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The role of women in craft and artistic traditions in ancient Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This study investigates the historical contributions of women artisans to the artistic and craftsmanship traditions of ancient Sri Lanka, spanning from the Protohistoric era to the 15th century AD. Despite their significant roles in pottery, weaving, and metalwork, women's contributions have often been marginalized in historical accounts. By employing a multidisciplinary approach, this research synthesizes archaeological findings, ancient texts, and artistic representations to reveal the socio-economic functions of female artisans. It highlights the importance of their work in sustaining families and preserving cultural identity amidst societal changes. The analysis focuses on prominent archaeological sites such as Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, where evidence of women's craftsmanship is found in artifacts tied to both practical and ceremonial contexts. Ultimately, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of women's roles in Sri Lanka's cultural heritage, emphasizing the necessity of inclusion and recognition for a balanced historical narrative that celebrates their invaluable contributions to society.

Keywords: Artistic Traditions, Women, Craft, Sri Lanka

Introduction

The artistic and craftsmanship traditions of ancient Sri Lanka reflect a richly complex identity that has its roots back in the Protohistoric era to be spread over a period of fifteen hundred years up to the 15th century AD. Interaction through centuries in South Asian and Southeast Asian neighboring regions and powerful influences from distant cultures have added a bonus to these traditions. But critical scrutiny reveals a gross omission in most histories about the part played by women in the development of such art and craft traditions. This study hopes to shed light on basic contributions from women artisans whose work has often been marginalized or substituted within discourse on Sri Lankan art and craftsmanship.

The history of Sri Lankan craft and art, therefore, is painted in a rich tapestry of influences and methodologies that emerged over centuries. The crafts run from pottery and weaving to the most intricate metalwork, which were not simple utilitarian tools but became very intertwined with the spiritual and cultural fabrics of society. From being mere doers of menial tasks, these particular crafts, like traditional pottery, were both practical and ceremonial, symbolizing and relating to deeper meanings within the collective psyche. Well, as the prosperity of ancient civilizations rose and fell, the crafts made within them changed according to the demand of society and religious needs. Of course, the significance of these traditions cannot be overlooked; they provided for mundane life as well as fulfilled the kind of spiritual lives that were mainstream in the contemporary era.

In all these various ways, female artisans form a vital part of the Sri Lankan cultural legacy. Various crafts emerged through female artisans; among them, there are pottery, weaving, and metal work. These women not only sustained their families with the enterprises but also kept cultures moving with times while giving them their identities. More ironically, the role for the females is hardly provided in historical records. Most of the craftsmanship were offered through the male artisans. This research attempts to balance out these historical oversights, focusing on archaeological findings, ancient texts, and artistic representations that highlight the nurturing and sustaining roles that women played within their artistic communities.

The research applies an overall multidisciplinary approach for the discovery of the roles of women artisans. By synthesizing archaeological evidence and historical texts, the study reveals how ancient Sri Lankan society valued the crafts and the artisans behind them. The more archaeologically important sites like Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa allow better exploration into the production and use of craft items, not just technical skills but also the cultural significance attached to those artifacts in ancient rituals and everyday life. The study approaches artifacts reflecting the technique of female craftsmanship, presenting powerful evidence of women's agency and contributions to the development of the society.

Though the recording of such significant roles, other than giving a voice to contemporary stories, enact dominant gender roles in opposition to strict norms; it concretizes empowerment that such acts of artistry gave women in traditional societies. If their artefact receives such recognition, one would be left with a more nuanced understanding of Sri Lankan history and be forced to overlook dominating cultural practices that made complexity of such a high degree in the gender dynamic. It is within this context that this research will delve into the core facets of highlighting the importance of the value of female artisanship, fostering depth in both the understanding of women's roles in historical craftsmanship and recognition for every individual associated with the cultural heritage.

The importance of inclusion, especially in making history inclusive, reminds everyone that an alternative, more balanced view of the past actually enriches our perception of the previous experience. It hopes, by unveiling the important role the women played, to motivate the future generations to engage, appreciate, and preserve this invaluable aspect of Sri Lankan cultural legacy. Endeavours like these fill each one of them with a sense of pride for the artistic heritage shared by all of us, which enables contemporary artisans, male, or female alike, to carry on this great tradition with respect and creativity.

Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this research are to explore the historical records, inscriptions, and archaeological evidence narrating dramatic women's engagement in the artistic and craft traditions of ancient Sri Lanka. This study is planned to examine the crafts, particularly pottery, weaving, and metalworking, systematically as these were the disciplines where women engaged efficiently and their level of experience and sophisticated skills entailed with each

discipline were assessed. Thirdly, it tries critically to examine the socio-economic functions of female artisans in order to clarify their importance towards the larger ancient Sri Lankan society. It examines the social mechanisms of inheritance of artistic and craft knowledge through family and community institutions by pointing out the importance of women in preserving and passing them down from one generation to another. All these goals attempt to fill gaps that are critical in the existing knowledge about the artisanship of women in ancient Sri Lanka while drawing attention to the importance of their contributions in Sri Lanka's rich cultural heritage and economic history.

Methodology

This study takes a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating historical analysis, archaeological research, and art history. It utilizes a diverse array of primary sources, such as ancient texts, inscriptions, and visual art, with a particular emphasis on uncovering references to female artisans and their contributions across various crafts. Inscriptions and ancient manuscripts that often describe the activities of workshops, guilds, or individual artists will be scrutinized for mentions of women.

Alongside textual analysis, the research will involve fieldwork at significant archaeological sites recognized for craft production, including Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. These locations offer crucial physical evidence of women's participation in craftsmanship through artifacts like pottery, metal tools, and textiles. Particular focus will be placed on craft workshops and production centers where the contributions of women may be evident in the archaeological findings.

By combining historical and archaeological data, this study aims to provide a thorough analysis of the socio-economic and cultural roles of female artisans in ancient Sri Lanka. Additionally, by correlating these insights with modern studies on gender roles in ancient societies, the research will enhance broader discussions regarding gender and craftsmanship in the premodern world.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection for this study will involve extensive review of both published and unpublished literature, including scholarly articles, archaeological reports, and museum catalogs. Archival research will be conducted to gather references to women artisans from ancient texts, inscriptions, and records from religious institutions, where women's contributions to craft production are sometimes recorded.

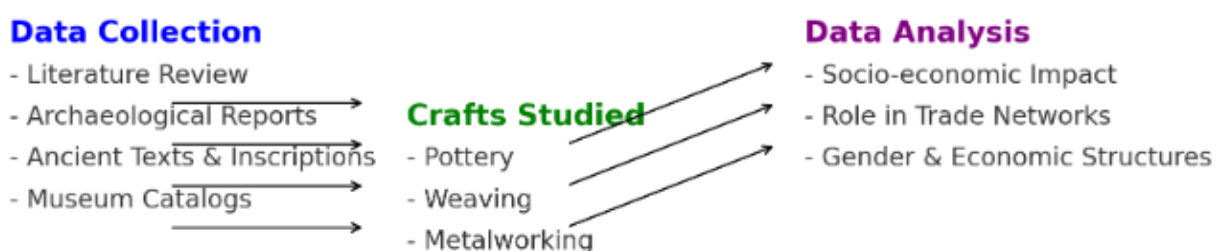


Fig 1: Data collection and analysis for female artisans in ancient Sri Lanka

The collected data will be categorized based on the types of crafts in which women engaged, such as pottery, weaving, or metalworking, and their relative importance within ancient Sri Lankan society. For instance, pottery findings from excavation sites will be cross-referenced with epigraphic evidence to trace women's involvement in the production of everyday and sacred objects. Similarly, weaving and textile production will be studied through material culture, iconography, and trade records, highlighting women's craftsmanship.

A qualitative analysis will be conducted to assess the socio-economic implications of women's roles in craftsmanship. This analysis will consider factors such as the integration of women's labor into the local economy, their participation in trade networks, and their influence on the preservation of artistic traditions. The analysis will also examine how these contributions impacted broader societal structures, including gender roles and economic status.

Agricultural and Artistic Contributions through History

The historical context of women's labor in Sri Lanka reveals a multifaceted and substantial contribution to the economy, particularly in agriculture, artisanal crafts, and trade. Women were not merely confined to domestic spheres; instead, they played critical roles in various economic sectors. As noted by Munasinghe (2004: p. 84) ^[34], their engagement in labor extended beyond household duties to include vital agricultural practices and other economic activities. Women participated in diverse fields, including agriculture, internal trade, and teaching, indicating their significant role in shaping the economic landscape of ancient Sri Lanka (Munasinghe, 2004: p. 84) ^[34].

