



Role of Wooden Sculptures in Temples

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Wooden sculpture is an important part of temple art. It combines devotion, culture, and artistic excellence. Temples decorated with wooden sculptures stand as valuable examples of heritage and remind us of the rich artistic traditions of the past. These regions collectively contribute to India's diverse wood carving heritage, reflecting the nation's cultural vibrancy, local aesthetics, and the skillful evolution of this ancient craft across different landscapes and traditions. Each place adds its unique touch to wood carving, demonstrating the versatility and timelessness of this craft in the Indian context.

Keywords: *Temple Wooden Sculptures, Carving trees, Wooden Doors, Wooden Conveyances, Wooden Cars.*



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1. Introduction

Wood carving is an ancient art of India. Though traditionally wood has been used for making home posts, rafters, yokes, ploughs, toys, planks, furniture among others, India has seen wood carving since yore. Emperor Ashoka's palace at Pataliputra was made in wood, and the grand temple at Bodh Gaya as well. The carvers of Madurai, Tamil Nadu, known as asaris, claim to be direct descendants of Vishwakarma, the celestial architect. Wood carving is one of the oldest arts of mankind, wood being derived from trees. Wood carving is also a part of ornate architecture. Figure-work seems to have been universal. To

carve a figure in wood is more difficult than sculpting with marble or stone, owing to wood tending to crack easily, to be damaged by insects, or to suffer from changes in the atmosphere. The work is slow and requires consummate skill. But despite this it has been sculpted on since yore. It seems to have started as a temple and palace craft which flourished alongside architecture and sculpture.

2. Historical Journey of Wood Carving in India

Wood carving in India boasts a rich and diverse history, deeply intertwined with the cultural, religious, and artistic traditions of the

subcontinent. The practice of wood carving in India has evolved over centuries, showcasing a remarkable fusion of skill, creativity, and spiritual significance. Let's delve into the historical journey of wood carving in India.

3. Ancient Roots (500 BCE - 500 CE)

The origins of wood carving in India can be traced back to ancient civilizations, with evidence suggesting that intricate wooden artifacts were crafted during the Mauryan and Gupta periods (circa 500 BCE – 500 CE). These early carvings adorned temples, palaces, and royal residences, depicting mythological themes, deities, and scenes from daily life. The use of wood carving in architectural elements, such as pillars and doorways, became prevalent, showcasing the craftsmanship's integration into structural design.

4. Golden Age of Wood Carving (500 CE - 1200 CE)

During the Gupta Empire and subsequent dynasties, wood carving flourished, reaching its zenith during the medieval period. Temples and stupas, particularly in regions like Odisha, Rajasthan, and Karnataka, became showcases of intricate wood carvings. The temples at Khajuraho, Konark, and Halebid are examples of this era, featuring detailed carvings depicting celestial beings, divine narratives, and intricate floral motifs. Wood carvings adorned not only religious structures but also royal palaces and homes of the elite. With the advent of Islamic rule in parts of India, wood carving adapted to incorporate Persian and Central Asian influences. Intricate geometric patterns, arabesques, and calligraphy became prominent features in wooden artifacts. The blending of Hindu and Islamic artistic elements resulted in a unique synthesis, exemplified in structures like the wooden interiors of the Mughal forts and palaces.

5. Colonial Era and Beyond (1700 CE - Present)

The colonial period witnessed a shift in the patronage of wood carving. European colonial powers introduced new techniques and styles, influencing the aesthetics of Indian wood carving. The craftsmanship continued to thrive, adapting to changing tastes and preferences. Post-independence, wood carving retained its significance, finding expression in modern furniture, religious artifacts, and decorative items.

6. Regional Traditions:

- **South India** (Tamil Nadu/Kerala): Known for Arumbavur wood carvings (250+ years old) and Thammampatti statues, creating ornate temple chariots, vahanas (vehicles), and deities.
- **Himalayan Region** (Kashmir/Himachal): Wooden temples in the Ravi valley and Chamba region show unique, early artistic styles.
- **Other Regions:** Intricate woodwork is prevalent in Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Assam.

