

A
MONOGRAPH
ON
WOOD CARVING

IN THE
BOMBAY PRESIDENCY

BY

J. A. G. WALES, M.A. (Oxon.), I. C. S.

1902.

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He is also indebted to Mr. O. Burns, Acting Principal of the Sir J. J. School of Art and Industries, Bombay, for a long and interesting note on the technical aspects of the industry and its prospects.

A

MONOGRAPH ON WOOD CARVING

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CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION.

The number of wood-carvers in the Bombay Presidency is very small; carving, whether in the shape of decorated house fronts, ornate furniture or artistic knick-knacks is essentially a luxury of the rich.

The popular idea of Indian wood-carving is that it is confined to the production of elaborately carved boxes and other articles of sandalwood. Bombay blackwood furniture, however, has for generations been famous in the Presidency, and many admirable instances of carving as applied to house decoration, both ancient and modern, are extant in almost every large town.

Wood-carving as an indigenous art is carried on only in Ahmadabad, Surat and Kánara; the wooden toys produced in the Belgaum District, which are mentioned later on, can scarcely be called works of art, and carving in Bombay is an imported industry.

It is interesting to conjecture the reasons why the art flourishes in these places alone. In the first two cases, the industry is confined to the cities and is not found in any other part of the districts of which they are the chief towns; in the Kánara District the art is carried on in four or five towns only.

There are natural reasons why Kánara should be the seat of a wood-carving industry; blackwood, ebony and sandalwood; the favourite woods of the Indian carver, are found there in abundance.

Ahmadabad, for more than a century and-a-half a royal city and the residence of a wealthy Court, attracted to itself artists of every kind to minister to the luxury of the Gujarát kings; the buildings they erected in their capital still testify to the skill and taste of the artists of the day. Of Ahmad, the founder of Ahmadabad (1411—1443), it is recorded that, "gathering merchants,

weavers, and skilled craftsmen, he made Ahmadabad a centre of trade and manufacture." His grandson, the celebrated Mahmud Begara (1459—1511), followed close in his footsteps, and at the end of the 16th century Ahmadabad carvers were famous. During the disorders of the 18th century, the trades and manufactures of Ahmadabad declined, until at the time of its transfer to the British they were almost non-existent. Gradually, however, they revived and with them returned the old skill in wood-carving.

From the beginning of the 16th century Surat was a great trading centre and a considerable sea port. Its wood work was famous when the English founded their factory there, and "desks, cabinets and boxes neatly polished and embellished" were among the chief articles of export at the end of the 17th century. Apparently the industry underwent the same vicissitudes here as in Ahmadabad. Local tradition ascribes the introduction of sandalwood carving to the middle of the last century; if carving in this wood was not done before that time, its rise to favour has been most rapid, for little else is now done or has been done for some time past in Surat.

CHAPTER II.

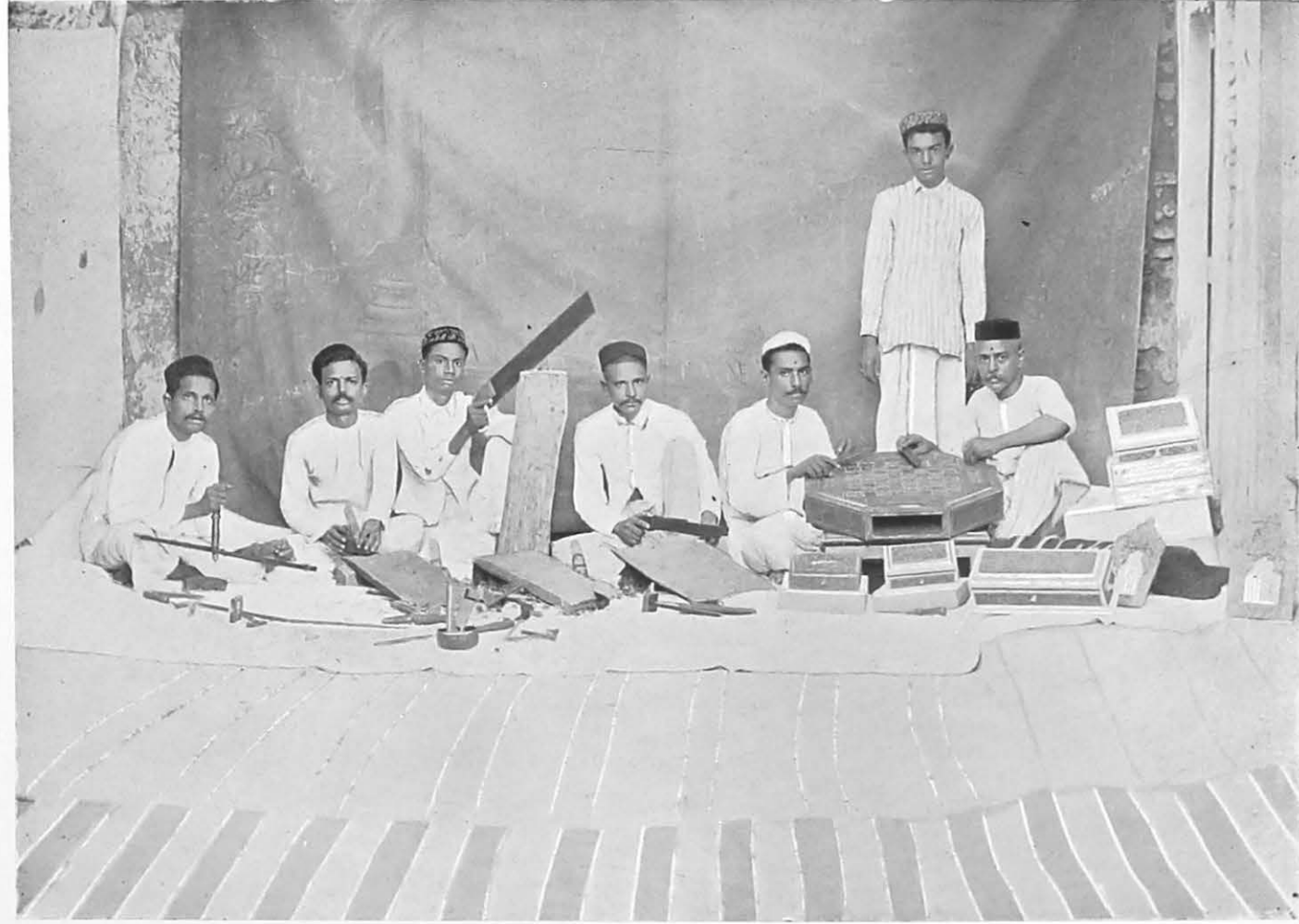
MATERIALS AND TOOLS.

