

Anglo Indian Sewing Boxes

The sewing boxes designed for the European market, but created and enhanced in India by those who lived there.



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I am thankful for the spirit of fun and tolerance my family has shown towards their errant parent. Not to mention my E-slaves who will sort out my computer woes.

A huge bouquet of thanks to the Museum curators, restorers, E bay sellers and auction houses with whom I have corresponded and received many kindnesses and encouragement.

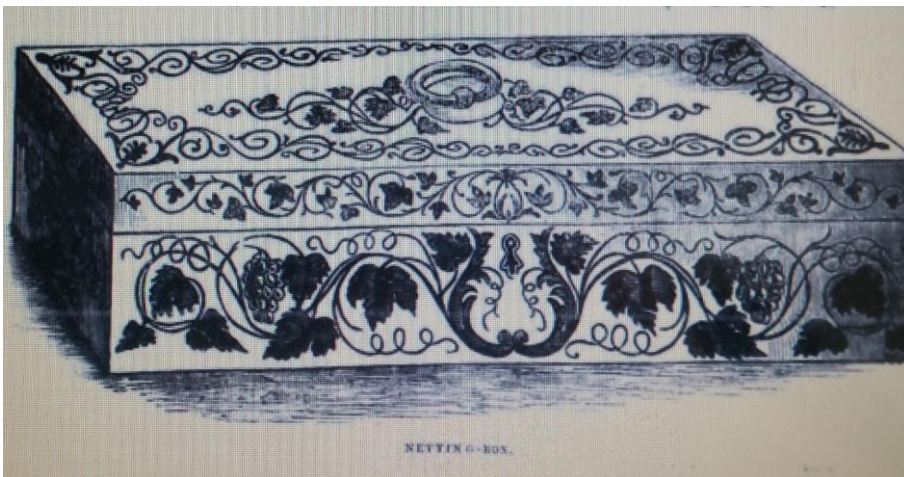


Figure 1 Cover illustration & page 1. *The Lady's Newspaper and Pictorial Times*. 20th August 1855. Issue 347. 100. Both boxes are from Vizagapatam.

Clare Muzzatti Biography: BA Macquarie University, MA Sydney University prior to marriage. Still addicted to embroidery and antiques!

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Contents

A Map of India	3
Introduction	4
My usage of the words 'Ivory' and 'bone'	5
Approximate age and date range.....	6
Finding the Women	6
Finding the Craftsmen who made these boxes	12
Other hands	14
Vizagapatam	16
A case study: A Vizagapatam Workbox – The National Gallery of Victoria	19
Inside the Vizagapatam sewing box	27
Sadeli	29
What is Sadeli?	30
Sadeli Patterns.....	31
A case study: The Early 1800's Sadeli Workbox	36
1810 – 1820	43
1830 -1850	44
1850 -1900	53
A case study: The 1859 Mutiny Sewing Box	55
Monghry.....	59
A case study: A Monghry Sewing Box 1840s.....	60
A case study: The Monghry Sewing Box. 1850 - 1855.....	63
Sandalwood sewing box.....	66
A case study: Mysore Sandalwood Box, possibly 1850s	69
Ceylon.....	72
A case study: Late Georgian/ William IV Period Netting Box	79
The contents of an ivory sewing box circa 1810	82
Needlework tools made in India	83
An Indian influence? Circle and Dot decoration, or Madras/Hot Needlework?	94

Repair and restoration	98
Conservation of Sadeli work	100
Not Quite Sadeli	104
Signs of quality	105
Glossary	106
Bibliography	107
Postscript.....	109

Fig 2.

A Map of India showing the areas, cities and towns mentioned in the text. The names are those used by the British and may have been changed post Indian Independence.



Anglo Indian Sewing Boxes

The scope of this research reaches back from Indian Independence in 1948 to the mid-18th century.

