

## Treatise On Wooden Carved Doors: An Essay on Ornately Wooden Carved Doors from Lahore

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### Abstract

Lahore is known as a cultural capital city of Pakistan. This city is also famous for its historical buildings as well for well-known colleges and universities etc. One of the hallmarks of Lahore is its old interior walled city. All over the year walled city is the center of attraction for many national and international visitors. Amongst many salient features of the interior walled city of Lahore, the ornately carved wooden doors embellishing local architecture, is worth praising. The doors are excessively decorated with the floral and geometric designs and clearly identify the rich taste of the owners once, living in the interior walled city of Lahore. The research paper is going to provide a visual walk through some beautiful old wooden carved (in-situ) doors from the city along with it a discussion will take place about the revival of ancient art of wood carving in Lahore. It will be discussed that the Wood Carving is one of the most ancient craft in the land of present day Pakistan and the roots of this tradition are deeply embedded in its soil. Lahore has earned fame particularly in carved wooden doors from colossal gateways of the forts, gardens, mansions, temples, gurudwaras and havelis to windows, jharokas, sehdaras, pinjras of ordinary houses. In

this research article the focus will be mainly on the doors from Mughal period, Sikh period, and post Sikh period.

**Key words:** bi-fold doors, Jharoka, pinjra work, gurudawar, teek wood, haveli, taali, Sehdarra

### **Introduction**

The history of Punjab enriched with wood carvings as a part of its architecture. Especially carving of the wooden door frames continued in the traditional manner. Even after the downfall of the Sikh rule in the middle of the 19th C. Punjab has always been renowned for its wood carving. There have been several well-known centers for this craft. But Lahore has earned fame all others-particularly in carved wooden doors from colossal gateways of the forts, gardens, mansions, temples, gurudwaras and havelis to windows, jharokas, sehdaras, pinjras of ordinary houses. In this research article the focus will be on the doors of the walled city of Lahore, mainly the doors from Mughal period, Sikh period, and post Sikh period. The wooden carved doors of Lahore city had never been the subject of a systematic study. The present research is meant to fill this gap. The authors have detailed visits the Lahore Museum where on display wooden doors were studied to write this paper. While, old doors of Lahore Fort, havelis and common houses within the walled city of Lahore have been visited and will be documented in some other research article, (expected to be published soon in continuation to the present article). The tradition of wood carving in Punjab has always been conditioned by several factors—mainly the availability of wood and the trend in architecture. In both these respects, this land has been very fortunate. Good numbers of perennial rivers have always ensured not only the ample growth of jungles along the river banks but also easy supply of good quality of timber wood, cut in the Himalayan forests in the up-country and transported into the plains by the five major rivers of Punjab. This has encouraged the traditions of excessive use of wood for embellishing local architecture. There have been many cities, towns and settlements where rich people always preferred to have their mansions fitted with ornately carved doors, windows balconies, bukharchas, balustrades with beautiful Seh-daras and wooden

screens spread over several stories in the interior of havelis. In Punjab, wood work –carved or painted has always been of two major varieties— architectural or free—standing articles for daily use. In Punjab, we had in the past strong tradition for creating architectural setting with wood carving. Having a walk through the different galleries of Lahore Museum the authors got the idea to prepare a repository on the wooded carved doors which were meant for decorating houses, havelis and mansions in the cities of Punjab like Lahore. Gujranwala, Jhang, Bhera, Chakwal and Chiniot are other main repositories of this ancient craft, may be discussed later.

### **Wood Carving: A Historical Perspective**

The term “wood carving” encompasses the working on wood with the tool into creating some aesthetic or functional objects. It includes the implementation of manual skills and artistic feelings. Wood has versatile qualities of utilization. It’s warm and supple grains are appreciated as the best material for carving. Thus the skillful artisans produced multifaceted and elaborate designed pillars, doors, brackets, door-frames, door-leaves and other elements of architecture.

