

# in search of aiyanar

by Åke and Eva Nobling

The chance viewing of a documentary film many years ago has led to the rediscovery of a rich sculptural tradition, and lifelong friendships between people from two very different cultures who share the same passion for pottery.

Aiyanar is the main god believed responsible for protecting villages in Tamil Nadu in South India.

For thousands of years, big terra-cotta sculptures were being built as gifts to Aiyanar and his entourage. The sculptures are images of gods, like Karuppan, a fiercer form of Aiyanar, Putam (the temple guardian), Munivar, Sannasi (the guru), Aiyanar himself with his two consorts, but the most common image is the horse, which Aiyanar and his men need to ride through the village by night, guarding against thieves, fire, drought, and illness.

Many years ago, Aiyanar was depicted riding on an elephant, but with the migration of the Aryans (around 1500 BCE) the horse was introduced to India. The horse took over successively as the vehicle of Aiyanar. This shift tells something about the long history of the Aiyanar culture.



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1 The Aiyanar horse created during a workshop in Sweden, fired to 2282°F (1250°C.) 2 Kottadivayal Aiyanar Temple in the Pudukkottai district. 3 Heavy stoking of the kiln in Aranthangi. 4 Unloading the kiln in Aranthangi.

Today the terra-cotta sculptures are often replaced by concrete ones. Concrete is considered a more durable and modern material. The strong economic development in India is also an important reason.

The Aiyanar culture is very much alive and many Aiyanar temples have been renovated. Many of the old terra-cotta sculptures (damaged by weather and wind) are “cleaned away” and replaced by concrete versions, painted in striking acrylic paint; however, the design of these concrete horses is getting clumsier and more uniform.

The terra-cotta sculptures are often built and fired in one piece; the tallest ones are more than 16½ ft. (5 m) high. Hundred years ago these terra-cotta sculptures were being made in numerous of villages in Tamil Nadu and some in the adjoining states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Kerala.

Twenty years ago there were about 200 potters still building the big sculptures. Today they number around 50, living mainly in the Pudukkottai district in Tamil Nadu. Besides building temple sculptures, the Aiyanar potters also make terra-cotta pots that the villagers need for daily use.

As with the shift from terra cotta to concrete horses for sculptures, the demand for pots is declining. Out of convenience, modern materials like aluminum and plastic are replacing ceramic, which is heavier and not considered as durable.

The son of the Aiyanar potter (the work/role is heritable) today often wants to work as an engineer or a telecom technician, professions that are in great demand in India today; the life of a potter is not as alluring.

In addition to creating sculptural and functional ceramics, the Aiyanar potter often functions as a priest as well (Tamil: *puchari*) in the temple. For his work providing the village temple with terra-

cotta sculptures, he is paid in form of grain, small gifts, sometimes money, but most important of all the right to cultivate the fields owned by the temple.

We, ceramic artists from the Swedish island Gotland in the middle of the Baltic Sea, first came in contact with the Aiyandar culture at a ceramic symposium in Stockholm in 1998, when we watched Ron du Bois' documentary *Terra-Cotta Sculpture in South India*. The short film from 1982 documents the building and firing of a 13-foot (4 m)-high ceramic horse in the village Puthur in Tamil Nadu.

In 2004, during one of our many journeys to India, we made a short visit to the Pudukkottai district in Tamil Nadu and visited the beautiful Aiyandar temple of Urapatti and found the village of Perambur where the big horse sculptures were still being made.

In 2008 we returned for two months and travelled around the Pudukkottai district visiting temples, Aiyandar potters, and participating in building a sculpture with Veramuttu in Perambur.

## Bringing the Aiyandar Horses to Sweden

Back in Sweden, along with some colleagues, we established the society "New Techniques for Ceramic Sculpture" (Nyteks), and applied for money for a two-year project from the European Union and the Swedish government. Our application was granted.

In the summer of 2009 we invited Palanichamy from the village of Duvaradimanai (Pudukkottai district) to Gotland. (Thanks to Ray Meeker and Deborah Smith of Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry for helping him travel to Sweden.)

In Gotland, Palanichamy led a workshop for fifteen ceramic artists, teaching the South Indian technique for building big ceramic sculptures. The clay is mixed with rice husks, or other organic material, then the clay walls are built up and shaped with a "paddle and anvil" (wooden paddle outside and rounded stone on the inside), until the thickness is not more than 15–20 mm. During the two week workshop, we built a traditional Indian designed Aiyandar horse that was 9 ft. (2.7 m) in height and several additional larger sculptures.

In 2010, we constructed and built a gas kiln to fire the big sculptures and in November of that year, the 9-foot-high horse was fired. The kiln worked very well—in 44 hours we fired the stoneware horse up to 2282°F (1250°C). In India they fire the earthenware sculptures between 1472°–1652°F (800–900°C.)

## Aiyandar Temples Then and Now

During the winter of 2010, we travelled around the Salem district in Tamil Nadu. We had read about several Aiyandar temples with big terra-cotta sculptures in a survey conducted by the Madras Craft Foundation in 1992, and wanted to see what they looked like today, nearly 20 years later. We saw many newly renovated temples with most of the terra-cotta sculptures removed and replaced with concrete sculptures. There were no new large terra-cotta sculptures, only some very small ones.

We also visited the Madurai district (documented by Stephen Inglis in "A Village Art of South India" (1980), seeing more than 10 temples. Where 30 years ago a wide range of many big terra-cotta





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5 Painting the big horse in Aranthangi after the firing.

