

craft

The humble potter has many feats to boast of. First, his *khullars* made their way to the Indian Railways in place of plastic containers. Next, he went upmarket, with clay pots and plates finding pride of place in well-decorated homes. Now pottery has found its own retail outlets in Kolkata. A host of stores have taken clay to such heights that it has morphed into the most eye-catching products.

Consider Pot Luck. The store that opened last May at Park Side Road. Its 220 sq ft of space is dedi-

cated entirely to clay. The owner, 32-year-old Sheemonti Gupta, who has a another job in sales, chanced upon the idea when she wanted to learn pottery. She realised that pottery, despite being a craft intrinsic to Bengal, lacked organised marketing and was generally ignored as a craft. "Even in retail stores, pottery was usually relegated to a neglected corner," says Gupta. That said, Gupta decided to open a store that would help potters sell their products and enable clay artists to showcase their work.

Afro-Indian figurines, a curious mix of Bengali clay models and African influences, stand out at this shop. For example, a clay statue of a black woman with a child on her back is seen cleaning rice on a *kulo*, a traditional Bengali container. "She is the ultimate working mother," laughs Gupta. She sources some of her unique flower pots and vessels with intricate work from an artist in the suburbs, while items like jewellery, toothbrush holders, cups, mugs, pen stands and candle stands come

Photographs by SUVASHIS MULICK

FIRED passion

POTTERY TRAVELS FROM THE WHEEL TO THE HIGH TABLE



Aanupamaa Jalan at her store A

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from artists in Santiniketan. Pot Luck also stores wall tiles, some of which tell an entire story through half a dozen tiles. One tile depicts an entire Rajasthani wedding, from the groom riding the horse to the bride leaving her home in a palanquin. Gupta plans to start a line of clay-based furniture next. She already has some centre table and dressing table designs in mind. "There is no limit to what you can do with pottery," she adds.

Aanupamaa
Jalan heartily agrees. Her chic studio in Alipore, simply called A, has already proved that. Jalan has been in the ceramic business for the last eight years. Her studio is exclusive and she prefers to

Pottery Stores

A

Jalan House,
9 Alipore Road.
Tel: 24790251.

CONFETTI

1/1 Camac Street,
Tel: 22267601.

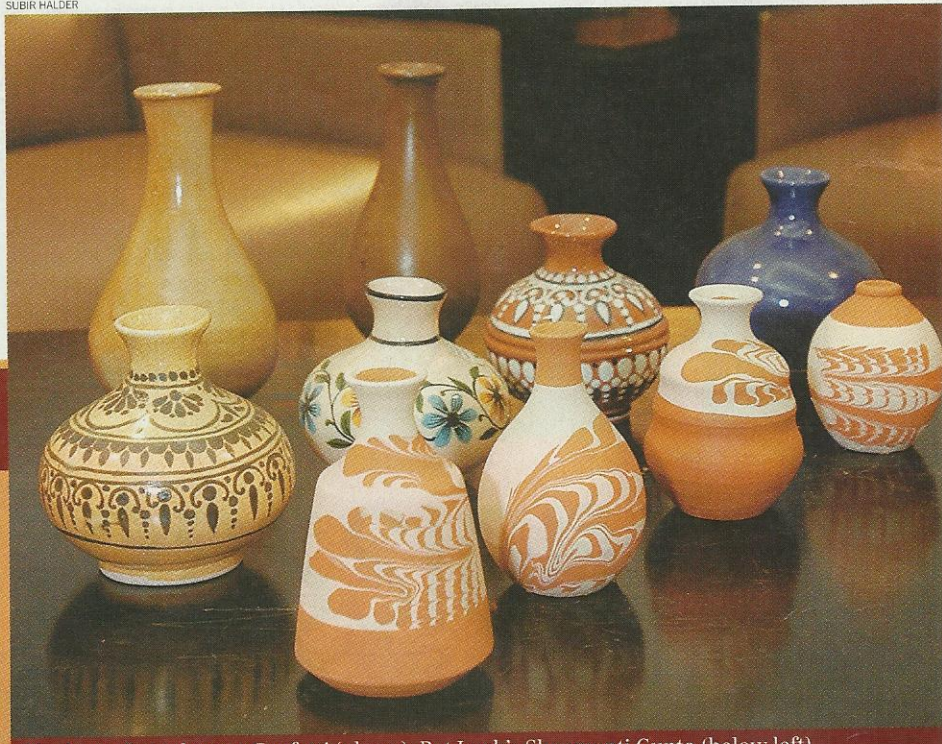
POT LUCK

27 Park Side Road,
Tel: 64530093.

SHAPE

74B AJC Bose Road,
Tel: 22177475.

