is made hollow.



Artisan removes the prepared idol from the mould.

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Image showing the detail design impression made by the mould on the clay.



The prepared idol is checked for breakages and cracks.



The cracks are filled with clay and the surface is smoothed using a wet brush.



Clay idol kept for drying.

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## Products

Clay figures or terracotta are made all over Tamil Nadu. The finest products of terracotta are made in Vellore such as idols, horses, diyas (clay lamps), and also house hold items. Large varieties of products are made colored using vibrant enamel paints to give glossier look to the products. The products are made according to the experience of the skilled artisans. The craft is practiced majorly by men artisans. The products are made according to the demand during special occasions and festivals. The idols have huge demand during Ganesh festival, Dussehra and Gowri Pooja.



Colorful clay idols of lord Rama, Laxmana, Hanuman and Sita.

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Idol of lord Vishnu which is beautifully ornamented with intricate jewelry design.



Idol of Goddess which is attractively decorated with glitter powder on attire.

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Idol of goddess Saraswathi playing veena.



Rich vibrant colors are used to give the idol astonishing looks.

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Lakshmi Hygreevar Set.



Goddess Lakshmi idol have huge demand during Diwali festival.

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## Video



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## Contact Details

This documentation was done by Prof. Bibhudutta Baral, Shruti K. and Vijay G. at **NID, Bengaluru**

You can get in touch with him at [bibhudutta\[at\]nid.edu](mailto:bibhudutta[at]nid.edu)

You can write to the following address regarding suggestions and clarifications:

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