ANTIQUARIAN TREASURES OF INDIA

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Dattātreya,
Carved Sandalwood Sculpture, Possibly Mysore, Southern India, ca. 1850 - 1870
Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

This particular piece of sculptural art represents an image of Dattātreya, believed to be a minor incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu.[1] He was an aestic. In this portrayal, he is beautifully depicted as the Trinity, embodying the divine essence of Brahma, Viṣṇu, and Mahesh in a singular, harmonious form. The three gods appear in a single indivisible whole. This three-headed Dattātreya image is being populated after the year 1550; an early reference is found in Gurucharita.

The iconography of Dattātreya typically features three heads and six arms, accompanied by four dogs of various colours and a cow, particularly in representations from the post-16th century. Notably, the current depiction lacks the presence of a cow.

The sculpture is supported by a round-shaped stele and a horizontally shaped and multi-layered base. The central head represents Viṣṇu, while the left and right heads depict Śiva and Brahma, respectively. Both Śiva and Brahma are adorned with jata-mukuta, and Śiva carries the Ganga in his hair, resembling the form known as Gangadhara Śiva. Viṣṇu wears a Karaṇḍamukuṭa, a headpiece typically associated with Śiva or the goddess.

The presence of dogs in the sculpture symbolises the Vedas, though they remain uncoloured as the image is carved from sandalwood. This representation of the Vedas challenges and undermines traditional Brahminical norms and serves to exorcize the uncleanliness and sexual licentiousness often attributed to these animals. The dogs are integral to Lord's antinomian identity.[2]

Additionally, the figure is sheltered by the Audumbara tree, recognised as the kalpataru, or wish-fulfilling tree, in Kalyug.[3] This tree is associated with Dattātreya, who is believed to have meditated or lived beneath it. References to the Audumbara tree can be found in the source known as the Gurucharita.[4] A species of bird is being relocated to the tree. The artist has realistically drafted the birds; it could be a Koel. Dattātreya's faces are calm and majestic, reminiscent of an aestic figure. His features are chiselled, displaying prominent double eyebrows, fish-shaped eyes, a sharp nose, and protruding lips. The cheeks are fuller, complementing an uplifted chin. On Viṣṇu's forehead, we see a Vaishnava tilak, while the other two faces—Śiva's and Brahma's—are adorned with Shaivite tilaks. He is depicted in an abhanga posture. The lord's upper body is bare, while his lower body is draped in a loincloth featuring intricate patterns, styled in a certain manner. A knot is tied at the left side, and the cloth conveys a sense of movement and fluidity, closely hugging his body.

The lord is being heavily ornamented and embellished, such as wearing karṇabhūṣaṇa5 (earrings), kaṇṭhī (a shorter necklace), muktāvali (a pearl-studded necklace), and ratnāvalī (a two-layered necklace as well as a larger necklace). He also wears a hara, which appears to be broken. In his lower right hand, he showcases a piece of rucikā or cūlikā (wrist ornament), while his other wrists remain bare. Both shoulders are embellished with aṅgada (elaborate shoulder ornaments). On his feet, he dons pādukas (wooden sandals), which are significant iconographic attributes, highlighting his ascetic nature as he roams the universe. The pādukas serve as objects of devotion and symbolise the presence of divinity.[6]

The weapons or astra he is holding in his hands are:
- Upper right hand: śaṅkha (conch), an attribute of Viṣṇu
- Middle right hand: padmā (lotus flower), an attribute of both Viṣṇu and Brahma
- Lower right hand: kamaṇḍalu (lotus pot), an attribute of Brahma
- Upper left hand: cakra (disk), an attribute of Viṣṇu
- Middle left hand: pāśa (noose or rope), an attribute of Śiva
- Lower left hand: gadā (club), an attribute of Viṣṇu

The sculpture is embellished with a highly ornate floriated design at the lower end, adding to its decorative appeal and showcasing the intricate craftsmanship involved in its creation. This design serves to enhance the overall aesthetic experience of the piece, further highlighting the divine nature of Dattātreya and the artistry of the sculptor.

[1] T. A. Gopinatha Rao, Elements of Hindu Iconography. Vol. I, Part 1. Madras: Law Printing House. 1916.

[2] Rigopoulos, Dattātreya: The immortal guru, Yogin, and avatāra: A study of the tranformative and inclusive character of a multi-faceted Hindo deity. Delhi: Sri Satguru. 2000.

[3] M.Y.S.U Fullerton Texts and trees: Ritual engagements with Audumbar Tree in the Dattātreya sampradāya, 1970. ScholarWorks. Available at: https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/concern/datasets/cz30q058n?utm_source (Accessed: 10 July 2025).

[4] Shri Guru Charitra. Available at: https://www.sdssc.in/pdf/Guru-Charitra.pdf (Accessed: 10 July 2025).

[5] Revaprasad, Dewedi. Natyashastra. Delhi: Aryan Books, 2015.



Ceramic Pot,

Stoneware, Kolkata, West Bengal, Eastern India, c.a. 1850-1890

Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

This vessel, more precisely ‘chutney’ pot as inscribed, is crafted from salt-glazed stoneware, a pottery technique known for its durable, non-porous body and distinctive glassy finish created by introducing salt into the kiln during firing. The pot features a unique cylindrical shape with a slightly tapering neck and broad shoulders, while its wide mouth allows for easy filling of chutney. The jar showcases a monochromatic design with tones of brown, depicting a village scene where men are gathered around a roaring fire, diligently preparing chutney or similar preparation in large quantities. On the opposite side, boxes labelled “INDIAN CHUTNEY”, while one man is seen assembling jars. Near the rim of the jar, the word “chutney” is inscribed in three different scripts: Arabic, Bengali, and Devanagari. This multilingual inscription reflects the rich tapestry of linguistic diversity prevalent in Indian communities and highlights the localised branding that often accompanies even industrially manufactured colonial products. With the arrival of British, specially after 1857 AD, these containers gained popularity by becoming more elaborate and enhancing the aesthetics of British dining tables. However, there is no evidence that chutney jars were made in India; they were produced outside probably and exported for storage. Crosse and Blackwell, a food manufacturing company from the Victorian era, specialised in making these kinds of pots. In 1840, they dispatched their first shipment to present day Kolkata.

When the British first arrived in the Indian subcontinent as part of the East India Company, their primary interest was in spices and food. Over time, they evolved from traders to colonial rulers, which likely influenced the production of condiments and the design of food storage jars. By the nineteenth century, these containers gained popularity among British families, becoming more elaborate and enhancing their dining tables.

However, there is no evidence that chutney jars were made in India; they were produced outside and exported for storage. Crosse and Blackwell, a food manufacturing company from the Victorian era, specialised in canned and bottled products like jams, pickles, and chutneys.[1] When the East India Company sent its first troops to India, they included a representative from Crosse and Blackwell. In 1840, they dispatched their first shipment to Calcutta (now known as Kolkata). This marked the beginning of a profitable export trade that transformed them into a multinational brand. By 1845, Abdool Fygo’s Chutney (named after the person for branding purposes) was added to their offerings, an early evidence of the reverence.[2]

In the Victoria and Albert Museum in London[3], there is pottery that is believed to be a storage jar for pickles, manufactured by a company called Samuel Moore and Co., which evokes a sense of familiarity and reverence. Additionally, another reference on the Redeemed Vintage website features a vintage Victorian chutney jar[4] from around 1890, showcasing remnants of Indian scenes.

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The pot features a unique cylindrical shape with a slightly tapering neck and broad shoulders, while its wide mouth allows for easy filling of chutney, making it both functional and aesthetically pleasing.

The jar showcases a monochromatic design with tones of brown, depicting a village scene where men are gathered around a roaring fire, diligently preparing chutney in large quantities. On the opposite side, boxes labelled “INDIAN CHUTNEY” hint at pride in local production, while one man is seen assembling jars. The figures exhibit indigenous features and attire, emphasising artisanal craftsmanship and cultural narrative.

Near the rim of the jar, the word “chutney” is inscribed in three different scripts: Arabic, Bengali, and Devanagari. This multilingual inscription reflects the rich tapestry of linguistic diversity prevalent in Indian communities and highlights the localised branding that often accompanies even industrially manufactured colonial products. This chutney pot not only serves as a functional item but also as a testament to the cultural heritage and craftsmanship that define its origins.



[1]Divya A, “London s Victorian-Era Pottery Find Unearths Tale of How Indian Food Became Popular in Britain,” Indian Express, January 17, 2017, https://indianexpress.com/article/research/londons-victorian- era-pottery-find-unearths-tale-of-how-indian-food-became-popular-in-britain-4480423/.

[2]Peter J. Atkins, “Vinegar and Sugar: The Early History of Factory-Made Jams, Pickles and Sauces in Britain,”, accessed July 26, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236848458_Vinegar_and_sugar_The_early_history_of_factory- made_jams_pickles_and_sauces_in_Britain.