The definition of a sewing box (also known as a 'workbox') used for this paper is a box that has been designed and fitted with sewing tools previous to its sale. Thus, a box fitted for netting¹ will be included as does a box that includes a writing slope in addition to sewing tools.

Included are Ceylonese Coromandal boxes which have trays with lidded compartments but no tools specific for needlework as part of the box's original contents. In addition, where boxes have been used to store sewing tools they are also part of this study.

Introduction

Very few Anglo Indian sewing boxes have survived considering how many were created over the last 200 years. Four very distinct types have been passed down through the generations, with the occasional and sometimes unique box that deserves a category all of its own. This research is based on what can be found online and in books, with a small number of restorers and my own tiny collection of examples. The dates given are a guide, except where there are written records. It is done in the hope it will lead to the discovery of unidentified boxes and to finding more examples that can illustrate their diversity and development.

The early workboxes were made as expensive and exotic gifts, to be sent back to England to the wealthy and well connected. These boxes with their thread barrels, bone thimbles and rollers, were designed for the pleasures of fine silk embroidery, tambour work, knotting and tatting as well as netting. They were made to be admired, and the greater the size, the more elaborate the lay out and versatility of their uses. The largest boxes would provide three key locked sections. At the top a jewellery box, just below a sewing tray and beneath both a full sized writing slope.

As time moved on sewing boxes were still a significant investment. The latter half of the 19th century saw the British Empire expand and transport improve, so Indian sewing boxes were exported, for sale in prestigious and magnificent exhibitions. Many more were bought as a traveller's keepsake, or for gifts. The need for a strong, insect proof box (essential for protecting sewing tools and threads) in the interior of India could have necessitated a purchase.

The Arts and Crafts Movement with its rejection of industrial mass production provided the opportunity for Indian artisan made goods to become sought after by all classes of British society. The following decades featured the rise of Colonial and Asiatic exotica in room decoration sold

¹ Netting is a method of creating an open fabric through weaving regular knots, similar to a fishing net but on a smaller scale and using beads, gold or silver thread for decoration.

though fashionable shops such as Liberty and Co². From India, furniture, fabric, silver and home wares were attractive and novel items with which to display one's taste and wealth.

My usage of the word 'ivory'.

For simplicity, throughout this work the word 'ivory' is used to describe the white and dyed natural material (terrestrial, as well as marine) and man-made substances which were used to decorate boxes and create usable sewing tools.

Ivory and bone are difficult to tell apart since bone can be treated to look just as white, with the brown and black flecks of blood vessels that distinguish bone, purged of colour. Bone comes from slaughtered domesticated animals, such as cattle, horses, and camels. Vegetable ivory which comes from the Tagua nut (a palm tree nut) and ranges in colour from cream to brown was also used to produce small carved sewing tools. Ivory was also 'created' by mixes of ivory, bone dust, chalk, gelatine, plaster of Paris and gutta percha (early rubber). In 1862 at the Great International Exhibition in London, Alexander Parkes introduced cellulose nitrate plastic, or "parkesine" (known also as French ivory), this became a popular synthetic substitute for animal material.

Animal ivory is basically another form of bone, as it has a similar chemical composition (its major component is 25 to 30% fibrous protein collagen).³ Chemical tests cannot tell bone from ivory, unless some of the material is taken for destructive analysis.⁴ Long wave ultra violet light can be used instead. Old ivory will fluoresce and give off mottled yellow tones, while younger ivory is deep blue-purple to blueish in tone depending on the type of ivory.⁵

The presence of a pattern of intersecting arcs, known as 'Schreger lines' may be noticeable (these are hard to see on Indian elephant ivory and more obvious on African elephant ivory), this is a clear indication of genuine elephant ivory.

Old ivory can also be stained, cracked or warped. This is irreversible. Very old ivory will yellow with age, a trend that can be slowed down by exposure to indirect sun light.

The earliest source for ivory in India was from domesticated Indian elephants. Elephants were valued for their power and strength in agriculture, forestry and in war. Their tusks were regularly trimmed⁶ and this ivory would not have been wasted.

