



The Glory of Wooden Art in Himachal: An Analytical Study

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Abstract: Art is a language of human expression. The easiest material to be obtained –was wood and it became the source of sculptural expression in the hilly state of Himachal like in the other part of the country. But as the material of wood is perishable, the wooden antiquity of wooden artwork is not available in good quantity. But in spite of this, wooden artwork flourished in all dimensions –such as architectural, sculptural, and other household materials of utility. Though, the heritage of wooden craft in Himachal Pradesh has very much potential and further work certainly needs to be done. This paper is an attempt to trace the practices and use of wooden art work in Himachal Pradesh.

Key words: Wooden art, Masks, Western Himalaya.

Introduction

The term 'wood carving' implies the process in which wood is fashioned for aesthetic purpose. It is one of the very ancient craft of India. Wood is widely used for construction and embellishment of palaces, temples and houses, as it is easily available and readily tractable material. It was the most popular medium for the artisan to express their artistic skill from very early times. There is little doubt that woodcarvings in relation to architecture have a long history. Although we do not have any surviving samples of prior work due to its perishable nature, it is evident that wood has been used for a variety of purposes from the beginning of time. Its antiquity may be pushed back to Harappan phase. Woodcarvings find mention in Veda. The Rig Veda confirms the significance of wood in its later phase. In the formation of the universe by Vishwakarma, the wood was the first thing that occurred to mind of the Vedic sage (Chauhan, 2005)

Epics, Buddhist literature, and the accounts of the foreigner travelers describe the splendor of this

art. The prototype of which one can still find in the cave temples of Maurya and early Gupta period.

Himachal, with rich cultural heritage, speaks of the glory of art and culture that once existed in this area. It has a magnificent forest of pine, walnut, deodar, *tun*, etc. which were used in the construction and decoration of temples, palaces and houses. Woodcarving mastery can be seen on doors and window frames, balconies, panels, brackets, and pillars. However, today only few old examples survive in temples and houses. Since wood is perishable, old, decayed carvings were often replaced by new ones, either depicting the same motifs or introducing new ones. The art conception in woodwork is greatly influenced by the grain of the wood used. For instance, walnut is good for deep carving, whereas pine is suitable for low and relief work. Deodar can be used for both, and therefore is the usual choice for woodwork and carvings.

Karukkani refers to the classic notions and basic techniques used to interpret the natural form imaginatively and skillfully. These are not exact



replicas of natural look (*pratikriti*), but rather an artistic depiction of their intangible traits and importance. Similarly, rather creating direct reproductions of their original shape, leaves, flowers, creepers, and other floral designs are developed from the essence of the forms.

Plants, flowers, and leaves have unique qualities, such as beautiful curves, bud clusters, flower unfolding, folding, and creasing, spiraling plant growth, glossy color, delicacy, and softness of diverse textures, to name a few. All these things have been noticed and comprehended, and the artist's response has been expressed through his distinct artistry and expertise. It's also evident in his paintings, as he depicts plant forms. Bands, columns, doorframes, and other architectural features are frequently embellished with these motifs. Various scholars in this Himalayan state were responsible for the early work on wooden craft. O.C Handa (Handa, 2001) and Hari Chauhan (Chauhan, 2005) are notable among them.

The community of artisans, engaged in woodwork in the Himachal, known in local parlance as '*Bari*' (*tarkhan*), is one of the functional castes in Hindu society. Their tools are of simple character and of indigenous make, like the tools of Uttarakhand (Yasodhar, 1997) and other parts of India, prepared by the local blacksmith. They are made to specification under the instruction of the carver. The artisan uses wide variety of tools ranging from few to hundred in numbers, according to the extent of artistic ability, the nature of carving and the quality of wood on which he works. The tools primarily used by the carvers are *aari* (handsaw) *basola* (adze), *randa* (plane), *nehan* (chisel), *hathodi*, scale and drilling equipment, etc. The most important tools used by the carver for minute carving are chisels and gauges of various sizes and shapes ranging from the point of a needle to three-fourth of an inch. Every artisan has his own

collection of a wide range and variety of these carving instruments as per his work and skill.

The woods used for this work are deodar, pine, walnut, *shisham tun*, etc. The grain of the wood selected has a big impact on the composition. "The art conception seen in woodwork has been greatly influenced by the grains of the timber employed, such as the deep undercutting and sculpture that is possible with teak, redwood, and walnut, the low relief *shisham* and *deodar*, the incised designs of ebony, the intricate and minute details of sandal, and the barbaric boldness of *rohira*, *sal*, and *babul*," says Sir George Watt (Watt, 1903) Deep carvings are available on redwood and walnut, for example, whereas low relief carvings are available on pine and deodar.

