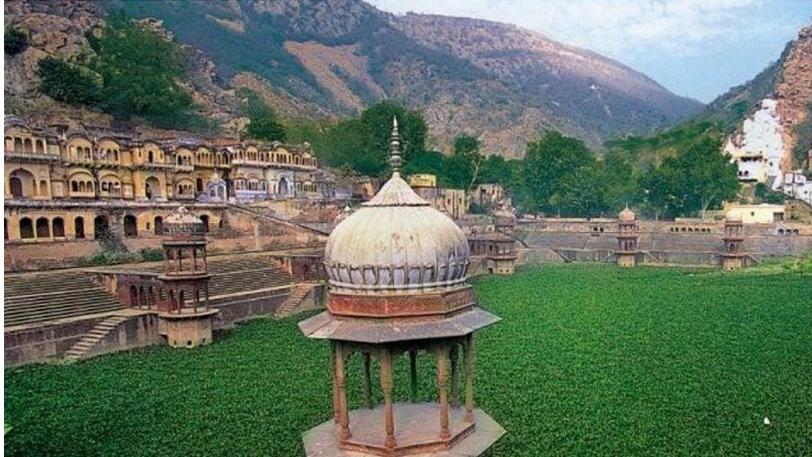


Heritage Craft and Community Division

Murti Making Traditions of Rajasthan : Alwar

Introduction



Nestled in the northeastern part of Rajasthan, the city of Alwar stands as a confluence of history, devotion, and artistry. Enclosed by the Aravalli hills, Alwar has long been known for its vibrant cultural expressions and traditional crafts that mirror the rich heritage of the region. The area has witnessed the influence of Rajput grandeur, Mughal refinement, and local folk traditions, all of which have blended seamlessly to shape its distinctive artistic identity.

Among Alwar's many crafts — such as miniature painting, pottery, metalwork, and terracotta, the tradition of murti making (murti crafting) holds a deeply revered place. This craft is not merely an artistic pursuit but a spiritual practice that intertwines faith, devotion, and cultural continuity. The murtis created here embody both divine grace and the artisan's heartfelt devotion, transforming raw earth into sacred form.

Historically, murti making in Alwar flourished under royal patronage during the princely state era, when the rulers of Alwar supported temple building and the visual arts as a part of their devotion and cultural pride. Temples and shrines dedicated to Lord Krishna, Lord Shiva, and various local deities became centers of artistic activity, where skilled artisans were commissioned to carve and mold exquisite murtis. Over generations, this tradition was passed down through families of sculptors and potters, who continued to preserve the craft's essence while adapting it to changing times.

Today, Alwar's murti making remains a vibrant symbol of its living heritage — where art and spirituality meet, and where every sculpture tells the story of a community's enduring relationship with its gods, its land, and its traditions.

People and Cultural Context

The murti-making tradition of Alwar is deeply embedded in the social and cultural fabric of the region. It is primarily sustained by the **Kumhar community** (traditional potters) and **Sthapatis** (sculptors and temple artisans), whose ancestral skills have been handed down through generations. For these communities, crafting murtis is more than a profession — it is considered a **sacred responsibility and act of devotion**. Each artisan regards the process of shaping clay into divine form as a spiritual offering, performed with purity of mind and reverence.

Within these families, knowledge is transmitted orally and through hands-on apprenticeship, where younger members learn the nuances of proportion, expression, and iconography by observing elders. Women in artisan households also play a crucial role, particularly in **painting, ornamentation, and finishing**, bringing color, grace, and delicacy to each figure. Thus, the craft becomes a collective cultural practice, engaging the entire household during festive and religious seasons.

The rhythm of murti making in Alwar follows the spiritual calendar of the region. Artisans become especially active during major religious occasions such as **Krishna Janmashtami, Shivratri**, and local fairs like the **Baba Mohan Ram Mela**, when communities come together in celebration and worship. During these times, markets and temple precincts come alive with rows of freshly crafted murtis, each radiating devotion and joy. These murtis, large and small, find their way into **temples, village shrines, and household altars**, strengthening the emotional and devotional connection between the divine and the community.

Geographically and culturally, Alwar occupies a unique position near the **Braj region** — the land associated with **Lord Krishna's life and legends**, encompassing Mathura and Vrindavan. This proximity has profoundly influenced Alwar's spiritual and artistic expressions. Consequently, **Krishna and Radha** remain the most beloved subjects in local murti making. The figures often depict scenes from Krishna's divine play (*leela*), characterized by gentle postures, tender smiles, and lively gestures.

This **Braj influence**, interwoven with Alwar's **Rajput and folk sensibilities**, gives the murtis a distinctive aesthetic — **devotional yet dynamic, graceful yet deeply human**. The murtis embody both the elegance of classical temple sculpture and the warmth of folk artistry, reflecting the region's composite cultural soul. Through this craft, the people of Alwar continue to express their devotion, preserve their heritage, and keep alive the centuries-old bond between art, faith, and community life.

