

The Embossed Leather Story

sasha
the art of giving



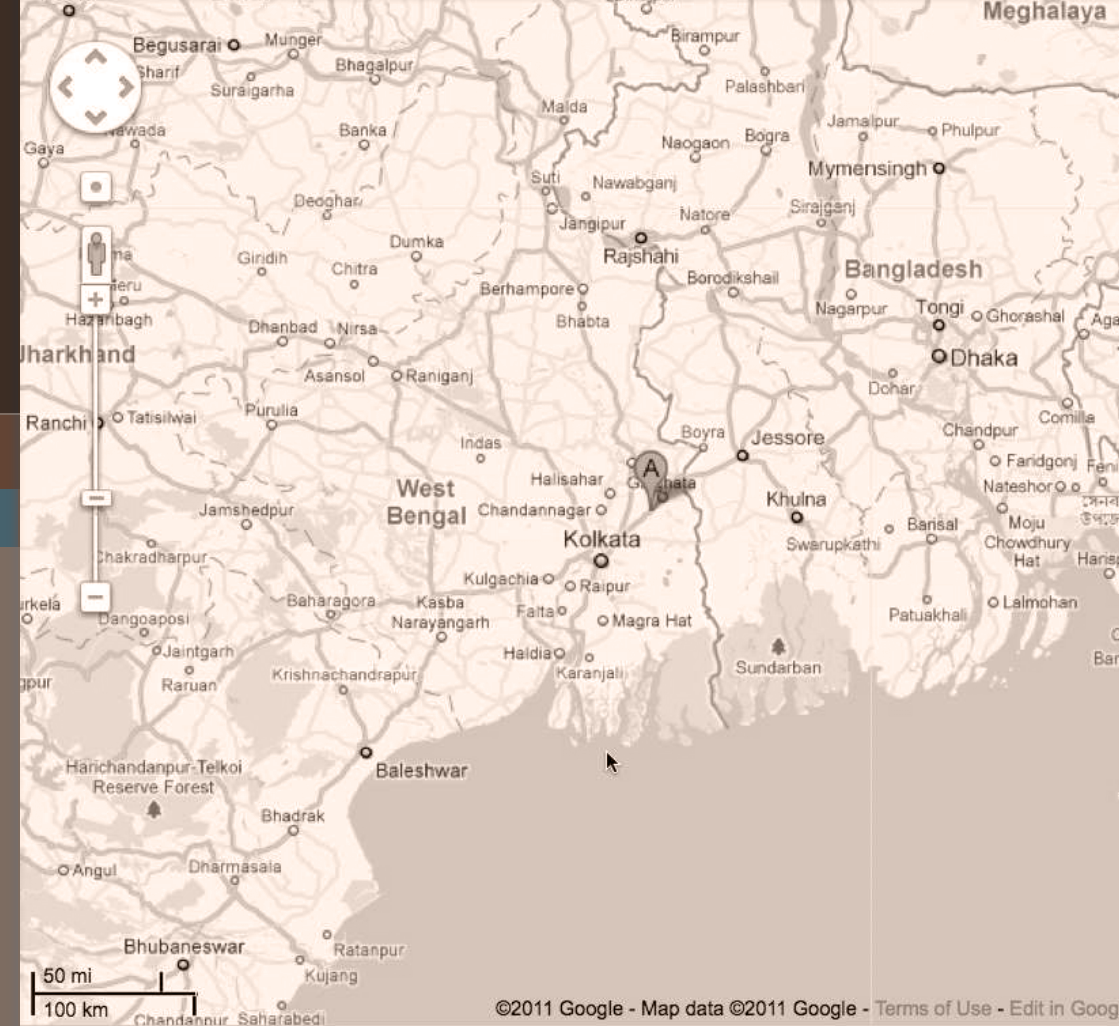


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Habra




Habra is a city, a municipality and a police station of Barasat subdivision in North 24 Parganas district in West Bengal. Habra is situated on the Jessore Road between Kolkata and the Bangladesh border at Petrapole. Its location makes it an important town for export and import of goods between India and Bangladesh.

Habra has many educational institutions and has a high level of literacy. It is also famous for the many organizations doing rural development work. After Kolkata, it has the biggest bazaars in the region and is a thriving hub of trade in grocery and livestock. It is also a thriving cultural centre with different social and religious public functions.



The Story



The dogs loll in the courtyard. They can – they are the only ones not working this winter morning in the workshop. There is an air of calm about the place, and a sense of a simple tidiness that doesn't always accompany the making of craft in these parts.

If you work backward, you can dismantle a pencil-case or a wallet all the way back to a stretch of soft plain leather.






Move from the finishing room, women working very carefully to make sure the colours are matched, through to where the leather is pasted onto the board, to where the patterns are painted, to where each piece is embossed by a monster of a machine belonging deep inside the 18th century to where it is cut to where it is dried after its first wash, and there is a curious feeling of peace and order.



The craft is not as old as some others, such as kantha stitching or dhokra, but by now it feels as if it belongs deep in the stomach of the past

A man wearing a grey cap and a yellow and white striped shirt is focused on his work in a pasting room. He is using large scissors to cut a piece of blue fabric. The room's walls are covered with various posters and images, including a large one of a woman in a white sari on the left and a couple in a yellow shirt on the right. The lighting is bright, and the overall atmosphere is one of busy, traditional craftsmanship.