[3]Victoria and Albert Museum, London, https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O150989/mustard-jar-wear- pottery-samuel/.

[4]Very Rare Victorian Advertising Chutney Pot c.1890, Redeemed Vintage, accessed July 26, 2025, https://redeemedvintage.com/product/very-rare-victorian-advertising-chutney-pot-c-1890/.



Sacrophagous Box,

Carved Sandalwood, Mysore, Southern India, c.a. 1860-1880.
Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

Mysore, known as the Sandalwood City of India[1], is famous for its extensive sandalwood forests and exquisite woodwork. A remarkable example is a sarcophagus box from the era of a British official, showcasing intricate carvings of captivating animal scenes. This craftsmanship is skillfully surrounded by elaborate foliage and reliefs of animals.

It was believed that the highly skilled gudigar families from the districts of Shimoga, Uttara Kannada, and Mysore are renowned for their exceptional craftsmanship in intricate sandalwood carvings.[2] Originally focused on creating deities, they later specialised in ornate boxes.[3] These boxes are distinguished by their interlacing foliage and scroll-like patterns, often embellished with figurines of animals and birds, reflecting the distinctive artistic tradition of Karnataka.[4]

The Mysore Gazetteer describes “Gudigar designs as intricate patterns adorning boxes and crafted items. These designs feature interlacing foliage and scrollwork that envelop medallions of Hindu deities or mythological subjects, sometimes including animals. The detailed work creates a rich, distinctly oriental ornamentation, leaving no part of the wood’s surface untouched.”[5]

Museums like Victoria and Albert Museum[6], provide evidence of the preservation of the sandalwood boxes from Karnataka, which were crafted in the 19th century, depicting intricate artwork.

Even in contemporary times, these kind of boxes is skillfully made from sandalwood, showcasing detailed designs, according to sources from NID Sagara.[7]

Numerous websites, including Christie[8] provide evidence of the preservation and sale of these sandalwood boxes from Mysore, which were crafted in the 19th century, depicting animal figurines and intricate scrollwork.

This box is crafted in a rectangular shape, resembling a casket, and features a high, detachable lid that adds an element of elegance. The exterior is richly adorned with a detailed design of foliated arabesques, showcasing intertwining vines, curling tendrils, and stylised flower-like petals. These intricate floral patterns create a decorative lattice effect, similar to traditional jali screens, which enhances the visual appeal by allowing light and shadow to dance across the surface.

Each lateral side of the box is divided into two sections, with one section being larger than the other. These panels present vibrant jungle scenes filled with intricately carved animals set among dense foliage. The elephants are depicted in mid-stride, symbolising strength, wisdom and royal dignity. Playful lions or leopards can be seen frolicking amidst the twisting vines, adding a sense of motion and life. Subtle hints of birds, such as peacocks or other kinds, may be suggested in the designs but are not prominently featured.

At the centre of one panel is a roundel, which may have once held a personal insignia or symbolic seal. This roundel likely served as a medallion of ownership or a mark of the craftsmanship behind this exquisite piece, further emphasising its value and significance.



[1] *“From Forest to Art: The Journey of Mysore Sandalwood Carving.”* iTokri, accessed July 31, 2025. https://itokri.com/blogs/craft-masala-by-itokri/from-forest-to-art-the-journey-of-mysore-sandalwood-carving

[2] “Sandalwood Craft – CS.” Scribd. Accessed July 31, 2025. https://www.scribd.com/document/54156538/Sandalwood-Craft-CS.

[3] “Sandalwood Carving from Mysore.” Medium, accessed July 31, 2025. https://medium.com/direct- create/sandalwood-carving-from-mysore-6a790ddd5a17.

[4] Rustam J. Mehta, *The Handicrafts and Industrial Arts of India* (Bombay: Taraporevala Sons, 1960).

[5] K. Balasubramanyam, ed., *Census of India 1961, Volume XI: Mysore, Part VII-A, Handicraft Survey Monographs – Crafts Using Wood as the Chief Raw Material* (Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1965).

[6] M. Puttapa Gudigar, *Casket*, late 19th century, carved sandalwood, made in Sorab, Karnataka, India, Museum no. 2006AN0058, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, accessed August 3, 2025, https://www.vandaimages.com/2006AN0058-Casket-by-M-Puttapa-Gudigar-Sorab-India-late-19th.html.

[7] National Institute of Design. *Sandalwood Carving – Sagara*. D’source Digital Learning Environment for Design, accessed July 31, 2025. https://dsource.in/sites/default/files/resource/sandalwood-carving- sagara/downloads/file/sandalwood-carving-sagara.pdf.

[8] *A Sandalwood Casket, Mysore, India, 19th Century*, Christie’s, accessed July 31, 2025, https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5826042.



Silver Pot,

Chennai, Tamil Nadu, Southern India,
c.a. 1865- 1885.
Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

This silver pot is crafted using the repoussé technique. It opens up like a flower in the moonlight. At the centre, framed within arch-like mandorlas, figures—possibly avatars of Viṣṇu or ethereal guardians of sacred space—are depicted in serene poses. Their limbs are gently extended, and they are adorned in flowing drapery that elegantly conveys a sense of both movement and stillness, capturing the divine essence of these figures. Along with the figures, the pot has a busy, continuous pattern of a delicate row of flower petals nestled along the bottom, while the neck of the pot is graced with a lavish garland of intertwining flowers and vines. The rim features a scalloped or lobed edge, mirroring the undulating petals of a fully bloomed lotus. This design, known in traditional Indian aesthetics as a “kamala mukha” (lotus mouth), is an object of both beauty and reverence.

In India, a silversmithing tradition established by Europeans in then Madras and Calcutta continues since 1840 onwards. In Madras, Silver artefacts (began with the craftsmanship of teapots) adorned with images of deities in temple processions, receiving the label of Swami (god) silver.[1] A name referred to a unique style of silver object from current day Chennai during the British rule, characterised by figures of Hindu deities. Swami silver was popularised by the English company P.Orr & Sons.

In British India, silver objects represented status and royalty. These beautifully crafted items not only served practical purposes but also reflected the rich cultural heritage and identity of the royals, highlighting the intricate relationship between craftsmanship and nobility during that time.

Silverware in India, reflecting a unique amalgam of taste, was produced from 1865 to 1940, continuing a silversmithing tradition established by Europeans in Madras and Calcutta from the 1760s. By the 1860s, Indian artisans developed distinctive decorative styles, showcasing a strong inclination for ornamentation. This included intricate patterns and, particularly in Madras, Silver artefacts (began with the craftsmanship of teapots) adorned with images of deities in temple processions, receiving the label of Swami (god) silver.[2] A name referred to a unique style of silverware from Chennai (formerly Madras) during the British rule characterised by figures of Hindu deities.

Swami silver was popularised by the English company P.Orr & Sons[3] for European use and produced in southern India by local jewellers and silversmiths, many of whom worked in workshops of European firms in colonial Madras, the main centre for its manufacture.[4]

This exquisite silver object, likely sourced from Chennai, features intricate embossments of divine figures that gracefully encircle the piece. Drawing inspiration probably from the renowned Swami Silver, it showcases remarkable craftsmanship and cultural significance.

This artefact is crafted using the repoussé technique, a sophisticated metalworking method where intricate patterns are shaped or embellished in relief by hammering and pressing from the reverse side. The silver pot opens up like a flower in the moonlight. Its round shape looks like the sacred lota, which is commonly used in Indian spiritual rituals.

At the centre, framed within arch-like mandorlas, figures—possibly avatars of Viṣṇu or ethereal guardians of sacred space—are depicted in serene poses. Their limbs are gently extended, and they are adorned in flowing drapery that elegantly conveys a sense of both movement and stillness, capturing the divine essence of these figures.

Along with the figures, the pot has a busy, continuous pattern of a delicate row of flower petals nestled along the bottom, that serves as a subtle reminder of nature’s beauty, while the neck of the pot is graced with a lavish garland of intertwining flowers and vines. This abundant floral motif evokes themes of fertility and the bountiful richness of the natural world, celebrating the interconnectedness of all life. Although the silver pot is characterised by its globular and round form, the rim features a scalloped or lobed edge, mirroring the undulating petals of a fully bloomed lotus. This design, known in traditional Indian aesthetics as a “kamala mukha” (lotus mouth), not only enhances the visual appeal of the piece but also symbolises purity and spiritual awakening, reinforcing its significance as an object of both beauty and reverence.

