



Walking Stick, Sandalwood, Mysore, c.a. 1870 to 1890

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

¹Fashionable Canes, “History of Canes,” *Fashionable Canes*, accessed August 26, 2025, <https://fashionablecanes.com/pages/about-can-es>

²E. 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>

³Melody 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/>

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 (an image has been attached)



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. (an image has been attached) 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

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

⁵"India – Walking-stick," sand-al-wood 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>

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

drawn from the personal holdings of the Salar Jung family⁷, 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.

⁷Salar Jung Museum, “Walking Sticks,” *Galleries* → *Central Block, Ground Floor*, accessed August 26, 2025, <https://www.salarjungmuseum.in/Walking-Sticks.html>