Another source was Burmese ivory, and today, sadly, it is this wild population that is being destroyed for both their skin and their tusks, to supply the Chinese medicine market⁷.

² Liberty and Co promoted Indian craftsmanship or art manufactures. In 1885 they created an Indian village of craftsmen at the Albert Palace in south London. In their Regent Street store they attracted customers with their "Oriental Galleries". Wynyard R. T. Wilkinson, *Indian Silver 1858-1947*, (Wynyard Wilkinson, London 1999), 68

³ I M Godfrey. *Ivory, Bone and Related Materials*. Western Australia Museum. <https://manual.museum.wa.gov.au> Accessed August 2018.

⁴ "Ivory, Bone" WAM.

⁵ "Ivory, Bone" WAM.

⁶ Amin Jaffer, *Furniture from British India and Ceylon*, (V&A Publications 2001)175. "Ivory from the Rajah's own elephants whose tusks were regularly shorn".

⁷ Axel Kronholm, "Demand for elephant skin, trunk and penis drives rapid rise in poaching in Myanmar" *The Guardian*. 7th June 2017.

From the late 19th century imports of African ivory grew. It was viewed as superior to Indian ivory as it was a better colour and more closely grained. The tusks were longer and did not crack or warp as easily.⁸

Bone, mammalian ivory, nut ivory and manmade ivory were popular for use in making small sewing and knitting tools. They were light, and easy to clean after handling. Mammalian ivory was cool to the touch and along with bone could be easily coloured and decorated. These materials did not rust or corrode and were very smooth to use in repetitive tasks when thread need to slip easily without catching (knitting and crochet).

Tools that were marked for measurement such as rulers and knitting needle gauges were easier to read with the white background.

The feel of smooth, cool, tools what could be pushed and pulled through fabric, and held comfortably for repetitive movements were valued by their owners. The carving and artistry to produce an attractive, yet special item, sometimes made to mark a relationship or event in life also added another layer of significance to the item.

In India, ivory sewing tools would have been easier to purchase than those imported from the UK and Europe. They may well have been cheaper too, at least until the railways and regular steam ships brought in more foreign goods. Making items that were light and cool in the hand would have been more popular, hence netting, tambour work and crochet in fine thread would have been the work of choice on hot afternoons and evenings...

Ivory was used as a veneer on boxes. By the 1830s a machine was patented which took thin slices of tusk and flattened them to create flat sheets of 60cm width or more.⁹

Approximate age and date ranges.

Where it is possible the date for a box is mentioned if it has written evidence. Otherwise, the style and materials may cover two to three decades or more.

Finding the Women...

It is easy to be tempted to view the boxes as just interesting remnants from the British colonial past, but is that 'history' from the purely male perspective?

An early record, made by a man is the "Portrait of a Lady". Painted in oil on canvas by Robert Holme around 1805-1810 in Calcutta¹⁰, this unnamed, attractive, young European woman is viewed seated at her netting stand. A partly netted miser's purse hangs on the stand and next to it her small work box and sewing tools. It is the project she will work on once she turns back away from the viewer. This is the accepted view of such women, mute, young and forgotten.

It is far harder, and more interesting to find women's voices and to weave them into the role of these boxes and the place of needlework in their lives in India.

⁸ Jaffer, *Furniture from British India and Ceylon*. 398.

⁹ Sandwith, H & Stainton, S. *The National Trust Manual of Housekeeping*. (Allen Lane, 1984 London)

¹⁰ Holme, Robert. "Portrait of a Lady". [https:// WWW. Phillip Mould.com](https://www.phillipmould.com) , accessed April 2020.



Figure 3. Miss Charlotte Needle 1858 at 16 years of age. She married soon after arrival in India. Charlotte had ten children and died a few weeks after her last was born. Not a woman of rank or birth. Photo: Author's collection.