There are sufficient evidences to prove that artisanship in wood has remained the chief medium of construction for the early centuries. Due to the woods unpreserved character, one can get the evidences of carving skills through the literature and stone carving which are based on wood carvings.<sup>1</sup>

Not only in Hindu architecture but it is also extensively used in buildings of the Muslim communities as one of its principal ornamental device. Most of the examples include pulpits, wall-panels and doors. In this context, a number of intricately carved panels show geometrical and floral designs from Al Aqsa Mosque at Jerusalem (8<sup>th</sup> C.). The Cairo Museum has acquired varied specimens of wood carving belonging to Tulunid period which include doors, ceilings and other elements. Some of the Timur’s wooden carved doors (15<sup>th</sup> C.) are preserved in the Hermitage Museum, Leningrade, Russia. It is manifested that the wood carving in its outstanding norms existed in the Sub-continent long before the Muslim advent. However in some aspects Muslim invasions augmented this medium. The chief was the geometrical designs

encompassing several variations and combinations. The second was the introduction of rhythmic arabesque in low relief carving and the third addition was of lattice work known as *pinjra* or *jali* work<sup>2</sup>

### **Styles And Variations Adapted By The Muslim Wood Carvers**

Tracing back the history of wood carving, one recognizes the actual in the work of the 'masters of the past'. It is definitely explored that they systematically realized the primary principles of their surroundings and requirements, and convert them into an objective reality. The elaborate carvings of wood, especially on the door frames and panels are some of such outstanding remains of the artistic vision of the past in the city that would surely take us back to the early age. The hybrid form of the art wood carving produced by the cop ration of the traditional Hindus and the migrant Muslim wood carvers. This amalgamation revealed the traditional characteristics of vivacious Indian art and the angular and geometrized treatment of the Persian decorative art. The combination of Indian figurative elements and Persian flora and fauna decoration is used to embellish the doors and exteriors of large mansions of woodcarving. The remnants of grand door-ways, balconies and intricately carved doors are excellent examples of wood art that flourished in the whole sub-continent.<sup>3</sup>

The wood work remained an integral part of the royal workshop during Mughal period and even in later patronage. In pre independence time, Sandal wood carving was in vogue mainly in Bombay presidency. The Surat and Bombay work was in low relief whereas; Canara and Mysore work was in high relief. At Moradabad in North-Western Province, Sandal wood was carved in less quantity; Saharnpur had obtained a name for its wood carving. Some other centers were Hissar, Hoshiarpur and Gujarat.<sup>4</sup>After the geographical division of the Sub-continent between Pakistan and Bharat in Northern areas of Pakistan including Hunza, Gilgit, Chitral and Swat, the wood that was extensively used for carving in Pine, Deodar and Mulbery while in Kashmir the walnut wood was used for the purpose of carving of architectural frames, furniture and objects of daily use. In South region, it was observed that

carving was not a major device of ornamentation and used as the supplement of other materials.<sup>5</sup>

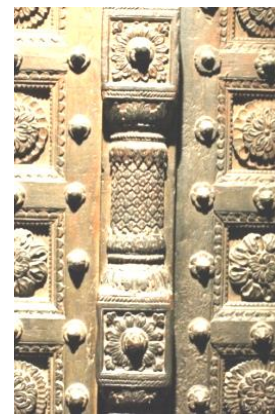
In the Punjab Chiniot, Bhera and Lahore gained celebrity in this craft. Each of these has its own regional character. Various wooden architectural styles are commonly found in these areas. All wood carving centers of Punjab have their own techniques, patterns, and designs.<sup>6</sup>

These characteristics depend on availability of wood type and priorities of areas. It is a repeated statement that the discriminative attribute of industrial art in Punjab is their Muhammadan character. The Hindu designing scheme is so perceptible in other parts of kingdom, generally in hilly areas but not present in the structures of the plains. Sikhs started producing designs with combination of Hindu adaptation and Islamic motives in architecture and decoration. At the time when they had already invaded by Europeans, they were developed their own traits in wood carving. Their foliage is intricately lined and twisted, and small distorted figurative forms prohibited, in Muslim works, were started appearing. But the basic characteristics, such as flatness of relief, lack of under-cutting, use of geometric shapes, and carving in line simply were still present. A number of massive and ornamented doors and windows were meant to be sold at surprisingly low price to native community. However when the Europeans showed liking to get such art pieces in special sizes, the prices increased unreasonably.

