



Calling Card Case, Sandalwood, Mysore, c.a. 1800 - 1820

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the etiquette of 'calling' was a firmly established social norm, and calling (or visiting) cards played a crucial role in introductions, invitations, and visits.¹ By the 19th century, these cards had become a vital aspect of social etiquette in Europe and the Americas. They served practical purposes, such as arranging social visits and sharing information, but they also functioned as status symbols, enabling select individuals to gain entry into exclusive social circles while keeping others at bay.²

To carry these calling cards, specially designed cases were created as an essential accessory.³ These cases were often beautifully fashioned; a gentleman's card case was slightly smaller than a lady's, allowing it to fit conveniently in his pocket. In terms of design, ornamentation on calling cards was generally deemed in poor taste. However, as the 19th century progressed, more colourful and decorative designs became increasingly popular.⁴ The cases themselves were crafted from materials such as silver, polished wood, ivory, tortoiseshell, papier-mâché, or mother-of-pearl,

¹Margaret G. Powling, "It's All in the Cards," *Discover Your Ancestors*, Issue 014, June 2014, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://www.thegenealogist.co.uk/featuredarticles/discover-your-ancestors/periodical/14/its-all-in-the-cards-4489/>

²Elizabeth Moore, "Cornerstone Contributions: Calling Cards—An Introduction From the Past," *DHR (Virginia Department of Historic Resources)* (blog), March 2, 2022, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/blog-posts/cornerstone-contributions-calling-cards-an-introduction-from-the-past/>

³Margaret G. Powling, "It's All in the Cards," *Discover Your Ancestors*, Issue 014, June 2014, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://www.thegenealogist.co.uk/featuredarticles/discover-your-ancestors/periodical/14/its-all-in-the-cards-4489/>

⁴Vic, "The Etiquette of Using Calling Cards," *Jane Austen's World* (blog), May 21, 2007, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://janeaustensworld.com/2007/05/21/the-etiquette-of-using-calling-cards/>

with decoration reflecting the owner's social status.⁵ Typically, most cards featured a name and title and sometimes included the name of a house or district.⁶

This artefact is crafted from sandalwood sourced from Mysore, known as the Sandalwood City of India⁷, renowned for its vast sandalwood forests and exquisite woodwork. The traditional art of woodcarving in Mysore has been maintained by hereditary communities of Gudigars, predominantly in Shivamogga and Mysore, who are skilled in creating idols, statues, souvenirs, and decorative items from sandalwood.⁸ Their craftsmanship is characterised by intricate detail, layered relief, and rich surface ornamentation, often leaving minimal uncarved space.

According to the Mysore Gazetteer, the Gudigar style is described as featuring "interlacing foliage and scrollwork enveloping medallions of Hindu deities and mythological subjects, often adorned with animals." This elaborate surface coverage, which leaves no space unadorned, became a hallmark of Mysore's sandalwood carving. The visual outcome is both ornamental and narrative, blending flora, fauna, and figural scenes into a cohesive decorative experience.⁹

This object is rectangular and elongated in shape, characterised by softly rounded edges and a detachable lid, meticulously designed to fit comfortably in the palm or pocket. The craftsmanship showcases delicate openwork and low relief techniques, transforming the surface into a rich and rare tapestry of intricate ornamentation.

⁵Margaret G. Powling, "It's All in the Cards," *Discover Your Ancestors*, Issue 014, June 2014, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://www.thegenealogist.co.uk/featuredarticles/discover-your-ancestors/periodical/14/its-all-in-the-cards-4489/>

⁶Claire Green, "Calling Cards and Visiting Cards: A Brief History," *blog*, Hoban Cards, September 12, 2016, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://hobancards.com/blogs/thoughts-and-curiosities/calling-cards-and-visiting-cards-brief-history>

⁷"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>

⁸Dhanajaya S. et al., *Availability of Wood for Handicrafts in Karnataka* (Bengaluru: Environmental Management and Policy Research Institute, 2023).

⁹K. 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).

The case is adorned with repeated motifs of foliate scrolls, rosettes and clusters resembling floral buds, creating a seamless ornamental field, generating a rhythmic compartmentalization that evokes the detailed margins found in traditional miniature paintings.

At the centre of the design, small relief panels prominently feature deities, embodying symbols of prosperity and divine protection that resonate with both indigenous and colonial audiences. The central figure is likely to be Viṣṇu, as evidenced by the attributes he holds: the chakra in his upper right hand and the śaṅkā in his upper left hand—elements conventionally associated with Viṣṇu iconography. His other two hands appear to be in restful gestures, suggesting a moment of tranquillity amidst the divine display. Viṣṇu is lavishly adorned, being elevated by an anthropomorphic figure resembling Garuḍa, his vahana. Garuḍa, depicted with wings extending from either side, symbolises strength and devotion.

Surrounding these principal figures are four attendants, depicted as showering their reverence upon Viṣṇu. These attendants are artistically illustrated to be uplifted by two lower attendants, each bearing one of the divine beings with care, further emphasising the devotion characteristic of such imagery.

The lid of the card case features two female figures skillfully crafted to appear as if they are playing the vīṇā, a musical instrument that embodies divine energy and creativity. Notably, their lower bodies are fashioned with tails resembling birds, suggesting an ethereal quality to these kīṃnarī figures that blend the divine with the earthly. They represent music, love, and celestial beauty. Between them, a kīrtimukha—a fierce and protective guardian figure—serves as a focal point, reflecting the merging of cultural motifs.

Additionally, a thin wooden strip is attached to the card case, bearing a carved inscription reading "ANNA" accompanied by two star-shaped motifs at either end. This detail hints at its origin and use, suggesting it may have belonged to a colonial lady of significance.

Overall, this card case exemplifies a European object of etiquette, which has been indigenized through the rich traditions of Indian carving. The result is a hybrid artefact that encapsulates the complexities and nuances of colonial material culture, celebrating both local artistry and the influence of European customs hence making it as rarest.