Sandalwood is the favourite wood of the Kánarese and Surat carver. The sandalwood tree is common in Kánara, being indigenous to Southern India; it is grown also in Gujarát, but it is said that, when grown out of its proper home, it loses to a great extent the heart-wood which alone is used in carving. Sandalwood enters largely into the religious ceremonies of the Hindus; in Kánara the carvers give the sawdust to Brahmans for use as incense; it is also scattered on funeral pyres. They sell the chips to the distillers of sandal oil.

Sandalwood grows in the drier parts of the Sirsi and Siddápur Tálukas and Mungod Petha in the east of the Kánara District. It is cut up into billets 2½ feet long and nine inches or less in diameter, barked and sent down by cart to the coast. The sap-wood is white and useless, the heart-wood is of a yellowish brown, light or dark according to the size and age of the tree, strongly-scented, very hard, close-grained and oily. In a good piece of sandalwood measuring nine inches in diameter, there will be from five to seven inches of heart-wood. The price paid varies from Rs. 3-4-0 per 24 lbs. for small pieces to Rs. 10-12-0 for large pieces.

Other woods used are ebony, blackwood and teak; all three are found in abundance in the Kánarese forests, and the two last grow also in Gujarát. Carving in teakwood is done principally in Ahmadabad; the teak is obtained for the most part from Bulsár in the Surat District, the market for the Dángs timber. In Ahmadabad boxwood from Northern India, and in Surat 'sevan' wood (*Gmelina arborea*) are also used to a small extent.

As a general rule, the work is done in one kind of wood only, but sandalwood, blackwood, and ebony are occasionally used in combination or with ivory.

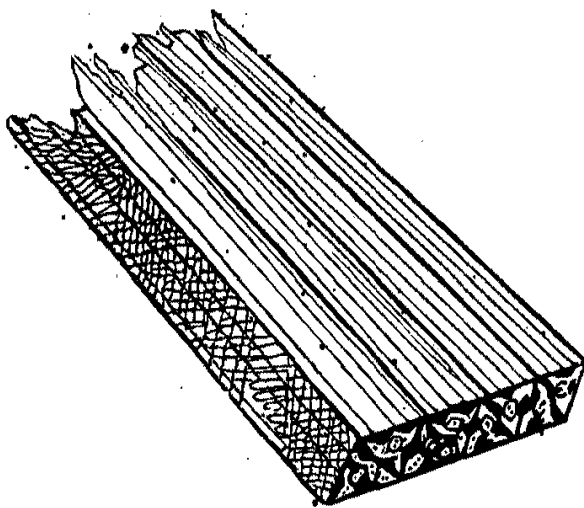


Group of Surat Carvers.



Surat carver at work.

Surat sandalwood boxes are very commonly decorated with borders of ivory, ebony, and a species of inlaying known locally as 'sadeli.' Long narrow strips of ivory, ebony, tin, green bone and 'pattan' (an Indian red wood), cut generally into a triangular shape, are fitted together with marvellous accuracy; the pattern of course appears in the cross section.



The stick so made is lozenge-shaped; it is cut up into pieces of about six inches in length and these are placed side by side with the result that a slab is produced having the patterns on the edge as many times as there are pieces of the sticks. Strips are then cut off about $\frac{1}{16}$ th of an inch thick and kept ready for use.

The tin is shaped from tin wire by being pressed between two metal rollers, in one of which a triangular groove is cut; the other components are shaped with a plane of the necessary form. This sadeli can only be made in the rains as the glue* (*saras*) made of hides cannot be kept sufficiently moist at any other time of the year.

Some idea of the fineness of the work and the thinness of the strips employed may be gathered from counting the pieces in a cross section; in a hexagon the side of which measured $\frac{3}{16}$ ths of an inch I counted 69 distinct pieces, 33 of tin and 9 each of ebony, green bone, ivory and pattan.

The tools used are in every case of the most primitive character, consisting chiefly of handleless chisels and gouges. The Kánarese carvers use four sizes of the former and three of the latter, varying in breadth from $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch and about six inches long; a piece of wood serves the purpose of a mallet. Though made of European steel, the tools are prepared by local blacksmiths and sharpened by the carvers themselves. Even for perforated work these tools, assisted by the common bow drill, are alone used; the fretsaw is never employed. When it is necessary to give a round shape to the piece of wood on which the carving is to be done, as in the case of umbrella handles, &c., the lathe is used. The Kánarese lathe, known as 'kadává' is worked by means of a bow string with raw deer hide, a turn being taken round the stick with the bow string; the lathe itself consists only of two heavy blocks of wood with strong spikes on the inside to form a point for the stick to revolve on. The bow is pulled

backwards and forwards by the workman who holds the chisel in his left hand and steadies it with his foot, thus doing unaided work which ordinarily requires two men.

To clear away chips and polish the work a piece of dry coconut husk cut transversely is used in Kánara; the oil in the wood gives the necessary polish. In Surat an ordinary boot brush serves the same purpose.