### **The Characteristics: Ancient Wood Carvings versus Modern Wood Works In Lahore**

In both old and new wood work the doorway remains the most elaborated element which required more time and concentration than any other part. Over the larger part of India generally doors consisted of two leaves, without using metal axis but revolve on turning points. The meeting point of two leaves is projected 'separating head' called *bini* in the Punjab.

Plate I Ornamented *bini* of wooden door from Lahore, 19<sup>th</sup> C. Lahore Museum, Lahore (Photo by author)



No other evidence of local structure is found where more creativity noted down than on the *bini*, sometimes it is the only decorative part of the building. The fine example of ornamented *bini* can be seen in (Pl.I), though the copy cannot validate the delicacy and richness of design of the original one.

Actually the entire door is covered with ornament, the downcast sections is decorated with symbolic forms and framed with deeply carved ornamented band. Comparatively large pane over the frieze embellished with distorted figures combined floral motives. The center part is engaged by the famous Hindu deity Ganesha, the elephant shaped head of Ganesha finds over most Hindu doors(Pl.2).



Plate 2 Ganesha figure above the carved lintel of the door 19<sup>th</sup>C. Lahore Museum, Lahore (Photo by author)

The carving of these panels is not as fine as of the rest, same about the portion of jambs; these might not have been carved by the same craftsmen. The enlarged part of the interlaced ornamented frieze in (Pl.3) shows the style which is famous among the native craftsmen as *Akbari*, there are numerous instance of this kind of ornamentation in Lahore city.



Plate 3 Interlaced ornamented frieze of wooden door from Lahore, 17<sup>th</sup>C. Lahore Museum, Lahore (Photo by author)

Almost all are near to perish, but all are notable for delicacy of implementation and deep carving.<sup>7</sup>Wood carving was certainly the most frequently employed medium for architectural embellishment for numerous

elaborately carved doors, eaves, brackets and windows that have survived and can be seen on display in Lahore Museum.<sup>8</sup> From the ornamentation of grand forts to the local dwellings, wooden doors have their own entity. The traditional art of carved doors of Punjab encompassed in itself – the historical profile, cultural variation, mythological fables, religious beliefs, symbolic significance, proficient techniques, expression of nature and much more. Master builders and skilled craftsmen having the grace and magic quality to create, express and depict the essence of versatility.

### **Carved Wooden Doors from Mughal Period (form the Display at the Lahore Museum)**

A door carved in *Akbari* style from Lahore is displayed on the eastern wall of Lahore Museum's vestibule consisting of a pair of door leaves, rectangular panel above the lintel and huge projected brackets with carved bell shaped hangings. The designing scheme is expanded with the amalgamation of geometric and floral patterns (Pl.4). The door size is 137 inches x 75.5 inches, according to the Museum record. The door is fixed in the brick structure to display appropriately.



Plate 4 Wooden door from old Lahore (17<sup>th</sup> C) Displayed on the Eastern side of vestibule, Lahore Museum. Lahore (Photo by author)

Next on display is a single pane of the door that is carved in inlay technique (Pl.5).



Detail of panel



Plate 5 Door panel carved in inlay technique, Lahore Museum, Lahore (Photo by author)

The ivory inlaid door is presenting the images of Hindu deities, floral design and lion figure. It is unique in technique and considered a rare art piece. Its provenance is not recorded but the images of deities make it sure that it is taken from some Hindu edifice.

