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MANGALORE, March 16, 2014

Bringing church art to life

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Ashwath Rasquinha explaining his work at the Simon Art Company near Capitanio in Mangalore on Wednesday.—
Photo: R. Eswarraj

Whether it is in Nairobi or North America or the New Mangalore Port Trust, the 82-year-old Simon Art Company has left an indelible mark of the city with their intricate sculptures of politicians and saints.

Even as one enters the low-profile complex, situated on Simon Lane near Pumpwell, nearly 300 terracotta statues – with their sage-like features tinged with shades of algae – gives a glimpse of the history behind the factory.

“In the 1930s and 40s, there were no catalogues. Instead, these sample pieces were created to show the buyer what kind of sculpture they could expect,” explained Ashwath Rasquinha, the third generation of his family to head the company.

He said the company, formerly called Simon and Co., remains the only outlet in the district that manufactures customised statues for churches.

The company specialises in church art, but every once in a while, their expertise seeps out into the public space: Freedom fighter and politician U. Srinivas Mallya was crafted out of the factory and erected at the NMPT gate and near Kadri park, while the Mahatma Gandhi statue in Aloyseum – the museum at St. Aloysius College – was sculpted by the founder himself.

In June 2012, a 9ft-tall statue of Mother Mary found its way to the Shrine of Our Lady of

Consolata in Nairobi. “Because the clergy from Mangalore around the world, we get numerous orders from abroad,” said Mr. Rasquinha.

Generations of art

Simon Sylvester Rasquinha, a musician, theatre personality and a self-taught artist, started making terracotta sculptures for churches in the district in 1932. Since then, the company has grown in



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prestige, with the founder even receiving knighthood from the Pope, said Mr. Ashwath Rasquinha, who inherited the company from his father, Arthur Rasquinha.

In the three generations of the family at the helm of the company, he is the only one with a formal degree in art.

Over the years, terracotta has nearly been phased out, replaced with the sturdier fibre glass, cement and Plaster of Paris. However, the techniques behind making each statue remain the same. The mould is, said Mr. Rasquinha, after all made out of clay.

At the workshop, workers spend hours to carve out the hand, or the elaborate folds of vestments and clerical attire, and to effect a polish that brings out a saintly glow to the statues.

Advance orders

Though the demand has remained the same over the years, clients have to order nearly a year in advance, he said.

“During my grandfather’s time, there were at least 40 people working. Now, though the demand is there, we have about 15 workers. Because of the lack of labour, a 10-foot statue may take at least two months for completion,” he said.

In the hustle and activity of the Simon Art complex, the pottery wheel of the long-running workshop of 70-year-old Merlin Rasquinha – the daughter-in-law of founder Simon Rasquinha – has stopped.

Unfinished masks and jewellery bear the trademark of her unique terracotta tribal motifs and lush finishes, which have travelled to over 60 exhibition across the country. “I’m too old to slave over the kiln, and there are no skilled workers to continue. The younger generation would rather work in an air-conditioned office than make art,” said Ms. Rasquinha.

After having been married to the Rasquinha family, Ms. Merlin used her training in art to start the workshop. For nearly 20 years, the workshop churned nearly four pairs of masks a day. On her inspiration for her unique styles, she says: “Since I got to exhibit works in a lot of states, I learnt their unique cultures and art. I inculcated bits of this and that in my work.”

Over the years, she says she trained – even received sponsorship from the Central government – numerous girls, children of beedi workers, among others in simple pottery, and to manufacture beads and other accessories for the workshops.



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