



Sacrophagous Box, Sandalwood, Mysore, Southern India, c.a. 1860-1880.

Mysore, known as the Sandalwood City of India¹, 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

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>.

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

⁵K. 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).

Museums like Victoria and Albert Museum⁶ (an image has been attached), 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. (an image has been attached)⁷

Numerous websites, including Christie⁸ 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

⁶M. 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>.

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

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

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.