

## **A History of Papier Mache Craft in Kashmir**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Handicrafts are unique representations of a country's culture, tradition, and heritage. One of the most important sectors of the economy is the handicraft industry. Kashmiri handicrafts are products that are made, crafted, and decorated by hand by Kashmiri people and artisans. The crafts of Kashmir are diverse and rich in history. The handicraft of papier-mache is significant in the annals of Kashmir history. Papier Mache is a technique for shaping raw paper pulp into aesthetically attractive products. Papier Mache is a popular craft in Kashmir. During the rule of Zain-ul-Abidin (1420-1470) and Mughals (1586-1752), this craft developed considerably. Unlike today, one might see such items being sold in the valley and India in the past. Unfortunately, art is rapidly disappearing in Kashmir. This paper endeavors to explore the vibrant history of this craft from its high days to its decline.

**Keywords:** *Papier- mache, Artisan, Zain-ul-Abidin, Mughals, and Kashmir.*



## INTRODUCTION

Handicraft is significant because it embodies our culture and tradition. It supports a country's heritage by utilizing local materials and preserving traditional knowledge and skills. Among handicrafts of Kashmir, papier-mache is important. Papier-mache is a French term that means "chewed paper" and refers to things formed by moulding paper pulp into various shapes. Then, using various colours and designs to decorate them.

Kashmir has been specialized in papier-mache production. The manufacturing of ornamented pen-cases made of paper is a long-celebrated tradition in Kashmir. Papier-mache is a term that refers to a variety of manufacturing processes in which paper pulp is pressed and moulded into various shapes. Lacquer, gold, silver, and bright dyes are also used to give the products created this way a gleaming finish to the articles such as pen boxes, bookstands, picture frames, soapboxes, and trays. In the case of ornamented roofs, papier-mache was used as a substitute for plaster. This art was taught to Kashmiris by Persian and Central-Asian immigrants.

Papeir Machie is an art, which is peculiar to Kashmir. It is a kind of 'mashed paper'. It was introduced to the valley by Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin (1420-1470) utilizing experts imported from Samarqand. The work is called kar-i-qalamdani or pen-case work, as it is generally used to decorate pen-cases and small boxes. It is also known as or kar-i-munaqqash or painted work. The basic method was to put papier-mache to woodwork, and examples may be found in Kashmir at the Madin Sahib Mosque, built-in 1444, the Shah Hamdan Mosque ceiling, and the Shalimar Garden (a Mughal garden in Srinagar). Even today, the custom of utilizing papier-mache or pulp on woodwork to be colorfully painted with various motifs is still alive. Some of the older styles, such as "Arabesque," "Yarkand," and "Hazara," included detailed paintings of kingfishers, maple leaves, and other designs.



(Papier-mache products of Kashmir)



[The Papier-mache pen box of 19<sup>th</sup>-century, with gold leaf and paint]

During the Mughal era (1586-1752) this industry developed significantly, as the way Mughals lived gave ample scope for the employment of Kashmir's craftsmen especially the papier-mache artists. The specimens of this art are drawn on the wood just as skillfully as on paper objects. According to Bernier, the interior of the black marble summerhouse in Kashmir's Shalimar garden was painted and gilt all over. He further remarks that most Mughal furniture, including bedsteads and palanquins, as well as elephant howdahs, tent poles, and the emperor's field thrones, was painted and gilded in the same manner.

In Karkhanas of the Mughal court in India, several Kashmiri artists of papier-mache could have been working and Bernier stated that in one of the workshops, there were goldsmiths, painters, 'varnishers in lacquer-work,' embroiders, tailors, shoemakers and weavers who could produce muslins so fine 'as frequently wear out in one night.'

However, some of the papier mache work was commissioned directly from Kashmir, as William Moorcroft was told in the valley in 1823 that the papier mache industry had thrived under the Mughals and employed a large number of craftsmen who sent samples of their painting down to Delhi to be examined by the emperor regularly. Some of these specimens were shown to Moorcroft, including a set of patterns painted on the plank and submitted to Emperor Aurangzeb, who especially patronized a variety of work called subz-kar of foliage grouped or compounded on a ground of gold and then highly varnished.

When Moorcroft was in Kashmir, the lavishly decorated and golden elephant howdahs and palanquins that Bernier had described being used in the reign of Aurangzeb were still being made, and the papier mache painters were still called upon to decorate the ceilings and walls of buildings.

Traditionally in Kashmir, the demand for pen-cases never stopped as the munshis or white-collar staff of the country-clerks, scribes, accountants, secretaries, and so on always held a pen-case or a scroll of paper as a sign of their profession. The art of papier-mache is mainly practised by the Shia sect of Kashmir.



