



Sandalwood Casket, Sandalwood, Mysore, c.a. 1870-1890.

Mysore, celebrated as the Sandalwood City of India¹, 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, Hyderabad⁴ (an image has been attached) is an early example of this transition from sacred to secular commissions.

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>.

⁴Salar Jung Museum, Salar Jung Museum, accessed August 24, 2025, <https://www.salarjungmuseum.in/>



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 Palace⁶, a special “casket room” (an image has been attached, LEFT) 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 (an image has been attached, RIGHT) Exhibitions like this presented Mysore sandalwood carving not just as a regional tradition but as a craft that represented India on a wider stage.



36-A
Portion of Lid of Mysore Sandalwood Work Box.

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).

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

⁷George 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).

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. (an image has been attached)⁸



⁸National 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>.