Of those who have left a record, very little has survived from the women who were outside those families with wealth or rank in British society. More has been written about them by their social superiors and not always of the kindest comments. What is to be valued from these writers and diarists is that rank and money gave them the opportunity to travel great distances and to have the leisure to record what they experienced.

One such diarist is Maria Graham, the wife of a Royal Navy captain, whose experience covers the years 1809 to 1811. She comments on a wide variety of subjects: the introduction of the potato (only introduced twenty years earlier), on the types of shell fish and the lime made from their shells, but never on her own sewing. That would be dull and mundane, for she has rank and money!

She does not make her own attire, but paid a tailor or 'derdjee'.

"my derdjee, a tall good looking young man, ... he works and cuts out beautifully, making much use of his toes as of his fingers in the last operation. His wages are 14 rupees a month for which he works eight hours a day"¹¹

Maria lived in Bombay, which she recorded as containing,

"upwards of two hundred thousand inhabitants"¹².

She gives us a valuable insight into the effect Britain's industrialization had on the local Indian economy and industry.

"In Bombay...Banyans, or travelling merchants...roam the country with muslins, cotton cloth and shawls to sell. On opening one of their bales, I was surprised to find at least half of its contents of British manufacture and such articles were much cheaper than those of equal fineness from Bengal and Madras...yet still it seems strange, that cotton carried to England, manufactured and returned...should under sell the fabrics of India, where labour is so cheap".¹³

¹¹ Maria Graham, *Journal of a Residence in India*. (Edinburgh 1812). 30-31.

¹²Graham, *Journal of a Residence*, 4.

¹³Graham, *Journal of a Residence*, 33.

In a further paragraph Maria describes another set of travelling merchants who had a less affluent clientele,

“The inside of a borah’s box is like that of an English country shop, spelling books, prayer books, Lavender water, eau de luce. Soap, tape, scissors, ... needles and thread make but a small part of the variety it contains”¹⁴

All these wonderful little objects would need a box.

We do know that Maria does needlework, but it is only on the long voyage home to England that she lets this slip out.

“I occupy one quarter of the cabin, and after breakfast I always write or study for three hours, after which I draw, or I do needlework till dinner time.”¹⁵

From Maria sailing home in 1811 we can next join Mrs Fenton. She embarks with her first husband Captain Neil Campbell in January, 1827 on a 500km journey up the Ganges River to Dinnapore. They travel in a convoy with a houseboat to themselves rowed by “16 oars”. They had a sitting room, bathing room and a bedroom. The latter was,

“roomy enough for 2 chests of draws, her workbox and Neil’s gun case”.¹⁶

A second boat carried their heavy luggage and a third for cooking and laundry.

Sadly, her husband dies from a fever a few months later in May. Now a widow, she returns to Calcutta where she is told the scandalous news of another who performed a very different type of stitching.

“Dr Barry was and is a woman...The truth of this strange tale I cannot pledge myself to uphold, but I well remember listening to it one tedious night.”¹⁷

A little later when in 1829 she meets Dr James Barry at Port Louis on the Isle De France (Mauritius), she is at once curious but not shocked, and referred to Dr Barry as “my friend,” and enjoyed long walks with him.¹⁸

Mrs Fenton’s life was seldom dull, but she did reveal her boredom of the mundane. About a letter that came from another young woman she commented,

“Oh! Six sheets about the hemming of Bonnets and bride’s maids Gear and the smart conversation of Gentlemen on the evening drives”.¹⁹

If bonnets and bridesmaids were not to Mrs Fenton’s taste, then Mrs Houvery was very much a proper army wife. When her expertise with a needle was called on to make the laced canvas base of a small, model fold- up bed to be sent to the Government for approval, she writes that she had the “honour” of making it.²⁰

¹⁴ Graham, *Journal of a Residence*, 33.

¹⁵ Graham, *Journal of a Residence*, 173.

¹⁶ Margaretta Pos, *Mrs Fenton’s Journey 1826-1876* (Walleah Press, Tasmania.2014). 11.