[1] Vidya Dehejia, Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2008)

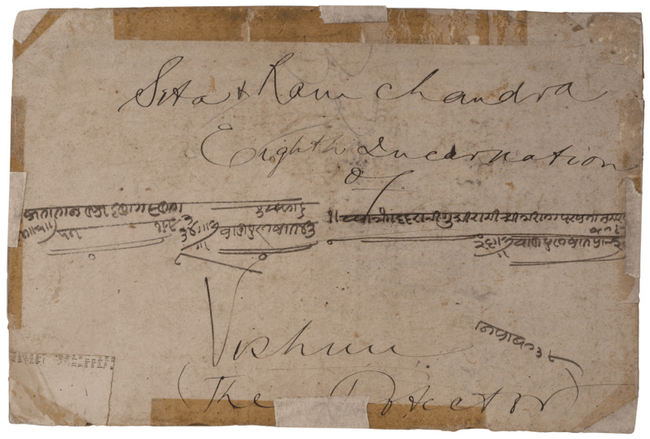
[2] Vidya Dehejia, Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2008)

[3] M3Michael Backman Ltd., Madras Colonial Indian Silver Water Pot (Lota), accessed July 25, 2025, https://www.michaelbackmanltd.com/object/madras-colonial-indian-silver-water-pot-lota/.

[4] Neil Shapiro, Match Safes from India, Match Safe Scholar, accessed July 25, 2025, https://matchsafescholar.com/assets/pdfs/articles/Match_Safes_from_India.pdf.







Seth-Malhara Ragini Miniature Painting,

Watercolour on Paper, Jaipur, Rajasthan,
North - Eastern India, c.a. 1820-1840
Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

Rāgamālā paintings are a unique art form that visually represent Indian classical music. They became important during the Indian painting Renaissance from the 16th to the 18th centuries. The Jaipur School of Art, which thrived in the 18th century, is well-known for its special style of Rāgamālā paintings.

In Indian music, rāgas are the basic principles of music. A rāga is a way of arranging musical notes, called svaras, each with its own meaning.1 Today, we count the six principal rāgas as follows: Bhairava, Mālakaunsa, Megha, Śrī, Hiṇḍola, and Dīpaka. The feminine aspects of these rāgas are called the rāgiṇīs, while their offshoots are to be known as rāgaputras, culminating in varying numbers of eighty-four to one hundred and eight.2

Malhara is intricately linked to the enchanting monsoon season and is classified under the principal rāga known as Megha. This exquisite miniature painting from Jaipur, titled Seth-Malhara Rāgiṇī, vividly illustrates the essence of this musical lineage. It is believed to be a derivative of the Malhara family, capturing the spirit and vibrancy of the rains through its intricate details and vivid colours, evoking the charm and beauty associated with the lush landscapes of the monsoon.

We do find a few familiar miniature paintings of the same region, i.e., Jaipur, preserved by various digital collections like Umma[3] and UCLA[4].

The painting features a captivating canto rendered in Devanāgarī script, meticulously arranged in a structured numerical order. Set against a vibrant yellow background, the text is enclosed within a rectangular box that is elegantly bordered in rich blue.

Canto:
राग सेतमलार मेध की सवैया बंदसोआसन स ंदर रूप है
उजस अंगववभ ंवतरमाया अव रखीनको पीनस सेइकसी
सन्अन ंप जटा वटिकाया जरी ववयोगवयिोर है जो गमरागको
रंगनी ही स ंष पावे याववधव राग मेघमसार की सेतम
तारारागनीयस्नामक हावै ३२

Translation:
The raga Seth Malhara, born of the great rāga Megha,
It is described in a savaiyya verse with a beautiful, noble form.
His limbs shine with divine ash, his yellow robe glows like lightning.
He wears charming curls, his matted locks artistically tied.
There is a trace of sorrow, a longing in his presence—

A mood akin to the colour of deep Rāga Gam (possibly referring to “Gambhira” or gravity).
In this way, Seth Malhara is known as the rāga’s rāginī, An embodiment of Megha Malhara’s emotional essence.

The numerical annotation “no. 32” likely refers to the sequence of the folios, positioning this painting within the chronological framework of 32 distinct works.

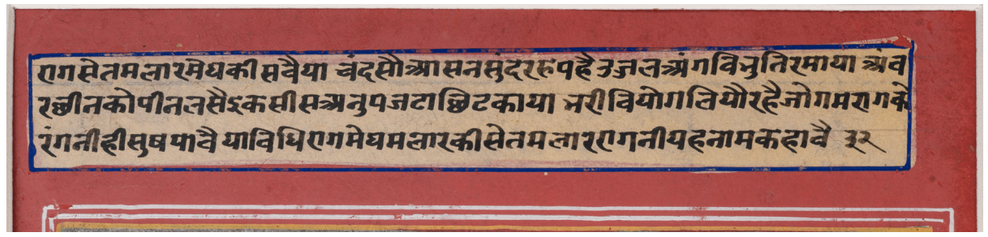
The painting is elegantly framed within a deep red rectangular border that enhances its significance. The scene is composed of one smaller canto alongside a larger, box-like shape featuring scenic elements. At the heart of this composition is a central seated figure, gracefully positioned beneath an intricately stylised tree canopy that adds to the serenity of the setting. This figure is attended by a second standing figure, while a third companion occupies a seated position, creating a balanced triangular arrangement that underscores a devotional or allegorical theme.

The central figure, depicted on a larger scale, radiates spiritual importance with a luminous halo encircling his head, suggesting he may represent a mystical or divine entity. Dressed in a vibrant yellow pītāmbara dhoti—as referenced in the accompanying verse—his portrayal lacks the ash markings or matted locks traditionally associated with such figures. This omission leads one to speculate that the canto might draw inspiration from a Rāgadhyāna of medieval texts. Behind him, his attendant holds ritual objects, such as a fly-whisk, indicating their reverence and adherence to ceremonial practices.

Opposite the central figure, a regal individual is depicted seated and playing a vīṇā —an instrument whose sound is described as “gambir,” a tone suggestive of depth and emotion. His attire and ornaments signify an aristocratic lineage, further establishing the hierarchical relationship within the narrative.

In the background, a palace emerges as a prominent feature, hinting at the royal prince’s origins and his journey to express his devotion and spiritual connection to the aesthetic. The clear blue sky above adds to the tranquil atmosphere, while below, a river flows in striking ice blue hues, woven through lush greenery and scattered shrubs that adorn the mid-level area, alongside thoughtfully rendered rocky formations.

On the back of the painting, there is a handwritten note that says, “Sitā and Ram Chandra, the eighth incarnation of Viṣṇu.” However, the painting does not clearly show Sitā or Ram, making it unclear how they are connected to the artwork and raising questions about why the note is there.



[1] O.C. Gangoly, Ragas and Raginis: A Pictorial and Iconographic Study of Indian Musical Modes (Bombay: Nalanda Publications, 1935).

[2] Klaus Ebeling, Ragamala Painting (Basel: Ravi Kumar, 1973).

[3] University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ragamala: Sethmalar Ragini, Accession No. 1981/2.42, accessed July 31, 2025, https://umma.umich.edu/objects/ragamala-Sethmalar-ragini-1981-2-42.

[4] UCLA Digital Library, Seth Malhara Ragini, Manuscript page from a Ragamala series, accessed July 31, 2025, https://digital.library.ucla.edu/catalog/ark:/21198/z1ps7t3z.



Silver Card Case,

Chennai, Tamil Nadu, Southern India,
c.a. 1880 - 1890.
Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

This silver case, probably a card holder features a beautifully scalloped edge, enhancing its aesthetic appeal. At the centre, Lord Viṣṇu is depicted in a sampada (standing with the feet together or even) posture, standing on a lotus pedestal. Surrounding the central figure are several smaller figures, which appear to be dancers or guardians, each captured in various dynamic poses, enriched by a foliated with a central motif of Kīrtimukha (face of glory). On top, at both ends of the piece are detailed figures in classic poses that attract attention. In the middle section, two guardian figures stand watch. On the right, a makara guardian is shown in añjali (salutation) mudra, bowing to the lord. On the opposite side, another figure appears captivated by the divine presence. In the foreground, to the left, one figure has a crown resembling a nāga, while next to it, a middle-aged man shows wisdom. In the centre, an ornate elephant sits on a narrow platform, adorned with jewellery that suggests a divine status. The entire scene features an array of botanical motifs that create a sense of life and movement and enhance the scene's spiritual quality.

The engravings beneath the representation of Viṣṇu feature the initials "W.H.C.," likely linked to a colonial official or a significant battlefield. One side references the Hastings Battlefield, possibly commemorating a historical victory, while the name "Hastings" might connect to a British official, though not necessarily Warren Hastings. Another side of the engraving bears the phrase "keep cracking," which could serve as an inspirational quote related to Hastings. Additionally, the markings "Juncal 691" and "Callo 555" are etched into the surface, possibly denoting important dates or military units. Overall, the piece reflects a blend of colonial history and personal legacies.