Materials and Tools Used

- **Primary materials:**
 - *Clay* from local ponds and riverbeds (fine, pliable, and naturally reddish).
 - *Plaster of Paris (POP)* or *lime mixture* for detailing and finishing.
 - *Natural pigments and paints* derived from minerals and plants.
 - In some cases, *soft white marble* or *local sandstone* is used for temple murtis.
- **Tools:**
 - Wooden carving tools (*chisel, kalam, katri*)
 - Brushes made from goat hair for fine painting.
 - Small iron spatulas and bamboo sticks for shaping details.

Process of Making

1. **Preparation of Clay:**

The clay is kneaded with water and sieved to remove impurities. Sometimes, rice husk or fine sand is added for strength.
2. **Modeling the Base Form:**

The artisan begins with a basic structure, often using straw or hay inside to reduce cracking. The murti is shaped by hand and refined with wooden tools.
3. **Detailing:**

Facial expressions, ornaments, and drapery are carefully sculpted — Alwar murtis are known for **soft, rounded facial features** and **delicate hand gestures**.
4. **Drying and Firing:**

The murtis are sun-dried and then baked in small brick kilns to harden.

5. **Painting and Decoration:**

Once cooled, the murti is coated with white gesso or POP and hand-painted in bright colors.

- **Krishna murtis** are often painted deep blue, with intricate golden mukut (crown) and ornaments.
- Local artisans also add embellishments like mirror work, glass beads, and cloth attire.

Materials and Tools Used

The materials and tools used by Alwar's murti makers reflect a deep understanding of their natural environment and a sensitivity to the qualities of each substance they work with. Every element — from the clay they mold to the brushes they use — plays an essential role in bringing divine forms to life.

Primary Materials

- **Clay:**

The most fundamental material in Alwar's murti making is **locally sourced clay**, collected from the beds of ponds, rivers, and tanks in the surrounding villages. This clay is prized for its **fine texture, natural pliability, and reddish hue**, which lends warmth and vitality to the finished murtis. Before use, the clay is carefully sieved and kneaded to remove pebbles and impurities, ensuring a smooth, even consistency. In some cases, artisans mix the clay with a small amount of **fine sand, rice husk, or cow dung**, which helps strengthen the structure and prevents cracking during drying and firing.

- **Plaster of Paris (POP) or Lime Mixture:**

For surface refinement and intricate detailing, artisans often apply a thin layer of **Plaster of Paris** or a traditional **lime and gum mixture** over the clay base. This coating gives the murti a smooth finish and enhances its durability. POP is particularly favored for creating smaller murtis and festival murtis because it allows for quick drying and crisp detailing.

- **Natural Pigments and Paints:**

The painting process uses **natural pigments** derived from minerals, plants, and stones — such as ochres, indigo, turmeric, and soot-based blacks. These natural colors not only add vibrancy but also ensure that the murtis remain **eco-friendly and non-toxic**, especially when immersed during rituals. Artisans prepare these pigments by grinding and mixing them with natural binders like gum arabic or linseed oil. Over time, synthetic paints have also found use, but traditional craftsmen still prefer organic hues for their authenticity and soft, earthy appearance.

- **Stone and Marble:**

In certain temples and heritage sites, murtis are also carved from **soft white marble** or **local sandstone**, both abundantly available in Rajasthan. These materials are chosen for their durability and ability to capture fine details. Alwar's proximity to regions like Bharatpur and Dausa provides easy access to quality stone, making stone sculpting a complementary craft tradition alongside clay work.

Tools

The tools used by Alwar's artisans are simple, often handmade, yet remarkably effective in achieving delicate precision.

- **Wooden Carving Tools:**

Tools such as the **chisel (kalam)**, **scraper (katri)**, and **spatula** are crafted from seasoned wood or bamboo. These are used to model and define facial features, ornaments, and the folds of garments. Each tool has a unique function — the broad ones shape larger forms, while the fine-tipped ones bring out minute details like the curve of a smile or the intricate pattern of jewelry.

- **Iron Implements:**

Small **iron spatulas** and **wire tools** are employed for carving deeper grooves and refining edges. These tools are often locally forged by blacksmiths, maintaining a long-standing interdependence between crafts communities in the region.

- **Brushes and Painting Tools:**

For painting and ornamentation, artisans use **handmade brushes** crafted from **goat, squirrel, or horse hair**, which allow for smooth, controlled strokes. These brushes are used to outline the eyes, adorn ornaments, and apply the final decorative motifs that give life and expression to the murti.

- **Bamboo Sticks and Modeling Aids:**

Simple **bamboo sticks**, wires, and pieces of cloth are used to support the structure while modeling. Some artisans also use **wooden boards** to rotate and view the murti from all angles as they work, ensuring symmetry and proportion.

