

WOOD

Wood has long been a popular art medium for centuries in India. The earliest examples of the Shunga period date back to the 1st and 2nd Century B.C. Kashmir also produced some very early works.

However the traded pieces of wooden carvings are of a much later period. Although the medium was used across the country the wooden works from Tamil Nadu and Kerala stand out prominently in the world of Indian wood works. In Kerala, wood was extensively used in both temples as well as households. The temple architecture that comprised of both external as well as internal decoration were of spectacular quality. At times there also existed a tradition of painting the wooden pieces using vegetable dyes. These polychrome figures especially the early ones from the 16th century are a mesmerizing sight. The earliest dated wood work from the region is the ceiling panel in Katinamkulam that goes as far back as the 13th Century. Great art experts like Stella Kramrisch, Douglas Barrett and Prince Aschwin Lippe did pioneering research on Kerala wood. Museums like the British Museum, the Art Gallery of Western Australia, the Trivandrum Museum, Trichur Museum and the Honolulu Academy of Arts possess prized treasures of art from this region. The state can most certainly be called the capital of wood carving in India.

In Tamil Nadu the Chettiar merchants played a vital role in the development of wood working. This wealthy community migrated back to their homeland in the 18th and 19th Centuries and built palatial homes primarily made of top quality teak wood. The entrance to their homes comprised of a large intricately carved door. Large wooden pillars supported the house. These door panels are today a collector's delight. Apart from these homes, the temples also created extensive work. From the late 18th Century onwards large chariots were created. These wagons are humongous in size and were made using small individually carved wooden carvings which were interlocked skillfully. The wagons being gigantic in size were left in the open courtyard with a thatched roof. Due to this a large part of the wagon got destroyed over time, preserving only the protected works. Over the years the temples began auctioning the redundant chariots which finally made their way to eager art collectors. These carvings are small to medium in size and a perfect fit for modern homes. The subjects are usually interesting mythological themes. Apart from the chariot pieces large vahanas or vehicles were also created. These were brought out once a year during temple festivals to carry the deities. They were hand pulled and taken around the streets. Some of these were covered with polychrome, traces of which still remain.

By the mid 19th Century ardent patronage for this medium declined. Due to this most works that were made from then onwards lacked the quality and detailing seen in earlier times. With the arrival of folk and tribal styles the classical idiom soon became a part of history. Today ardent collectors acquire the finest available early wood works which still stand as reminders of a bygone era.