In ancient and medieval Sri Lanka, agriculture emerged as the primary economic activity, wherein women's labor was indispensable. Scholarly research highlights that women actively participated alongside men in farming practices, emphasizing their integral role in sustaining agricultural output (Munasinghe, 2004: p. 84) ^[34]. Women's labor commitment in agriculture was influenced by social needs and agro-economic systems, revealing the adaptive nature of their contributions (Munasinghe, 2004: p. 84) ^[34]. Evidence suggests that women engaged in multiple agricultural roles, including paddy and chena cultivation, which were critical for sustaining household economies (Sangaraja, 1954: p. 707; Buddhadatta, 1959b: p. 112) ^[40, 10].

Moreover, women actively participated in preparing for agricultural events, such as the paddy-sowing ceremony, where they were often dressed in traditional attire, showcasing the cultural significance of their labor (Sangaraja, 1954: p. 707) ^[40]. Historical texts further document that women participated equally in festivals related to agriculture, reinforcing their social roles within agricultural communities (Munasinghe, 2004: p. 86) ^[34]. Literary sources indicate that female farmers contributed significantly to the paddy cultivation process, demonstrating their essential involvement in this vital economic activity (Dharmawardana, 1967: p. 11) ^[17]. Notably, women's agricultural contributions were not limited by social class during ceremonial occasions, as women from various social strata participated in diverse agricultural activities, including harvesting and safeguarding crops (Munasinghe, 2004: p. 86; Dharmawardana, 1967: p. 11; Iriyagolla, 1991: p. 93) ^[17, 34, 26].

While agriculture formed a significant aspect of women's labor, this study aims to broaden the scope to encompass the socio-economic roles of female artisans in crafts such as pottery, weaving, and metalworking. Women's involvement in these crafts showcases their mastery of complex techniques and underscores their importance in the ancient economy. The skills women exhibited in these disciplines were not merely practical; they were embedded with cultural significance, reflecting the artistic traditions of their communities. By analyzing their craftsmanship, this research aims to reveal the esteem with which their work was held and its implications for gender roles within the socio-economic framework of ancient Sri Lanka.

A pivotal dimension of this research focuses on the mechanisms by which women transmitted artistic and craft knowledge across generations. The informal educational structures prevalent within families and communities played a crucial role in this knowledge transfer, positioning women as custodians of artistic heritage. By examining these social frameworks, the study aims to highlight the cultural significance of women's roles in preserving and perpetuating craftsmanship and artistic traditions. This knowledge transmission not only reinforced familial bonds but also contributed to the continuity of Sri Lankan heritage, establishing women as key figures in maintaining cultural identity.

This research seeks to address critical gaps in the current understanding of women's artisanship in ancient Sri Lanka. Previous studies have often overlooked the depth and breadth of women's contributions to crafts and their socio-economic implications. By elucidating their roles within the broader context of ancient society, the study endeavors to enrich the narrative of Sri Lankan cultural heritage. Recognizing the multifaceted contributions of women will foster a more comprehensive understanding of their impact on economic realities and traditional practices, challenging existing historical narratives that have traditionally marginalized women's contributions.

In summary, this research underscores the significance of women's contributions across various sectors in ancient Sri Lanka, emphasizing the necessity for a nuanced understanding of their roles within cultural heritage and economic history. By illuminating the artistry and craftsmanship of women, this study aims to enhance appreciation for their influence on Sri Lanka's rich cultural landscape. Furthermore, it advocates for continued exploration into women's historical contributions, highlighting their essential place in shaping the socio-economic and cultural realities of ancient Sri Lankan society.

Women's Roles in the Industrial and Craft Traditions of Ancient Sri Lanka

The historical engagement of women in the industrial sector of ancient Sri Lanka is a subject that warrants deeper exploration, as it reveals significant insights into their socio-economic roles and contributions. Despite the scarcity of evidence from the Raja Rata civilization, records indicate that women actively participated in internal trade and various industries, illustrating their multifaceted roles in shaping the economic landscape of the time.