Marvelous carving can be seen on a 19<sup>th</sup> C. wooden door which is displayed on the eastern wall of Lahore Museum's vestibule next to ivory inlaid door (Pl.6). The door is in very good condition and presents diverse characteristics to the other items on show. Figurative work and floral designs are employed to adorn it. Eight panels on the door show varied fine chiseled figures. The door is from Lahore as told by Dr. Dar during an interview.



Plate 6 Door from Lahore, 19<sup>th</sup> C, Lahore, Museum, Lahore (Photo by author)

The adornment features such as Hindu deities and crowning Ganesha figure (Pl.2) above the lintel proved that it is taken from Hindu religious building as Ganesh was the son of Parvati and Shiva.<sup>9</sup> Therefore in my opinion it must have been taken from some Shiva temple.

A huge entrance structure is further added to the western wall, which is the carved door of 16<sup>th</sup> C. in *Akbari* style (Pl.7). Door leaves and the panel above the lintel are showing geometrical patterns. Rests of the door components reveal abstract motifs, symbols and scrolls.

Plate 7 Akbari style wooden door, Lahore Museum, Lahore (photo by author)



A colossal wooden entrance to some significant building in Lahore is displayed in general gallery of Lahore Museum. It is in the form of double entrance dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> C. The double door measures 12'-7" x 13'-9". Whole body of the door consists of three vertical and two horizontal pillars all worked in Shisham and Bair wood. Entire body of the door from every side is abundantly carved (Pl.8).

Plate 8 Part of the profusely carved double doorway, Lahore Museum, Lahore (Photo by author)



It is one of the oldest doors in our country but its craftsman is unknown.<sup>10</sup>The combined structure of two openings with mutual pillar (Pl.9) showed that it was used as entrance to a room or to adorn the interior but not produced as the main entrance of building.

Plate 9 Wooden entrance with two openings in Lahore Museum, Lahore (Photo by author)

Corbel arch with bell shaped hangings is the prominent feature and the enormous upper part is exposing rows of hanging knobs in three layers.

**Carved Wooden Doors from Sikh Period (form the Display at the Lahore Museum)**

When we pass through the vestibule of Lahore Museum on our left can be sighted a wooden door removed from Haveli Naunehal Singh, 19<sup>th</sup> C. It is fixed alongside the entrance to the Islamic Gallery (Pl.II). The door provides good example of Sikh period wood carving. Variety of vegetal foliation proved the sort of adornment of Sikh art work.



Plate II Door of Naunehal Singh Haveli, Lahore Museum, Lahore. (Photo by author)

**Door from Jain Mandir Gallery (Lahore Museum)**

Carved door of Hari Nalwa Singh Haveli is displayed in the Jain Mandir Gallery leading to the Armory Gallery, Lahore Museum. The door is brought from Gujranwala containing wooden ventilators above the lintel and elaborated projected arch that is supported by intricately carved pillars. Ceiling of the arch is of wood and beautified with complicated carved design (Pl.I2). Both floral and geometrical designing scheme is found on the door.



Plate I2 Carved ceiling of arch, door of Hari Singh Haveli, Lahore Museum, Lahore (Photo by author)

### Wooden Carved Door from Lahore Walled City

The wooden door of Haveli Mubarak Begam, Bazar-e-Hakeeman is having intricately carved jambs whereas leaves are plain (Pl.10). Wooden ventilator is fixed above the lintel. The door is painted in blue and not in very good condition especially jambs are much decayed. Projected arch of wood is crowning the door structure, adorned with carved medallion on the spandrels. Haveli is erected during the period of Muhammad Shah (last Mughal Emperor) and has been recently renovated.



Plate 10 Door of Haveli Mubarak Begum, Lahore. (Photo by author)

Inside the Mori Gate, the entrance door of Naunehal Singh Haveli is showing marvelous example of Sikh period carving (Pl.13).