¹⁷ Pos, *Mrs Fenton*, 43.

¹⁸ Pos, *Mrs Fenton*, 44.

¹⁹ Pos, *Mrs Fenton*, 65.

²⁰ M. Houvery, *A Ladies Diary Before and During the Indian Mutiny* (King UK 1892). 67.

The never ending fight to protect and maintain clothes and possessions from vermin, insects, and mould was shared by all.

“On opening the draw today, I found to my horror, 2 dresses bitten into shreds by a rat and quite destroyed.”²¹

While dresses could be replaced, an army officer’s dress uniform was an expensive loss. Storing clothes in a box in the Mess House was no guarantee of safety.

“Of boots nothing remained, but the soles.....His dress and undress Shako-10 Guinea affairs- has been converted into nests where mice have been born and reared!”²²

The most difficult of insects were white ants, which could travel up a wall and remain hidden by framed prints and by curtains, or move under carpet and matting to silently make holes, then nests in boxes and furniture.

Sewing boxes from British and European woods would have been toothsome delights. There are yet to be discovered records of sewing boxes eaten from within by white ants, but there are records of other imported furniture that attracted them, so it seems most likely.

Sandalwood and ebony, both valued for their insect resistant qualities, plus durability and beauty, were the chosen timbers for either creating the carcass and trays of sewing boxes, or used as individual timbers for boxes that displayed the inlay and carving skills of Indian master craftsmen (even after 200 years the scent of sandalwood lingers).

The continual fight with the climate, rodents and insects was a common and everyday rhythm of life in India.

In 1857 a far more serious war began, which swept across the Gangetic plain and led to changes in the way India was governed and to the swift development of the railways.

Caught up in this rebellion were women of whom, only a small and narrow social strata have left us their experiences.

Officers wives like Maria Germon, who during the siege of Lucknow, wrote that there was a brisk trade in the clothes of the dead. She kept her husband “decent” by patching his “unmentionables” with a piece of Reverend Harris’s habit.²³

Maria and her husband survive and it is the description of her departure that reveals what possessions she had left.

“I sewed mother’s fish knife and fork in my pink skirt.... I also had two under pockets, one filled with jewellery and a card case, the other with my journal and valuable papers. I then filled my cloth skirt pocket with pencil, knife, pin cushion, handkerchief”²⁴

The valuables were well hidden, but the essentials like her pin cushion were in easy reach!

²¹ Houvery, *A Ladies Diary*, 50.

²² Houvery, *A Ladies Diary*, 134.

²³ Pat Barr, *The Memsahibs- Women of Victorian India* (Secker and Warburg, London.1976).126.

²⁴ Barr, *The Memsahibs*, 136.

Maria was determined to take all she owned. So dressed in all her clothes (3 pairs of stockings, 3 pairs drawers, one flannel and four white petticoats, dressing gown, a skirt, a dress, two jackets and a cashmere shawl) she struggled to get on the pony hired to carry her away.

In her own words,

“It cost.... a great deal of exertion (to mount the pony)...which was no joke dressed and laden as I was.... (All those who watched were in) “fits of laughter”.²⁵

You may wonder at these details and ask, why are they part of a paper on Indian sewing boxes? Maria was recording the struggle to live through the siege and yet to her, her remaining wardrobe is just as worthy of comment. The preservation of clothes, and their repair was a constant of life in this period. The most cherished garments were imported from Britain and Europe, the cut and design were valued as was the knowledge of the latest trends in fashion. Expensive to buy, and owing to the climate, wearing out quickly, or providing a meal for a horde of insects, clothes needed to be repaired at the first sign of wear. A well-stocked workbox was essential, as mending would have been a monotonous task but unavoidable. Planning and carrying out alterations could keep a dress fashionable or as needed, one to be remade for another, younger member of the family.

Decorative embroidery would have been a refreshing change, but one suspects only indulged in if the mending basket was near empty!

