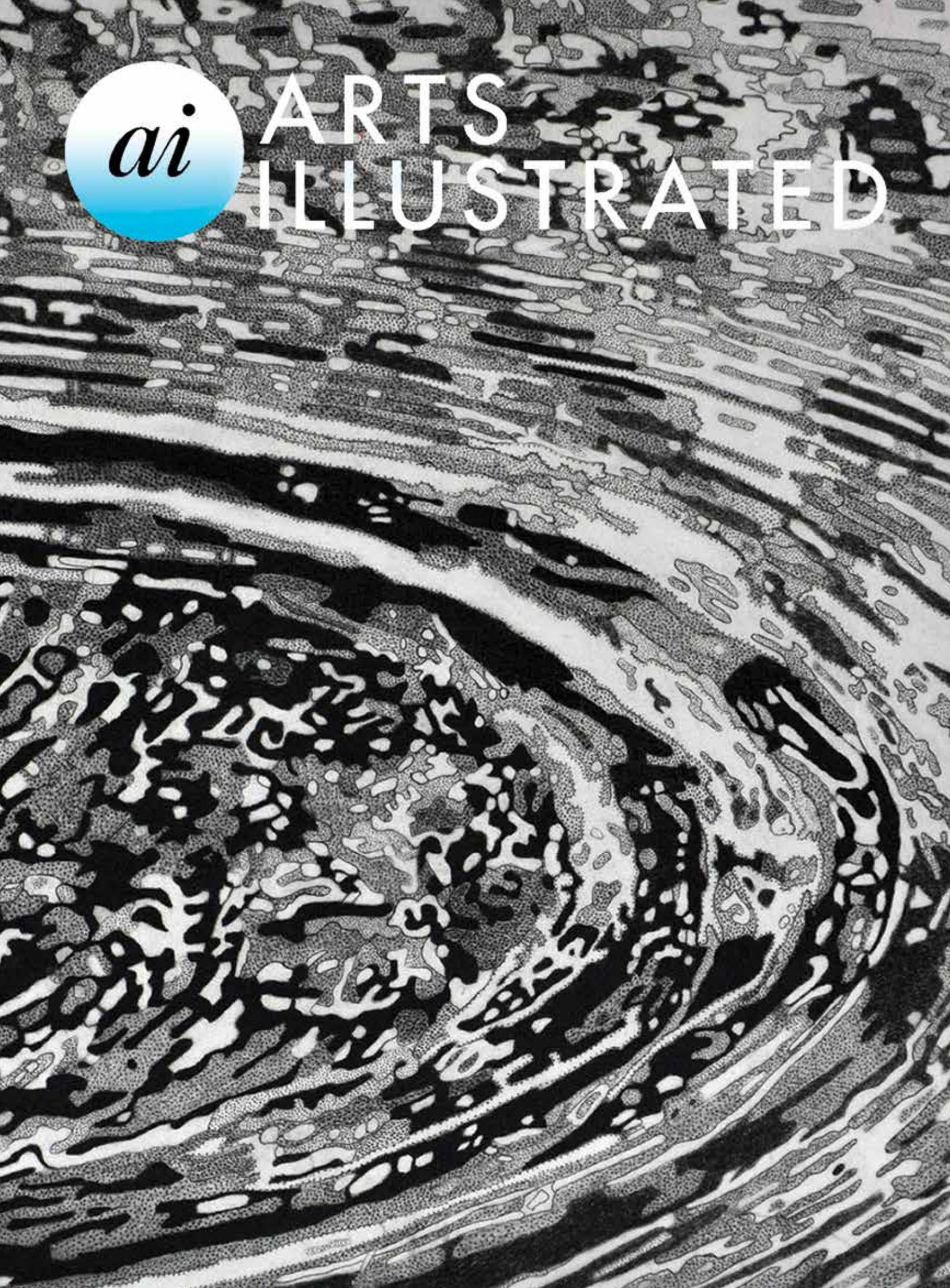




# ARTS ILLUSTRATED





Art & Travel

# Handing it Down

A deep reminiscence and ode to the mysteries of the human hand and its many splendored relationship with the earth

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There is something mesmerising about seeing a person do something he or she has done for a long time. A coconut seller lopping the top off with a simple machete; a binder folding paper; a tailor fashioning a flat piece of fabric into a three-dimensional shape; the hands wafting through the air, fingers lyrically sliding over a piece and creating a shape.