The Surat carver uses a considerable number of tools. I found that, besides the ordinary carpenter's tools such as planes, saws, &c., the leading artist of Surat had ten carving gouges (tānkṇā) varying in breadth from $\frac{1}{16}$ th of an inch to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch, sixteen carving chisels (pāniā), the finest being little more than a sharpened needle, the coarsest about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch, eight pattern chisels and gouges (chitayānā tānkṇā), and three veining chisels (ār). The pattern chisels and gouges, as I have called them, are punches; they are used to decorate the plain spaces between the carving in relief; one makes a cut like a cross and gives a diapered effect, another makes a circle, another a dotted segment of a circle and so on. The veining chisels are angular gouges, shaped like a V,* and are used to cut the veins of the leaves in floral designs. These last were the only tools with handles and even with their handles they only measured some four inches; the angle at which they are used makes a handle almost indispensable. All the tools, with the exception of the saws which are of English manufacture, are local productions: they are made of English steel, many by the carver himself, others by the blacksmith. The mallet is a piece of heavy dark wood about 9 inches long and a little over an inch square.

CHAPTER III.

CARVERS AND THEIR WORK.

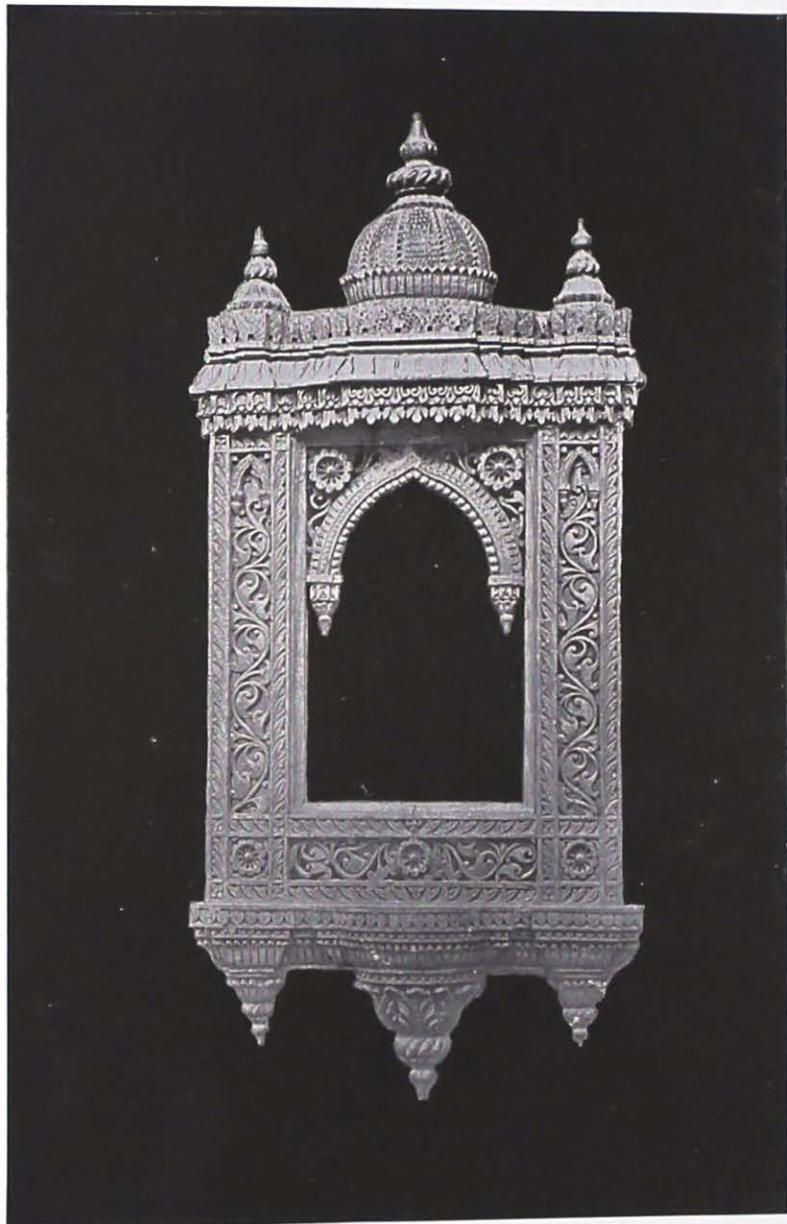
KANARA.

According to the Dictionary of Economic Products, "Kánara is the chief home of the sandalwood carving industry, and there, for upwards of a century, the handicraft has been well known and the art handed down from father to son."