Silverware in India, reflecting a unique amalgam of taste, was produced from 1865 to 1940, continuing a silversmithing tradition established by Europeans in Madras and Calcutta from the 1760s. By the 1860s, Indian artisans developed distinctive decorative styles, showcasing a strong inclination for ornamentation. This included intricate patterns and, particularly in Madras, Silver artefacts (began with the craftsmanship of teapots) adorned with images of deities in temple processions, receiving the label of Swami (god) silver.[1] A name referred to a unique style of silverware from Chennai (formerly Madras) during the British Raj, characterised by figures of Hindu deities.

Swami silver was popularised by the English company P.Orr & Sons for European use and produced in southern India by local jewellers and silversmiths, many of whom worked in workshops of European firms in colonial Madras, the main centre for its manufacture.[2]

This silver object, which is either a tablet or a frame (features a tiny stand-like material attached to its corner, allowing it to stand upright). It has been acquired from the lands of Madras and is exquisitely unique due to its engravings. It could have served as a gift from one official to another or been purchased, as silverware was one of the most prestigious trading items during that period.[3] This artefact is crafted using the repoussé technique, a sophisticated method of metalworking where intricate patterns are created in relief by hammering and pressing from the reverse side.

The frame features a beautifully scalloped edge, enhancing its aesthetic appeal. At the centre, there is a divine figure depicted in a sampada (standing with the feet together or even) posture, standing on a lotus pedestal. This figure is likely Lord Viṣṇu, identifiable by his upper left hand holding a śaṅkha (conch) and a padma (lotus) in his right upper hand. His lower left hand is depicted in the varada (boon-giving) mudra, while the other hand is shown in abhaya (protection) mudra. The upper portion of the figure is bare, contrasting with the lower garment that is intricately embellished, topped with a crown.

Surrounding the central figure are several smaller figures, which appear to be dancers or guardians, each captured in various dynamic poses. They are arranged within a foliate niche, suggesting a sacred context. The central niche features a Kīrtimukha (face of glory), elegantly crafted with curling scrollwork, adding to the overall intricate design of this remarkable artefact.

On top, at both ends of the piece are detailed figures in classic poses that attract attention. In the middle section, two guardian figures stand watch. On the right, a makara guardian is shown in añjali (salutation) mudra, bowing to the lord. On the opposite side, another figure appears captivated by the divine presence. In the foreground, to the left, one figure has a crown resembling a nāga, while next to it, a middle-aged man shows wisdom. In the centre, an ornate elephant sits on a narrow platform, adorned with jewellery that suggests a divine status. The entire scene features an array of botanical motifs, including curling vines and blooming lotuses, each petal carefully crafted to create a sense of life and movement and enhance the scene's spiritual quality.

About the engravings, beneath the Viṣṇu's representation, the initials "W.H.C" are inscribed, which may denote the initials of an official connected to the colonial era or a significant battlefield site. On one side of the engraving, there is a reference to the Hastings Battlefield, likely commemorating a historical victory that took place there. The name "Hastings" could also suggest a connection to a British official (not potentially referring to Warren Hastings, a notable figure in British colonial history and the first Governor-General of India).

Additionally, on another side of the engraving, the phrase "keep cracking" appears, which may be interpreted as an inspirational quote or a badge of honour associated with the person named Hastings.

Furthermore, on the lengthwise section of the engraving, the numbers "Juncal 691" and "Callo 555" are etched into the surface. These could represent important dates, locations or military units related to the history of the figures or events commemorated by the engraving, although the exact significance of these engravings remains uncertain. Overall, the piece encapsulates a rich tapestry of colonial history, personal legacies, and battlefield memories.

[1] Vidya Dehejia, Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2008)

[2] Neil Shapiro, Match Safes from India, Match Safe Scholar, accessed July 25, 2025, https://matchsafescholar.com/assets/pdfs/articles/Match_Safes_from_India.pdf.

[3] Vidya Dehejia, Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj



A Kashmiri, Papier-Mâché Vase,

Possibly Srinagar, Kashmir, Northern India,
ca. 1870 - 1890.
Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

Papier mache, derived from the French term “papier mâché,” translates literally to “chewed or mashed paper.” [1]This versatile craft encompasses various forms that utilise processed paper, often featuring ornamentation and use of vivid colours over smoothly finished surfaces created from paper pulp or layered papers.

Kashmir is recognised as the primary centre for this craft, which has Persian origins.[2] In the 14th century, the notable Muslim saint Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani introduced the art of papier mache to the Kashmiri people[3]. Today, large quantities of these intricately designed articles are produced annually in Srinagar[4], celebrated for their vibrant colours and picturesque aesthetics.

Historically, the craft was referred to as kar-i-qalamdan, primarily used for embellishing cases that housed pens and other small personal items. It was also known as kar-i-munaqqash, highlighting its role in decorating smooth surfaces made from paper pulp or layers of polished paper. Contemporary creations include lampstands, cups, boxes, and vases[5], all showcasing the intricate craftsmanship involved.

Prominent institutions, such as the National Crafts Museum and Hastkala Academy[6] in New Delhi and the Salar Jung Museum in Hyderabad[7], along with the Victoria and Albert Museum of London[8] internationally, house significant pieces of papier mache art, preserving the rich legacy of this traditional Kashmiri craft.

The vase features a stunning baluster-like shape, gracefully resting atop a flat, circular base that is beautifully painted in a deep, rich blue. Its body is a vibrant canvas of polychromatic hues intermingled with delicate gold accents. The exterior of the vase is meticulously decorated with eight distinct panels, each alternatingly depicting spotted Demonic figures alongside Righteous Human Rulers.

These figures are elegantly seated upon traditional Indian low thrones, each supported by large, oval bolsters that add to the regal atmosphere. The demonic rulers are often shown accompanied by a variety of companions, including fellow demons and formidable wild animals such as serpents, bears, and tigers. These creatures, representing carnivorous and omnivorous threats, symbolise the struggle and chaos of the natural world, highlighting their fierce and untamed condition.

In contrast, the Human Rulers are depicted in opulent settings, being pampered and entertained by a host of attendants as well as ethereal, winged angels. The overall composition is meticulously set against a dense floral backdrop, rich with details that add depth and texture. This intricate artwork conveys a captivating allegory that explores the dichotomy of Evil and Good, engaging viewers with its vibrant storytelling and complex symbolism.

The base, neck, and interior rim are intricately adorned with vibrant polychrome fretwork bands, featuring elegant cusped arches that are characteristic of traditional Kashmiri decorative arts. These motifs reflect the region’s rich artistic heritage and skilful craftsmanship.

Complementing this stunning design are a pair of side handles to hold the vase with ease, artfully fashioned in the shape of mythical dragons, each boasting a distinctive spiky crest. These handles are embellished with a lavish gilt finish and meticulously painted in an array of colours, showcasing an elaborate floral meander pattern that adds to the overall opulence of the piece.

[1] Sahapedia, *Papier-Mâché Craft (Kashmir)*, accessed August 4, 2025, https://www.sahapedia.org/papier-mache-craft-kashmir.

[2] T. N. Mukharji, *Art Manufactures of India* (Calcutta: Government Central Museum, 1888).

[3] In Photos: Papier-mâché – the Labyrinth of a Dying Art,” *Free Press Kashmir*, February 6, 2019, https://freepresskashmir.news/2019/02/06/in-photos-papier-mache-the-labyrinth-of-a-dying-art/.

[4] T. N. Mukharji, *Art Manufactures of India*.

[5] D. N. Saraf, *Arts and Crafts*, *Jammu and Kashmir* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1987).

[6] *Paper Mache (J&K)*, National Crafts Museum & Hastkala Academy, accessed August 4, 2025, https://nationalcraftsmuseum.nic.in/paper-mache-jk.

[7] “Photo Gallery,” *Salar Jung Museum*, accessed August 4, 2025, https://salarjungmuseum.in/photo-gallery.html#pid=31.

[8] “Papier-mâché Bowl, Kashmir, India, 1910,” *V&A Images*, accessed August 4, 2025, https://www.vandaimages.com/2006AT6677-Papier-mache-bowl-Kashmir-India-1910.html.





Photographic Album,

Carved Sandalwood, Possibly Ahmadabad, Gujarat, Western India, c.a. 1901-1904.
Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

Wood has been masterfully shaped in a myriad of forms to cultivate the vibrant heritage of Gujarat. A remarkable piece dating back to the colonial era is a sandalwood photographic album. This sandalwood photographic album displays excellent craftsmanship with intricate carvings on all the sides with a beautifully designed lock.

Focusing on the front-facing carved panel, the composition features two medallions, with the larger outer medallion enclosing a smaller inner medallion. At the heart of the inner medallion, the esteemed figure of Lord Krishna is depicted. In the outer medallion, groups of men and women partake in the lively dandiya dance, a celebrated folk dance from Gujarat. Expanding on the larger outer medallion, the apsaras and men are playing musical instruments. The back panel of the album features a prominent oval medallion surrounded by four smaller circular ones. The central medallion vividly depicts a fierce goddess engaged in battle, symbolising the conflict between good and evil. The smaller medallions display men and women in dynamic dance postures, celebrating the triumph of good. The rendition of animals like parrots and mythical reindeer is shown. The spine of the panel prominently features oval-shaped medallions at its centre, where a captivating rendition of Garuḍa, the vahana of Lord Vishnu, with a pair of elephants facing each other. The lock of the album resembles a blossoming lotus, gracefully unfurling its intricate design, and captures the elegance of nature. The whole album is busy with elaborate floral vines, intricate lotus motifs, and intertwining foliage that create a rich tapestry of design and has floral borders that frame the piece, making it visually appealing and showcasing the careful craftsmanship.