The selection of wood is done with meticulous care, which helps the artisan to be at best in workmanship at his best. The piece of wood selected for carving is first cut off in required size and trimmed carefully with adze to give the desired shape. After drawing the outline, the superfluous portion is first taken out to give it a rough shape. The real technique and skill however lie in the subsequent operations, which require the true knowledge of the carver regarding the forms and correct use of the tools, which would enable him to deftly take out the unwanted portion by means of gauges and chisels of different sizes with manipulation of strokes through the movement of hands. Starting with broad outlines, the artisan precedes the carving work from simple to intricate carving. Many animals and birds have been gracefully and imaginatively depicted. The most prevalent animals include lions, elephants, horses, bulls, and deer.



Fig. 1 – A: Horse. B: Deer under the trees.

Image courtesy: Himachal State Museum Shimla



Figure-2: Lion and Elephants with deities (Courtesy-Himachal State Museum, Shimla).

The lion represents bravery, its form in these carvings being stylized, quite unlike the realistic shape of a lion. Elephant is a symbol of royal splendor and serve as a mount of state and the purpose of magic. Horses are depicted in battle scenes, while the bull and deer are shown with deities as their mount. Intertwined snakes, and birds such as swan, peacock, pigeon, and Monal are also used in the embellishment of the architectural members.

The obvious reason for the absence of old examples is the perishable nature of the material. After the establishment of Islamic rule in the North India, the artwork was badly affected as North India became the battlefield for many foreign invaders and internecine rivalries among the local ruler that resulted in the suspension of art activities for a long time. The cultural link of the valley was thus disconnected and thereafter the local need could only be satisfied by local artisans which resulted in misunderstood iconography and deviation from the classical

prototypes thus producing local but interesting style of their own which become popular with the masses. The output of such art represents a unique complex of primitive impulses and traditional practices both subjected to sophisticated influences and to local developments, aside from aesthetic consideration.

Wooden sculptures of a very high order are a significant part of the temples. Large numbers of wooden sculptures are noticed in the temples of this region. Each sculpture is carved in a folk style of the area. The three-dimensional freestanding sculptures are found in a very small number while those carved in relief on the wooden panels are innumerable. Both the types of sculptures are marked by unique expression. People have implicit faith in these sculptures.



A: Ram & Sita, B: Ganesh C: A Gana, D: Brahma (Fig : 3 (Image Courtesy- Himachal State Museum, Shimla))

Their shapes are representational rather than symbolic. Each sculpture is crafted in careful accordance to iconographical standards to ensure immediate recognition of a well-known Hindu god. During the rhythm of production, the master craftsman displays his deep faith and religious belief in that same sculpture. It has a long-lasting impact on people because of the profound faith. Three-dimensional sculptures of minor gods known as beer are frequently found in little temples within the main deity's compound. The carver makes great effort to preserve the wood grain intact when carving these sculptures out of a single block of wood. The deity's representations and life events during different incarnations are carved with exceptional creative skill in a wooden panel. These reliefs are carved on small wooden panels that range in size from a



few inches to several feet, and they are designed to be fixed to architectural components or put in temple niches.

In addition, the goddesses, both men and women, are carved, but the portrayal of *Matri-Shakti* as a female deity and a typical woman is particularly noteworthy. *Yakshani, Kinnari, Ganga-Yamuna, Yakchana devi, Markula devi, Chaya devi, Suparchana devi* (Omkar & Singh, 2021)

Another type of specific wooden work is Known as mask. Masks are used either on festivals or to display character in dramatic performance and in re-enactment of mythological events (Goverdhan, 1983). The mask carved out of wood, are typically primitive in appearance. In some of the mask the mouth is shown by a long slit. Ears are represented by raised wooden portion and eyes are represented as a shallow cavity. The backside is hollow and the mouth is stylistically represented with two rows of teeth.



**Fig - 4 : Various types of Woodan Masks
(Image Courtesy - Himachal State Museum Shimla)**

The masks are also carved with animal faces representing various species and vary in size and shape, serving as a powerful testament to the region's folk art. Wood has been utilized for utilitarian purposes in the past, such as furniture, decorative items, utensils, and so on, in addition to decorating architectural parts and creating images. The kitchen wares were shaped and finished from cylindrical hardwood logs. These jars were typically used for grain storage, curd churning, and floor kneading, among other things.

As it has been discussed and analyzed that culturally rich Himachal Pradesh was very much

potential for all type of cultural development i.e in various forms such as stone, ivory bone, metal, and lastly woodwork. But the wooden craft was not less in any way than other types of sculptures. Findings from the various regions of the study area and some masterpieces placed in the State Museum, Shimla are very much significant and provide a base for the fundamental study of the wood carving and other woodwork in Himachal Pradesh. Various types of wooden work recovered a lot from different places of state exhibit the importance of wooden work and the cultural significance of Himachal Pradesh.

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