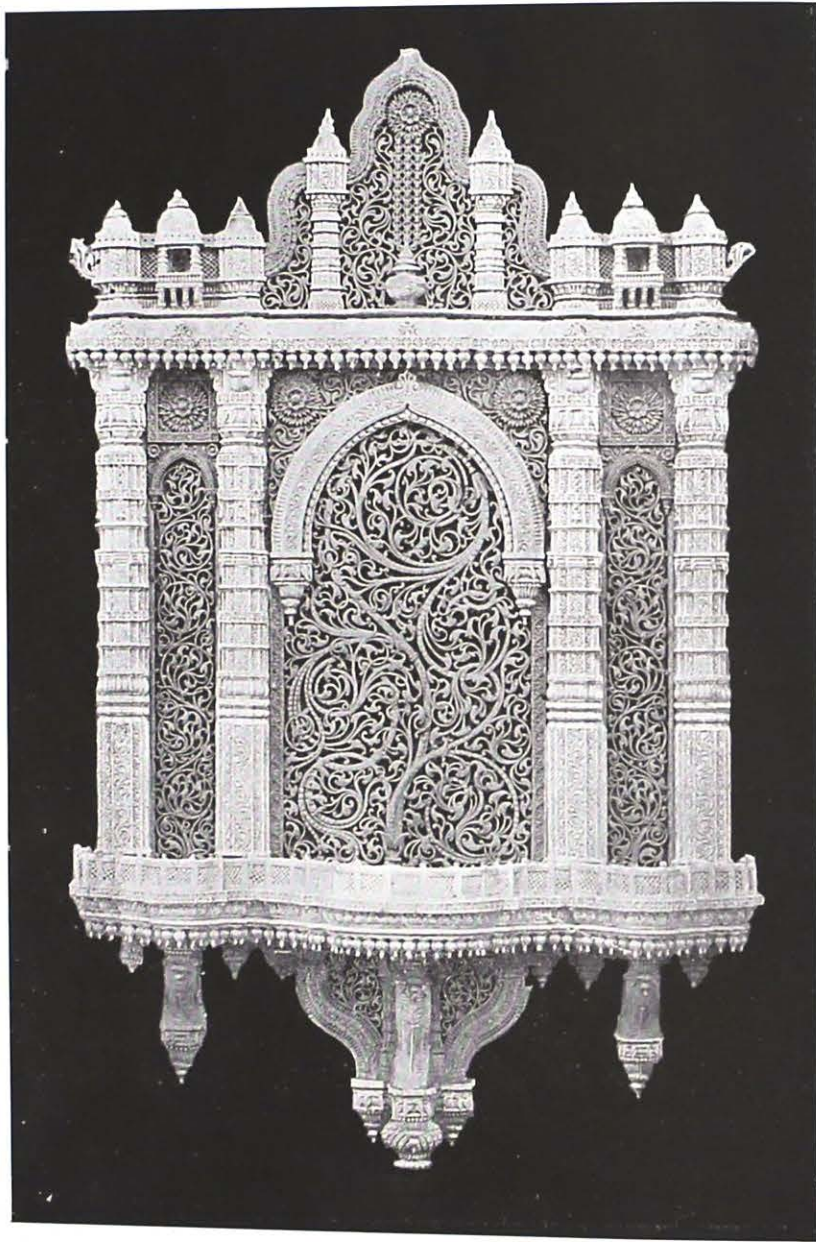
The industry is in the hands of a caste called Gudigars, who are said to have migrated from Goa after the establishment of Portuguese rule early in the 16th century. They live chiefly at Kumta and Honávar on the southern coast of Kánara, but a few are also to be found at Bunvasi, Siddápur and Sirsi on the Mysore Frontier. They numbered 336 at the last census.

The art is strictly confined to the caste; the boys are initiated into it at the age of 12 years commencing with a two years' course of drawing. The hours of work are from six to ten in the morning and then for two or three hours in the evening. The work being delicate is trying to the eyes, and the

* I was told in Surat that originally two chisels were tied together at an angle to be used in this way, till it occurred to some inventive genius to make a special tool for the purpose.



Ahmadabad Photograph Frame.



Ahmadabad Bracket.

oil in the sandalwood is said to injure them. They are a hard-drinking improvident class though very skilful in their work. On several occasions work exhibited by them at exhibitions in Europe has been awarded prize medals.

Generally speaking, work is only executed to order, and articles are not kept for sale; the majority of articles in stock are rejected orders. The local market is almost entirely confined to orders of District Officers and a few articles are sent to Bombay. The articles commonly manufactured are images of gods and groups of gods, glove-boxes, fans, and the many other small articles which can be made of carved wood. They will however make anything if given a pattern or a design. In the case of stereotyped designs the pattern is drawn directly on the wood with a pencil, but if a special design is required it is first drawn on paper and inked in with an ink composed of burnt cocoon shell and gum-arabic, a fine piece of spear grass taking the place of a brush.

Most of the carving is in high relief, perforated work is uncommon. A favourite model is a seated figure of Shiva with Ganpati on his right knee and Parvati on his left. In the corners are images of Hanuman and Garuda, and the whole is surmounted by a canopy supported on four pillars, the back ground and the canopy being carved with scrolls and leafy tracery. The ordinary small articles cost from Re. 1 to Rs. 20, but special orders, e.g. models of festival cars and cabinets may cost Rs. 300 and over and give employment to four men continuously for a year.

AHMADABAD.

In Ahmadabad the industry is in a much more organized state than elsewhere. Though it is still to a considerable extent a home industry, much of the Ahmadabad carving, which finds its way into the market, is produced in the factory of Messrs. Mulchandbhai Hathising and Brothers. This firm has certificates from Antwerp and other exhibitions, and their work is known both in Europe and America. At one time as many as 125 men were employed by the firm, but business is reported to be very slack at present and only about a dozen find work. Most of the work now being turned out is for an American gentleman who is apparently furnishing a house with Ahmadabad wood-work. There is no native market for their work; a native gentleman who wants any carving done goes to the Sutar direct.

The designs in vogue in Ahmadabad are nearly all of the conventional floral variety. Animal life, especially the human figure, is rarely introduced; if the design is not a floral one it is generally an intricate geometrical pattern. It has been suggested that this is due to the influence of Muhammadan stone work; the fact too that the industry had its origin when the Mussalman was lord of Ahmadabad has not been without its influence on the local designs. The well-known aversion of the Muhammadan to the reproduction of the human figure in any form would naturally prevent the artists who worked for the

Mussalman king and his nobles from introducing this design into their work; the tradition survived the period of almost total extinction of the art and when the carver looked about him for his patterns he naturally found them in the beautiful buildings of his native city. A common subject is a window and verandah like that of a mosque; the famous "branching tree" window of Sidi Syed's mosque in the Bhaḍar is an especial favourite and is much copied.*

In Ahmadabad the carvers all belong to the Sutar caste and apprenticeship is entirely hereditary, there being as a rule a natural aptitude for design and execution. The wages given in the factory are 8, 12, 16 and 20 annas a day, according to skill and experience.

