

## **Terracotta Universe by Himmat Shah: From Earth to the Soul**

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### **Abstract**

India, is a land of art and specially clay crafts have a very rich tradition that dates back more than a thousand years. The Indus Valley Civilization and Lothal's clay pottery artefacts proved that there were skilled potters practising in ancient India. Pre historic terracotta crafts were the most recognizable and tangible elements of Indian art history. Now a day this terracotta tradition followed by lots of artists but there was one contemporary artist Himmat Shah who was the creator of whole universe of terracotta and took it to such heights where it become immortal. Himmat Shah is one of the India's most acclaimed artists who is known for his redefining traditional art through his terracotta sculptures. His terracotta sculptures have an almost primitive appearance that mimics prehistoric iconography, perhaps growing up in his home town Lothal (Gujarat), contributed to the development of his signature style and his style shows his intense connection to lost civilization and culture. This research paper explores the rich terracotta traditional art of India from pre historic to modern. This study also investigates that how unconscious mind of Himmat shah added proto historic iconography in his sculptures. Terracotta was Shah's favourite medium of expression, through this paper we will explore what played an important role in his life in making terracotta medium so special for him. Through this research paper we will also try to explain how Shah's terracotta sculptures depict pre historic clay art qualities in the modern forms. Nevertheless, the paper highlights the journey of terracotta crafts in Indian art history and contribution of Himmat Shah's terracotta sculptures in making this heritage international.

**Key words:** Terracotta Universe, Unconscious, Primitive Appearance

## Introduction

Art is a universal human activity which exist in every age every place and every time. No matter how it evolves, in the form of expression or in the form of communication. Whenever a human became conscious he wanted to give meaning to the existence of world and himself also. The eagerness to find himself can be seen in his oldest creations and this eagerness gave birth to art. As human started to grow, the art also grew with human and had a unique place in the world. This is undeniable truth that tendency of making art always existed in the heart of our ancestors. Our ancestors embraced many ways to develop their cultural environment but clay was their favourite. It is believed that Indian terracotta art started from Indus Valley Civilization from time period 3300 BCE to 1300 BCE. Clay was the earliest medium in which human began to mould and we have discovered a large number of terracotta figurines from the Indus Valley sites. These Indus Valley sites are best example of architecture also. We can see a highly developed and planned form of architecture in the two main centres of Indus Valley Civilization- Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. Initially the culture remain here can be seen to be similar to the Sumerian civilization. So it is also called Indo Sumerian Civilization.

Despite of being rich in architecture, business and art we are focusing on 22000 seals and clay sculptures which have been found from these sites. These statues have been made of the best type red baked clay. A site of Indus Civilization 'Kulli' is that site where we found lot of clay statues of women and animal. A large number of statues can be considered as statues of 'Goddess.' In fact, many other statues of these type have been found from different parts of India. These statues are called 'Goddess.' Apart from human figures a large number of animal figures also have been found. These animal figures are of humped bull, elephant, pig, monkeys, mongoose, tortoise, birds etc. one more important aspect of clay heritage is 'Clay Pottery'. Indian tradition was always like they make pots from clay and burn them into fire to turn them into terracotta. These earthen pots excavated from some major centres of Indus Valley Civilization, Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro and Lothal.

Lothal situated near Sargwala village in Ahmedabad district of Gujarat and this is a important centre of Indus Civilization. Construction of this city is believed to have begun around 2300 BCE. Traditional pottery found here is primarily red and black ware. Lothal is known for its extensive collection of painted pottery with intricate designs. Black and red ware is significant part of the ancient pottery heritage. Lothal is characterized by a range of pottery types, such as painted pottery with intricate designs and terracotta figurines of animals and human. These

potteries unearthed at Lothal and demonstrate the remarkable artistic skills of the Harappa civilization.

After Indus Valley Civilization stone sculptures emerged late during the Mauryan Empire but terracotta continued to be used for religious and folk art. In Gupta period we can see highly refined terracotta sculptures, with the best examples of Shiva Head, Parvati Head from Ahichahtra. These sculptures represented details and spiritual expression. One more example of clay art I want to mention that blue pottery of Jaipur, Rajasthan and Ghurni terracotta works of Bengal, showcase diversity and rich tradition of Indian art history. The gist of the whole discussion is that clay art always been a medium for religious expression through idols and ritual objects, and a testament to enduring craftsmanship and regional artistic diversity. This tradition has evolved from small delicate terracotta to contemporary styles, serving as both a functional modern art form and a vital part of India. [www.ccrinndia.gov.in](http://www.ccrinndia.gov.in)

In contemporary time, many artists blend traditional rural abstractions with refined urban tastes in their clay or terracotta artworks. But Himmat Shah is that name who took this art to new heights. His terracotta sculptures represent deeply rooted tradition and modern forms with abstraction. Further in this article we will take a deep dive into his life, art influences and his contribution to taking Indian clay art at the international level.