Women's involvement in internal trade has been documented as substantial, though the evidence from the Raja Rata civilization remains limited. The *Sandēsa* literature emerges

as a crucial source, providing insights into women's engagement in trading activities during the Kotte period. The text specifically mentions female traders who operated with integrity, highlighting the agency and capabilities of women in commercial endeavors. This lack of extensive documentation from earlier periods points to a need for further examination of women's roles in trade and how their contributions may have been integral to the economic fabric of ancient Sri Lanka.

Women significantly contributed labor to various industries, notably the sugarcane industry, with its origins traced back to the Anuradhapura period. The Mahāvamsa references King Mahachuli Mahatissa's disguised involvement in a sugarcane factory, indicating the historical significance of this industry. Additionally, literary sources reveal that women were involved in industries such as pottery, cotton production, and animal husbandry, showcasing their diverse contributions across different sectors (Buddhadatta, 1959b: pp. 131-132) ^[10].

The recognition of women's labor is further exemplified through historical inscriptions acknowledging their work as garland makers, perfumers, and caretakers of stupas. An inscription from the reign of Kalyānavathī highlights female garland makers among others, suggesting that such roles were valued within society (Paranavithana, 1944: No. 5, p. 260) ^[36].

Investigating the valuation of women's labor reveals a complex landscape where certain contributions were recognized and compensated. The Mihintalē pillar inscription of King Mahinda IV documents that women received payments and allowances for their work, indicating an appreciation for their labor (Wickramasinghe, 1912: pp. 84-90) ^[48]. The mention of "Jetamava," identified as an old woman who was granted land for her contributions, suggests her involvement in temple cleaning, although the exact nature of her work remains partially obscured (Wickramasinghe, 1912: p. 87) ^[48].

Hettiarachchi (1988: p. 109) ^[23] further emphasizes that women were not only present in monasteries but were also compensated for their employment, reflecting an absence of significant barriers to women's participation in labor during this era. This is particularly noteworthy in the context of socio-cultural norms that often constrained women's roles in many historical settings.

This study aims to systematically examine the roles of women in specific crafts such as pottery, weaving, and metalworking, traditionally associated with female artisans. By assessing their levels of expertise and the sophistication of their skills, the research will highlight the importance of women in these disciplines. Furthermore, it seeks to critically evaluate the socio-economic functions of female artisans, elucidating their integral roles in sustaining and enriching the cultural fabric of ancient Sri Lankan society.

A critical dimension of this research involves investigating the social mechanisms through which artistic and craft knowledge was inherited and transmitted among women. By examining family and community institutions, the study will underscore the vital role women played in preserving and passing down traditional crafts and artistic skills from generation to generation. This aspect is crucial in understanding how women's contributions not only influenced contemporary practices but also laid the groundwork for future generations.

Engagement in other Artistic Professions

The historical narrative of women's contributions to the labor force in ancient Sri Lanka is rich and multifaceted, as evidenced by the pillar inscriptions of King Mihindu IV. These inscriptions reveal that women actively participated in various professions and activities, affirming the value placed on their labor. During the medieval period, women engaged in industries and social services alongside men, accumulating wealth and contributing to economic advancement. Archaeological sources indicate that women employed in temples, particularly as dancers, received compensation for their roles. Notably, seven women, identified as dancing girls dedicated to the god Kailasha, received a monthly stipend of 23 gold coins, drawn from a deposit set up for their services. As stated in the inscriptions,

"...having placed forehead marks on seven females (dedicating them) as dancing girls of the god, 23 kācu (coins) were deposited as an endowment..." (Paranavithana, 1944: p. 195) ^[36].

This suggests the establishment of a professional class of female attendants, or "devadasis," although it is crucial to recognize that the Sri Lankan concept may have differed from its Indian counterpart. The honor attributed to these female attendants is further supported by their portrayal in the *Sandēshakavya* literature of the Kotte period, which positions this role as an "honourable profession." The economic stability of these dancing girls illustrates that women actively contributed to the socio-economic landscape of ancient Sri Lanka, evidenced by their ownership of movable property, allowing them to manage their wealth independently.

In addition to performing arts, another significant profession for women in ancient Sri Lanka was prostitution, historically regarded as the world's oldest profession. Although it was often seen as disreputable, the profession's existence is noted in various inscriptions. For instance, the Sasseruva inscription references a character named Cūla as the grandson of a prostitute (Paranavithana, 1970: p. 79) ^[38]. The complexities surrounding prostitution in Sri Lanka are further explored by Munasinghe, who notes that while there are numerous references to prostitutes known as *Abisaru* in the *Sandēsa* poems, it remains inconclusive whether prostitution was a prevalent mode of employment for women (Munasinghe, 2004: pp. 110-111) ^[34].