Harriet Tytler was born in 1828 in Oude, India. Harriet’s parents were English, and she was their fourth child. Her father was an officer in the East India Company (EIC) army and so she grew up moving with his regiment from one army post to another. Harriet tells her reader that by the age of eight she was an accomplished embroiderer and under her mother’s careful tuition had made a christening robe in French embroidery for her new born sister.

She also records that she used her father’s watch to see how much needlework she could accomplish in five minutes.²⁶ Her love of fine needlework did not encompass mending. As a child, her pet hate was to be made to mend stockings, especially if her mother kept her up at night past 11pm in the hot weather²⁷ (there was no escape to the cool elevation of the Hill stations, as they had yet to be established).

Harriet married an EIC Army captain in 1847, and thus her family were also caught up in the Indian Mutiny of 1857. They fled from Delhi in the clothes they had on their backs and little else. Harriet was eight months pregnant and completely unprepared for the harsh life ahead of her. She was unable to travel to safety and so remained with the regiment at the siege of Delhi throughout the hot season.

She was not alone. Though she tells the reader that she was the only “Lady” present, with her were her children’s Indian Ayah and her long suffering French Breton ladies maid, Marie. Their home was a cart on which Harriet gave birth to a healthy son. Harriet’s skill in mending and plain sewing ensured that the clothes she and the children were wearing lasted through the heat and the siege, as well as providing the newborn baby with linen and clothes.

The strain and exhaustion of her situation did not halt her sewing,

²⁵ Barr, *The Memsahibs*, 137.

²⁶ A. Satin, *An Englishwoman in India. The Memoirs of Harriet Tytler 1828-1858* (Oxford University Press 1986), 15.

²⁷ Satin, *An Englishwoman*, 19.

“My life... was chiefly spent in darning, from morning to night, the little we possessed, to keep them from going to pieces”²⁸

Harriet never mentions her sewing box or basket in spite of the work and pleasure she had from this occupation.

In another account this time written by Emily Metcalf, whose uncle Sir Charles Metcalf (Acting Governor General of India), presented

“Georgie and me with two beautiful workboxes made of rosewood. They were lined with red silk and fitted with silver articles...These were the receptacles of all our special treasures as children, and I grieved sorely over the loss of mine in the Mutiny at Delhie (sic),...where it was sent for safety during our absence from India”²⁹

It is most likely that this could have been an English box with its fitted contents, but this does indicate how a sewing box could have more than one purpose and be just as treasured by its owner. In looking at the range and date of Indian sewing boxes, those that have survived intact and in perfect condition are surely to have been treasured by their original owners and passed down through the family with care and forethought.

While mending was domestic slavery and a sewing box could provide protection for your trifles, there was pleasure to be had in making your own items.

Dr Ellen Farrah, who in November 1891 arrived at Baptist Zenana Mission at Bhiwani, 40 miles from Delhi and was still working there thirty- five years later. Farrah records that while recovering from “country fever” she spent her time in bed sewing an umbrella cover to send to her Mamma for Christmas.³⁰

A gift made from your own hands had significance and perhaps for many of the givers of sewing boxes this was a thought that was in their mind. The occasional box surfaces with a note about the giver and in some boxes the contents include a token of love and friendship in the form of a Bristol card with a sentimental phrase in cross stitch. Otherwise, it is a bare, grubby and distressed sewing box that makes its way onto the antiques market. Cheap enough for easy acquisition, and invariably without its feet, or locks, or other items harvested for use on other more valued antiques.

An antique box in perfect condition is an item to be admired and at the price it can command, who would dare to risk damage to it by taking it apart? Thank goodness for the broken, permanently twisted and defaced boxes. My family may feel that I have collected a pile of junk but this has allowed a hands on approach to understanding how these boxes were made and a limited attempt to correct and repair them using reversible and age correct glue and techniques. Uncovering and

²⁸ Satin, *An Englishwoman*, 149.

