



Fancy Representation of Sacred Forms in Etikoppaka Lacquer Toys

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Abstract: This article examines contemporary Etikoppaka wooden toys as vernacular design objects that reinterpret sacred Hindu figures through minimal, child-centred forms rather than strictly adhering to classical texts such as the Shilpa Shastras. Employing qualitative methodologies, including interviews with artisans and material analysis of deity toys, the study reveals that artisans prioritise recognizability, structural stability, tactile safety, and visual clarity over intricate iconography, drawing on craft knowledge and social feedback. These toys serve as pedagogical tools that connect sacred narratives to everyday life and child development while preserving craft identity and market relevance. The findings suggest that Etikoppaka practices exemplify vernacular modernism, in which tradition serves as a flexible resource for creative innovation, underscoring the significance of adaptive cultural practices over static preservation.

KEYWORDS: Etikoppaka toys; toy-based pedagogy; child-centred design; sacred representation; heritage sustainability; fancy toys

1. INTRODUCTION

Etikoppaka, a craft village in Andhra Pradesh, is known for hand-turned wooden toys finished with natural lacquer. This hereditary tradition often depicts deities and mythological figures in minimal, child-centred forms rather than as miniature temple sculptures. Contemporary artisans design robust, simplified deity toys that balance cultural identity with play, safety, affordability, and market acceptance, suggesting a form of vernacular modernism that is locally grounded even if not framed in formal design vocabulary [1]. Instead of treating departures from canonical norms as a loss, this article understands Etikoppaka toys as products of cultural negotiation, in which sacred imagery is adapted to new domestic and pedagogical contexts [2].

The study contributes to material culture studies, craft epistemology, child-centred design, and heritage sustainability by treating toys as knowledge-bearing artefacts, highlighting practice-based design intelligence, showing how natural toys support children's development, and demonstrating how craft communities sustain tradition through adaptation rather than replication [3]. The article proceeds with a review of work on folk toys and pedagogy, an outline of the qualitative methodology with artisans and a designer, presentation of key results, and a discussion of vernacular modernism, concluding that Etikoppaka toys exemplify a living design tradition in which modern design ideas arise from within craft practice itself.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Folk toys, pedagogy, and child-centred design research show that toys can strongly support children's cognitive, social, and cultural development, especially when they are child-sized, made from natural materials, and used within toy-based pedagogy frameworks. Indian guidelines further promote indigenous toys as culturally rooted "learning resources," while scholars argue that folk toys with simplified forms aid symbolic thinking by reducing visual complexity and cognitive load; Etikoppaka toys, with minimal forms and bold colours, exemplify this approach [4, 5].

Material culture and craft epistemology scholarship emphasises that objects participate in knowledge transmission and that craft learning involves tacit understanding developed through negotiation with materials and tools. Apprenticeship allows novices to acquire both techniques and evaluative criteria, so artisans' design decisions embody complex reasoning about form and usability without relying on texts, as in Etikoppaka, where makers respond to material properties and user expectations [6, 7].

Heritage and vernacular modernity studies critique rigid authenticity, stressing that traditions survive through adaptation and creativity. South Asian work highlights how artisans evolve inherited forms for contemporary markets, and the notion of vernacular modernity frames craft as an innovative design process; Etikoppaka artisans exemplify this by transforming sacred iconography into child-friendly domestic toys [8].

3. METHODOLOGY

The study uses a qualitative, interpretive approach, treating Etikoppaka wooden toys as contemporary design artefacts within a long, evolving practice rather than measuring them against *Shilpa Shastra* prescriptions [2]. It examines how artisans reimagine sacred figures through a consciously minimal, practice-led design language validated through social and market acceptance, focusing on how they think and decide.

Research design combines: (1) object-centred analysis of toys as material artefacts that embody design choices, meanings, and pedagogical intentions [9]; and (2) semi-structured interviews with key artisans and a UI/UX designer to elicit tacit criteria and values informing toy design [5]. The goal is to understand how inherited iconography is selectively reinterpreted to produce structurally stable, visually apparent, child-friendly deity figures within a living, adaptive design culture.

Participants were purposively selected across roles in the Etikoppaka ecosystem, and interview and field data were thematically analysed to identify shared principles, such as “too much detail confuses children” and “show only what is needed,” which were read as ordinary design sensibilities rather than statistical generalisations [9, 10, 11].

4. RESULTS

4.1. Minimalist deity representation as a conscious design choice

Etikoppaka artisans conceive deity toys as intentionally simplified, child-friendly forms rather than miniature temple sculptures. Facial features are minimal, ornaments compressed into colour bands, and complex poses turned into stable, turnable shapes. This minimalism reflects durability, usability, and cost-efficiency rather than a loss of tradition, privileging symbolic clarity over exhaustive iconographic detail so that toys remain culturally legible in both play and display contexts.