Evidence from Indian history indicates that courtesans held significant societal roles, often providing companionship and entertainment to those who could afford their services. High-class courtesans could command substantial fees, reflecting their social status and cultural importance (Ariyapala, 1956: pp. 306-307) ^[3]. This historical context sheds light on the potential status of women engaged in similar professions in Sri Lanka, despite the local stigma attached to them. Hettiarachchi also underscores the ancient roots of prostitution, albeit acknowledging the lack of substantial evidence concerning its prevalence in Sri Lanka (Hettiarachchi, 1988: pp. 109-110) ^[23].

Furthermore, ancient texts, including *Siyabaslakara* and *Dhampiyā Atuvā Gatapadaya*, refer to various terms for prostitutes, such as *abisārika*, *ganikā*, and *gihiniya* (Jayathilaka, 1933: pp. 131, 187) ^[28]. Notably, the *Kavsilumina* and the *Sandēsa* poems from the thirteenth and

fourteenth centuries provide ample information on prostitution, illustrating its existence and social perceptions. The *Sigiri graffiti* further highlights women's roles in this context, with references to them behaving as *abisaruvan* or prostitutes.

Beyond these professions, women participated actively in agriculture, working in fields and engaging in household labor without formal compensation. Despite this, they often received payment for various other roles, showcasing their economic contributions. While the evidence may not be extensive enough to fully establish the scope of women's roles in a male-dominated society, it is clear that they held an important position and contributed significantly to the economy.

Results and Discussion

This research illuminates the critical yet frequently unrecognized roles that women artisans played in the craftsmanship and artistic traditions of ancient Sri Lanka. Their contributions transcended mere production, encompassing aspects of cultural preservation and economic agency that were vital for the sustenance and evolution of the island's rich heritage. By addressing the historical bias toward male contributions, this study underscores the importance of recognizing women's multifaceted roles in crafting, which were essential for the socio-economic dynamics of ancient Sri Lankan society.

Women in Pottery

The tradition of pottery in ancient Sri Lanka serves as a vital illustration of women's integral roles within both domestic and communal spheres. Archaeological evidence from historical sites such as Anuradhapura indicates that female artisans were not merely auxiliary contributors but rather central figures in the pottery production process (Munasinghe, 2004, p. 45) ^[34]. Their creations, ranging from functional storage vessels to decorative items for religious and ceremonial purposes, reflect a profound understanding of materials and techniques that has persisted for millennia. This expertise not only met the daily needs of the community but also enhanced the island's cultural tapestry, establishing a foundation upon which various cultural identities were built (Hettiarachchi, 1988, p. 98) ^[23]. The continuity of these practices underscores the importance of women's contributions in navigating socio-cultural landscapes and maintaining heritage.

Weaving

In the domain of textiles and weaving, women artisans were revered for their extraordinary skills that produced intricate fabrics essential for both local consumption and international trade networks. Historical records highlight the pivotal contributions made by women weavers during the medieval period, as evidenced by their intricate textiles being sought after beyond Sri Lankan shores (Iriyagolla, 1991, p. 85) ^[26]. Thus, women not only played a substantial role in beautifying society but also enhanced Sri Lanka's position within the broader Indian Ocean trade, fostering economic prosperity that transcended geographic boundaries. This dual capacity for artistry and economic contribution illustrates how female artisans navigated complex trade networks, establishing a legacy that integrated artistic skill with entrepreneurial spirit

(Kiribamune, 1990, pp. 30-35) ^[30].

Metalworking

The craft of metalworking further illustrates the crucial involvement of women in ancient Sri Lanka's artisanal landscape. Archaeological findings in Polonnaruwa reveal that women were actively engaged in crafting both functional tools and ornamental jewelry, reinforcing social hierarchies as their creations became emblematic of status and refinement within society (Siriweera, 1972, p. 15) ^[43]. The artistic expression embodied in metalwork not only reflected the skill and creativity of female artisans but also reiterated the economic implications of their craft, as finely crafted jewelry served as both personal adornment and markers of social identity (Perera, 1959, pp. 12-18) ^[38]. Therefore, understanding women's contributions in metalworking provides insight into the socio-economic structures that defined ancient societies in Sri Lanka.