6 The last details being painted on the big horse in Aranthangi.

sculptures could be seen, when we were there, they were all gone. The new sculptures were made of concrete and painted in strikingly bright acrylic colors. Yet, at the beautiful Mancamalai Anti Temple north of Madurai, many old terra-cotta horses are still standing.

## The Aiyandar Festival

In the summer of 2011, we again returned to Pudukkottai district, this time together with the documentary-film editor Tony McVeigh to film a festival and a 16-foot-high terra-cotta horse being taken from the town of Aranthangi to the Aiyandar Temple in Kottadivayal. The festival season is between May and September.

Each year, for 25 years, the Aiyandar potter Kasirajan has built a 16-foot (5 m)-high, monolithic terra-cotta horse for Kottadivayal. The villagers cooperate to finance the big horse, in addition to this, many families order a 6½–9½-foot (2–3 m)-high horse or cow for the same festival. Besides delivering sculptures to Kottadivayal, Kasirajan and his family (around ten adults) deliver sculptures to six to seven other temples. In addition to the one 16-foot-high horse he makes each year, the family makes about 200–300 6½–10-foot (2–3 m)-high horses and cows.

We arrived after the big horse was already built and was being prepared for the firing. The horse was built in an extra-tall kiln, and even then, the head of the horse reached 5 feet (1.5 m) above the top of the kiln. The horse-shoe shaped kiln had no roof, was

made of a very coarse clay mixture, and was supported by an outer stone wall.

Loaded around the big horse were unfired pots, previously fired damaged pots, and pot shards. Wood and coconut fibers were stacked in between the wares and used to ignite the fire. All of it formed a big pile that covered the horse's head. On top of the pile, a 20-cm-thick layer of straw was arranged and then covered by a thin layer of clay slurry. When this was ready in the late afternoon, a small fire was started to dry out any moisture. The candling fire continued through the night.

At 9 o'clock the next morning the real fire was started. Firewood and bushes were fed into the firebox at the bottom, front side of the horseshoe-shaped kiln. At 10:30 am, the clay slurry top started to fall off the backside of the kiln and the firing then moved to that side. Bundles of straw on long sticks were ignited and then pushed up onto the head to give it some more heat. At 11:30, the firing was finished. That same evening they started to unload the pots from the kiln.

The day after, when all the pots and shards had been unloaded and the horse uncovered, it was prepared for painting. The terra-cotta horse was first covered with a mixture of clay slurry and aloe vera fiber. Its function was both protection during the transport and as a base for the paint. After some years, the clay/fiber cover will fall off, due to weather and wind. Then the beautiful patina surface of the terra cotta will show again. The clay/fiber covering was painted with acrylic paint.

On the morning of the festival, the villagers who would be carrying the big horse started to arrive, along with the musicians and dancers. The last painting on the smaller sculptures was completed and bamboo poles were tied to the big horse to make it possible to lift it out from the kiln. Families who had ordered a horse or a cow also prepared bamboo poles and straw packing for the transport.

In the afternoon when all preparations were finished, the rest of the villagers and the priests arrived. One priest, the *camiyati*, whose task it was to “wake” the horse to life, rushed up to the head of the horse, accompanied by forceful music, and “opened the eyes.”

This task is reserved for the *camiyati*, because a common man or even a common priest (*puchari*) would not withstand the first powerful look from the god, who is believed to be inside the horse. Even for the *camiyati*, it was such a great strain that he was instantly knocked out and had to be carried away. Now the journey to the temple could begin. The musicians and dancers start out first, then the smaller sculptures of Aiyandar flanked by his two consorts; next, Karuppan, Sannasi, and Matalam pillai start to go; then the big horse was carried by 70–80 men; thereafter the smaller horses and cows, around 30 in number each, were carried by family members.

When the procession arrived at the temple, the sun was down. Markets and food stands opened, people were everywhere, and all were happy. The big horse was placed alongside the other big horses from previous years. The smaller cows and horses were installed on the sides of the temple and the sculptures of Aiyandar, Karuppan, Sannasi, and Matalam pillai were placed into their specific shrines within the temple compound.

The week after we filmed the festival, Palanichamy taught the Aiyandar technique to Åke and they built a big horse head together.



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## Aiyandar Today

In the winter of 2012 we visited the Perambalur and Cuddalore districts in Tamil Nadu to get a current picture of the terra-cotta sculpture situation. As in Salem and Madurai, concrete had taken over more and more as the dominating material for building sculptures. We visited some temples with beautiful old terra-cotta sculptures including ones at the Melkalpondi Aiyandar Temple, which were very impressive.

In Puthur, we visited the temple where Ron du Bois had made his film 30 years earlier. Damaged remains of four old terra-cotta horses could be seen along with a recently renovated concrete horse.

In the southern outskirts of Chennai (formerly Madras) we visited the Kalakshetra Foundation, a government financed art center that has a ceramic program lead by the studio ceramic artist D.Gukanraj.

Here Palanichamy and four more Aiyandar potters from Duvaradimanai and Malayur in the Pudukkottai district had built a whole collection of sculptures for Kalakshetra's own Aiyandar temple. The bigger pieces were fired in parts and joined together after the firing—although this was not the traditional method, it was necessary as only a small kiln was available. The two biggest horses were very impressive, one of them was designed by Palanichamy and the other one by Rangasamy's son Kumareshen.

Rangasamy, an Aiyandar potter from Malayur, is now making commercial sculptures for a non-religious market. He and his family have made many commission works for hotels and public places around India.



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7–8 The big horse is carried through the village by 70–80 men during the festival. 9 Old terra-cotta horse in the Aiyandar temple of the Cuddalore district.