

THE DELICATE ART OF ENAMELLING

(Alternate title: When a Sculptor turns Enameller)

*Enamel: An [opaque](#) or [semi-transparent glossy](#) substance that is a type of glass, applied by [vitrification](#) to [metallic](#) or other hard surfaces for [ornament](#) or as [protective coating](#): Late Middle English (originally as a verb; formerly also as *inamel*): from [Anglo-Norman French](#) *enamailler*, from *en-* 'in, on' + *amaill'* 'enamel', ultimately of [Germanic](#) origin.*

___ Oxford English Dictionary

Balan Nambiar's preoccupation with fecund symbols of growth like leaves, darbha grass, paddy stalk, lotus, solar objects and such, leap out of their form to inhabit that no-man's land between nature and culture, that ambiguous zone where technology, language, magic and the social imagination overlap and interpenetrate....

___ Sadanand Menon

I have known Balan Nambiar for a long time now: known him as a remarkable sculptor whose monumental works in stainless steel adorn the city of Bangalore in numbers— glistening objects, some of them more than six meters in height - ; as a photographer of great distinction who has been documenting for years the wonderful ritual art forms of his native Kerala – Teyyam, Bhagavati Pattu, Kalaripayattu, among them - ; as a painter always in search of something: above all as some restless soul, an elemental force. This time, however, when we met – close to a month back – in Hyderabad where both of us had gone to assess the working of the regional branch of Delhi's Centre for Cultural Resources and Training, I saw a different aspect of him. Or, possibly, I saw it because we talked at length and with some leisure on our hands.

There was a very striking piece in pure stainless steel – this is his favourite medium, as far as sculpture goes – of which there was a reproduction in one of the many catalogues he had with him. It consisted of a large circular disc that served as its base: from the centre of it, like an axis, rose a tapering rod to which, fanning out in different directions, were attached other circular or semi-circular discs at irregular intervals, all most elegantly fashioned and arranged. “Equi-angular spiral” is how he had titled it. I was greatly drawn to it, its abstract beauty glistening against a velvety black ground making a deep impression. Seeing me concentrating upon the piece, Balan offered an explanation. Somewhere, in my mind, there were Fibonacci numbers when I conceived this piece, he said. This startled me a bit. Personally, I know next to nothing about mathematics even though I had heard, vaguely, of Fibonacci numbers, named after a great thirteenth century Italian mathematician. But apparently Balan knew quite a lot about them, due mostly I imagine to the fact that his Italian wife was a mathematician. These are apparently Nature's numbering system, to put it simply, he said, for they “appear everywhere in Nature”. As I learnt later, they are there “from

the leaf arrangements in plants, to the pattern of the florets of a flower, the bracts of a pinecone, or the scales of a pineapple”. Each term in “these numbers is defined as the sum of its two predecessors” – thus, 0,1,1,2,3,5,8,13 and so on endlessly – and related as they are somewhere to the Golden Ratio in art, they seem to be applicable to the growth of every living thing. There was food for thought here. In any case, I was fascinated by all this. “I often wonder what I would have liked to be if not an artist: a mathematician perhaps?” Balan said.

Slowly, our conversation veered towards enamelling, the art on which Balan had been leaning lately: ‘jewellery enamel in art’ to be more precise. This again interested me, for I had seen not long back a short but utterly fascinating film on the craft – *minakari*, in common parlance – as practised by the jewellers of Jaipur. But, here again, I was completely out of my depth, for the technical aspects of it I was completely unfamiliar with. That the art is ancient, I knew; I also knew that enamel is not paint but a thin coat of glass which, when applied to metals like gold or silver at very high temperatures, melts and fuses with the metal. But of the extraordinary sophistication of techniques in the enamelling world I knew nothing. Terms like *cloisonné*, *champlevé*, *plique-a-jour*, *grisaille*, apparently so common in the trade, meant nothing to me. *Cloisonné*, so favoured in China, I was to learn for example, is ‘the technique of creating designs on metal vessels with coloured-glass paste placed within enclosures made of copper or bronze wires, which have been bent or hammered into the desired pattern’. Again, *champlevé* consists of ‘cutting away troughs or cells in a metal plate and filling the depressions with pulverized vitreous enamel’. All this is a bit heavy for me, but I was certainly intrigued by the beauty of the objects, and the intensity of colours, produced using these different techniques.

Balan knows a great deal about it, and spoke of various things: how enamel colour is essentially made up of silicon sand with other elements added to it; of there being mainly four types of enamel colours – opaque, translucent, opalescent and transparent –; of how important ‘neatness’ is as a factor in the technique used, almost a pre-condition for the perfect technique of enamel art. And so on. Aware of all this, but with typical restlessness, he is going on to explore further possibilities in the art, for ‘hundreds of shades of enamel colours are now available’, and how things are changing fast because the old ovens that used organic fuel are being replaced by thermostat controlled electric ovens. A glow seemed to come into Balan’s eyes as he kept talking about all that can be done within the expanding range of this art. Abstraction he has never abandoned, but pushing the boundaries of this art is what drives him.

I continue to remain nearly as ignorant as before about an understanding of techniques, but I am dazzled by the work he and other enamellists are producing today. As the poet said: *rang ka umadaa hua sailaab hai har soo yahan*. Any direction you turn to, you can find, if you are so inclined, a flood of colour, a virtual inundation ...

B. N. Goswami