At 19, I went to learn pottery from Sardar Gurcharan Singh, or Daddyji, as he was called by all who knew him. He was 92, frail, and was supported by his little wiry stick and his deep throaty laughter. He would sit bemusedly and watch all of us as we would try and coerce a truant lump of clay on our wheel. He would walk up tentatively, his hands shaking a little and put them gently but firmly on the lopsided lump of clay and centre it effortlessly. These hands had known clay for a lifetime.

Jatin Das, *Portrait of Sardar Gurcharan Singh*, Oil on Canvas, 1994.

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When we lost Sardar Gurcharan Singh in 1995, the fragrance of his beautiful being disappeared without many knowing of it.

Daddyji was the pioneer of studio pottery. About 70 years ago he went with his friend, the legendary painter NS Bendre, to Iran in search of the timeless Persian blue glaze. Not surprisingly his workshop was titled by him 'Delhi Blue Pottery', which gave several institutions across Delhi its hand-glazed blue tiles. I was a teenager and the man Friday when my sister decided to make her first film, a documentary on Daddyji, called *Imprint in Clay*. It took us to the potters' workshop he had created in the little mountain village of Andretta in the Kangra Valley of Himachal Pradesh. He had taught the traditional *kumbars* of the village the joys of glazing on terracotta wares that till then was the preserve of the more up-market stoneware ceramics.

Years later, in a small village in Tripura, I remember the same

joy of creation while working with the bamboo craftspeople and potters, especially that of a wrinkled, wiry, cheroot-smoking lovely old potter as he moulded some clay into a little pot for a bamboo lamp we were making. For a year, the bamboo lamp had a pride of place in my studio, and travelled happily to distant exhibitions and lands.

Memories of creators of clay take me to the sculptors of Kumartuli in Kolkata who slap on clay onto rough bundles of straw that suddenly become



beautifully crafted multitudes of Durga and Saraswati waiting quietly by the roadside. The brown clay later takes on mottled colours and is found hoisted up by large congregations across Kolkata, floating away curiously in the Hooghly or under trees keeping a watchful eye on the land around.

As a child, every summer my family would troop down to my father's ancestral home in Odisha – a curious little town with verdant green landscapes, dotted with ponds of blood-red lotuses and a river that gently divided the place into two. It had an eighty-year-old tiny train with six bogies that stopped every now and then and we killed ourselves laughing seeing the passengers

get off to push the train till it spluttered like an old car into life. Many of my childhood memories were wrapped up in this quaint little town of Baripada. Every now and then we would go on small trips to the Santhal villages nearby. The clay of the potter's wheel was now on bamboo and straw walls. The arched swishes on the mud walls were reminiscent of the dexterous hands that applied clay onto it.

The same memory of hands that worked on the mud walls can be found on the sculpted logs of wood that get fashioned into totemic figurines from Oceania that I saw in the Musee du quai Branly in Paris, or malleable wax that became bronzed figurines in the hands of artist and sculptor Alberto Giacometti, or Ram Kinker Baij. All from that singular mind of honing a skill that with poetic dexterity creates something timeless. As the 12th century Kannada poet, Basavanna said:

*The rich  
Will make temples for Siva  
what shall I, a poor man, do?  
My legs are pillars,  
the body the shrine,  
the head the cupola of gold,  
Listen, O! Lord:  
Standing things shall fall,  
that which moves shall stay.*



Mudwalls of a traditional home, Odisha.

Clay and straw figurines being fashioned by the artists, Kumartuli, Kolkata.

Totemic wooden figurines at the Musee du quai Branly, Paris.

Swiss artist, Giacometti's bronze sculpture at the Louis Vuitton Foundation, Paris.