I discovered this enticing, unusual figurine of a young woman absorbed in reading a book in the souvenir section of New Delhi’s Cottage Industries Emporium – a sprawling, ethnically designed store created as an outlet for India’s prolific ‘craft’ production. While looked upon with condescension by the local intelligentsia, the emporium is a favorite haunt of foreign visitors who enjoy leisurely browsing through its selection of hand-crafted Indian objects, available at affordable prices and of a reliable quality, all conveniently under one roof. The young woman caught my attention, as she languished among a profusion of similar figurines all made of a copper-based alloy and representing familiar themes – animals, trees, deities, men playing music or wielding a plough.
Female subjects, when portrayed, were primarily mothers, women on the fields, or many-armed goddesses. This strikingly contemporary image of self-contained femininity brought a sudden reminder of modern European oil paintings: absorptive portraits of chaste young women – for instance Henry Fantin-Latour’s *Liseuse* – ensconced in bourgeois interiors, rendered in restrained colors and delicate brushwork.

While my ‘reading figurine’ shared with these works from a distant continent the particular absorption that is oblivious to the presence of an observer, the firm, sensual contours of her reclining body, animated by a unique subjectivity, and yet utterly at ease, eschew the delicacy of the painted medium. Once in my possession, she remains invariably present in my working space – at home, in the office, or during travels.
I am not the only one fascinated by this particular genre of objects. They are ubiquitously present in museum shops, souvenir stalls in Indian cities, and the more posh state emporia catering to up-market buyers. The artistic genre is known as *Dhokra*, which stands for a non-ferrous metal – mainly alloys of copper and bronze – casting using a ‘lost-wax’ technique. This mode of creating an object involves first making a basic clay model of the object and covering it with wax on which the finer details are etched – often a thread is used to delineate the fine lines. Thereafter, another clay layer is added, which acts as a mould into which hot metal is poured. Before that however, the clay is baked, causing the wax to melt – it is drained via the ducts created in the clay. Liquid metal poured in hardens between the core and the inner surface of the mould, and takes the same shape as the wax. The outer layer of clay is then chipped off, and the metal icon is polished and finished as desired. This mode of metal casting in India is some 4000 years old, remounting to Mohenjo-Daro in the Indus Valley.

*Dhokra* is referred to as ‘tribal’ or ‘folk’ art. While it is practised in many regions of the Indian subcontinent, the particular style of the figurines being discussed here is characteristic of the region of Bastar in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh, flanked by the provinces of Orissa to the east and Maharashtra on the West. About 70% of the region’s population is classified in the nation’s censuses as ‘tribal’, their cultural productions carry the epithet ‘primitive’ – and their artefacts, collected over the centuries have made their way into ethnographic museums across the world. The staple themes of this art are local deities, flora, fauna, music instruments, though the repertoire has expanded to meet the taste of urban buyers looking for unspoilt simplicity as a sign of escape from urban modernity. Today, the artists of Bastar produce for a market of clients – furnishers, interior decorators, members of the middle class for whom ‘original’ works of art from the gallery circuit are beyond reach, and of course, collectors of souvenirs and bric-a-brac. Commodification ensuing from expanding production for the market has brought forth a narrative of loss and nostalgia among those who study this material production from a museological or connoisseurial perspective. *Dhokra* as commodity is read as a degeneration of an ancient art form into a commercial article, signalling a loss of authenticity that ensues when object-making is driven by the need to provide the economic mainstay of the makers.

The so-called tribal communities inhabiting the Bastar region carry different community names – Gond, Doria, Dhuva – and the Ghadwas, who make *Dhokra* objects together with other artisanal products, mainly in metal. These groups are also the bearer of different labels – modes of classification that go back to colonial censuses. The term ‘tribe’ is the most frequent designation of groups who had mainly inhabited non-urban spaces – forests, villages, the hills – and have a long history of marginalization and impoverishment. The appropriation of forests and rivers as key sites of resources for modern industry – minerals, coal, hydraulic energy – under co-
lonial rule, has continued into independent India with all its modernization programmes. Faced with the dis-
possessions of lands or the drowning of entire villages following the construction of large dams, sections of
the population of these communities have – since the early twentieth century – migrated to urban areas, while
drawn into the modern economy as workers in mines, factories, or wage labourers in various governmental
schemes. Others have – through the intervention of the state and middle-men – taken to the production of what
is termed ‘handicraft’.

The notion of primitivism, both in its cultural-evolutio-
nist iteration as well as its artistic variant had migrated – together with colonial modernity – to other sites of
the globe. Colonial officials stamped the so-called tribal
groups as primitive, conjuring up either a savage force
that had to be domesticated or, as the obverse of same
coin, a romantic image of people lacking in forms of mo-
dern rationality, but possessing an instinctive wisdom and imagination. Stashed away into a different historical
space as well as a different temporality, these groups
continued to be the object of a politics of cultural nostal-
gia in postcolonial India. Colonial as well as postcolonial
elites avidly collected cultural products of communities
considered primitive, valorizing their artefacts as exam-
ple of exceptional artisanal skills and reservoirs of tra-
ditional knowledge systems whose survival they sought
to ensure. Even activists supporting the rights of ‘tribal’
communities have frequently sought to naturalise the
latter’s connections to the environment by attributing to
them a special ecological wisdom due to an innate, or-
ganic link to nature, together with an economy based on
reciprocity and subsistence rather than competition and
accumulation. Dhokra, for instance, is invariably praised
on innumerable websites as an ‘eco-friendly craft’ that
uses scrap metal as its basic material. Such ascriptions
that have extended over a longue durée, have produced
contradictions and slippages, denying to these groups
the capacity for autonomous and willed negotiations
with the forces of change – including urbanisation, mo-
dern education, and the relationship to markets, all of
which brought with them transformations in familial
structures as well as those of cultural production.

State encouragement and subsidizing of ‘craft produc-
tion’ has been instrumental in revitalizing local traditi-
ons and facilitating through middle-men the access to
markets in metropolitan cities and beyond. At the same
time, the multiple replication of the object – a precon-
dition of commodity production – meant an evacuation
of its artistic value in the eyes of the art collector or the
museum. While ethnographic or craft museums acquired
Dhokra figures during the nineteenth and early twentieth
centuries, this acquisition stopped at a later period. Or
else objects languished within the museum crypts, were
sometimes even deaccessioned, as they were considered
to be lacking in the values of authenticity and uniqueness. Till today the artists producing these intricate, ex-
quisite objects remain unnamed.
My young woman absorbed in her book appeared in different variations over a few years, during which I built up a small collection (fig. 1–4) – and then disappeared forever. I do wonder about her maker, whose bold imagination managed to defy both nostalgic primitivist desires as well as official stances of state patronage in an act that reaches towards the new and the living. This small, one-time gesture deconstructs the infamous opposition positing the timeless, pre-modern and static against the modern and dynamic.

Empfohlene Zitierweise/Suggested citation