

## **Handicrafts in Nepal**

The handicraft industry in Nepal

When you think of Nepal perhaps you imagine a country of extremes. Home to the tallest mountain in the world, Everest, the deepest gorge, Kali Gandaki and the highest lake, Tilicho, but Nepal is much more than just amazing views and natural wonders.

Little is known about the very early history of Nepal, except to say that the area was known in early history for the dynasties that ruled it. Early on several families were believed to have successfully lorded over the area from the cowherd dynasty down to the buffalo herder dynasty passing from family to family down the line.

In more recent history there has been a revolution, coup and even civil war. Whatever has happened in Nepal, the spirit of the Nepalese people is strong and their commitment to preserving Nepalese culture has remained constant.

Nepalese handicraft culture, which spans many centuries, has become so closely associated with the art of the people that it is impossible to ignore this mass industry and the skilful artisans who produce amazing , bespoke items for sale around the world.

Tracing its routes back to the fourth century, the handicraft industry has long been associated with practical wares alongside its more artistic endeavours. Hand knitted blankets were the order of the day early on in Nepal's handicraft history, favoured by travellers and neighbouring regions.

The special Nepalese rainproof blanket, which consisted of eight squares sewn together, was made famous hundreds of years ago as roaming travellers from China spoke highly of them in their travelogues.

Decades later the handicraft industry has expanded but hasn't always enjoyed the popularity and success it has today.

Early in the nineteenth century, for example, a rapidly expanding Nepalese economy meant cheap imports flooding into the country, competing for space alongside homemade produce.

Despite the challenges of a fluctuating market, the last 50 years have seen the handicraft industry in Nepal grow and thrive, changing with taste and styles in the market and tapping in to new trends, with the distinct styles of Nepalese artisans.

Alongside a desire to preserve Nepalese culture is another to help the economy thrive and grow and create a working handicraft industry.

### **Distinctly Nepalese**

If western culture can be characterised by modern mass production, then Nepalese industry is the exact opposite. The culture of handicraft in this part of the world can trace itself back to the Stone Age, while the practice grew in popularity at the beginning of the fifth century AD.

Like other parts of the region, Nepalese people were divided into categories by the work they carried out. Priests, or Brahmins, were one such category while warriors, skilled and unskilled workers formed still further more. Handicrafts made at the temple were considered to be of high value and the prevalence of religious statues still pays a major part of the culture today.

Like so much of what is good in Nepal, most handicraft artisans can trace their craft back through hundreds of years of family tradition. With skills passed down from father to son and from mother to daughter, when you buy a Nepalese souvenir you are buying a piece of family history.

While crafting techniques and technology may have changed a little, nothing has changed in terms of the care and quality poured into each piece by its maker.

Each item of Nepalese handicraft, from ceramic to metal work and fabric making represents something of the ethnic background of its creator, coming together to form an industry which sums up the heart of the Nepalese people.

### **Nepal exported and online**

Back when travelling to the region was the only way to purchase something as unique and daring as a piece of Nepalese handicraft, a souvenir was a rare commodity for any home.

Recognising a gap in the market, Nepalese handicrafts are now available across the world simply by browsing online. Visiting sites such as [www.kathmanduhandicrafts.com](http://www.kathmanduhandicrafts.com) has given Nepali artists much wider access to a world wide market, selling work and bringing more money into the Nepali economy.

And where there's online buying and selling, there's also wholesale export driving prices down and bringing Nepalese art to the world.

Nepalese art and handicraft has become big business, bringing much needed commerce into the country. Great news for the people and for us, who have long admired Nepalese arts and crafts from afar.

### **Trained up**

With the market for Nepalese handicrafts growing so rapidly, there is a need among the community to train up the younger generation to carry on the traditions and perhaps a need for the younger generations to train their parents in the art of business strategy!

Several handicraft training schools have opened up in the region, committed to keeping the Nepalese traditions alive and encouraging young people to take the industry forward, making it a sustainable and robust livelihood for generations to come.

These training schools also give incentives for artisans to keep their skills in Nepal, boosting not only the economy but local population.

Artisans are encouraged to explore both traditional and modern techniques, bringing the old and the modern together for a sustainable future.

### **Worldwide popularity**

As the industry grows, more and more countries recognise the benefits both artistically and commercially of having Nepalese handicrafts exported to them.

Early into the 21<sup>st</sup> century the pashmina industry accounted for around 82% of exports leaving Nepal. Divided into textile and non-textile categories, Nepalese handicrafts find homes all over the world, leaving Nepal for destinations such as the United States, Europe and parts of Asia Pacific.

As popular as material and clothing exports have become, artisans have seen a real rise in demand for metal craft and woodwork with people amazed at the attention to detail and skill of the creative artists. Silver jewellery with its unique style and fine detail has found a home in European homes while finely worked wooden pictures adorn the walls in homes across America and Asia.

### **Handicrafts by category**

As mentioned earlier in the article, handicrafts in this beautiful part of the world can be divided up into textile and non-textile, with stunning pashminas and hand-woven blankets and clothes forming the majority of the textile-based arts.