Process of Making

The process of murti making in Alwar is a **harmonious blend of craftsmanship, devotion, and ritual discipline**. Each stage from preparing the clay to painting the final details is carried out with patience, precision, and spiritual mindfulness. The artisans believe that they are not merely shaping a form, but invoking divinity into being through their hands.

Preparation of Clay

The process begins with the careful **selection and preparation of clay**, which forms the foundation of the murti. Clay is collected from the beds of nearby ponds, rivers, or tanks, usually after the monsoon when the soil is fresh and fine. The raw clay is first **sieved and cleaned** to remove pebbles, roots, or other impurities that could weaken the structure.

Once cleaned, the clay is **kneaded thoroughly with water**, often by hand and foot, until it attains a soft and elastic texture. In some workshops, artisans mix in **fine sand, rice husk, or cow dung** to add flexibility and prevent cracking during drying. The kneading process itself is rhythmic and meditative — a crucial step that determines the quality and longevity of the murti. The prepared clay is then left to rest under a damp cloth to retain moisture until it is ready to be used.

Modeling the Base Form

The modeling stage marks the **birth of the murti's form**. The artisan begins by creating a basic armature — often made of **straw, hay, or dry grass** — which serves as the internal framework for the murti. This not only provides support but also reduces the weight of the clay structure.

Over this framework, layers of clay are gradually applied and molded by hand to build up the form. The artisan starts with the **main body posture**, then moves on to shaping the head, limbs, and gestures. At this stage, proportions and symmetry are carefully maintained, often guided by traditional **iconographic rules** and religious canons.

As the figure begins to take shape, the artisan uses **wooden tools and spatulas** to refine contours, smooth surfaces, and add finer details. The process is slow and deliberate, with constant attention to balance and expression. The murti, even in its raw clay stage, already begins to reflect serenity and devotion — hallmarks of Alwar's artistic style.

Detailing

The next stage is **detailing**, where the artisan's mastery truly shines. Facial features are sculpted with great care — the eyes slightly elongated, the nose gently curved, and the lips shaped into a soft, divine smile. The **hands and fingers** are crafted with delicate precision, often depicting expressive gestures (*mudras*) that convey blessing, dance, or devotion.

Ornaments, jewelry, and drapery are then added, inspired by local Rajasthani motifs. Necklaces, bangles, anklets, and crowns (*mukut*) are modeled in fine relief, and the folds of the garments are carved to create a sense of movement and natural grace. **Alwar murtis are particularly admired for their rounded forms, calm expressions, and rhythmic flow of lines**, which make them appear both divine and approachable.

Drying and Firing

Once the sculpting is complete, the murti is allowed to **dry naturally under the sun**. The drying process may take several days, depending on the size of the murti and the season. Artisans ensure that drying happens slowly and evenly to avoid cracks — sometimes covering the murti with damp cloth during intense sunlight.

After the murti has dried completely, it is **baked or fired** in a small brick kiln or open pit. This step hardens the clay and makes the murti durable. The firing process requires skill, as excessive heat can cause breakage. Experienced craftsmen monitor the temperature and timing carefully, ensuring the murti emerges strong and intact.

Painting and Decoration

Once cooled, the murti enters its final and most vibrant phase — **painting and decoration**. A thin coat of **white gesso (a chalk and glue mixture)** or **Plaster of Paris** is first applied to create a smooth surface. Over this, artisans paint the murti using **bright natural or mineral-based pigments**, following traditional color symbolism.

- **Krishna murtis** are painted in deep blue or indigo shades, symbolizing divinity and cosmic depth.
- **Radha and Gopis** are adorned in bright reds, pinks, yellows, and greens, reflecting joy and festivity.
- **Shiva murtis** may feature ash-grey tones, with fine detailing in white and black to emphasize ascetic strength.

The **eyes are painted last** in a sacred ritual known as *Netronmilana* (opening of the eyes), believed to infuse the murti with life and spirit.

After painting, the murtis are decorated with **mirror work, glass beads, sequins, and cloth garments**. Artisans often craft miniature crowns (*mukut*), veils, and ornaments from foil, lace, or fabric. These decorative additions enhance the divine beauty and celebratory aura of the murti.

Each completed murti becomes a unique creation — a union of skill, devotion, and imagination. The process concludes with a small prayer of gratitude to the divine creator, acknowledging that the artisan's hands were merely instruments in giving form to the sacred.

Rituals and Beliefs

In Alwar, the act of creating a murti is not merely a craft, it is a **sacred ritual, rooted in deep spiritual belief**. For the artisans, every step of the process, from touching the clay to painting the eyes, is guided by faith and reverence.