## **Himmat Shah – Early Life and Background**

Himmat Shah, one of India's foremost sculptors, is widely celebrated for his innovative and exploratory approach to sculpture. His works spanning over several decades has been instrumental in defining the modern sculptural landscape of India. He is known for his versatile use of materials and exploring of forms. Shah's art is both, deeply rooted in tradition and innovative in its approach. He is not just a sculptor but an artist whose constant curiosity and search for new artistic vocabularies have made him a pioneer in Indian contemporary art.

Himmat Shah was born in 1933 in the town of Lothal, Gujarat, India. Growing up in a region rich in historical significance, particularly with its proximity to the Harappan Civilization. He was deeply influenced by the sense of antiquity and the enduring legacy of ancient Indian terracotta art. His curiosity and inclination toward clay was started from his childhood. His childhood was shaped by the deep rooted Indian heritage of Indus Civilization, Lothal. The art forms of animals, human made pottery found there, fascinated him so far. As well as from his

childhood he always denied formal education and that's why he was more active with art activities from the early age of his childhood. (wong,2024) He used to go to potters every day and practice of making shapes from clay. He was always wondering on the excavation of Lothal's land and got inspired with the unique qualities of Lothal's artworks and architecture. That's why he was obsessed with the sensitivity of clay. He chose clay to express himself over all the medium, because this medium connected his unconscious mind to the past memories of his childhood. This was the reason that he found himself very comfortable with clay. He himself said "Art always reflects the subconscious mind and the experience of childhood." Experience during childhood forced him to express himself through this medium and his unconscious mind turned cultural roots into iconic modernism. For Himmat Shah, terracotta as a material has the power of sensitivity to express someone's thoughts and feelings.

### **Aims and Objectives of the Study**

The aim of this research study is to discuss that how Himmat Shah got influenced by the terracotta medium and why he included the protohistoric iconography in his sculptures in modern form. As well as this paper explains that art journey of artist Himmat Shah and highlights the contribution of Shah in making the Indus Civilization alive through his modern sculptures. Objectives of this study are as follows:

- The present study's goal is to better understand our terracotta heritage from Indus Valley Civilization.
- To explore the contribution of Himmat Shah in keeping alive to the terracotta heritage of Indus civilization through his modern forms of terracotta sculptures.

### **Significance of the Study**

Himmat Shah is a well-known contemporary sculptor of Indian contemporary art, who is known for his terracotta sculptures. He was influenced by clay from his childhood. As he belonged to the Lothal, a Indus Civilization site and his hometown also and play with clay. He expressed himself through clay with fully hearts content. All this left a mark on his unconscious mind which he expressed through his terracotta sculptures. The famous art critic Geeta Kapur also said "Himmat Shah is obsessed with the sensuous quality of clay." His sculptures are great reminder of Indus Valley Civilization's art through many qualities. This study will reveal the

starting period of Indian terracotta sculptures history and how these sculptures or art became the heritage of nation.

In the era of modern art where every artist is now trying to express himself through terracotta medium, it is very much needed and mandatory for all the young artists to know the roots of the medium which they are using to express himself. This study explains the roots of heritage of the nation and also explains how it developed period to period. This study remains exploring further and give knowledge about contemporary artist Himmat Shah who choose this medium to express and his art and includes proto historic iconography in his sculptures. This study analyses how Shah unknowingly includes protohistoric iconography in his sculptures which represented Indian heritage of clay art. It is very important to know this aspect of Shah's sculptures to all the contemporary artists of this nation. When an artist connects himself with his land's heritage deeply then he creates such eternal forms that not only became the mirror for artist but also presents his country on international level. This research study is a humble effort to give a message to India's young generations who are more influenced by western culture and art, trying to copy them the they should make connection with their heritage and try to explore it deeply. This will help them to form a strong personal and cultural identity. By knowing and making connection with culture can give them a sense of belonging, purpose and wisdom also to navigate the present and future challenges of art field like Shah did. Himmat Shah is a name that keep alive India's terracotta heritage through his sculptures and this paper is a kind effort to remember his dedication and contribution in making India's heritage international. Shah deserves to be known with this aspect of his art by every young artist although I should say that every citizen of nation.