SUBIR HALDER



The best of rural art at Confetti (above); Pot Luck's Sheemonti Gupta (below left)



lotus buds form the bowls to hold the dips and sauces. Or the simple ceramic pot, which finds new appeal as a candle, with a lid shaped as a

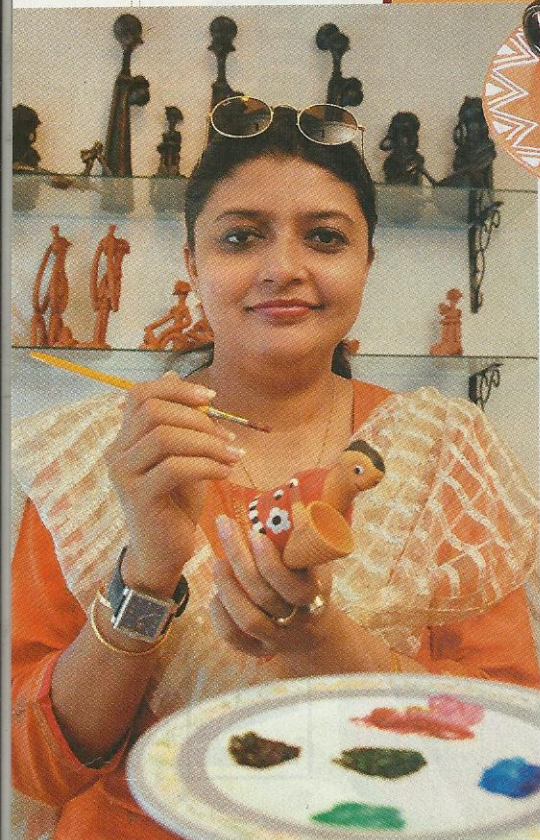
tuberose. Jalan confesses to drawing from nature for inspiration. Other than flowers, petals and leaves, the colours she uses are mostly earth colours such as brown, orange, deep red, and green. There are blacks and blues as well, as she explains that she has to keep all kinds of home colour schemes in mind.

Jalan retails from Osho World stores in Delhi and Mumbai. Her next step, she says, would be to start more retailing outlets. She certainly has the ingredients required for that.

Shape, a pottery company that has three artists doing something they have always loved, has already started retailing. For Debabani Basu, Debashis Mitra and

meet her clients by appointment. Jalan, who came to Kolkata from Delhi 10 years ago, had learnt a bit of sculpture while studying at Delhi's Modern School in Vasant Vihar. After graduating from Lady Shriram College, she went to the US to do a course in gardening and landscape design.

On returning to Kolkata, where her sister-in-law had a potter's studio in the house, she realised that she could combine her love for nature with her prowess in pottery and create unique objects. With happy results. Today, Jalan's designs are such that you won't find anywhere else. Take the dip plate shaped like a lotus leaf. A couple of



craft

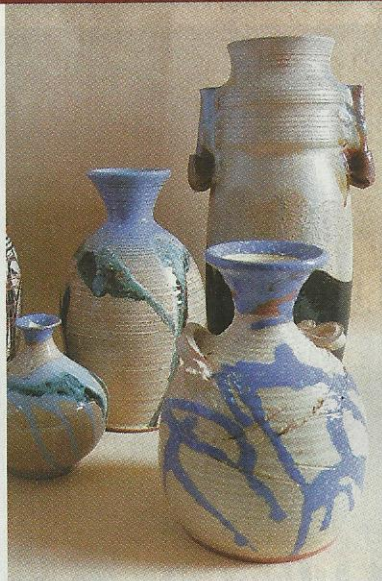


The wares seen at Shape (above and below) are the labour of love of three artists

Shantanu Baidya, Shape is more than just business, it is art for them. "We find unique uses for clay," says Basu, showing us a Ganesha that has been created out of the leftover clay that is scraped out of a potter's wheel, with a couple of ears and a trunk added on. Or the funky tortoise that can be used as an innovative paperweight.

Although Shape retails from a small boutique on AJC Bose Road, it has a huge, beautiful farmhouse for a workshop in Naihati, where seven workers give shape to the artists' designs when they can't do it themselves. Utility is kept strongly in mind, and Shape produces a lot of dinner sets and pots and pans, in a variety of colours (including the monotonous brown colour of clay). The colours used are edible and the crockery is microwave safe. But the best part is the price, most affordable.

Confetti, which has a showroom in Camac Street, besides working on a made-to-order basis, also performs the role of an employment-generating enterprise for rural



women. Started by Shanta Ghosh, one of Kolkata's most prominent entrepreneurs in 1998, Confetti was set-up as a social programme.

Initially Ghosh and her co-workers started a workshop in a potter colony close to Santiniketan. The women were not only taught to read and write but also to manage the business themselves.

The workshop also ensured that the village got electricity and a telephone, which it didn't have earlier. "We even have one woman who can use the computer now," says a proud Subir Chakraborty, director, Confetti Exports.

Handmade pottery glazed with bright colours and traditional hand-painting, or simple vases, kitchenware and tableware, all are made by these women. Confetti's products are very distinct and many of their designs have become a trade mark. From the rural locales of Santiniketan, these pots find their way to the prestigious locations, such as five-star hotels.

Handmade pottery glazed with bright colours and traditional hand painting on them, or simple vases, pottery is an art that is slowly dying. These retail shops have not only revived this ancient culture but have also given the art a global face and an international style.

And thus, the pot travels from the tacky wheel to the best tables. And travels full circle in the process.

■ by Swagata Sen