Work is done, as a general rule, to order, and only occasionally are things kept on sale. Apparently all Sutars are ready to carve house fronts, cloth printers' blocks, &c., when called upon, and this connection between the carpenter's trade and the carver's art may account for the curious fact that at the last census Ahmadabad returned no "wood-carvers" among its population. It is difficult to arrive at a correct estimate of the number of persons engaged in the industry; it fluctuates with the state of trade; a wood-carver to-day finding no demand for his work may be a carpenter to-morrow.

The number of persons who devote themselves to wood-carving only is certainly very small, probably not more than a dozen families.

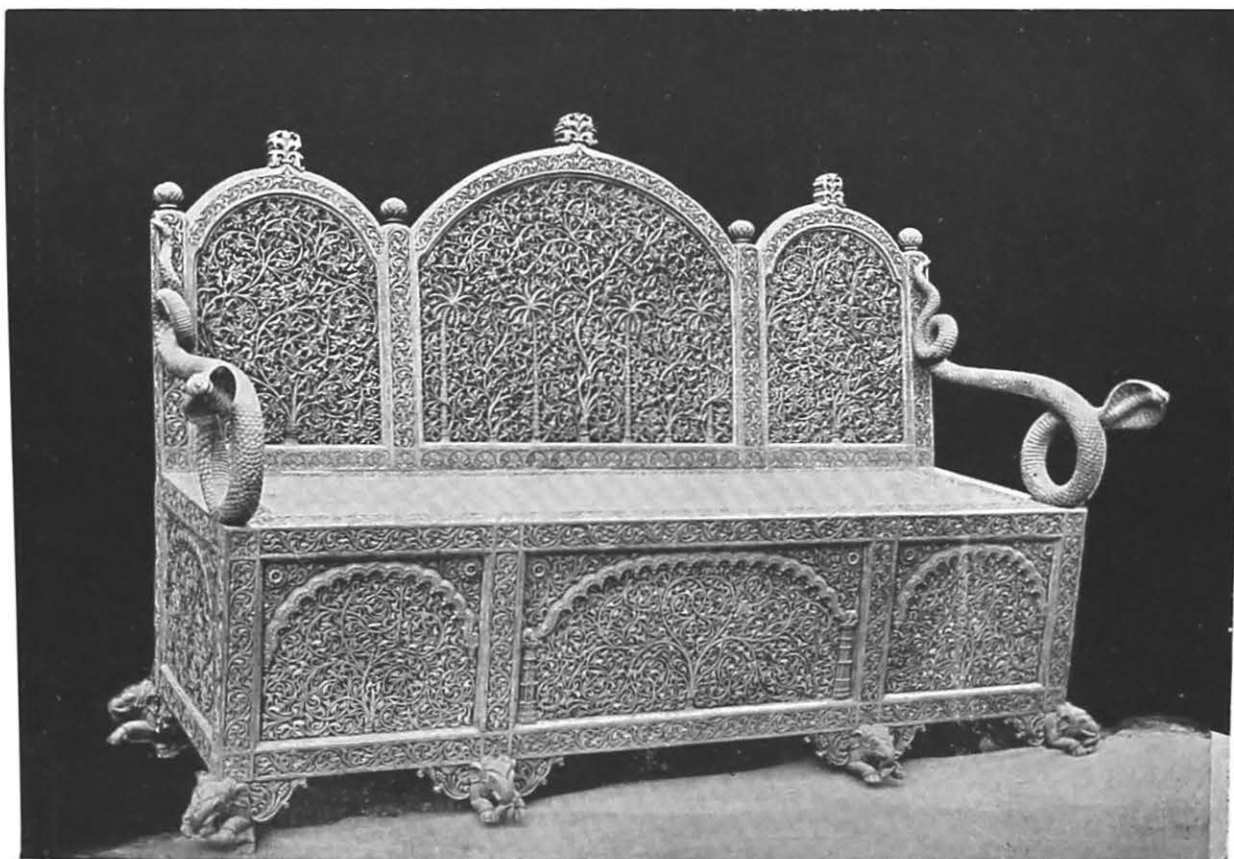
SURAT.

In Kánara carving is confined to a small caste; in Ahmadabad it is still a caste occupation, but there is no hard and fast line of demarcation between the carpenter and the carver; in Surat the limitations of caste do not exist at all. Sutars predominate, as is only natural, but Pársis and even Ghánḍhis (oil-pressers), Káohias (market gardeners) and Kumbhárs (potters) are to be found among the Surat carvers.

