

SEMESTER IV
SEC – B(2)
Module I

Protohistoric art : Harappan arts and crafts

Pottery : The typical Harappan pottery is a fine, sturdy, wheel-made ware with a bright red slip, decorated with painted black designs. Polychrome painting is rare. The decorative patterns range from simple horizontal lines to geometric patterns and pictorial motifs. Some of the designs such as fish scales, pepal leaves, and intersecting circles have their roots in the early Harappan phase. Human figures are rare and crude.

Stone work : More visible at all Harappan sites were the mass-produced chert blades made by the crested guided ridge technique. The Harappan civilization is marked by the first stone sculpture in the subcontinent. The stone bust (17.78cm) of a male figure found at Mohenjodaro, which has been labeled the 'priest-king'. Two fine stone torsos of a male figure (about 10cm high) were found at Harappa, a seated stone ibex or ram at Mohenjodaro and a stone lizard at Dholavira. The only large piece of sculpture is that of a broken, seated male figure from Dholavira.

Terracotta : More numerous than stone sculptures are terracotta figurines of females (goddesses) and beasts of various types. The modeling of the goddess images shows a continuity from the early Harappan tradition, but now with a greater degree of ornamentation. There are figurines of animals such as bulls, buffaloes, monkeys and dogs. There are toy carts with solid wheels. There are male figures also. The Harappan crafts-persons also made terracotta bangles. Terracotta masks have been found at Mohenjodaro and Harappa.

Copper and Bronze : Apart from making artefacts out of pure copper, Harappan crafts persons alloyed copper with arsenic, tin or nickel. Copper and bronze artefacts included vessels, spears, knives, short swords, arrowheads, axes, fishhooks, needles, mirrors, rings and bangles. The tradition of metal sculpting (in bronze) also began during Harappan times. This is represented by the famous 'dancing girl' figure found at Mohenjodaro.

Ornaments and other miscellaneous objects: Beautifully worked gold and silver ornaments including necklaces, bracelets, brooches, pendants and earrings have been found at Harappan sites. Terracotta bangles are found. Another distinctive Harappan craft was the making of hard, high-fired bangles known as stone ware bangles. Faience is a paste made out of crushed quartz and coloured with various minerals. The Harappans made faience bangles, rings, pendants, miniature vessels and figurines. Bangles were often made of conch shells. Beads, bracelets, and decorative inlay work show the existence of crafts-persons skilled in shell work. Beads, awls, pins made of bones are found. There are a few examples of ivory carvings in the form of combs, carved cylinders, small sticks, pins, gamesmen and a carved plaque.

Bead making was a craft known in earlier cultures, but in the Harappan civilization new materials, styles and techniques came into vogue. A new type of cylindrical stone drill was devised and used to perforate beads of semiprecious stones. The Harappan craftspeople made beads out of steatite, agate, carnelian, lapis lazuli, shell, terracotta, gold, silver and copper. The Harappan long barrel cylinder beads made out of carnelian were so beautiful and valued that they found their way into royal burials in Mesopotamia. Tiny micro-beads were made of steatite paste and hardened by heating. Beads were also made of faience.

Textile manufacture : Harappans made cotton and woolen textiles

Seals : Seal making was an important Harappan craft. Most of the seals are square or rectangular. A few cylindrical and round seals have also been found . Some have a perforated boss at the back for handling and suspension. Most of the seals are made of steatite, but there are a few silver, faience, calcite ones as well. The carvings is in intaglio – i.e., it is a sunken engraving, with the impression appearing in relief. Motifs include the elephant, tiger, antelope, crocodile, hare, humped bull, buffalo, rhinoceros, and the one horned mythical animal referred as unicorn. There are also composite animals, human figures and plants. Most of the seals have a short inscription.

The Harappan arts and crafts display an impressive level of standardization. Kenoyer suggested that state control may have been responsible for the high level of standardization in crafts that were considered to have a value in maintaining the socio-economic or ritual order and which used non-local raw materials and highly complex technologies. Leaving aside pottery and bricks, crafts using local materials and simple technologies tend to show greater variations.

Dr. Sudarsana Choudhury
Associate Professor of History