

The Telegraph

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THREADS OF TIME

DESIGNS ON YOU ▶ **Tilak Samarawickrema** is using contemporary designs to revive traditional tapestry, says **Saimi Sattar**

PROFILE

■ Talagune Uda Dumbara is a tiny village of about 50 people in a remote corner of Sri Lanka. It's a village that had a long tradition of weaving tapestries. But, over the years, the village almost fell off the map, with its tapestry-making skills almost forgotten.

Then Tilak Samarawickrema, Sri Lankan architect and artist, stepped into the picture. He literally rediscovered the remote village, and got the weavers back to work on designs that he supplied. Says Samarawickrema: "Within two years, the tapestries were being retailed at the Museum of Modern Art's Design Store in New York."

A man of multiple skills, Samarawickrema divides his time between art and architecture. He

has created numerous factories, residences and banks over years — his Mihila Green Factory, 70km from Colombo, won a prestigious global award. In addition, he has shown his sketches in Milan, Rome, New York, Sao Paulo and Colombo. Over 100 of his sketches were put together in a book, *Ink of Lanka*, published in 2009. Samarawickrema says: "My sketches echo vaka deka, or the curves of traditional Sinhalese art, over 2,000 years old."

In the 1970s, when he was living in Italy, he made an animation film called *Andare of Sri Lanka*, based on his sketches, which was shown at the Oberhausen Film Festival in 1978. Samarawickrema also reinterpreted the drawings from *Ink of Lanka* as life-size wire sculptures.

Now in his mid-50s, Samarawickrema did his Intermediate

from the Royal Institute of British Architects at Colombo University in 1969-70 and then went to Rome on a scholarship. There, he completed a two-year diploma in conservation from the International Centre for Conservation and Preservation of Historic Sites and Monuments. He stayed on till 1983, a period which influenced him deeply. Samarawickrema says: "It was a breakthrough period where several new movements like Memphis-Milano, which created post-modernist objects, came to dominate the design scene."

Back from Italy, he did an MSC



in architecture from the Faculty of Architecture, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka. Then he joined the ILO as a consultant to the National Design Centre, Sri Lanka. His job there was to

document the indigenous crafts of the island.

Initially unable to locate Talagune Uda Dumbara village, Samarawickrema went to Guatemala where he worked with Mayan Indian weavers. He returned to Sri Lanka in 1990 and finally rediscovered the weaving village beyond Kandy.

Samarawickrema works with four families here. He provides the weavers with design sheets, including colours to be used. While traditional designs are still woven in the village, the weavers who work with him only create the patterns he provides. He says: "I create the designs and source the dyed yarn from Germany, and the weavers reproduce them." A 190-cm x 107-cm tapestry takes 15 days to create.

TRENDS

■ Most tapestries are used as wall hangings but there are some that cover entire ceilings. Samarawickrema's pieces are mostly geometric patterns with an interplay of colours. He says: "My tapestry is for aesthetic purposes. There is no attempt to convey any deeper meaning or message."

PRODUCTS

■ The tapestries can be customised as per clients' requirements. While Samarawickrema's earlier creations were influenced by his architectural background, the newer ones are increasingly minimalist. He now tends to create identical blocks in different colours or repeat particular patterns.

Samarawickrema's tapestries, on display at the Gallery Art Moit, Delhi, come in two sizes — 106cm x 124cm, priced at Rs 20,000 and 106cm x 191cm, priced at Rs 25,000. A black, blue and yellow vertical tapestry with a triangle on top is priced at Rs 25,000. Another creation, with beige blocks outlined in different colours, is one of the smaller pieces and priced at Rs 20,000.

Photographs by Jagan Neri