Before beginning their work, the sculptors perform a **small prayer to Lord Vishwakarma**, the divine architect and patron deity of all craftsmen. They seek his blessings for skill, precision, and purity of intention, believing that the success of the murti depends not only on technique but also on spiritual alignment. The workspace is cleaned, incense is lit, and a pinch of turmeric or vermilion is offered to the tools — symbolic of invoking auspiciousness before creation begins.

A particularly sacred moment in the process is the painting of the eyes, a stage known as **Netronmilana** (literally meaning “opening of the eyes”). This ritual marks the transition of the murti from a mere clay form to a **living embodiment of divinity**. Artisans often perform this stage in silence or after a brief chant, as it is believed that at this moment, the deity’s spirit enters the murti. The atmosphere during this ritual is deeply devotional; the artisan’s brush, dipped in color, becomes an instrument of spiritual awakening.

Once the eyes are painted, the murti is treated with utmost respect. It is never left on the ground, and during transportation or installation, prayers accompany the journey. The artisans believe that the murtis carries **sacred energy (prana)**, and hence, its creation and handling must be done with **ritual purity, devotion, and humility**.

Through these age-old customs, murti making in Alwar transcends material creation; it becomes a **form of worship**, where the artist and the divine merge in a moment of spiritual artistry.

Cultural Significance

The murti-making tradition of Alwar holds immense **cultural and social significance** within the region’s heritage. It serves as a vibrant bridge between **folk art and temple tradition**, connecting sacred rituals to everyday life.

The murtis crafted by Alwar’s artisans are used widely across different settings:

- **In local temples and shrines**, where they become central to daily worship and community rituals.
- **In-home altars during festivals**, particularly during **Janmashtami, Diwali, Shivratri, and Navratri**, when families install clay murtis for prayer and celebration.

- **In religious fairs and processions**, where large, colorfully painted murtis of Krishna, Shiva, and local deities are paraded with music, dance, and devotional singing.

Beyond their spiritual importance, these murtis play a key role in sustaining local livelihoods. Murti making supports a network of **seasonal artisans**, painters, decorators, and helpers, many of whom belong to rural households. Women often participate actively in the painting, polishing, and embellishment of murtis adding their creativity to the process while earning supplementary income for their families.

The craft also strengthens **community bonds**, as the preparation of murtis for festivals becomes a shared activity, involving artisans, devotees, and local temple committees. In this way, murti making in Alwar continues to serve not only as an artistic expression but also as a **social and cultural thread**, weaving together faith, livelihood, and tradition.

What Makes Alwar Murti Making Unique

The murti-making tradition of Alwar stands out for its **distinctive character, aesthetic expression, and cultural depth**, setting it apart from other regions of Rajasthan and India.

Blend of Folk and Classical Styles

Alwar's murtis beautifully merge the **refined detailing of classical Rajasthani sculpture** with the **expressive warmth of folk art**. While the forms maintain proportional accuracy and composure, they also carry a softness and emotional appeal that reflect everyday devotion. This duality — of technical finesse and human warmth — makes Alwar's murtis particularly endearing.

Braj Cultural Influence

Situated close to the **Braj region (Mathura–Vrindavan)**, Alwar naturally absorbs the devotional and artistic spirit of Krishna's land. The **Krishna–Radha iconography** here is infused with lyrical grace — their postures playful yet serene, their expressions full of affection and joy. Scenes from Krishna's *leelas* (divine play) are common, reflecting the deep spiritual and cultural connection between Alwar and the Braj Bhakti traditions.

Local Material Use

The use of **reddish, fine-textured clay** from Alwar's natural ponds and riverbeds lends a distinct earthy tone to the murtis. Unlike the polished white marble of Jaipur or the lustrous black marble of Nathdwara, Alwar's clay murtis have a **warm, organic glow** that enhances their folk charm and authenticity. The local materials also ensure sustainability and accessibility for artisans across villages.

Vibrant Color Palette

The murtis are adorned in **bright, festive colors** cobalt blues, vermilion reds, emerald greens, and golden yellows reminiscent of local folk paintings and temple murals. The vibrancy of the palette reflects the **joyous devotional culture** of Rajasthan, turning every murti into a celebration of color, life, and spirituality.

Sustainability and Eco-friendliness

Many Alwar artisans continue to follow **eco-conscious practices**, using locally available natural materials and non-toxic pigments. Clay murtis dissolve harmlessly in water during immersion rituals, symbolizing the cycle of life and renewal of the divine returning to the earth. This sustainable approach not only preserves tradition but also aligns with modern environmental values, making the craft both ancient and relevant today.

In essence, Alwar's murti making tradition embodies a unique harmony between **devotion and artistry, nature and culture, faith and livelihood**. Each murti stands as a living testimony to the region's enduring heritage where hands guided by devotion shape the divine out of earth, keeping centuries of spiritual artistry alive.