Pashminas, of course, is better known as cashmere and drawn from the fur of the Nepalese mountain goat, known as a chyangra. Of course for the people of Nepal, the wool was the practical answer for lightweight warmth but for so many fans of pashminas, it has now become a go-to autumnal fashion item perfect for accessorising, adding warmth and glamour to any outfit. The pashmina is soft on the skin and feels delightfully cool but it has a durability born of the mountains of Nepal, making it an extremely diverse and versatile fabric. It's this versatility that has made it so popular across the world, particularly in America and in Europe. But watch out! Thanks to its popularity pashminas now come in all manner of materials including sheep wool and even man-made fabrics such as Nylon. Don't be fooled and certainly don't pay more for an inferior product. Choose a reputable store to buy your hand crafted pashmina, woven by a proud group of artisans who would simply balk at these fake wannabes.

Beside pashminas the list of other craft and clothing is almost endless and a simple scroll down a list of hand crafted items, will show the following headings: metalwork, here you will find stunning singing bowls, statues, prayer wheels and musical instruments. For those unfamiliar with some of these terms, singing bowls are a beautiful mixture of musical instrument and large goblet. These hand crafted bowls can produce a musical note when struck gently or by running a mallet around the outside lip. Traditionally they are used in the Buddhist religion as aid for meditation and chanting.

Similarly prayer wheels are used in the Buddhist religion as a guide to prayer. These ornate pieces are spun around with the holy words written on them.

Other traditional handicrafts fall under the category of wooden items. Here you'll find some of the most intricately crafted wooden ornaments and unique masks to add interest to any wall.

Historically Nepalese wood craft can be found in temples and holy places and is the remit of families, who have made their living through wood craft for hundreds, if not thousands of years.

Moving on from wood we also have the clay and resin-based crafts. Highly sort after, these amazing creations are incredibly popular with visitors to Nepal and online visitors alike.

The famous Nepalese pots serve both a practical and a cultural use, symbolising the hard work that goes into creating this earthenware. The practice oldest pot is believed to be more two and a half thousand years old. They are traditionally made on a potter's wheel and decorated with classic Nepalese design. Holding oil or water they are both useful and attractive and distinctly Nepalese.

If you're looking for fine detail, combined with religious symbolism then look no further than the resin-based statues of Buddha and other decorative figures.

Distinctly Nepalese, with the variety of resin arts and crafts there's sure to be something to please everyone.

Practised in the Mithila region of India and Nepal this stunning artwork is created using fingertips, twigs, matchsticks, brushes and with the use of natural dyes. These works of art were traditionally

created by women, depicting scenes from everyday life and people. It has become incredibly popular across the world and remains a source of pride from Nepalese artisans.

Specific images were also used for celebrations and rituals, including marriage, the birth of a child and so on.

This impressive, eye catching art has five distinct styles and alongside everyday life, also depict religious themes, gods and goddesses in their paintings.

For a more personal gift for yourself or a loved one you can do no better than a beautifully-made piece of Nepalese jewellery. Whether you're looking for a statement piece or anniversary present, there is so much variety you'll be spoilt for choice. These eye catching designs have always proved popular and the range of designs is simply breath taking.

Silver takes the starring role in jewellery design and is an extremely popular choice. But pockets of colour are the hallmark of many designs and include fantastically coloured stones and jewels. Coral and turquoise are key stones to look for and will surprise and delight with their detail and intricate silver work. A fabulous gift indeed for someone special.

Choose from stunning necklaces, pendants, earrings, bracelets rings and silver chains.

But if silver isn't your style, have no fear. For a more unusual material try traditional bone jewellery, one-of-a-kind hand carved pieces both unusual and beautiful. Browse key rings, lockets, bracelets, necklaces and earrings.

Religion and its associated iconography is unique way to capture the spirit of Nepal and handicraft makers are able to offer a huge range of religious sculptures, incense burners and more niche gifts such as ritual daggers and mala beads.

Finally, we turn our attention to paper products and the many gifts you can purchase to give your home that unique feel, bringing a small part of Nepal to your walls and table.

Skilfully hand painted paper lampshades, notebooks and journals, colourful greeting cards and resin ashtrays show just far Nepalese handicrafts have come in catering for a larger, more westernised market.

And if you're thinking how you might brighten up your Christmas tree, lateral thinking artisans have created a beautiful range of Christmas decorations for you and your guests to enjoy.

### **Sourcing the best**

For the very best in Nepalese handicrafts and export, why not check out

[www.kathmanduhandicrafts.com](http://www.kathmanduhandicrafts.com)

On this site, run sympathetically alongside Nepalese culture, you'll be able to source unique gifts and crafts for friends or a fabulous treat for you or your home.

This online boutique offers authentic jewellery, small gifts, religious beads and incense holders among other great items. The site offers all handicrafts at wholesale prices and is able to ship safely and securely all over the world. There are several payment options to ensure you get just what you need at a price you like.

Always make sure you're buying authentic Nepalese products, supporting people who work with pride and skill to produce authentic, beautiful Nepalese handicrafts.

Whether you're looking for something to remember a bygone trip to this incredible part of the world, want to brighten up your décor or send a fabulous surprise gift to someone, you won't be disappointed with these amazing handicrafts. Bring a little bit of Nepal home.