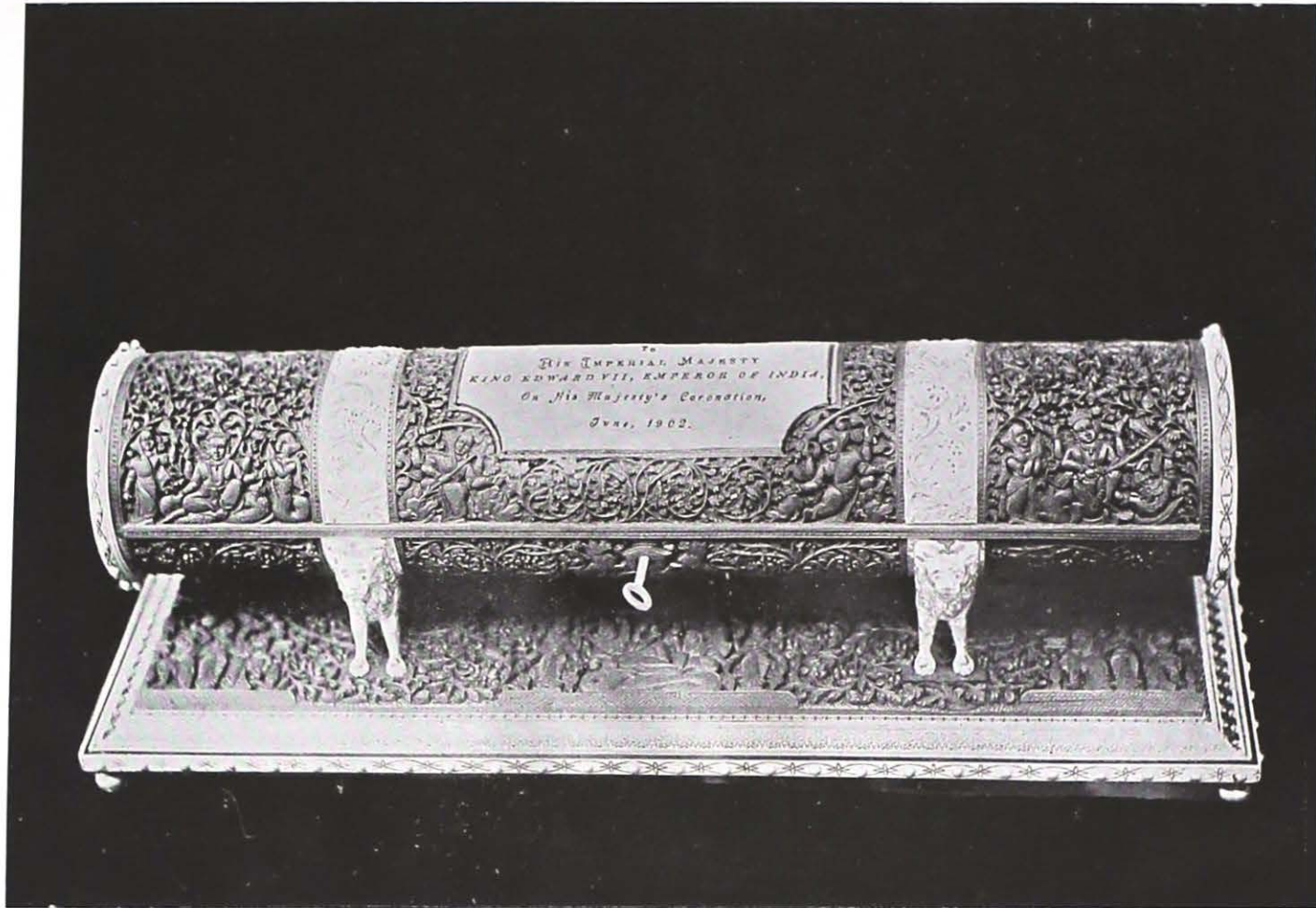
Local tradition traces the origin of wood-carving to some immigrants from Mewar in Rájputána when Surat was under Muhammadan rule. The tradition is however worth little, and the fact that one of the six divisions of Sutars is called Mevada gives a clue to its origin: it is probable that the first wood-carvers were Mevada Sutars. In Bombay most of the carvers belong to this sub-division: they as well as the Gujars, Pancholis and Vaishes (other sub-divisions) trace their descent to Vishvakarma, the 'takshaka'—carpenter or wood-carver.

At present it is estimated that there are about forty wood-carvers in Surat; here as in Ahmadabad the census figures give no clue to the real state of the case. The trade is in the hands of five small capitalists—two Pársis, two Brahma Kshatris and one Chhipa. Work like glove-boxes, &c., is given out

*An admirable example of a "branching tree" design as applied to a bracket is given in the Journal of Indian Art, Vol. V, No. 38, and there too will be found an illustration of a screen of Ahmadabad carved work.



Carved seat—Ahmadabad work.
'(Design from Mosque in the Bhadar)



Casket for the Coronation address of the Surat Municipality—designed and executed at Surat (End-pieces and bands of ivory, lions of silver, rest sandalwood).

on piece-work, but an elaborate piece of work like the photo frame illustrated, is paid for at the rate of 4 annas per square inch. Less skilful carvers are paid 2 and $2\frac{1}{2}$ annas per square inch. The carver earns from Rs. 15 to Rs. 20 a month, working generally at their own houses. Eight or ten years practice is necessary before a man is a finished carver.

Work is done almost entirely to order, though occasionally, if trade is slack; articles are made for sale.

The ordinary design consists of representations of Hindu deities with a background of foliage; a favourite model is the Sheshashayi Bhagwan or Vishnu reclining on the serpent. This model appears in the photograph frame of which a representation is given. This frame is said to have occupied its carver for one and-a-half months, and the price asked for it is Rs. 45.

Surat carving is almost wholly in sandalwood. The manufacture of carved sandalwood boxes is not of longer standing than fifty years, if local tradition is to be believed. I give the local story for what it is worth. It is said that about the middle of the last century two brothers, Ambaram and Bhukan Punja, Mali Sutars by caste, began to turn out sandalwood boxes for sale, working with closed doors and jealously excluding the local carvers. It is obvious that such methods could not long be successful; and soon the new art was taken up by the Surat workmen. It would be interesting to know where these two brothers learnt the art; but on this point the tradition is silent. I am not inclined to place much reliance on this story though it is possible that sandalwood had not been much used prior to this date.

In an account of Surat carving the "Surat toys" are deserving at least of mention. These consist of models in wood of bullock carts, nautch girls, elephants, &c., and are made by a Sutar, being coloured by Mochis. They do not pretend to be works of art, and they owe much of their effect to their colouring; but they are above the average toy in merit and are fairly cheap. They are made of 'sevan' wood. For a bullock cart Rs. 8 is charged; for a large elephant with howdah, Rs. 5; the smaller articles cost a rupee or two.

BOMBAY.

There is little that is distinctive about the Bombay carving. Most of the persons employed in the industry are from Ahmadabad and Surat; they have their homes there and usually leave their wives and children behind when they go to Bombay, paying them visits from time to time.

