

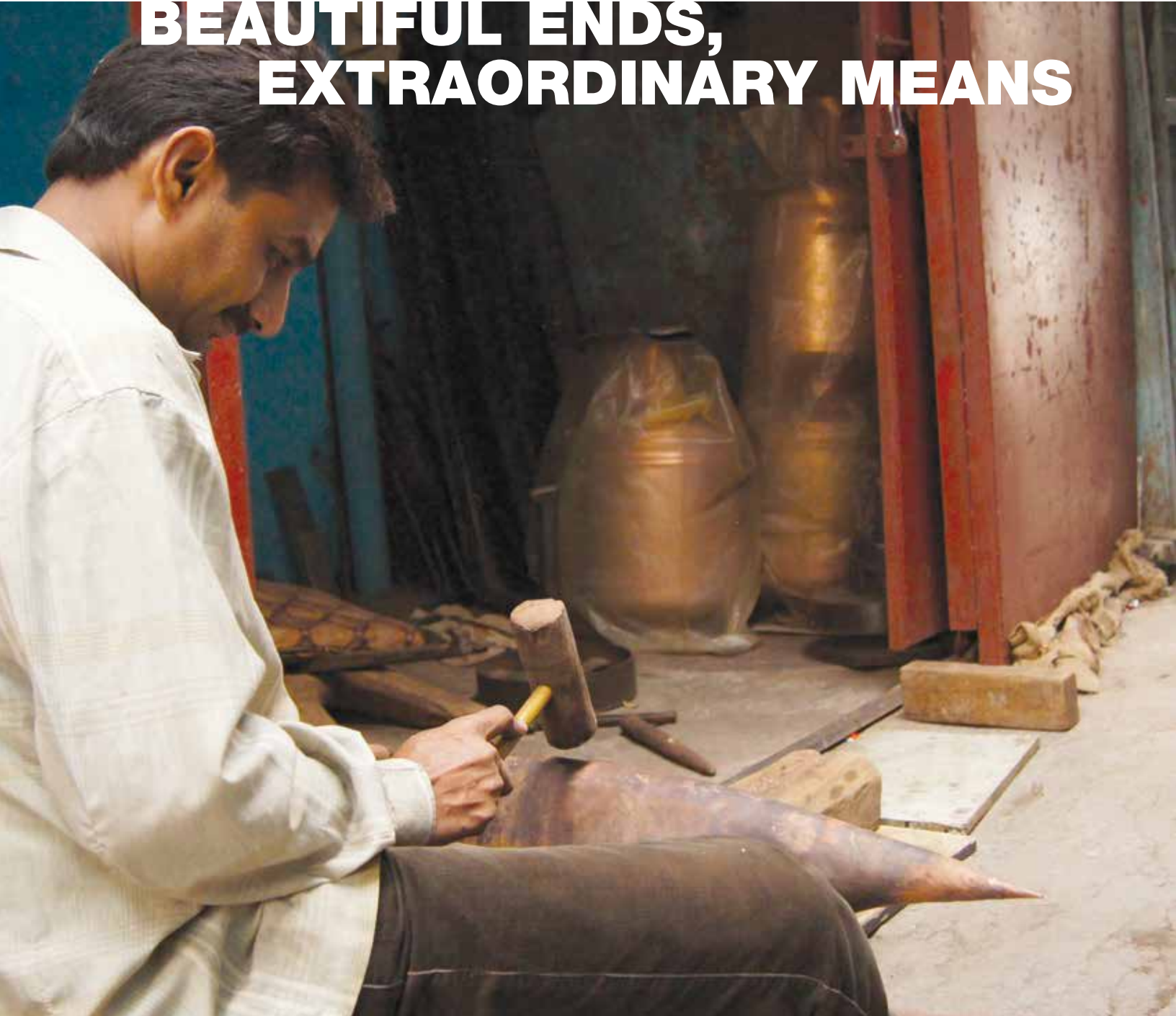


By Prasad Boradkar, IDSA

Prasad.Boradkar@asu.edu

Prasad Boradkar is associate professor and coordinator of the Industrial Design program at Arizona State University (ASU) and the director of InnovationSpace, a transdisciplinary laboratory at ASU where design, business and engineering students and faculty partner with corporations to develop human-centered product concepts that hold societal benefit and minimize impacts on the environment. Boradkar is the author of *Designing Things: A Critical Introduction to the Culture of Objects* (Berg, 2010) and is currently working on a book on Indian design.

BEAUTIFUL ENDS, EXTRAORDINARY MEANS



Long before you see the craftsmen of Tambat Ali (Copper Alley), you can hear them. Their hammers sound like a symphony that rings out from deep within the historic district of the city of Pune in western India. In a network of jumbled streets that wind around sunny courtyards and shadowed studios, some 40 coppersmiths ply an old and honorable trade, as did several generations of Tambat Ali craftsmen before them. Here sheets of malleable copper are molded into the squat, sturdy form of a cooking pot or into the long, elegant lines of a water jug. Each object is passed through a long line of practiced hands until it ends up in the workshops of the expert finishers who strike the copper's surface with a precise hammer tone pattern that gives each vessel its strength and lustrous beauty.



EXTRAORDINARY



Tambat Ali established itself in the bustling city of Pune during the mid-1600s. Under the rule of the powerful young emperor Chhatrapati Shivaji, the craftsmen created a variety of metal objects for the kingdom, such as highly ornate finials for temples as well as cannons for Shivaji's army. Their repertoire expanded in the 18th century to include such items as copper coins, body armor and letterforms for printing presses. When India fell under British control in the mid-19th century, the copper craftsmen were prohibited from creating arms and weapons. So they turned instead to making everyday objects ranging from cooking utensils and storage containers to water heaters. Some of these classic, timeless designs are still being made by the community.

Although its traditional handiwork has endured for more than 400 years, Tambat Ali faces tough challenges, many of which are shared by other artisan communities around the world. The number of new apprentices willing to learn the craft, for example, has dwindled as the children of the coppersmiths opt for formal college education and enter other professions. In addition, the rising price of copper (fueled by the global need for the metal in electrical applications) has increased the cost of the objects at a time when mass-produced stainless-steel utensils and plastic containers are providing consumers with cheaper alternatives.

Noting such economic and cultural trends, in 2000 Pune-based product designer Rashmi Ranade approached Tambat Ali leaders Bhalchandra Kadu and Kishore Karde about developing new applications for the community's ancient craft. Over the past decade, their collaboration has produced innovative modern housewares that marry contemporary design with Tambat Ali's age-old copper-smithing skills.

The Tambat Ali craftsmen are now working with Coppre, a Pune-based venture set up by designers, marketing professionals and investors (www.facebook.com/coppre). In addition, the Indian National Trust for Art and Heritage (INTACH), an organization dedicated to preserving India's natural and human resources, markets and sells the copper goods through its nationwide network. Plans call for establishing an international market for Tambat Ali's work in the future.

Ranade's collaboration with the artisans of Tambat Ali is a clear demonstration of how contemporary product design can play a critical role in preserving cultural traditions and promoting grassroots entrepreneurship. And product design accomplishes these goals simply by doing what it does best: serving utilitarian ends through extraordinarily beautiful means. ■