### **Proto-historic Iconography in Shah's Sculptures**

As we discussed earlier that big part of Shah's unconscious mind is influenced by the folk art of India as well as the art qualities of Indus Civilization. We can see some unique and clear qualities of pre-historic art in his sculptures in the modern forms. These qualities prove his deep connection with his birth land Lothal. Here are some of the qualities we will discuss about:

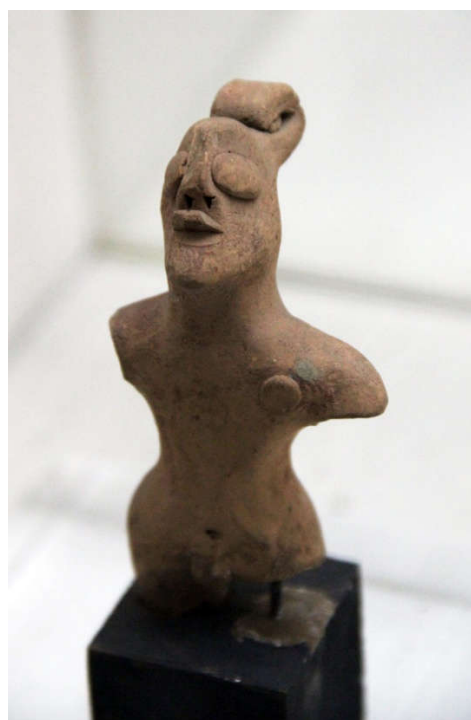
- **Abstraction:**

Quality of abstraction in Indus Valley Civilization was at its peak. Their forms simplify or distorts the natural appearance of subjects to emphasize essential elements or concepts rather than realistic representation. In Himmat Shah's sculptures also we can see abstraction with perfection. The abstraction allowed Shah to express ideas, emotions and cultural significance beyond visual accuracy. His abstract forms in sculptures suggest a symbolic meaning, reflecting the cultural value and beliefs of early societies. Shah's sculptures indicate an early human desire to explore concepts beyond physical reality. In fact, he was setting the stage for later artistic development. In both pictures we can clearly see the similarities, like in both there are only expression of eyes lips and nose. Both artists were beyond the physical restriction of monotony. As Indus civilization gave only impression of body parts, Himmat Shah also did. This proves his influenced personality of Shah by Indus civilization art.



**Figure- 1. Shah, H. Untitled. (Terracotta Head)**

Retrieved 15 September 2025 from  
<http://www.mapinpub.com>

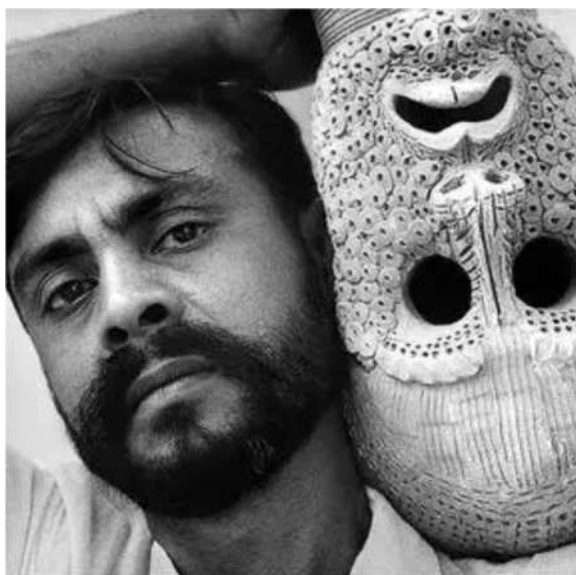


**Figure-2. Male figure (Indus civilization)**

Retrieved 15 September 2025 from  
<http://www.smarthistory.org>

- **Cryptic Symbols and Geometrical Forms**

Pre historic sculpture's main quality is that their forms include patterns and systematically shapes. Patterns are predominantly geometrical, such as group of small circle or dots, wavy lines, filled rectangles along with stylized symbolic forms. These such patterns can be clearly seen in the sculptures of Shah also. The symbolic pattern of Shah's sculptures reveals symbolic or spiritual meaning and state a deep connection of his unconscious mind's connection with Lothal's Indus Civilization art.