7. Wood Carving in Tamilnadu

Tamil Nadu's wood carving is an ancient craft, rooted in Vedic traditions and Shilpa Shastra, evolving from early wooden temple structures and implements, with major centers like Arumbavur, Kallakurichi, and Thammampatti developing unique styles, often originating from Madurai artisans who migrated, creating devotional idols, temple components, and home decor using local woods like Vagai (Thoongai), and receiving GI tags for their distinct craftsmanship.

8. Origins & Early History

- **Ancient Roots:** Wood was one of the earliest materials used for tools and religious icons, even before stone, due to its availability and ease of shaping, with early Vedic rituals using wooden spoons (sruk/sruva).
- **Madurai Migration:** The craft's significant development began in Madurai, with artisans later migrating, spreading the art and its styles across Tamil Nadu.
- **Spiritual Significance:** The connection to Vedic rituals and Shilpa Shastra (ancient texts on art/architecture) lends wood carving a sacred status, focusing on divine figures and temple art.

9. Wood Carvings in Literature

Purananuru contains a reference to a carpenter making a chariot. Madurai Kanchi mentions that the image of Korravai (a goddess) was carved on the back doors of the palace gate. Pattinappalai states that the image of a tiger was engraved on the gate doors in Kaveripoompattinam. Paripadal contains a reference to wooden figurines.

Manimekalai mentions that divine images were made of wood and other materials. Perunkathai also includes the phrase, "like a new wooden puppet without a mechanism."

10. Temple and Wooden Sculpture

Temples have always been significant hubs for art, culture, and religion. Sculpture, particularly wooden sculpture, is one of the most exquisite aspects of temples, showcasing the talent and imagination of ancient craftspeople. Temple construction, ornamentation, and worship all heavily relied on wooden sculpture.

In many ancient temples, wood was widely used because it was easily available and simple to carve. Sculptors used wood to create images of gods, goddesses, animals, and mythological stories. These sculptures were often placed on doors, pillars, ceilings, and chariots of temples. The carvings were not only decorative but also symbolic, representing religious beliefs and moral values. Wooden sculptures in temples show fine craftsmanship.

Regional customs are also reflected in temples with wooden sculptures. For example, in areas of India, especially Tamilnadu temples are famed for wooden carvings that portray. These sculptures provide a visual aid for the general public to comprehend religious narratives.

During the reign of the Pallava king Mahendravarman I (590-630 AD), cave temples were built, but the idols were made of wood or metal. Wooden sculptures were also found in some later temples. For example, the idols in the Sundaravarat Perumal temple in Uthiramerur are made of wood. Wooden sculptures can be seen in the mandapams of some temples in Tirunelveli and Nagarkot. The front mandapam of the Nellaiappar temple in Tirunelveli has a temple dedicated to the Thiruvadi kings of Kerala. Its canopy houses numerous wooden sculptures. Each of them is one and a half feet high. The idols, stories from the Ramayana and Bharata and folk customs sculptures are found here. The canopy on the upper level of the Srivilliputhur Andal Temple has beautiful wood carvings and sculptures. In these, small sculpture groups related to Krishna Leelas, Bharata and another Vaishnavism can be seen. The interior of the first level of the Krishnapuram Venkatachalapathy Temple Gopuram is like a mandapam. The figures of Veeran and Natara Madhu support the mandapam.

There are exquisite wooden sculptures in the Thirunelveli Thamir Sabha. There are wooden sculptures in the Pulidevar room of the Sankaran Temple. There are wooden sculptures in the Thirukurungudi Temple Gopuram

11. Carving Trees

The trees to be cut were chosen with care. Trees growing on the roadside, near a temple, in an important part of the village, or near a cremation ground were not to be cut. Trees that were the nesting spots for birds and other animals or infested by insects or struck by lightning were also to be avoided. The texts also differentiated between male trees (with harder trunks and straight flowers) and female trees that bulged at the base and had softer flowers. The gender of the tree was connected to the type of conveyance and car that was to be made.

The tree was cut on a date favourable. A small cut was made to check the consistency of the sap. Clear sap was preferred. Sap that was coloured red, if present, meant that the tree was disqualified from being used. The cut tree had to fall in an auspicious direction, particularly towards the east. The tree was then dried, cured and seasoned. The master sthpathi, on an auspicious day, appropriately dressed and with Sanskrit hymns on his lips, cut the log into the required parts.