The building façade encompasses an elongated *bukharcha* above the door flanked by two comparatively slim *bukharchas* and the lattice work is noticed in the openings of them.



Detail of carving

Plate 13 Door of Naunehal Singh Haveli, walled city, Lahore (Photo by author)



The door is fixed in plastered brick structure which is embellished with bright fresco paintings and flanked by low seats within the projected arch in conventional manner. Being an artist and historian I suggest that the entrance of the particular building does not mean the jambs of door including leaves, it comprises all the components on façade

such as *jharoka* and *bukharcha* that is traditionally found above the entrance. These fragments are brought to display individually but actually these are parts of the doorways because the conventional style is considered absolute by the assortment of all façade modules. In most of the cases main entrance and the top window found on the recessed surface surrounded by projected arch. The building of Naunehal Singh Haveli is presenting good evidence of this tradition (Pl.14).



Plate 14 Façade of Naunehal Singh Haveli, walled city Lahore (Photo by author)

Door of Gurudwara Dera Sahib is located near Ranjit Singh Samadhi. The door is providing versatile patterns in each panel on the door leaves and affixed in white plastered structure (Pl.15). Natural elements like leaves, flowers, fruits and birds figures are employed to adorn the door.



Plate 15 Door of Gurudwara Dera Sahib near Lahore Fort (Photo by author)

The carving on the door of Ranjit Singh Samadhi is marvelous in its characters which comprises splendid balance and harmony in its designing. The door set in red sand stone and flanked by seats and small niches. Carving is in bas relief and the motifs that are used logical and symbolic (Pl.16).



Plate I6 Door from Ranjit Singh Samadhi, Lahore  
(Photo by author)

### Conclusion

Regarding wood carving an artisan should be careful to select the patterns due to the nature of craft, as it is harder than painting and molding. But the designs I found on the wooden doors are complicated and eye catching, signature the true skill of artisans. Harmonious Intricate and perfect carving on the huge mass of wood is presenting excellence of craftsmanship in this medium. With a view to the study of Mughal doors, the doors are erected with projected arch built in corbelling manner with hanging knobs that is acknowledged as Akbari style. The same approach on entrances found in the buildings built during the period of Akbar the great. This might be the reason to know this style by the name of the emperor. The entire designing on the doors is the blend of geometric and floral designs with the addition of a few abstract motifs. Mughals interest to the beauty of nature could be guessed by the frequent use of various floral motifs. The massive structure, superb design, elaborate carving present a marvelous impact of light and dark contrast, invite everyone to stop and view. The innovative adornment style of the Mughal doors, including vertical semi cylindrical profusely carved bar in the center and strong wide door jambs, influenced later door structures of Sikh period. Wooden doors of Sikh period reflect the artistic diversity of the Punjab region, the adornment style of the Mughal dynasty and indigenous

artistic style. Sikh artists synthesized a wide range of elements to create their own distinct imagery. The art work that produced under the Sikh patronage reflects the grandeur of the Sikh royal courts. The enormous structure like Mughal doors are not found in Sikh period. No projected wooden arch is observed in Sikh doors, in some cases double multi foiled arch is built on the entrance but not of wood, but can be considered as part of the door. Mostly vibrant fresco paintings or simple patterns of stucco could be seen around the entrance. The fundamental features of Sikh doors are multi sections on the door leaves, Ventilators or *pinjra* work above the door that considered the part of the previous doors is totally absent, geometric patterns are hardly found in the carved design on the door while floral motifs are abundantly used. Mainly these floral motifs and delicacy are the result of Mughal influence but the exaggeration of some vegetal motifs is also found. Carved designs on the door appear with some addition such as Guru's image. Bird figures with fruits, vines and flower pots are noticed on the Sikh door which although, are found in Pre-Mughals and Mughals art work but are not found on Mughal doors. On the whole, in the Sikh adornment elements of vegetal foliage played a major role that is developed on their own significance as their own style.

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