



The SUPPORT Arts and Crafts
International Centre of Thailand
(Public Organization)



Handicraft work

Miniature Clay Figures



Miniature clay figures are Thai handcraft works from clay molded in smaller proportion and painted with various colors beautifully and realistically. This kind of work requires expertise, delicacy and imaginations of the sculptors to create appealing works with outstanding facial expressions in order to transmit stories of Thainess in terms of living ways, cultures and traditions such as Thai plays, Thai orchestras etc. The miniature clay figures are Thai wisdom that have been developed from toys in the palaces until they became a part of Thainess substantially expressing value of Thai arts and cultures.



Uniqueness reflecting wisdom and craftsmanship skill

Miniature clay figures reflect values of Thainess in terms of cultures, traditions, livelihood, dressing and folk plays. They are handicrafts that are made by Thai people by imitating ancient Thai play activities

Uniqueness of miniature clay figures is traditional process by filtering clay from rice farms to be delicate before molded into different shapes with different postures in a way of imitating Thai's way of

living in smaller size. A knife is used to carve the figure with different facial expressions and postures. Most importantly, the dolls must be proportionate in terms of facial expression and natural emotion. The figures are burnt until their color changes into brick color. Initially, they were decorated with oil paint but later, acrylic paint is used to create more delicate, smooth and appealing look. A crucial technique depends on skills of the sculptors as they need to be meticulous and cautious in creating the works because each piece is minute and refined and it takes time to mold each piece.

Miniature clay figures can be divided into 3 sizes including small size: 1-centimeter, middle size: 3 centimeter and large size: 4 centimeters. They are popularly molded as an adult or a child figure in sitting, crawling, reclining, laying on side and kneeling postures. While a young child figure is molded with different hairstyles such as pigtails, plaits and top-knot. Although miniature clay figures are in different size, adding details on countenance, clothing and hairstyle must be at same standard for every piece of work.

Each set of works is designed in different stories such as raft house, rice farm, food, floating market, merit making, folk plays and others.



Background of miniature clay figures

Molding clay figures in different shapes was originated in Thailand for long time since pre-historic era until Rattanakosin Period. Each type of dolls is different in terms of beliefs and usages. In the past, beliefs about the dolls were that if the dolls were placed in a coffin aside the passing person, it was the way to dedicate to the dead to use in the next life. Therefore, clay dolls in the pre-historic era was created as an icon and prophetic dolls used in most rituals.

Later, clay dolls were discovered in Dvaravati Period because in early time of this era, it was influenced by India and the dolls in this period looked like Amaravati Art of India. In 12th-16th Buddhist Century, the clay dolls were discovered in U-thong District, Suphanburi Province. It was a female head with high hair in the middle with hair band. Interesting clay dolls in Dvaravati Period included the dolls made of red clay as a person walking along with a monkey, a man with hair in the middle of his head wearing a single piece of cloth with a small money sitting aside his body. Assumingly, this kind of doll could be a toy for children or used in religious rituals.



After that, the clay dolls were discovered based on living way and beliefs of people in that period such as dolls in Sukhothai Period: it was molded based on their beliefs to remove dangers and threats from ill people or delivering women, or tumbler as a toy of children or Brahma Doll created to offer to a Tree Guardian Shrine etc. Sukhothai Period was flourished in terms of earthenware and it looked exquisite and particularly lively.

In Ayutthaya Period, most clay dolls were influenced by Sukhothai Period such as holy dolls and animal dolls: dogs, cats, chickens, and turtles. However, they were invented more elaborately i.e. adding details of hairstyle like people in this period.

In Rattanakosin Period, Thai people respected home ghosts, ancestor's spirits and house guardian spirits, so a spirit house was established inside each house and people placed offerings to worship them such as food, drinks and dolls such as Tiam Yos, Tiam Sak, subordinate dolls. Apart from beliefs, the dolls were produced as toys including girl dolls, body dolls with clothes and hair painted in different colors. There were various hair styles such as long tuft, flower-like hair style and high-shape style like a Japanese girl. These dolls were tiny, and some were as small as a match that people in the palace highly cherished. They bought the dolls as collectibles or decorated the house with these dolls.



Development of Miniature Clay Figures

Handicrafts of molding are ability of Thai people that have been inherited since ancient time. Materials used for molding are naturally found or local such as clay. Molding a piece of work was divided as low-relief, high-relief, round-relief and freestyle types and it was popularly used to make toys or belief-based offering. When clay was molded in intended shape, it would be left dried and painted with natural color. Later, it has been developed by burning the clay with high heat before decorating it with different colors. The works are more durable and stronger than generally molded pieces and they can be kept for long times.



Evolution of Thai clay molding is influenced by foreign countries such as China, India, European countries. So, white clay is mixed with natural chemicals and burned with high heat that the work is durable, strong and glossy.

After that, Japanese clay has been introduced in Thailand for 30 years. With quality of Japanese clay, the works can be created more elaborately and magnificently. It can be mixed with various colors and it is not easily dried that the works are wavering, realistic, not easily broken and various. The clay matter is delicate, and it can be kept for long times without disturbance of insects. So, Japanese clay is popular and widely used. However, due to its expensive price, other raw materials are initiated with similar properties such as raw materials from crops, white clay, fiber glass, soap, paper fiber as main materials mixed with viscous agent until it becomes Thai clay that has been extensively and popularly applied comparable to Japanese clay.