A remarkable piece, dating back to the era of a British official, is a sandalwood photographic album that showcases the artistry of this craft. Its cover is intricately carved with elaborate designs, portraying captivating mythological scenes that bring the wood to life. Woodwork in Gujarat showcases a diverse range of artistic expressions, including carving, sculpture, painting, lacquer work, silver and gold plating, inlay work, and marquetry. This variety provides wood artists with a vast canvas to explore and showcase their creative talents.[1]

Woodcraft in Gujarat also experienced significant growth, beginning with the construction of houses, havelis, temples, and eventually expanding to encompass various decorative and utilitarian items.[2] Gujarat being situated on the port land made trade easier from there and hence gained popularity in the handicrafts sector. This region is believed to have produced crafts that served as archival documentation for the British, leading them to take these items as souvenirs to their foreign lands.[3]

This impressive artefact displays excellent craftsmanship with intricate carvings on all sides with a beautifully designed lock.

Focusing on the front-facing carved panel, the composition features two medallions, with the larger outer medallion enclosing a smaller inner medallion. At the heart of the inner medallion, the esteemed figure of Lord Krishna is depicted. He holds his beloved flute delicately to his lips, creating an impression of melodic harmony as he plays. Krishna's serene facial expression, coupled with his cross-legged posture, exudes tranquillity. He is attired in a pitambara dhoti and adorned with a mukuṭa, enhancing his divine presence. Surrounding him, delicate floral buds bloom gracefully, adding a sense of vitality to the scene.

In the outer medallion, the energy of devotion comes alive with groups of men and women rendered in alternating arrangements, each caught in various postures and attitudes as they partake in the lively dandiya dance, a celebrated folk dance form of Gujarat. Their vibrant movements suggest that as Krishna plays his flute, his devotees respond with joyful celebration. The men are dressed in lower garments and mukuṭa, embellished with ornamental details. The women, equally adorned, wear upper and lower garments, styled into decorative buns, highlighting their cultural elegance. The medallion is further enhanced with elaborate floral vines, intricate lotus motifs, and intertwining foliage that create a rich tapestry of design.

Expanding on the larger outer medallion, on the upper right and left sides, a pair of women is depicted in a graceful bent position, playing the trumpet. They are adorned with striking feathers attached to their backs, suggesting their identity as celestial apsaras, enhancing the ethereal quality of the scene.

On the lower right and left sides, a pair of men can be seen in a relaxed cross-legged stance, energetically playing drums, contributing to the celebratory ambience.

The album has floral borders that frame the piece, making it visually appealing and showcasing the careful craftsmanship.

The back panel of the album features a prominent oval medallion surrounded by four smaller circular ones. The central medallion vividly depicts a fierce goddess engaged in battle, symbolising the conflict between good and evil. She is shown riding her majestic lion vahana, adorned with ornate jewellery and a mukuṭa. In her numerous arms, she wields a gada, a sword, and the head of a defeated devil while capturing his throat and hand with the other two arms. Her vahana is also killing another devil.

In the mid-ground, two additional devils prepare to fight, wielding swords and shields. The backdrop is richly detailed with valleys, mountains and trees that enhance the drama of the battle. Above, vidyamaladharadeva offers a garland to the goddess, symbolising her victory and reinforcing her divine status.

The smaller medallions display men and women in dynamic dance postures, celebrating the triumph of good. Surrounding these scenes are vibrant depictions of animals, like parrots and a mythical reindeer, enriching the artwork's symbolism of nature and divinity. Again, the rest is being rendered with floral foliage.

The spine of the panel prominently features oval-shaped medallions at its centre, where a captivating rendition of Garuḍa, the vahana of Lord Vishnu, is depicted in an anthropomorphic form. In this portrayal, Garuḍa is shown with an impressive posture, carrying a shankha in his left hand and a gada in his right, symbolising the divine attributes of Vishnu - the power and authority.

Enhancing the visual narrative, a pair of elephants is elegantly showcased at the sides of the panel, facing each other, conveys a sense of movement, adding an animated quality to the overall composition. Throughout the spine, intricate floral and foliage designs are rendered.

The lock of the album resembles a blossoming lotus, gracefully unfurling its intricate design, and captures the elegance of nature.

[1] R. K. Trivedi, *Census of India 1961, Volume V, Gujarat, Part VII-A(2): Wood Carving of Gujarat* (Ahmedabad: Superintendent of Census Operations, Gujarat, 1963)

[2] V. S. Parmar, *Wood Carvings of Gujarat* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 2001).

[3] *Material Culture for Global Markets: The Craftspeople of Kutch and Their Artisanal Heritage*, accessed July 22, 2025, https://studylib.net/doc/13209553/material-culture-for-global-markets---the-craftspeople-of











Bhavachakra,
Linen, Thangka, Tibet, Himalayan Region
c.a 1890 to 1905.
Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

Buddhism became predominant in Tibet in the 6th century. From the 7th century onwards, while extensive literary activity began and the composition of Tibetan literature was in progress, a corresponding development in art also took place.[1]

This Thangka depicts the Bhavachakra, which refers to the 'Wheel of Life or Wheel of Samsara.' Thangka paintings are Tibetan Buddhist scroll paintings on cloth. The Buddhist cosmology model of Bhavachakra is based on the Abhidharma literature of the Theravada and Sutrayana vehicles.[2] Bhavachakra is a real picture of Dharma taught by Buddha.

Many such museums have housed the painting of Bhavachakra, one such is been showed here is the Philadelphia Museum of Art[3]

The large figure of Yama, the Lord of Death, is striking with its red and orange colours. It has one face, two hands, a crown of skulls, and flaming orange hair. Yama holds the circular wheel of existence near its mouth, ready to swallow it at any moment. This represents how quickly things can change or end. Yama has three eyes that symbolise impermanence, harm, and non-self as it grips the wheel. The five skulls represent freedom from old age, sickness, death, decay, and rebirth.[4] The bone ornaments are notable features in Tantric art and echo the costumes of demons from Indian mythology. Skull cups and bone ornaments show the awareness of impermanence, which is vital in Buddhist teachings.[5]

At the centre of the wheel are the three poisons, vividly represented by three animals: a black pig, symbolising ignorance; a venomous snake, embodying anger; and a fierce rooster, signifying desire. These creatures are the fundamental sources of suffering in life, tirelessly driving the wheel of existence. Each animal is depicted biting tightly onto the tail of the one in front, creating a relentless cycle—greed, hatred and blindness intertwining in an unending dance of turmoil.

The Second Layer of the wheel illustrates the concept of Karma[6], depicting the results of one's actions. On the left half, it portrays beings ascending to higher realms, symbolising the positive outcomes of virtuous actions. Conversely, the right half shows beings descending into lower realms, highlighting the negative consequences of non-virtuous actions. This duality emphasises that all actions are motivated by the triad of ignorance, desire, and hatred, ultimately shaping the experiences of suffering or joy in one's existence.

Outside of that is a circle of five sections portraying the six realms of existence: god, asura, human, animal, ghost and hell. All of these sectors represent the level of suffering in terms of birth. Each realm offers unique lessons and experiences, reflecting the complexity of existence and the interplay of suffering and enlightenment. Each is separated by an orange dividing line.

The outermost circle is composed of 12 scenes which represent the Twelve links of the Dependent Arising sequence, the links in this chain of cause and effect, starting at the top and moving in a clockwise direction[7]:

- A blind old man holding the stick, which represents Ignorance.
- A monkey in a tree shows the lasting impact of actions, which carry into future lives.
- Travellers in a boat depict how consciousness enters the womb, developing into a body.
- An empty house symbolises the emergence of the six senses in the growing embryo.
- A couple holding each other represents contact, allowing for communication as the senses mature.
- A man shot in the eye represents the ability to feel pain and pleasure, helping individuals understand the results of their actions.
- The triangular shape with fire and a man joining hands suggests a path to escape the cycle of existence.
- A woman giving alcohol to a man symbolises desire caused by attachment, leading to further entanglement. The image of a man grabbing fruit illustrates grasping, showing how strong attachments complicate life.
- The pregnant woman symbolises new life. Grasping and attachment at death become seeds of karma, carried into the next life.
- A woman in childbirth represents the growth of these karmic seeds.
- Finally, the individual is represented by a person carrying a heavy bundle, which is symbolic of the burden of karma that the individual created during the past lives.