The Bombay census returns give only 32 "wood and ebony carvers"; but many carvers have, no doubt, been shown as "furniture-makers," of whom there are 257.

There is not much demand now for the Bombay blackwood furniture, and many of the Bombay carvers are employed in doing carving for furniture modelled on English lines.

The "Bombay furniture" is almost too well-known to need description; unlike the up-country carving already described, it is largely perforated work; scrolls, foliage and grotesque figures of animals and birds are freely introduced.

The only change during the last forty years is in the direction of deterioration; the ordinary bazaar made article is but a degenerate descendant of the handsome carved work to be seen still in many Pársi houses. The desire to turn out a cheaper article is responsible for this scamped and careless work; the demand for the furniture at a price which would repay the carvers declined, and in order to find a market the makers of the furniture had to turn out cheaper, and less artistic work.

The carvers are usually employed by small capitalists and earn from 6 to 14 annas a day at piece work.

The better class of workmen find employment with European firms, and earn as much as Rs. 25 to Rs. 40 per month. Every effort is made to preserve the native character of the work, and the designs are executed under skilled European supervision. They are largely taken from the carvings of the temples and mosques of Gujarát. If specially good work is required, the design is sent to Ahmadabad for execution.

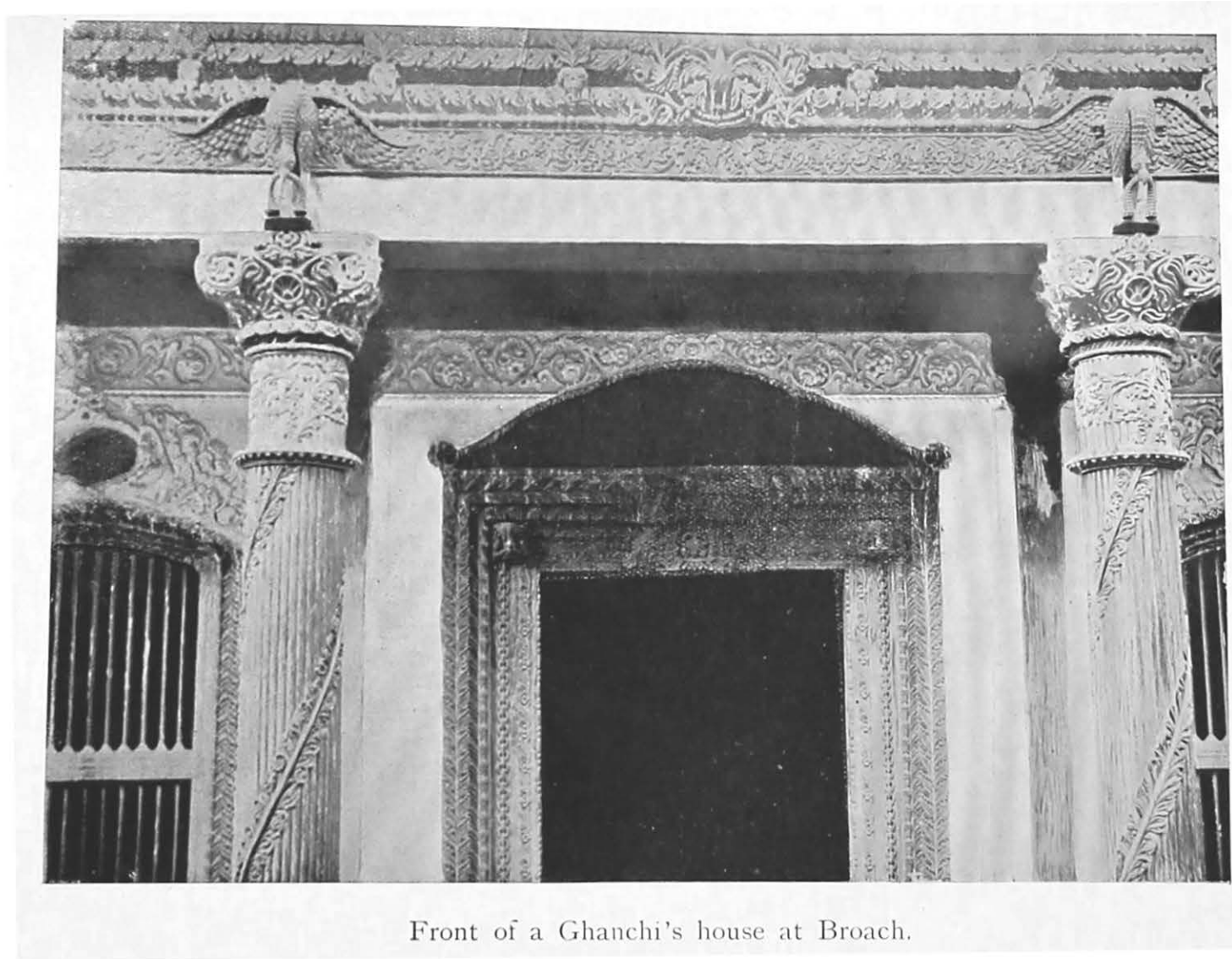
A favourite design for the panels of a sideboard, as I find from photographs supplied to me by a well-known European firm in Bombay, is a branching tree obviously modelled on the Ahmadabad window already mentioned; it makes a most effective panel.

BELGAUM.

In the Belgaum District the Jingars of Gokak make wooden models of men, animals and fruit, which are then painted in colours more or less true to nature. There are also a few workers in Belgaum City. The wood generally used is known locally as 'polki.' I have not been able to identify it, notwithstanding a reference to the Forest authorities. It is described as a light wood. The paints are prepared by mixing with gum coloured powders obtained from Bombay.

