

Craft Revival of Ayyanar Terracotta Horses & Their Potential in Contemporary Product Design

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Abstract - Ayyanar terracotta horses are among Tamil Nadu's most culturally significant rural artefacts, symbolizing village guardianship, ritual devotion, and community identity. While these sculptures hold immense cultural value, their presence in modern contexts remains limited. This research explores the sustainable revival of Ayyanar terracotta through contemporary product design applications. Using methods such as literature review, material analysis, user surveys, and co-creation insights from artisans, the study examines how traditional motifs, clay properties, and symbolic features can be meaningfully adapted into modern lifestyle products such as lamps, planters, desk artefacts, and utility objects. Findings demonstrate that terracotta's natural materiality, cultural depth, and aesthetic versatility make it highly suitable for modern design when supported by artisan collaboration and sustainable processes. The research concludes that culturally rooted, functionally redesigned terracotta products can both preserve heritage and meet contemporary design expectations.

Index-Terms: Ayyanar, Terracotta, Craft Revival, Sustainability, Clay, Product Design, Materiality, Cultural Identity, Artisan Collaboration, Heritage.

I. INTRODUCTION

Terracotta has long been an integral part of India's material history, serving both functional and cultural purposes. Among its most iconic manifestations, the Ayyanar terracotta horse of Tamil Nadu stands as a unique sculptural tradition deeply connected to rural belief systems. These monumental horses, often placed at village boundaries, serve as votive offerings to Ayyanar—the guardian deity believed to protect the village.

Crafted by generations of potters (Kumbharar/Velar communities), these forms exhibit strong visual identity through elongated limbs, expressive eyes, tall ears, and symbolic ornamentation.

However, globalization and industrial products have marginalized this craft, reducing it to a ritual object with limited visibility in contemporary life.

At the same time, the modern design world increasingly values handcrafted, sustainable, and culturally meaningful materials, making terracotta relevant once again. This research investigates how Ayyanar terracotta horses can be adapted into contemporary product design while preserving their symbolic and cultural significance. The goal is to merge traditional craftsmanship with modern utility, ensuring economic sustainability for artisans and cultural continuity for future generations.

II. CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF AYYANAR TERRACOTTA HORSES

Ayyanar is revered as a kaval deivam (guardian deity) responsible for protecting people, livestock, and village boundaries. Terracotta horses offered to him represent spiritual vehicles through which he performs nightly patrols. Their exaggerated proportions elongated ears, bulging eyes, flared nostrils, muscular limbs—intentionally amplify strength, vigilance, and readiness. These symbolic exaggerations are not merely aesthetic choices but rooted in the belief that the deity's power is manifested through monumental form.

The craftsmanship is traditionally undertaken by hereditary potter communities who follow specific rituals before and after sculpting. Clay is sourced from local riverbeds, prepared using age-old methods, shaped in sections, assembled, and fired in open kilns. The knowledge is primarily transmitted orally, representing an intangible heritage that is vulnerable to erosion.

Integrating elements of this heritage into modern design must therefore be approached with respect, ensuring that reinterpretation does not desacralize, distort, or trivialize cultural meaning.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 Materials

Terracotta was chosen as the focal material due to its sustainability, tactile warmth, and compatibility with modern product applications. The clay's natural porosity, cooling behavior, and earthy texture make it inherently suited for interior products such as lighting, planters, and sculptures. Traditional decorative motifs—geometric incisions, embossed ornaments, saddle patterns—served as aesthetic material sources for analysis.

3.2 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative-dominant mixed methodology. Ethnographic elements included visits to artisan villages, observation of production techniques, and informal interviews to understand cultural context. A structured online survey captured user perceptions regarding terracotta, cultural products, and reinterpretations of Ayyanar forms. The literature review integrated anthropological, craft, material science, and design intervention studies.

3.3 Symbolic and Form Analysis

The anatomical exaggerations of Ayyanar horses were analyzed using visual, proportion, and semiotic frameworks. The goal was to identify design-translatable features such as the upright ears suggesting alertness, the expressive eyes indicating vigilance, and the patterned surfaces signifying ceremonial richness. These features were catalogued as potential inspiration for functional products.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 Traditional Terracotta Craft Literature

Scholarly works repeatedly emphasize the ritualistic importance of Ayyanar horses in Tamil rural societies. Studies document the spiritual symbolism associated with horse offerings and the role of potter communities in maintaining village identity. Researchers highlight the community's dependence on seasonal demand, noting a decline in recent decades.¹

Category	Details
Author & Year	Dr. Meenakshi Sundaram, 2022
Purpose of the Study	To document traditional terracotta practices, including Ayyanar horse-making techniques and their ritual context.
Method Used	Field documentation, artisan interviews, visual analysis of shrine installations, observations, stakeholder interviews with artisans.
Key Findings	Ayyanar horses preserve village identity, use locally sourced clay, and continue as a major votive practice. Their forms have strong design potential.
Limitations / Gaps	Lacks exploration of modern product applications.

4.2 Craft Revival and Design Intervention Studies

Design-oriented literature stresses the importance of co-creation, collaboration, and user-centered innovation in reviving traditional crafts. Successful interventions in bamboo, grass weaving, and metal crafts demonstrate that traditional materials can achieve contemporary relevance when adapted carefully. These studies underscore the necessity of preserving authenticity while addressing modern consumer needs.²

¹ Chaudhuri, *TERRACOTTA ART AND CRAFT OF BENGAL: A LIVING TRADITION OF INDIA*.

Category	Details
Author & Year	Lalitha Narayanan, 2020
Purpose of the Study	To investigate how craft traditions can be redesigned for contemporary utility.
Method Used	Co-design workshops, prototype development, user testing.observations, stakeholder interviews with artisans.
Key Findings	Rural crafts can be revitalized through scaled-down products, minimalistic forms, and functional reinterpretation.
Limitations / Gaps	Does not include terracotta or Ayyanar-specific traditions.