At the top right and left of the painting, the pair of Buddhas is standing with their left hand in a teaching pose and with the index finger of their right hand pointing to a moon on the other side. The moon symbolises liberation. Buddha is pointing out that freedom from pain is possible.

The Bhavachakra is a diagram that shows the cycle of life. It explains how our actions, or karma, impact us and how ignorance leads to suffering. It highlights the possibility of freedom through spiritual practice and breaking the twelve links of dependent origination.

[1] *Sacred Arts of Tibet: Art from the Roof of the World*, Educator Workshop presented by the Asian Art Museum, Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture, April 21, 2001.

[2] "Wheel of Life," *Himalayan Art Resources*, accessed August 1, 2025, https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=6023.

[3] Artist/maker unknown, *Bhavacakra, The Wheel of Existence*, 19th or early 20th century; colors on cloth mounted on cloth; image painted surface approx. 110.5 × 80 cm (overall 111.4 × 188.6 cm); Gift of Mrs. George S. G. Cavendish, 1961; Accession No. 19612252; Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

[4] Deepak Dong Tamang, "A Comparative Study of Bhavacakra Painting," *Historical Journal* 12, no. 1 (2020): 60–70, https://www.nepjol.info/index.php/hj/article/download/35447/27934.

[5] Peter Della Santina, *The Development and Symbolism of Tibetan Art and Iconography* (Singapore: Tibet House, 1995).

[6] Deepak Dong Tamang, "A Comparative Study of Bhavacakra Painting."

[7] "Wheel of Life (Bhavachakra)," Himalayan Art Resources, object no. 591, accessed August 1, 2025, https://www.himalayanart.org/items/591.



A FINE KUTCH SILVER TEAPOT WITH RAISED FLORAL AND SWIRLING VINE DECORATION,
Possibly Bhuj, Kutch, Western India, ca. 1870 - 1890.
Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

This silver teapot was produced in the 19th century, Kutch, colonial India. Repoussé and chasing techniques were used to shape this teapot. Repoussé gave rise to the flora in low relief while chasing carved the depths. The elongated neck, dome top with a finial, an elaborate handle, and an elegant spout, makes the teapot monumental.

This teapot might have belonged to a larger tea service set, with a milk jug and a sugar cup. Such sets were much desired and used at the end of the 19th century in India as well as Europe. English and Dutch material cultures from the 19th century show traces of similar objects. The joy of conquer paired with the delight of consuming the 'Oriental', was at its peak in the second half of 19th century. This silver teapot is a product of that desire. The Custom of tea drinking has been a part of British culture, which gave birth to tea set of teapot, milk jug, and sugar cup made in silverware. On ceremonial or celebratory occasions, silver teapots were to illuminate the cheerful spirit of the morning or afternoon tea. Europeans or Indians of Anglicised taste had an eye for silverware of this kind; in fact, they commissioned many of such silver pots in a variety of shape, subjects and style.

Ornamental raised foliage runs through the entire visible surface of the teapot. An inverted S-shaped handle holds the pot with the upper end curling inward and the tail end turning outward. The curved spout terminates gracefully with a V-cut opening. Insulators in the handle are to prevent any heat flow when a tea is poured, keeping it suitable for holding and serving. A dome-shaped hinged lid is attached to the top, upon which a polished ball-shaped finial is mounted. The dome is covered in worked foliage. The end of the dome is encircled with upward acanthus leaves followed by a silver convex ring. This ring of the lid matches the upward facing ring attached to the neck. Right below the neck opening is another row of downward acanthus leaves.

The base of the pot is spherical with a circular stand, like most teapots but the neck is unusually elongated. At the center of the pot exterior, a shield-shaped medallion protrudes, which is left unmarked. Such medallions were often engraved with the name of the patron in many other similar pieces or sets. In contemporary visual culture, similar shapes also held coats of arms. The interplay of oxidised black low areas and shining silvery highlight areas enhances the brilliance of silver, making it look further lustrous.

The Victoria and Albert Museum in London has many similar pieces and sets. A particularly notable set made by Oomersee Mawjee is available to view online, resembles the technique and appearance of foliage of this piece, though the forms and details vary a little. The British Museum has a large collection of silverware made by the same silversmith from Bhuj, as well as many detailed drawings of this silverware, which illustrate the preparatory drawing phase in the process of making these silver pots.

Vidya Dahejia, in Delight in design: Indian silver for the Raj, referred to similar silverware from 1880-90, made in Kutch. Kutch became a significant centre in India for decorated silverware during the second half of the 19th century, alongside Kashmir, Lucknow, and Calcutta.[1] The craft of silverware and its trade particularly flourished in Kutch during the reign of Mirza Raja Sawai Khengarji Bahadur.[2] The elaborate foliage in view typically resembles the Kutch style, particularly of famous Oomersee Mawjee and the less-known Raghavji Mawjee.

The high silver content and minimal portion of other metals helped retain the malleability of silver. Once the basic form of the pot was brought into shape after preliminary repoussé of the foliage, black wax and resin were poured inside the hollow spaces.[3] This mixture creates a semi- hard core, which allows chasing without perforation and also provides support for the fine-tuning of the repoussé work. After completion, the filling material was melted down.

The silver sourced from Bombay, Mecca, or Zanzibar, worked by artisans of Kutch, rendered Mughal foliage, and an unmarked medallion of European shape make this artefact a product of the global confluence of culture.[4] A handle with insulators, a hinged lid, and a long spout make this pot ideal for serving tea. This teapot blends the boundaries between art, everyday objects, design, and aesthetics. The rhythmic curling foliage entraps the viewer's gaze, holding it within the web of the swirling foliage of this artefact. Yet this is not just a mere ornate teapot of visual delight but an artefact of history, culture, consumption, and craftsmanship.

[1] *Dehejia, Vidya. Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2008.*

[2] https://www.josephcohenantiques.com/collections/kutch-silver

[3] Object Description, Accession Number :- IS.162, 163 and 164-2007, https:// collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O140165/teapot-mawji-oomersi/

[4] DWynyard R.T. Wilkinson, Indian Silver 1858-1947, 1999: The Chameleon Press Ltd., 68











A Model of Tiruchirappalli,

Rock Fort, Pith Wood, Tamil Nadu,
Southern India, c.a. 1899-1920
Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

The Tiruchirappalli Rock Fort, dramatically rising above the plains of the Kaveri River in Tamil Nadu, is among the most iconic fort–temple complexes in South India. The fort sits atop an 83- metre-high monolithic rock[1] that has, for centuries, shaped the city's religious and political identity. The Pallava ruler Mahendravarman I (r. 600–630 CE) first commissioned a cave temple on this site. Unlike his later Shaiva leanings, this early cave temple was unusually dedicated to the Trimurti—Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—attesting to the transitional nature of religious and political patronage during his reign.[2]

Over time, successive dynasties fortified and embellished the hill. The Nayakas of Madurai, particularly Viswanatha Nayak (r. 1559–1564 CE) and his successors such as Chokkanatha Nayak, recognised the strategic advantage of the naturally elevated rock. They transformed the site into a formidable fortress, surrounding it with ramparts, gateways and bastions that gave it the character of an impregnable stronghold.[3]

At the heart of the complex are two temples: the Ucchi Pillayar Temple, perched atop the summit and dedicated to Ganesha, and the Thayumanaswami Temple, positioned midway up the hill and consecrated to Shiva.[4] The Rock Fort thus embodies layered architectural idioms: Pallava rock-cut beginnings, Chola and Pandya sanctification of shrines, and expansive Nayaka-Vijayanagara additions in the form of mandapas and stuccoed towers.

The miniature model under discussion, made of pith (Indian cork or sola), is an ivory-like delicacy, lightweight nature and capacity for intricate carving. The model has a label at the base that says, —was produced by the workshop of T. S. Nagarathinam Pillay & Bros. It exemplifies a unique architectural and symbolic ensemble—an expression of both spiritual devotion and political authority

Comparable examples of this Rock Fort model are preserved in the Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad[5] (an image has been attached) though with some modifications in assemblages, but significantly it has the label which mentions, T. S. Nagarathinam Pillay & Bros., Pookulam, Trichinopoly, which marked its relevance with this particular model.

[1] Leandro Alegsa, "Tiruchirappalli Rock Fort," *AlegsaOnline.com*, February 21, 2022, accessed August 21, 2025, https://da.alegsaonline.com/art/100078.

[2] K. R. Srinivasan, *Cave Temples of the Pallavas* (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1964).

