

HERITAGE

Simmering cauldrons



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aged by K.A. Jose. Apart from *uralis*, the workshop casts a range of traditional incense burners, lamps and bells used in Hindu rituals. This foundry also employs an encouragingly large number of women who are rarely seen in traditional metal working shops elsewhere.

One feels transported back in time at the Irinjilakuda workshop with the sight of glowing embers, flaming crucibles and sounds of hammering metal. It recalls the flourishing trade in prized metal vessels from the Malabar recorded by medieval Jewish merchants in Cairo in the 11th and 12th Centuries.

At Nadavarambu Metal Wares, moulds are made by building them over wooden wheels shaped roughly to re-

◀ Making the mould.

▼ The *urall* at the Madurai temple.

THE art gallery right inside the Meenakshi temple in Madurai (Tamil Nadu) boasts a fine collection of metal icons and ritual artefacts. Although dimly lit and carelessly displayed, this exceptional gallery provides a rare setting for metal icons and artefacts.

One of the more remarkable pieces in the collection is a large *urall* or metal cauldron of over one metre in diameter. This may be one of the earliest known surviving examples. It was reportedly found with a hoard of 12th Century Pan-

dyan-style images and looks older than the 18th Century *urall* in the Crafts Museum, New Delhi. *Uralis* are still made traditionally in Kerala and the Madurai temple specimen may represent links between the Chera Malabar and the Pandyan Tamil regions of yore.

Over in Kerala, I first witnessed the lost wax casting of a metal *urall* in 1991 at the verdant Irinjilakuda close to Trichur. The Nadavarambu Metal Wares at Irinjilakuda has brought together artisans, in a cooperative enterprise man-

semble the cauldron fixed on axles line in pits.

The inner clay model is built on the wooden axle over which the wax model is built and it is invested with three lay-

ers of moulding clay to form the finished mould.

The mould and wax model are skilfully crafted by hand turning them to get the smoothest and finest possible finish. The wax is then melted out and the mould fired leaving a cavity in the precise shape of the *urall* to be cast. An army of artisans carries the enormous mould packs it below ground and pours the molten metal in through several sprues. When the metal solidifies, the *urall* is retrieved after breaking the mould.

Traditional rope-turned manual lathes are used to finish the cast lamps and vessels, which give an insight into how the elegant rounded metal shapes were achieved in ancient times. The **Shilpashastras** and treatises like the 12th Century **Manasollasa** attributed to the Chalukyan king Someshvara describe the lost wax processes or *madhuchehisthavidhana* for casting metal icons, which are broadly followed by the traditional *sthapatis* in Swamimalai, Tamil Nadu.

Certain formulations mention the use of lampblack to make certain grades of moulding clay. This is also mentioned in the treatise of the Gupta era, **Manasara**.

Uralis were traditionally used to cook communal feasts in temples. In its latest avatar, the cauldron has become the *de rigueur* accessory for restaurants, resorts and homes, where it is displayed prominently sometimes with flowers floating on water.

The resurgent popularity of the *urall* was evident from the vastly increased line-up of gargantuan moulds, wheels and partly finished *uralis* strewn all over the Irinjilakuda workshop. ●

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