4.3 Material Science and Terracotta Performance

Recent scientific research indicates that terracotta's mechanical and acoustic performance can be significantly improved through glazing, composite layering, and double firing. This opens pathways for producing durable terracotta-based products that overcome traditional fragility concerns.³

Category	Details
Author & Year	Department of Ceramics Research, 2023
Purpose of the Study	To test strength, porosity, durability, and finishing options for terracotta in modern use.
Method Used	Material testing, waterproofing studies, slip-casting experiments.
Key Findings	Terracotta can be made highly durable through glazing, polymer coating, and double firing.
Limitations / Gaps	Does not address cultural craft integration.

4.4 Research Gap

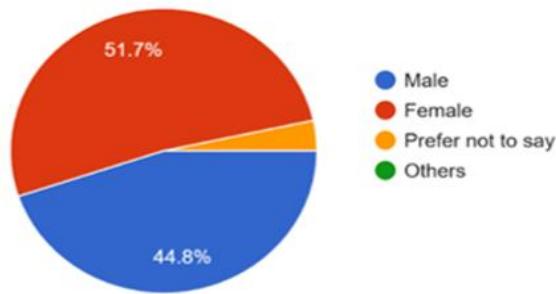
Despite extensive cultural and material research on terracotta, few studies explore the intersection of symbolism + craft process + user - centered product design. This study addresses that gap by linking cultural heritage with contemporary product innovation.

³ S et al., "Analyzing the Acoustic Performance of Unglazed Terracotta in an Indoor Office Environment."

V. ANALYSIS

5.1 User Demographics and Awareness

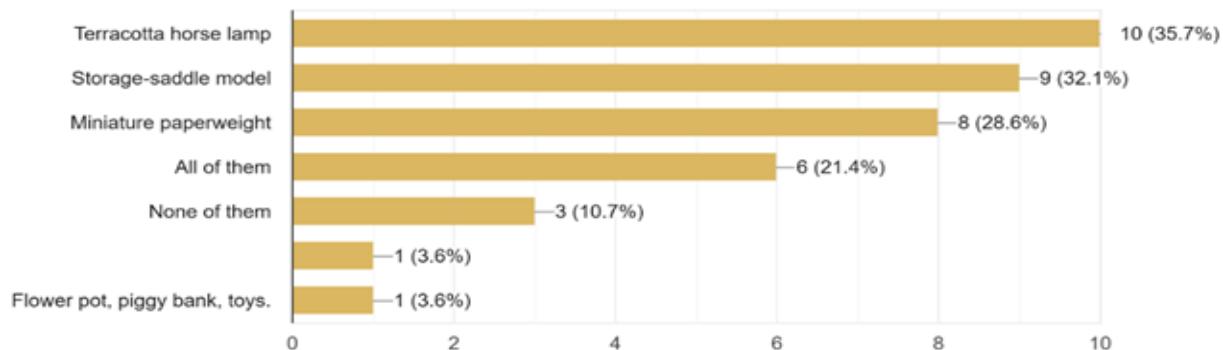
Most survey participants belonged to the 18–25 age group, a demographic known for its preference for sustainable, handcrafted, and culturally expressive products. Awareness of Ayyanar terracotta traditions was moderate, suggesting room for improved cultural dissemination.



5.2 Perception of Terracotta Material

Respondents consistently regarded terracotta as eco-friendly, aesthetically warm, and suitable for interior products. Concerns centered on fragility and water sensitivity, reinforcing the need for modern material enhancements.

5.3 Acceptance of Cultural Reinterpretation



Users responded positively to reinterpretations of Ayyanar horse forms into lamps, miniatures, bookends, planters, and desk accessories. They preferred designs that maintained symbolic identity while offering clear functionality. Authenticity and artisan involvement significantly influenced their likelihood of purchase.

5.4 Market Implications

Findings suggest a viable contemporary market for culturally rooted terracotta products—particularly in urban and semi-urban interior décor segments—provided durability and finish quality are improved.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Material Potential

Terracotta's natural properties offer advantages for contemporary product categories. Its cooling ability makes it ideal for planters and tabletop artifacts; its translucency when thinned allows for atmospheric lighting design; and its textured surface lends itself well to sculptural décor.

6.2 Cultural Significance as Design Value

Rather than mere decoration, the symbolism embedded in Ayyanar horses adds narrative and emotional depth to modern products. When incorporated thoughtfully, these motifs help shift products from being functional objects to being storytelling pieces, strengthening their cultural value.

6.3 Design Implications

The design translation of Ayyanar elements must prioritize sensitivity. Certain motifs—such as horses in full ceremonial form—are sacred and cannot be casually commodified. However, abstracted forms, structural silhouettes, and selectively adapted features can create culturally respectful designs.

6.4 Socio-economic Impact

Reimagining Ayyanar terracotta in modern markets can support artisan livelihoods in meaningful ways. It introduces year-long demand instead of seasonal ritual-based production and encourages skill diversification. Co-creation ensures that artisans become co-authors rather than laborers in the design process.

VII. CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that Ayyanar terracotta horses hold immense potential for contemporary product design when approached with respect, cultural understanding, and material innovation. By grounding reinterpretation in cultural authenticity and user-centered design, it becomes possible to create products that preserve heritage while satisfying modern lifestyle preferences. The integration of symbolic morphology with functionality can revitalize the craft, foster economic opportunities for artisans, and promote sustainable design practices. Future work can focus on prototyping, advanced material treatments, and developing market pathways to support long-term craft revival.

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