**Figure-3. Shah, H. Untitled. (Terracotta Head)**

Retrieved 15 September 2025 from

<http://www.artandbeyond.gallery>



**Figure-4 Terracotta Pottery (Lothal)**

Retrieved 15 September 2025 from

<http://www.travelclix.in>

- **Primitive appearance and ancient Semiotics**

All art of a certain time period reflects the essence of that time period as pre historic art do. In pre historic sculptures there were a unique appearance which make them known that they belong to this specific time period. The same essence of pre historic appearance can be seen in the sculptures of Himmat Shah which certainly depict his influenced character from the Indus Valley Civilization. As psychologist Freud said in his theory of psychoanalysis that when an

artist being true to his art, all unconscious images of his mind began to reflect through his art. We know that Shah has spent his childhood in the land of Indus Civilization, Lothal, so unknowingly his unconscious mind represented him that images or experience which are so far close to his heart and mind. That's why primitive appearance can be seen in his sculptures due to the memories of his land.



Figure-5. Shah, H. Untitled. (Terracotta Head)

Retrieved 15 September 2025 from  
<http://www.indianexpress.com>



Figure-6. Terracotta sculpture (Indus Civilization)

Retrieved 15 September 2025 from  
<http://www.indiafolkart.org>

- **Over Simplification of Figures**

Over simplification of prehistoric figures is a key quality of Indus Civilization sculptures although it has a very complex meaning. So far as over simplification can be seen in the sculptures of Shah also. Shah only gave impression of body parts in his sculptures beside making them according to the monotony of figures.



Figure-7. Shah, H. Untitled. (Terracotta Head)

Retrieved 15 September 2025 from  
<http://www.anantart.com>



Figure-8. Terracotta sculpture (Indus Civilization)

Retrieved 15 September 2025 from  
<http://www.indicinspiration.com>

- **Technique of preparing clay**

In ancient time there was many methods of preparing clay like slip casting method, coil building and hand building followed by drying and firing in kilns. They also used many advanced methods like polishing, adding slips and painting with geometrical and animal motifs. (kumar. 2024). Himmat widely used slip casting method for his sculptures but he added his personal features to this method. His use of clay, terracotta making techniques and slip cast sculptures deliberately evoke the limitations and curiosities. He mixed jute cloth, multani mitti in clay and left it for months and years in an airtight container. This method develops a unique smoothness in clay and make a resemblance with Indus Civilization art.

- **Denied for Monotony of Naturalism**

From childhood Himmat was a rebel child. In his childhood he denied formal education because it bound him in the unwanted rules. Same as he also denied rules of making monotony

set by experts because he felt bound again. He was the true rebellion who always denied to follow the path set by others. Same quality match with the artists of protohistoric period. They also created art with no rules. They did not give weightage to naturalism or monotony. They create art with full of expression, symbolic meaning and freedom. As we can see that only a small circle is used to represent the eyes in the sculpture of Indus Civilization and so as in Himmat's sculpture. Here for example we showed only one sculpture of Shah with round circled eye but almost his every sculpture has these circled eyes.



**Figure-9. Shah, H. Untitled. (Terracotta Head)**

Retrieved 15 September 2025 from

<http://www.indianexpress.com>



**Figure-10. Terracotta sculpture (Indus Civilization)**

Retrieved 15 September 2025 from

<http://www.indiafolkart.org>

## Conclusion

According to Himmat Shah “An artist should be very sensitive person who could experience art at very subtle levels and could give unmatched forms to their own artworks. So that the unmatched quality of their individuality stays in their work and when faced with doubt, they could search for their path inside their inner self.”

Even till death, at the age of 92, Himmat Shah continued his search for his inner self and pushing boundaries in sculpture as well as painting. When I interviewed him in 2024, he specially mentioned that ‘every young artist should make connection with the folk art of nation. Folk art of every country is the heritage of people which they should try their best to preserve and promote it. We can find gist of life through this heritage art’. Himmat Shah opened his unconscious mind and create sculptures with primitive appearance by making his connection

to the art of his birth land. His terracotta head sculptures are the reflection of his inner voice and his inner voice continuously propelled him to make primitive appearance sculptures.

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