Mostly, Jackfruit, teak, blackwood, sandalwood, and mavalanga are the first type. Chenbagam, thumbai, vanni, marudhu, karuvembu, mulpoo marudhu, tuvala, marukkarai, bala mullip palai, iluppai, venkai, and neem are the second type of trees. Vetpalai, maramaram or achcham, vagai, lemon, kasa, white ebony, asokam, and karuvembu are the third type of trees. Muralam, namai, surapunnai, thippili, kadambu, neekadambu, Chenbagam, manjam, pachilai, and kongu are the fourth type of trees. Although so many types of trees have been mentioned, the majority of the trees used are ilupppai, achcham, venkai, teak, magizham, vagai, sandalwood, karumarudu, and pullamarudu.

12. Temple Wooden Conveyances or Vahanas

Tamil Nadu has a rich tradition of wooden sculpture, which is closely connected with its temples, festivals, and daily life. One of the most important areas where wooden sculpture can be

seen is in conveyances and traditional cars (ther or rathams) used in temple processions.

Vahana is a Sanskrit word that literally means 'vehicle.' In temples, conveyances are the sacred vehicles used to carry the deity during festivals.

These conveyances are often decorated with detailed wooden sculptures of gods, goddesses, animals, flowers, and mythological stories. These sculpture shows the religious devotion as well as the craftsmanship of Indian wood carvers.

Vahana is a Sanskrit word that literally means 'vehicle.' In ancient Hindu texts, when the iconographies of the Gods are described, each of them is given a vehicle, such as goat for Agni. Some of the less common vahanas {along with the deity for which it is described in parenthesis) include the following: Dog (Bhairava and Angarakan or Mars) Swan (Brahma) Jackal or Owl or a Human Corpse (Chamundi) White elephant (Guru or Jupiter) White elephant/clouds (/ndra) Pigeon/hawk (Dragon's tail or Ketu) Human dwarf/goat (Kubera) Owl (Lakshmr) Yali (Budhan or Mercury) Chariot drawn by male black buck (Chandran or Moon) Human corpse/crocodile (Nairuthi) Snakes, trees, clouds (Saptamatrikas) Makara or crocodile (Varuna) Antelope (Vayu) White horse (Sukran or Venus).

13. Wooden Sculptures on Temple Doors

Like in North India, during the reign of the Pallavas, Pandyas and Cholas, the custom of placing sculptures on the top of the pillars of the temple gates was followed in Tamil Nadu. Figures of plant branches showing prosperity were carved on both sides of the pillars. This tradition changed during the period of the Vijayanagara Nayakas . Sculptures were carved on the temple gates. These were usually made separately and attached to the doors. The ideas for this were taken from the Puranas, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

Doors with such sculptures are found in many temples in Tamil Nadu. Among them, some doors are very beautiful and have a strong meaning. Examples of this include the Alagara Temple, Brahma Desam, Kallidai Kurichi, Papanasam, and the Madurai Meenakshi Sundaeswarar Temple (door in the Ayyarangel Mandapam). The doors of the temples of Alaghar Temple and Kallidai Kurichi have sculptures related to Vaishnavism , while the others have sculptures related to Saivism . On the upper plate

of the doors of the Vaishnavism temple, there are sculptures of Vishnu's incarnations and a sculpture of Ganapati. On the next plate, Ramayana sculptures are carved as continuous story events or in a cross-sectional structure. Below this, Mahabharata sculptures are located on the same basis. On the lower plate, there are also sexual sculptures. This shows how importance was given to epic, Purana and other stories.

The rationale for the installation of Ganapati sculptures on all doorways stems from the belief that he serves as the protector of entrances. It is a prevalent tradition to install representations of Vishnu in his Anantasayi form (reclining on the floor). This depiction serves as a metaphor for the portal that facilitates access to Vaikuntha. The narrative continuity is evidenced in the epic sculptures adorning the temple doorways of Tamil Nadu.

14. Wooden Wooden Sculptures on Cars or Chariots

The most temples have chariots. They have been built since the medieval period and are still in use today. The chariots of many temples were built during the reign of the Vijayanagara Nayakas. These chariots, which are shaped like temples, are used to carry the idols of the gods on the streets during festivals.