[3] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India 1500–1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[4] "Tiruchirappalli Rock-Fort: A 19th-Century View (1870 Photo)," *Past-India*, posted February 2, 2025, accessed August 21, 2025, https://www.past-india.com/photos-items/tiruchirappalli-rock-fort-a-19th- century-view-1870-photo/

[5] "*Explore the Museum*," Salar Jung Museum, accessed August 21, 2025, https://www.salarjungmuseum.in/explore-museum.html





Silver Cigar or Cheroot Case,

Pondicherry, Southern India, c.a. 1880 to 1890.
Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

Puducherry or Pondicherry is often referred to as the “Little France of India.”[1] As a French colonial possession from 1674, Puducherry developed into a cultural and artistic hub where European tastes and Indian craftsmanship intersected. The region is particularly notable for its high density of artisanal traditions, including metalwork and silver craft.[2]

This particular object appears to be a rare example of Pondicherry silverwork. However, its stylistic affinities also resonate with the celebrated silver traditions of Trichinopoly or Tiruchirappalli.[3] Trichinopoly, another former French stronghold until its capture by the British in 1761, was renowned for its finely chased silver objects, often decorated with dense and intricatve floral patterns.[4] The present object shares this meticulous workmanship, suggesting either a direct influence or possible production in the region.

The object’s form—a large, four-sided cheroot or matchbox case with a hinged cap in Chinoiserie style5, a European decorative style that flourished in the 17th and 18th centuries. Derived from the French word chinois (“Chinese”), Chinoiserie reflected Europe’s fascination with the exoticism of East Asia. In French taste, particularly during the Rococo period, such motifs became highly fashionable, and artisans in colonial outposts often adapted them for luxury items destined for elite patrons. The silver cheroot case demonstrates this cross-cultural dialogue, where Indian metalworkers employed local chasing techniques to articulate designs that resonated with French aesthetic preferences.

The object is structured into three distinct horizontal registers, each adorned with elaborate figurative and ornamental motifs. The top register depicts dynamic combat scenes in which lions attack deer, a common motif in both Indian and European art. The lion, often associated with power and kingship, is here shown asserting dominance over the more vulnerable deer, suggesting themes of strength, control, and vitality. The Middle Panel portrays riders mounted on richly caparisoned elephants and horses, framed within scrolling floral motifs. These figures likely reference royal processions, evoking the grandeur of Indian courtly spectacle. The inclusion of elephants—symbols of strength, wisdom, and royal authority—underscores the object’s connection to themes of power and ceremonial splendour, while the representation of Peacocks symbolises beauty, prosperity, immortality and serenity. Furthermore, the Lower Panel depicts the same motifs as the upper panel.

The lush foliage framing the panels enhances the sense of abundance and continuity, reflecting both indigenous symbolic systems and European taste for ornate surface decoration. At the end, this lavish decoration elevates it beyond a mere functional item, transforming it into a status object that encapsulates both colonial tastes and local artisanal virtuosity.

[1] *“Puducherry Crafts Heritage,”* Crafts Council Puducherry, accessed August 21, 2025, https://craftscouncilpuducherry.org/

[2] Neil Shapiro, *Match Safes from India*, Match Safe Scholar, accessed August 21, 2025, https://matchsafescholar.com/assets/pdfs/articles/Match_Safes_from_India.pdf.

[3] “*Rare, French-Colonial, Indian Gilded-Silver Cheroot Box*,” Michael Backman Ltd, accessed August 21, 2025, https://www.michaelbackmanltd.com/object/pondicherry-indian-silver-box/



Walking Stick,

Carved Sandalwood, Mysore, Karnataka, Southern India, c.a. 1870 to 1890.
Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

The walking sticks has a long and fascinating history that extends across civilisations. From the earliest times, people employed walking sticks not merely as aids for travel or support, but also as ornamental objects that conveyed status and authority. Among shepherds and travelers, the stick served as a practical tool, yet over time it came to embody broader cultural meanings—strength, power, and eventually social prestige.[1]

By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the walking stick had become an indispensable accessory for the European gentleman, an extension of his dress and demeanour.[2] In the nineteenth century, when both Europeans and Americans were eager to display refinement through fashion, the walking stick emerged as a symbol of elegance and social standing.[3] Within this global culture of walking sticks, the Indian examples—especially those from Mysore—gain particular importance.

Sandalwood carving flourished across several parts of India, but it was in Mysore that the craft reached its highest refinement, largely because the princely state exercised a monopoly on sandalwood production. The woodcarving tradition here was sustained by hereditary communities of Gudigars, particularly in Shivamogga and Mysore, who specialised in producing idols, statues, souvenirs, and decorative mementoes in sandalwood.[4] Their style was marked by intricate detail, layered relief, and dense surface ornamentation, often leaving little uncarved space. Here, we have one such artefact from Mysore, a walking stick in Sandalwood carving.

Royal and colonial collections attest to the prestige of such objects. For instance, the Royal Collection Trust preserves a sandalwood walking cane from Mysore, presented by Vijayarama III Gajapati Raju Pusapati, Maharaja of Vizianagaram, to King Edward VII (then Prince of Wales) during his Indian tour of 1875–76. [5]

Similarly, the Official Catalogue of the Delhi Durbar Exhibition of 1902–1903 records the display of an elaborately carved sandalwood walking stick valued at Rs. 100, exhibited by the Mysore artisan Yusuf Ali and Sons [6]. Although the catalogue does not reproduce an image of the piece, its mention reflects the high esteem such objects commanded in colonial exhibition culture.

Museums in India also safeguard important collections of walking sticks. The Salar Jung Museum in Hyderabad holds approximately 250 pieces, displayed in a dedicated gallery. These are made of diverse materials—cane, Malacca cane, sandalwood, ivory, fishbone, jade, glass, and leather—and often embellished with semi-precious mounts. The collection, largely drawn from the personal holdings of the Salar Jung family[7], underscores the wide range and decorative ambition of walking sticks in South Asia.

The present artefact is a simple yet elegant sandalwood walking stick, cylindrical in form, proportionally long, and tapering slightly toward the base. The lower end is reinforced with a metal ferrule (probably brass or copper alloy) to guard against wear. Unlike crook- or knob-handled canes, this example is conceived as a staff-form stick, uninterrupted in its line, with a warm reddish-brown tone characteristic of polished sandalwood.

The surface is richly worked. The shaft is carved in high relief, encircled by alternating registers of flora and fauna. Paisley-like creepers and dense foliage fill the spaces, while animal motifs such as peacocks and deer appear in elegant procession. These figurative bands are punctuated by geometric borders of beaded and knotted design, which provide rhythm and separation to the composition. The result is a highly ornamental yet balanced design, fully wrapping the surface of the stick.

Although functional in form, this walking stick was clearly conceived as a luxury object rather than for everyday use. Its refined workmanship and intricate ornament suggest it was intended as a curio, souvenir, or prestigious gift—a testament both to Mysore's carving tradition and to the broader global culture of the walking cane.

[1] Fashionable Canes, "History of Canes," *Fashionable Canes*, accessed August 26, 2025, https://fashionablecanes.com/pages/about-canes

[2] E. P. Richardson, *Walking Sticks of the Eighteenth Century, Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* of the City of Detroit 23, no. 1 (October 1943): 6–8. Accessed August 26, 2025, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41501004

[3] Melody Amsel-Arieli, "Nineteenth Century Walking Sticks," *Journal of Antiques & Collectibles*, December 27, 2021, accessed August 26, 2025, https://journalofantiques.com/digital-publications/joac-magazine/features/nineteenth-century-walking-sticks/

[4] Dhanajaya S. et al., *Availability of Wood for Handicrafts in Karnataka* (Bengaluru: Environmental Management and Policy Research Institute, 2023).

[5] "India – Walking-stick," sandalwood carved with the ten avatars of Vishnu, animals, and foliage in spiral bands; RCIN 11429, Royal Collection Trust, accessed August 26, 2025, https://www.rct.uk/collection/11429/walking-stick

[6] George Watt, I*ndian Art at Delhi, 1903: Being the Official Catalogue of the Delhi Exhibition, 1902–1903* (Delhi: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1903).

[7] Salar Jung Museum, "Walking Sticks," Galleries Central Block, Ground Floor, accessed August 26, 2025, https://www.salarjungmuseum.in/Walking-Sticks.html





The Hour of Cowdust,

Handmade Paper with Original Colour and Real Gold, Kangra, Himachal Pradesh, Northern India c.a.1825-1850.
Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

In the mid-18th century, Northern India experienced invasions by Nadir Shah and subsequently by Ahmad Shah Abdali. During this tumultuous time, the Kangra School of Painting emerged in Haripur-Guler, patronised by Raja Govardhan Chand (1744 to 1773) and was renowned for his appreciation of the arts.[1]

In the Kangra school of miniature painting tradition, the portrayal of Kṛṣṇa and his life is a central subject for artists. Kṛṣṇa's life, from childhood to his later years, serves as a perennial inspiration for poets and artists alike, representing the ideal of human character and endeavour.[2] In this artwork, we see a depiction of Kṛṣṇa and his deep love for cows, reflecting his alternate name, Gopāla, which means "the protector of the cows."[3] This painting beautifully captures his Kṛṣṇa- līlā, the divine pastimes of Kṛṣṇa about why the note is there.

