



Photographic Album, Sandalwood, Possibly Ahmadabad, Western India, c.a. 1901-1904.

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.

Wood has been masterfully shaped in a myriad of forms to cultivate the vibrant heritage of Gujarat woodwork. 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 mukuta, 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

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

²V. 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>.

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, vidyamalaharadeva 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.