²⁹ M.M. Kaye, *The Golden Calm - An English lady's Life in Moghul Delhi*, (Web and Bower Exeter UK 1980). 26.

³⁰ Barr, *The Memsahibs* 179,181.

describing the changes and the history of these boxes and looking at what their contents could have been, is the aim of my research.



Figure 4. The mystery signature in Mutiny sewing box 1859 (Sadeli). Author's collection.

The box that began this search was signed by its original owner. Her signature, written in ink on the base of a small lidded compartment in the sewing box tray, was so very poorly made that it is impossible to decipher. What can just be read is Jhansi and 1859. After its manufacture in Bombay it would have travelled overland to the centre of India and into the heart of Mutiny area. Jhansi became a large Army station and its dry flat landscape is caught in early postcards that show rows of houses and the elephants trained to pull the guns. The postcards now reside in the box as testament to the history it has been a part of.

Finding the craftsmen who made these boxes

Some boxes have hints of their past, of the hands that have held them and in a few cases helped shape them. It is rare to have a record of manufacture. Workboxes made for exhibitions either in India or overseas can be identified, but it is the entrepreneur or best workshop carpenter whose name is known. A few photos of their exhibition stands have survived, laden with a mix of wares to appeal to every taste. From the collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) only a handful of names have been recorded.

To my knowledge, (at present) only two boxes sold by the same entrepreneur have come onto the antiques market in recent times. The first was identified by an old label adhered to the base of a beautifully carved sandalwood sewing box that was offered for sale on EBay. It was exhibited at the 1868 Broach Agricultural Exhibition in Bombay (Mumbai) for sale at the price of 105 rupees.

Sandalwood carved sewing boxes of this quality have shown a steady rise in value and are somewhat scarce, especially if they still have their original fittings and tools.

By chance, a recent acquisition of a standard, non-sewing type box, bought for its beautiful carving has a partial label on its base that reads, 'Framjee Pestorjee' and below that, 'Bhumgara' and no.13. The rest of what would have been a square label in ink has been ripped away. It is a sandalwood box covered with detailed carving and I feel very fortunate to be its present guardian. It is of a different style of carving, but of high quality, suitable for sale at an exhibition for which Framjee Pestorjee would have chosen the best work he could find. There is a photograph of one of his stands taken at

the Universal Exhibition in Paris 1889,³¹ with a very wide range of wares including furniture, boxes of all types and brassware.



Figure 5. A Framjee Pestonjee Sandalwood sewing box sold in 1868 at the Broach Exhibition. Photo courtesy of Vince Berry.



Figure 6. This collection of four boxes shows the style of wood carving of Surat³² and Gujarat north of Bombay (Mumbai). Top left is an early box carved from ebony and below it is a similar box that still has Framjee Pestonjee's label. All boxes were made in the 1800s. Various woods.

³¹ Jaffer, *Furniture*, 315.

³² Dasgupta. K. K. *Catalogue of Wood Carvings in Indian Museum*. Indian Museum, Calcutta 1981.13

Other hands....

The record of acquisition can also add to a boxes past. Amongst the fourteen workboxes at the V&A, the date, cost and/or donor had been recorded. In one case, a Vizagapatam box made at least fifty years earlier, was acquired by Queen Mary from the Wembley Exhibition in 1925 and given to the V&A. Inside the box was a pair of calling cards, one from Joseph Wedgwood –wine and spirit merchant of the Isle of Wight, and the other from Miss Martelli. The Martelli family name is also found in Anglo Indian records pre 1870.³³

Auction house advertisements indicate that at the start of the 1800s Indian workboxes were amongst the belongings of the wealthy. An 1818 auction notice that was both in 'The Times' and the 'Morning Post' of London, records;

“Removed from Piccadilly...remaining household furniture...2 forte pianos ... a pier glass 60 feet by 25 feet (mirror)....an Indian workbox, unusually fine skins of a tiger and a lion, formed as couches”³⁴