These cars are equipped with four or more substantial wheels. On three of their sides, one may observe intricate carvings of deities, sculptures illustrating mythological narratives, as well as depictions of fauna, flora, and sporadically, representations of devotees and benefactors. During celebratory occasions, these sculptures are adorned with oil-based paint, which imparts a visually appealing dark hue reminiscent of stone sculptures.

The practice of constructing chariots from timber has been a longstanding tradition in Tamil Nadu for centuries. In accordance with the tradition of wooden chariots, monolithic chariots referred to as Kaltheras were erected by the Pallavas at Mamallapuram and by the Pandyas at Kazhugumalai. Nevertheless, no remnants of chariots from ancient epochs have been discovered. Nonetheless, there exist textual references to the presence of chariots during those times in Sangam literature, specifically within the works Silappadhikaram and Manimekalai. These chariots have been designated with various titles

such as Nedunther, Potter, Kodinji Nedunther, Kodithera, and Anikollotera, among others. The Silappadhikaram elucidates that a chariot festival was conducted in honor of the Buddha God.

The sculptures on the main tiers of the chariots of Tamil Nadu range from eight inches to two and a half feet high. The miniature sculptures are six inches high. The figures of Ganapati, Murugan, and the Bhootha Ganas are placed on the axis of the chariot. They are considered the guardians of the chariots. Hindu mythological stories and stories depicting the daily lives of the people are carved in the upper parts of the chariots. The pedestal of the chariot has figures of dancing girls, musical instrument players, Acharya Purushas, Ashtadhi Balakas, and Kajalakshmi. Another important example of wooden sculpture is found in temple cars, also known as *ther*. Tamil Nadu is famous for its massive temple cars, especially in places like Thiruvavarur, Chidambaram, Srivilliputhur, and Madurai. These cars are made almost entirely of wood and covered with intricate carvings of gods, goddesses, saints, and scenes from epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata. The wooden panels show great craftsmanship and take many years to complete.

15. Conclusion

Wooden sculpture occupies a significant place in the artistic and cultural heritage of Indian temples. From ancient times, artisans have used wood as a medium to express devotion, creativity, and architectural skill. Despite the challenges associated with wood—such as vulnerability to insects, climatic changes, and decay—craftsmen have continued to produce remarkable works that reflect deep religious beliefs and refined craftsmanship. The presence of wooden sculptures in temple doors, mandapams, vahanas, and temple chariots demonstrates how closely this art form is connected with temple architecture and ritual practices.

In Tamil Nadu, wooden sculptures are particularly prominent in temple festivals and processions. The beautifully carved temple cars, vahanas, and decorated doors illustrate scenes from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and various Puranas, thereby serving both decorative and educational purposes. Through these carvings, devotees are able to visually understand mythological stories and religious teachings. Thus, wooden sculptures not only enhance the aesthetic

beauty of temples but also function as an important medium for conveying cultural and spiritual narratives to the public.

The tradition of selecting specific trees, following sacred guidelines for carving, and performing rituals before shaping the wood further highlights the sacred nature of this craft. Artisans, often belonging to hereditary communities such as the *Asaris*, have preserved these traditional techniques for generations. Their skills demonstrate the close relationship between craftsmanship, spirituality, and cultural identity.

Although many ancient wooden structures have not survived due to the perishable nature of wood, literary references, temple records, and surviving examples clearly indicate the widespread use of wooden sculpture in earlier periods. Today, this tradition continues in various parts of India, especially in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and other regions where temple festivals still employ wooden chariots and carved vahanas.

In the modern era, efforts to preserve and promote traditional wood carving are increasingly important. Government initiatives, cultural organizations, and artisans themselves are working to protect this valuable heritage. Encouraging training programs, documentation of traditional techniques, and recognition through Geographical Indication (GI) tags can help sustain this craft for future generations.

Therefore, wooden sculptures in temples should not be viewed merely as decorative elements but as significant cultural artifacts that embody religious devotion, historical continuity, and artistic excellence. Preserving this tradition ensures that the knowledge, skills, and cultural values associated with temple wood carving will continue to inspire future generations and remain an enduring symbol of India's rich artistic heritage.

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