This painting reflects a common theme in various Indian painting traditions, most effectively shown in the Kangra school. A similar work, created between 1810 and 1815, is in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and was made using the same technique.[4]

This exquisite miniature painting is titled "The Hour of Cowdust." It captures a deeply evocative moment at dusk when cowherds guide their cattle back to the village. This time of day is often celebrated in poetry for its romantic and optimistic qualities, emblematic of reunions—husbands with their wives and cows with their calves.[5] In this enchanting scene, women lean gracefully out of intricately carved windows, their expressions filled with warmth and anticipation as they welcome the returning men. The phrase "Hour of cowdust" poetically encapsulates the moment when the golden glow of the setting sun dances in the dust kicked up by the cows' hooves, a phenomenon that the artist skillfully captures, reflecting the joy and contentment intrinsic to this hour.[6]

The composition features elegant pillared arches, ornate balconies, and slender, ethereal minarets that frame the setting. This marble architectural setting resembles the Rajasthani art tradition, while the slopes of the roof give an idea of the Punjab Hills, as the hilly region is surrounded by cold and snow, for which this kind of sloping roof is needed to be constructed. In the foreground, a serene procession of cows, adorned in alternating tones of alabaster, muted grey and dusky brown, gracefully makes its way toward a grand central gateway. The cows, with their gentle and discerning eyes, embody a sense of calm as they wend their way peacefully through the ornate gates, entering an unearthly yet beautifully rendered village. Behind this tranquil movement, women stand atop steps and balconies, gesticulating and observing with a keen sense of community.

Kṛiṣhṇa, depicted on the right side of the painting, distinguished by his radiant crown adorned with a vibrant crest of peacock feathers and his striking light-blue complexion, holding a blooming pink coloured lotus, adorned and wearing the pītāmbara dhoti. Surrounding him, the group of herdmen are being rendered, wearing the turban of red and green colour, holding a stick to march the cows to their place and positioned in different movements.

In the distance, rolling hills of pale green lie beneath a golden sky, imparting a soothing depth typical of the hilly miniatures from the Pahari art tradition. There is are appearance of Chinese- like clouds, giving an inspiration from the Mughal art tradition. There is a depiction of lush green shrubs and trees as well.

The overall composition is masterfully balanced; cows lead the viewer's gaze horizontally across the scene while the vertical lines of architecture and figures draw it upward, creating a harmonious flow. The figures in the painting possess refined, porcelain-like faces—smoothly modelled with sharp chins, long, narrow eyes, and noses elegantly aligned with their foreheads. Their flat hair surfaces add to the stylised beauty of the figures, enhancing the painting's overall aesthetic, a typical stylistic feature of Kangra art.





[1]Dr. M. S. Randhawa, Kangra Paintings on Love (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, originally published 1962; reprint 1994).

[2]Priyatosh Banerjee, The Life of Kṛṣṇa in Indian Art (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Government of India, 1994).

[3]Kṛṣṇa's Mercy. 2018. Three Reasons Kṛṣṇa Is Known as Gopala. January 28, 2018. Accessed August 1, 2025.

[4]The Family of Nainsukh, The Hour of Cowdust, c. 1810–1815, opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 38 × 31.9 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, accession no. 22.683.

[5]Joan Cummins, Indian Painting: From Cave Temples to the Colonial Period (Boston: MFA Publications, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2006).

[6]Ibid.





Carved Sandalwood Casket,

Sandalwood, Mysore, Karnataka, Southern India, c.a. 1870-1890.
Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

Mysore, celebrated as the Sandalwood City of India[1], occupies a central place in the history of Indian woodcraft. The region's abundant forests and courtly patronage enabled a thriving tradition of sandalwood carving, which developed into one of the most refined forms of decorative art in southern India. A striking example of this legacy is a rectangular sandalwood casket produced in the colonial period, whose surface is entirely enveloped in relief carving—figural scenes, floral motifs, and animal forms intricately interwoven into a dense ornamental vocabulary.

The artisans of such artefacts were the Gudigar families of Shimoga, Uttara Kannada and Mysore, hereditary artisans whose skill in working with sandalwood became legendary.[2] While their practice initially revolved around producing ritual images of deities, by the late nineteenth century they expanded to crafting ornate caskets or boxes, objects that combined devotional iconography with the demands of elite patronage.[3] The sandalwood carving of Lord Kṛṣṇa on a swing, preserved today in the Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad[4] (an image has been attached) is an early example of this transition from sacred to secular commissions.

The Mysore Gazetteer offers a valuable contemporary account of the Gudigar style, describing their designs as "interlacing foliage and scrollwork enveloping medallions of Hindu deities and mythological subjects, sometimes ornate by animals." Such dense coverage of surface, leaving no space unadorned, became the signature piece of Mysore's sandalwood carving. The visual effect is at once ornamental and narrative, a fusion of flora, fauna and figural scenes into a seamless decorative continuum.[5]

Sandalwood was highly valued in southern India, prized not only for its fragrance but also for its religious and ritual significance. In Mysore Palace[6], a special "casket room was created to store collections of these boxes, gathered over successive royal reigns. Their importance went beyond the local court. At the Delhi Exhibition of 1902–1903 (also known as the Delhi Durbar Art Exhibition), Mysore caskets were prominently displayed, with one listed as lot no. 36-A in the official catalogue.[7] Exhibitions like this presented Mysore sandalwood carving not just as a regional tradition but as a craft that represented India on a wider stage.

This rectangular sandalwood casket demonstrates the distinctive qualities of Mysore woodcarving. Its form is elegant yet functional, with a detachable, slightly tapered lid that enhances its visual appeal. The lid is carefully divided into five sections. At the centre is Veṇugopāla—a form of Kṛṣṇa—shown with his flute, his cow, and a small group of attendants, all framed beneath a wide trefoil arch. The placement of Kṛṣṇa at the centre signals the devotional character of the box, linking it to Vaishnava traditions that were particularly strong in southern India. At the same time, his representation is highly ornamented, showing the blending of sacred subject matter with luxury craftsmanship.

The four surrounding trapezoid panels depict seated figures beneath cusped arches. These figures are integrated into dense backgrounds of foliage, which also carry depictions of animals such as peacocks, elephants, deer and tigers. The inclusion of these animals reflects both symbolic and decorative intentions: peacocks, often linked to beauty and divinity; elephants, associated with royal power; deer, with gentleness; and tigers, with strength and ferocity. Together, they create a visual vocabulary that balances nature, kingship and the sacred world.

The elongated panels on the sides of the casket continue this dialogue. Richly dressed male and female figures are positioned within arched niches. Their posture and attire suggest associations with the courtly class. The appearance of women is significant, pointing to a recognition of gender roles and female presence within Mysore's cultural imagination. The heavy foliage that surrounds them symbolises fertility and abundance, while also serving as the unifying ornamental pattern across the object. The panels are framed by the layer of daisy flowers with tendrils, evoking the aesthetic essence.

The casket rests on legs carved as lion's claws at the front, while the hind legs are plainer and extended with simple wooden supports. The lion claw feet evoke ideas of power, protection and majesty, linking the object once again to both divine and royal spheres.

Even in contemporary times, these kind of boxes is skillfully made from sandalwood, showcasing detailed designs, according to sources from NID Sagara. [8]



[1] *"From Forest to Art: The Journey of Mysore Sandalwood Carving."* iTokri, accessed July 31, 2025. https://itokri.com/blogs/craft-masala-by-itokri/from-forest-to-art-the-journey-of-mysore-sandalwood-carving

[2] "Sandalwood Craft – CS." Scribd. Accessed July 31, 2025. https://www.scribd.com/document/54156538/Sandalwood-Craft-CS.

[3] "Sandalwood Carving from Mysore." Medium, accessed July 31, 2025. https://medium.com/direct- create/sandalwood-carving-from-mysore-6a790ddd5a17.

[4] *Salar Jung Museum*, Salar Jung Museum, accessed August 24, 2025, https://www.salarjungmuseum.in/

[5] K. Balasubramanyam, ed., Census of India 1961, Volume XI: Mysore, Part VII-A, Handicraft Survey Monographs – Crafts Using Wood as the Chief Raw Material (Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1965).

[6] Casket Room, Mysore Palace, Government of Karnataka, accessed August 24, 2025, https://mysorepalace.karnataka.gov.in/casket_room.html.

[7] George Watt, *Indian Art at Delhi, 1903: Being the Official Catalogue of the Delhi Exhibition, 1902–1903*, with illustrations by Percy Brown (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1903).

[8] National Institute of Design. Sandalwood Carving – Sagara. D'source Digital Learning Environment for Design, accessed July 31, 2025. https://dsource.in/sites/default/files/resource/sandalwood-carving- sagara/downloads/file/sandalwood-carving-sagara.pdf.

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