Originally, miniature clay figures were used to produce toys only and they were simple human figures which were easily made without meticulousness and delicacy. Later, it has been developed to look more gorgeous and elaborate by adding details clearly such as countenance, hair styles and clothing with painting on the dolls to look more beautiful. However, the way of inventing miniature clay figures is still traditional. Miniature clay figures are increasingly popular until their purposes change from being just toys to souvenirs and collectibles. The miniature clay figures are developed to look more meticulous. Originally, only the face part was painted but at present, the face part is carved with a knife to add details of the countenance as well as the hair part. With this development, the miniature clay figures are more refined and realistic. Apart from human figures, they have been developed to be vegetables, fruits, desserts, Thai food, Thai-style house or offering sets. They can be used as decorations or placed in the showcase until they are developed to be utensils such as earrings etc.



Type of clay for miniature clay figure production

Thai handicraft with ingredient of white clay is outstanding, glossy and the work will be white without adding colors. It can be kept for long time without molds and it is used to produce flowers, garland, dessert, souvenirs and keychain etc.

Thai handicraft with ingredient of marl is dimly white. If needing white-colored work, it is required to mix it with white color. When the work piece is dry, no insects will disturb, and it is popular for making garland, flower and blossom tray etc.

Thai handicraft with ingredient of plants: the clay is dense and soft and clay matter is dimly white. Mostly, it is made of sticky rice flour, corn starch and preservatives. When finishing it, it must be coated with waxing agent to prevent insects. It is popular used to make Thai dessert, fruits, keychain and souvenirs etc.

Handicraft work with ingredient of paper fiber: clay containing paper fiber is white and free of molds and insects. However, the process to mix clay from paper fibers is relatively complicated and clay is expensive. It is used to produce various works such as flower, fruits, Thai desserts, souvenirs, toys and garland etc.

Handicraft with ingredient of soap is soft and scented. The clay matter is white, but it is easily broken. When the clay is dry, it is necessary to be careful when storing it. It must be kept in a box or wrapped with plastic to prevent damages. Soap clay is popular used to produce flowers and garlands etc.





Process to create miniature clay figures

Materials/ Equipment

Filtered clay from rice farms

Spike-tip knife for carving on face and hair

Acrylic paint for only green, yellow and red
colors

Paintbrush size 0-4 for painting

stove

Clay pot in which dolls are put before burning
charcoals





Miniature clay figure production procedures

Clay filter: clay from the rice farms is put in an enameled basin and immersed in water for 1 month. After that, mingle the clay with hands until it becomes muddy and then use a filter cloth to filter pebbles out of the clay entirely before sun-drying for 7-10 days.

Clay collection: when the clay is getting dried, collect it in a plastic bag closely to prevent hardening.

Molding: before molding, remove clay from the plastic bag and press it. If it gets hardened, immerse it and then press it again to remove air bubbles so it becomes stickier and denser that it will not be easily broken when burned.

The invention of a miniature clay figures is divided into 4 parts as follows

Body part: make a body part in intended size.

Leg part: make left leg and right leg including 10 toes before assembling with the body. Make shorts or sarong and put in on.

Arm part: make the left arm, right arm and 10 fingers before assembling together and then put on the clothes.

Head part: make the head part to fit the body and use spike-tip knife to carve on face such as eyes, nose, mouth and hair.

Burning: put the dolls in a clay pot and set fire to remove water. When it is getting dry, place the pot on the stove and then burn it over until charcoals become ashes. After that, remove the burnt clay pot from the stove and leave it cooler that it can be touched

Painting: decorate the burnt dolls with intended colors.



Assembly of miniature clay figure

When every step is finished, all parts of miniature clay figures are assembly to make them look beautiful and it is the way to transmit Thai living way as follows

Local occupation and living way is to simulate occupation of Thai people such as basket interlacing, Thai massage, orchard farming, rice farming, animal husbandry and trading etc.

Thai plays and music are the way to simulate local plays of Thai people such as Ri Ri Khao San (catching the last one in the line), Piggyback, Thai Boxing, Chicken Fight, Banana rib horse-riding, Ferris wheel, sword dancing, Thai chess, bald-touching and Local Thai music such as Piphat Band, string instrument band, Thai Grand Orchestra, Thai-style antiphon and long drum etc.

Custom, tradition and cultures are the way to express traditions in various festivals and religious rituals in Thailand such as wedding, ordination ceremony, Loy Kratong Festival, sand castle construction, Songkran Festival, merit making and topknot-cutting ceremony etc.

Currently, they are highly popular because customers buy the products as a gift, souvenir or collectibles. Size of most miniature clay figures are middle and large because it is difficult to produce a custom miniature doll as it is time-consuming and requires good eyesight, best skills and expertise. So, it is relatively rare at present.

Although the time changes, Miniature Clay Figures have been produced in traditional way and stories about living have been transmitted for generations. It is the way to succeed and conserve Thainess to remains in Thailand forever.



Data source and documentary reference for data provision

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