(Muslim papier- mache ornament painters)

### **Manufacturing Process**

The skilled artisans who work on this laborious process are known as sakhta makers. Discarded paper, fabric, rice plant straw, and copper sulfate are among the components used in this process, which are blended and turned into a pulp. After being soaked in water for 4-5 weeks, the paper is removed, pulped, and dried. The powder is made from dry paper. To aid coagulation, it is also common practice to combine the powdered paper with rice water. The pulp is then poured into molds constructed of wood or brass. In the earlier times, the craftsman formed the mold himself out of clay. It's also said that the paper was simply softened, not pulped, and then put in layers over the mold, drying after each layer of pulp was covered to achieve the appropriate shape. The layers were covered with a muslin cloth and layered with another layer of substance akin to plaster of Paris, locally known as gutchi, during the wet stage of application.

### **According To Moorcraft, There Are Two Types Of Pen-Cases:**

- I. Masnadi or royal: These are articles of table furniture, more or less bulky. It sometimes has trays or stands or is fitted with feet. Part of the interior is separated to hold an inkstand.
- II. Farsi or Persian: These are portable ones. They are generally long, shallow boxes with a sliding convex cover, rounded at the ends.

### **About The Above Types Moorcraft Stated**

“They are remarkable for the variety and elegance of the patterns with which they are painted, most generally of flowers, for the brilliancy of their colours, and the beauty of the varnish. They are most commonly made of paper, which has been written upon, but sometimes of light wood. The ground of the colouring is commonly metallic, of gold or of tin, and the pigments employed are cochineal, or the kirmis insect, ultra-marine from Yarkand, white-lead from Russia, as well as verdigris from Surat, and possibly from Britain. Other colouring drugs are found in the country or imported drugs are found in the country, or imported from Hindustan.”

He further stated that the varnishes for this stuff are derived from aloe or storax resin; but the best is that of Kahruba, which is commonly known to be amber, but is claimed to be copal by others. Its abundance and low cost in Kashmir strongly suggest that it is a living plant. The brushes are made of half of the shawl wool goat, and the pencils are made from the fur of the cat. The ground of the ornaments is formed with white lead mixed with a glue solution, which elevates the ornamented or embossed pieces. The surfaces are spotted with a dot of white paint that is left to dry and then cut with a knife. They are then coated with a glue surface and the colour of the decoration is laid on it. Sometimes, between flowers and foliage, birds and butterflies are depicted on the flat surface in this way. Sometimes a similar painting style is applied to Palankins, elephant houdas, and even the ceilings and walls of rooms.

The articles produced in papier-mache are; picture frames, screens, bedstead legs, tables, teapots, trays, vases, card and stamp boxes, candlesticks, writing sets, snuff-boxes, pen-cases, gloves, and handkerchief boxes are only a few of the products that are now manufactured. Floral decorations and book illuminations, among other items, are included in the work. At one time the Lamas of Lhasa were indenting to a sort of table named saksha, on which two books (fekru) and nine pieces of wood were put. The table was beautifully worked in gold and red and green medallions in a Chinese pattern. In paper mache boxes, shawls were exported to France and were separately sold there at high prices.





(The above images depicts the manufacturing process of Papier mache craft in Kashmir)

G.T. Vigne remarks about this art as: “The Kashmirian’s are expert as manufacturers of wooden works and the painting on the pen-cases and work-boxes is alike curious and elegant in pattern. They have no oil colours, but flowers and other ornaments are sometimes raised on the surface, by means of a composition paste, then painted and oiled two or three times, until they have the appearance of being varnished.”

Walter R. Lawrence mentioned: “The nakash or lacquer-workers chiefly apply their beautiful designs to smooth wood. These designs are very intricate, and drawing is all free hand, for the workmen do not possess mathematical instruments .The skill shown by the nakash in sketching and designing is remarkable. The papier-mache work is known as kar-i-kalamdani, as the best specimens of the old work were the pen-boxes (kalamdan), but a variety of articles such as tables, cabinets and trays are now made, and the richer classes call in the nakash for the decoration of their ceilings and walls.”  
Papier-mache products are manufactured in Srinagar and other parts of the Kashmir Valley in homes



and workshops, and are largely sold within India; however, there is a significant international market.

## Conclusion

The craft of paper papier-mache for which Kashmir was famous is slowly dying due to new technologies and manufacturing practices. Due to machine carving and artists preferring other jobs, the art's economic viability has suffered a setback. The art and its goods are primarily aimed at the highest echelon of the luxury market, with prices that are on the higher end of the scale. Lower-cost, lower-quality machine items have posed a major challenge to the sector, with craftsmen battling to keep it going.

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