Figure 1. Etikoppaka Crafted Dasavatara Toys

4.2. Design practices in Etikoppaka: insights from artisans

Interviews with C. V. Raju, Hema Shiva, Satyanarayana, and Trimurthulu reveal a design ethos that fuses inherited visual knowledge with pragmatic refinement. Recognisable motifs such as Krishna's flute and Ganesh's trunk are prioritised over delicate ornamentation, while proportions are adjusted, limbs thickened, and poses compacted to resist breakage. Colour and lacquer carry much of the form, guiding children's attention through clear contrasts. Through apprenticeship, observation, and user feedback, artisans develop an iterative, experiential vernacular *modernism grounded* in traditional aesthetics.

4.3. Child-friendliness and child experience: designer's perspective

UI/UX designer Vijaya Santosh Kumar Ch. reads Etikoppaka toys through the lens of contemporary design concepts. Rounded forms, smooth surfaces, and balanced proportions support graspability and tactile comfort, while simplified silhouettes and strong colour segmentation reduce cognitive load and invite open-ended play.

According to The New Indian Express, Etikoppaka artisans have long been known for creating wooden toys with distinctive designs. Still, their craft is now in decline due to a lack of government support. The visual language of Etikoppaka toys, with its soft curves and warm finishes, has traditionally shaped how children engage with cultural motifs, even those depicting powerful deities like Kali. These choices help give children a sense of familiarity and safety, connecting traditional craft practices with contemporary ideas about child-centred design. Artisans also use Shilpa Shastra as a visual guide rather than rigid instructions, preserving cultural roots while allowing for creative adaptation. Proportions are judged by tactile and visual balance, with correctness confirmed when “people immediately recognise the deity.” Sacred imagery is thus adaptively reworked for wood, lacquer, and play, presenting tradition as flexible and embodied rather than text-bound.

According to a report by The Times of India, renewed interest and increased orders for Etikoppaka toys from international buyers have signalled social validation, as market demand helps determine which designs endure in the workshop and which fade away. Etikoppaka minimalism combines practical design choices with community consensus, helping preserve tradition through collective decision-making. According to the Handicrafts Department of the Government of India, these toys are recognised for their smooth lacquer surfaces and vibrant, earthy colours, often featuring motifs from mythology and rural life. Additionally, they are influenced by economic and social demands. Innovation arises within tradition, as sacred iconography is adapted for everyday handling and play.

4.4. Minimalism as aesthetic and functional economy

Minimalism functions as an economy of form, distilling identity into essential cues that balance clarity and strength. Artisans’ maxims, such as avoiding excessive detail or fragility, parallel design theories that link reduction to effective communication and the translation of sacred imagery into memorable, child-handled forms.

4.5. Parallels between craft and design epistemologies

The designer’s perspective reveals deep affinities between artisanal and formal design reasoning: both rely on iteration, feedback, and material sensitivity. This convergence highlights how craft can be seen as a valid form of design knowledge, showing that design education has much to gain from practice-based problem-solving as seen in workshops. According to the Ministry of Textiles, Etikoppaka toys are made primarily from *Ankudu Karra*, chosen for its softness and pale colour, demonstrating a tradition in which material, touch, and social context guide adaptive problem-solving, with heritage at its core. Selective engagement with classical imagery and proportion further shows how living heritage informs such craft practices, recognition rather than strict textual conformity. Etikoppaka toys thus appear as autonomous translations of sacred iconography into the tactile, playful world of childhood.

4.6. Market as cultural validation



Figure 2 Etikoppaka crafted Kali toy

The market operates as an informal evaluative arena where makers and users co-shape form, proportion, and visual grammar. Enduring demand for simplified deity toys confirms their cultural relevance and emotional accessibility in contemporary India.

5. CONCLUSION

Etikoppaka wooden toys demonstrate a living design tradition in which sacred imagery is reinterpreted through minimal, child-centred forms shaped by practice-led experimentation rather than textual prescription. In Etikoppaka, toys remain widely appreciated as display pieces in Telugu households, demonstrating the craft's enduring appeal and its connection to tradition. Still, artisans also face challenges such as the dominance of middlemen in sales and marketing, who earn most of the profits. In heritage policy, the case highlights that cultural sustainability thrives through adaptive innovation rather than rigid authenticity. Etikoppaka artisans sustain continuity through materials and motifs while flexibly responding to modern needs. Their toys, aligned with toy-based pedagogy principles of clarity, safety, and imagination, illustrate how indigenous traditions can inform education and design alike. Ultimately, Etikoppaka craft exemplifies how culturally grounded, user-sensitive design intelligence can emerge organically within living traditions.

6. REFERENCES

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