Though wood-carving as an independent art is confined to the places already mentioned, yet in nearly every district the carpenters are able to decorate houses with ordinary geometrical patterns; and in some cases their skill extends much further than this. The illustration of the house at Broach, for which I am indebted to the Collector, Mr. Logan, is a good example of an ornate house front of modern construction; it has been built by a Ghanchi, to whom the recent famine has brought fortune. The artist immigrated from Bhávnagar in Káthiáwár to Broach about 20 years ago.

The Collector writes:—"This rich and beautiful work is performed with hardly more than half a dozen tools of the simplest appearance, and any chunk of wood for a mallet (*gotilu*). The original curved tools (*tānkṇā*) appear to have been five, corresponding in width to the five finger nails. To these have been added a straight-edged chisel or two (*pharsi*) and a gouge (*gunj*) both of Eng-



Front of a Ghanchi's house at Broach.



Door of the temple of Rama at Broach

lish origin, and the latter retaining its English name. Only these two implements usually have wooden handles. The tools are sharpened on a piece of Bhávnagar stone with water, not oil, and no strop is used."

The illustration gives a good idea of the ordinary method of construction of the front of an Indian house and the places where carving is introduced. The first story commonly rests on a cross-beam supported by pillars built into the wall of the ground floor part of the house, and usually projects, being supported either by pillars or by brackets; these, with the beams which rest on them, are often excellently carved. The door and window frames also give the artist wide scope for the display of his talents. The door itself is occasionally a fine piece of work; the one of which an illustration is given belongs to the temple of Rama at Broach, and is supposed to date back to the 17th century.

CHAPTER IV.

STATE AND PROSPECTS OF THE INDUSTRY.

From the reports received from the centres of the carving industry it is clear that the trade is far from flourishing. The persons engaged in it are for the most part well off; but this is due to the fact that they are not as a rule carvers pure and simple, but have other work to fall back upon when the demand for carving is slack. A trade which depends principally on casual orders must have many times of idleness, and the Bombay carver has not the enterprise to attempt to create a market. Occasionally things are brought round for sale to the bungalows of residents in the towns where carving is done, but they are generally articles of an inferior class.

The Bombay carver is an extremely slow worker, and this makes the price of his products very high considering the lowness of Indian wages. Increase of speed in his case is always accompanied by deterioration in quality; the explanation of this is to be found in the tools used and the methods of working. A European or Japanese workman will often get an excellent effect with a few rapid cuts of a chisel or gouge, but for such work the force must be given by the muscles of the lower arm and play of the wrist and not by blows of a mallet. It is absolutely essential that the tools should in this case be extremely sharp and be provided with long wooden handles to afford a firm grip. The native carver, however, rarely has his tools perfectly sharp and does all his work with repeated taps of a mallet; his tools are handleless and more like sharpened nails than the chisels and gouges in use in Europe. Considering his tools it is a remarkable achievement to turn out the work an Indian carver does.

The movement inaugurated by Mr. Wimbridge of Bombay some years ago has seriously affected the carving industry. He introduced a style of furniture which depended more on good proportions and fine joinery for its beauty than on elaborate carving, and it has driven out of the field the florid ornament associated with the Indian furniture of former days. His example has been largely copied by native furniture-makers, and simplicity of design is the characteristic of most of the furniture now manufactured in Bombay.

At the same time another branch of the wood-carving industry has suffered considerably in Bombay. New houses in the native city are rarely decorated now with carved doors and windows or balconies; most of these are machine made and as the owner of the house rarely lives in it himself he has no inducement to spend money on decoration.

Want of good taste and originality are the most serious defects of the Bombay wood-carver. His only idea of decoration is to cover an article entirely with ornament; a reference to the illustration of the photograph frame carved by probably the best of the Surat carvers shows to what an extent this idea is carried. A judicious use of plain spaces would enhance the artistic value of the work as a whole and there would be less excuse for hurried and inferior work. There is little variety in design, the same designs are reproduced over and over again and are in themselves almost a certain clue to the place of origin of the carving.

If the Bombay carver is ever to find a large foreign demand for his products, his artistic sense must improve, he must cease to be the unintelligent copyist he is at present, and he must learn to work with greater rapidity. All other things being equal, the cheapness of Indian labour would give him an immense advantage over his brother craftsmen of other countries.

At one time a considerable business was done in Ahmadabad with America in the fitting up of rooms in Indian style, but the demand has now ceased with disastrous results to the Ahmadabad carvers. If the Indian carver would learn to carve in other than Indian styles, he might supply the market with mouldings, cornices and other accessories which are constantly wanted by architects the world over. If the preliminary shaping of the wood was done by machinery instead of by hand labour in order to save the time now spent on that part of the work, the Indian carver on his Rs. 30 or Rs. 40 a month would be able to turn out mouldings, &c., at about half the cost of the European article and in all probability a demand would arise for his work far in excess of the supply.

Much might be done by the Schools of Art in the Presidency in this matter; wood-carving is a recognised branch of the curriculum in these schools and many of the younger generation of carvers learn the elements of the art there. It is futile, however, to expect the ordinary Indian carver to open up a European trade for himself; we can only hope that the future may produce a man with the necessary capital and enterprise to revivify this ancient and decaying industry.



Surat Photograph Frame.

The centre-piece represents Narayan (Vishnu) reclining on the serpent, Shesha, attended by his wife Lakshmi; from his navel springs the lotus, seated on which is the four-headed Brahma. The whole is called the Sheshashayi Bhagwan.

On the right is Rama with his wife Sita, on the left Krishna and Radha.

The panels on the right side represent the fish incarnation of Vishnu and Ganpati and Siddhi; those on the left Krishna struggling with the serpent Kaliya and Shiv sitting with Parvati.

The two corner panels at the bottom represent Mahishasura.

The two male figures in the middle are Jain deities (Parasnath).

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