The glamorous film actresses look on from the walls at the young guys as they work in the pasting and assembling room, and it feels as though they are looking back from centuries in the future. Not true, of course, when you know that these craftsmen will definitely go to the cinema at the end of the week to do their own gazing as the dream-screen, that some of them will have the hit songs on their mobiles, that they don't see themselves as being from anywhere like ancient times.

The peculiar thing about leather-work is that the maker knows the user will touch it in the same way, at the same scale as she or he is doing. This not bedsheet which will engage the whole body, this is not a decorative elephant that will primarily please the eye, many of these are small objects of daily and constant use, boxes, change-purses, and the series of touches the maker initiates will continue as long as the object is in use, as if the leather was transmitting from one set of fingers to another.





The speed (or slowness) of work, the stillness and the (mostly) small movements that go into making these pieces, all come from this subconscious knowledge.



So, when a woman takes a brush or her finger and fills colour into an embossed design, it seems as if the morning, as if all of time, has been filled with this calm and precision.

Leather Working Process



Embossed leather work on goatskin has been a speciality of West Bengal since 1940s. It is said that it was Tagore's daughter-in-law who brought this legendary art of embossing to Bengal from Java. It was in the 1980's, Sasha revived this craft unique to Shantiniketan and helped disseminate the skill other parts of Bengal. It was Sasha's sustained effort in design & product development, technical and skill upgradation, quality control and, most importantly, vigorous promotion & marketing drive that expanded the scope of this craft and created greater employment opportunities for the crafts persons.

Vegetable-tanned leather is the only form of leather suitable for use in leather embossing or stamping. It is tanned using tannin and other ingredients found in vegetable matter, such as tree bark prepared in bark mills, and other such sources. It is supple and brown in colour, with the exact shade depending on the mix of chemicals and the colour of the skin.

In the embossing process used in Bengal, first the leather is washed to remove all traces of salt. Usually sheepskin is used, and is bought from the old Chinese tanneries in Kolkata



The pieces of leather are dried by hanging on a line and then stretched on the ground to give an even flat surface and maximize the work area.



The leather is then cut into the shapes required, using a cardboard pattern. These patterns are normally strung together and hung on the wall. When used, the outline is first marked, and then cut using a pair of scissors or a chisel.





Each piece is then passed through a skiving machine. This thins down the edges so that they can be pasted down, folded or stitched. Earlier this was done by hand using a chisel, which called for great skill. Today the skiving machine gives perfectly even edges.





To emboss the leather piece, a die is used. The moistened leather is placed on the die and the heavy manually operated iron press is spun down to make the embossment.





সচে
পুলিশ। কিছু
যা যা করার দরকার করত
বহু ক্ষেত্রেই বাড়তি ঝুঁকি নিয়ে কাজ করে যাচ্ছে পুলিশ।
এটা একটা 'থ্যাঙ্কলেস জব'। তসলিমাকে নিয়ে
গণ্ডগোলার দিন মার খেয়েও সংখ্যম দেখিয়েছে পুলিশ।
অথচ সমালোচিত তারক সালেহীন সাবেদ মাখামেও পুলিশের
ভূমিকা এবং সমস্যা সমাধানের মাধ্যমে অস্তিত্বশীল হয়েছে
না। ফলে, বিজ্ঞান

প্রেম প্রণব

যে... মন আত্মসাৎ



রিচার্জ
পেশ হলে

পায়পূর্ণ দিক। রাববার



Next, the embossed leather is coloured. The raised portions are coloured using the simplest brush - a piece of rag wound over a stick. Spirit colours are used. The depressed areas remain uncoloured. In some patterns several colours are used. Larger areas are spray painted using a simple mouth spray.



The next stage is fabrication where the leather is stitched or pasted on to board, to construct a purse, box or bag. Fabric is often used for lining. This stage calls for very skilled and careful working as the glue used can stain and spoil the piece.





Accessories such as buttons etc are added last. The pieces are each finished with careful touching up, with a lacquer finish added in certain cases.



Simple Tools



Brush and Paint

Block



Chisels



Sewing Machine



Scissors



Chisels



Shanti Handicrafts

Shanti Handicrafts is situated in Habra, North 24-parganas, specialising in “Shantiniketan” style hand embossed leather products. Led by a young artisan-entrepreneur Dilip Das, the unit has scaled up its capacities and facilities with direct intervention of Sasha. The unit is development minded quality conscious, environmentally responsible and socially proactive. It has always lived up to the demands of international business and done well in domestic market as well.

With Sasha’s initial inputs and order support, the small group at Shanti slowly grew up. In 5 years time, its turnover increased over two fold and the number of artisans increased from 4 people initially to 12 in 2004.

The products included different varieties of bags, purse, frames, boxes etc. The products of this group reiterate the fact that traditional concepts can be moulded to satisfy modern functional requirements.

In spite of the good work, the unit was suffering from low productivity and slow growth affecting its margins and fund flow. It was then that Sasha- EDF with support from its Fair Trade partner undertook a systematic and integrated project at Shanti Handicrafts. The project intervened in several areas of operations & systems, design & development, modernization & skill up-gradation. Sasha- EDF offered a range of services to the group from infrastructure sup-

port, improvement in planning, processing, colouring, stitching and simultaneous skill development.

Sasha has introduced new design concepts, contemporary colour schemes and a fresh look to the existing product range for development of new products. Sasha has promoted these products in the international market and propagated direct interface with foreign buyers through systematic feedback mechanisms.

In last 5 years, its turnover increased significantly and the number of artisans increased to more than 25 now. Today Shanti Handicrafts is a thriving & growing enterprise with regular income for its artisans in the community.



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