Economic Agency and Trade Networks

The economic agency exercised by women artisans extended well beyond their individual crafts, as they participated actively in regional and local trade networks. Their products—pottery, textiles, and metalwork—became sought-after commodities pivotal to the vibrant economic activities characteristic of ancient Sri Lanka (Gunawardana, 1979, p. 92) ^[22]. Such participation not only contributed to enhancing the island's economy but also facilitated cultural exchanges with surrounding regions, forging connections that transcended mere trade and enriched cultural interrelations (Siriweera, 2002, p. 71) ^[44]. These dynamics highlight the importance of women's roles as economic agents, influencing not just household economies but also broader market interactions.

Guardians of Cultural Continuity

Women artisans also assumed the role of cultural stewards, preserving traditional knowledge and craftsmanship techniques over generations. Families and communities entrusted women with the transmission of skills essential for maintaining and nurturing their cultural heritage (Jayathilaka, 1933, p. 160) ^[28]. This role as educators and guardians of tradition ensured that artisanal practices, often steeped in historical significance, continued to thrive in contemporary contexts. Thus, recognizing women's efforts in teaching and preserving craftsmanship is critical for understanding the evolution of arts and crafts in Sri Lanka, encompassing both historical narratives and contemporary cultural expressions (Ariyapala, 1956, p. 55) ^[3].

Addressing Historical Bias in Artisanal Contributions

While historical narratives have predominantly highlighted male contributions to craftsmanship, it is imperative to reevaluate these perspectives to acknowledge the holistic contributions made by women. This research advocates for a more inclusive historiography that recognizes the complex interplay of gender roles within ancient Sri Lankan craftsmanship (Wickramasinghe, 1928, p. 45) ^[49]. By illuminating women's extensive involvement, this study challenges existing biases and offers a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic and cultural dynamics that shaped ancient Sri Lankan society.

Conclusion

The narrative surrounding women's contributions to craftsmanship and artistic traditions in ancient Sri Lanka stands as a powerful testament to the profound impact female artisans had on shaping the socio-cultural landscape of the island nation. This research challenges traditional gender norms and enriches our understanding of historical roles often relegated to the margins. By illuminating the contributions of women, it unveils a previously underrepresented facet of Sri Lankan heritage, urging a reconsideration of established historiographical narratives.

Throughout the annals of ancient Sri Lankan history, the mastery exhibited by women in pottery, weaving, metalworking, and other crafts has left an indelible imprint on the island's cultural identity. Their expertise and creativity in producing both functional and decorative artifacts enhanced the daily lives of communities while simultaneously enriching religious and ceremonial practices. For instance, the intricate pottery found in archaeological sites such as Anuradhapura not only fulfilled utilitarian needs but also played a pivotal role in cultural preservation.

Moreover, the economic significance of women artisans is paramount. Their craftsmanship was instrumental in local and regional trade networks, bolstering the island's economic prosperity and establishing Sri Lanka's place within broader commercial frameworks in the Indian Ocean. By producing sought-after goods, women artisans facilitated cultural exchanges that transcended geographic boundaries, thereby contributing to the growth of commercial activities in ancient Sri Lanka.

Acknowledging the invaluable contributions of women in these artistic fields paves the way for a more inclusive historical narrative. Recognizing their talents and agency not only enhances our comprehension of ancient Sri Lankan society but also empowers contemporary generations to appreciate the diverse and pivotal roles women have played throughout history.

In summary, this research project seeks to explore and celebrate the legacy of women artisans in ancient Sri Lanka. By bridging gaps in historical knowledge and illuminating the accomplishments of female artisans, this study aspires to foster a deeper sense of cultural heritage and national pride. As we continue to unearth and embrace the stories of women in craftsmanship and artistic traditions, we cultivate a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic and influential roles they played in shaping both the cultural heritage and economic vitality of the island nation.

Thus, the narrative of women's craftsmanship in ancient Sri Lanka not only underscores their historical importance but also invites a broader conversation about gender roles and contributions in the context of art, culture, and economy. It is through such explorations that we can fully appreciate the rich tapestry of Sri Lanka's past and recognize the crucial role of women as artisans and cultural custodians.

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