Such goods were worth stealing; from the Police Gazette 1831,

“a silver coffee pot... one small inlaid ivory workbox, consisting of Trinkets and Indian coin, one large Bombay box: a pair of bracelets and a gold brooch were taken from the home of Mr Hunter of Russell Square London”.³⁵

By 1881, Indian workboxes were common enough to be stolen from the less affluent, such as Mr Harding, a schoolmaster at Warley Barracks. Among the articles valued at five pounds six shilling and six pence, were warm clothes, an Indian made workbox and three saucepans.³⁶

Even within a family, the history of a sewing box can be lost. When parents and their children are estranged, the links with the past disappear and items left behind are just excess stuff that needs to be sold. For one seller there may have been regret, when he became aware that his battered sewing box showed a link that reached back at least seventy years earlier than the 1920s and 30's of his Grandparent's residence in India.

Some hands have been less than kind. The oldest and most damaged box in my collection had been shot at with an air rifle. The tiny silver beads of round shot buried in the wood spoke for the large patches of rosewood, bare of Sadeli micro mosaic.

While this may have been the result of a child's game, other harvesting is not so thoughtless. Very few Indian boxes escape intact. They have parts that are hard to source. However, as they have been produced over a long time span these have a value. The carved and cast feet are valued for use on clocks while other items such as locks and escutcheons are reused, as are the sewing tools which can find their way into another box of a similar period. Lately, with the CITES³⁷ restrictions, and the call to burn all ivory of any age, it is not unusual to find Sadeli boxes striped of micro mosaic and ivory

³³ Families in British India Society Website- <https://www.fibis.org/research>

³⁴ The Times, Issue 10449 (London, 31st August 1818). Morning Post, (London, 24th August 1818). Eighteenth Century Collection Online, Primary Sources, Gale. (CS68174623) Accessed July 2018.

³⁵ Police Gazette: or, 'Hue and Cry,' (London, 9th February 1831) 1182-1183. Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale (BHTNGJ70911615). Accessed July 2018.

³⁶ Essex Newsmen, Issue 566: 4. (England, 5th February 1881). Issue 566, p4.

³⁷ Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

stringing, and the carved panels 'improved' with a coat of oil or varnish for a swift and worry free sale.

Intact boxes that have been stored with care (with only the long wood splits of old, dried wood as damage) are still sought after. A few, with their contents untouched, intact and unchipped will command the highest value when placed on sale.

Repairs and restoration can be done on some boxes to bring them back to as near original condition as is possible. However, the number of restorers with the knowledge and skills are thinning, thus this will become even more difficult and expensive to restore a damaged box.

Sadeli micro mosaic is particularly difficult to repair. An innovative method may come from 3D printers, but how these materials will age in comparison to the original mix of micro mosaic materials will be interesting. Many years ago there was an attempt to use a colour matched printed paper as patches and this was written up in a museum paper, but fading ink was my first thought...

Vizagapatam

The port of Vizagapatam is on the east coast of India. In the days of sailing ships, it provided the best harbour between Madras and Calcutta. The locality also supplied fine timber for ship building³⁸ and became a hub of industry for luxury export goods sent to Europe and Britain. First developed by the Dutch as a trading post in 1628, the English arrived in 1668, after the area was ceded to the East India Company (EIC).

At first Vizagapatam produced sturdy hardwood furniture, using ebony, rosewood or padouk inlaid with ornate floral designs in ivory. The arrival of European furniture makers with their skills and techniques gave the port an economic edge over other ports. Local tradesmen learnt to make furniture that was light, but strong and for India's village carpenters, novel methods of joining timber. By 1806, it was written,

"The natives are very expert in their ivory works... little boxes and work baskets of ivory and bone"³⁹

Amin Jaffer states that from several accounts and the inventories of estates taken at the time of death, reveal that there was a strong involvement by both the European and English traders in organising and investing in goods made for the western market.

From one of these accounts, written by Elizabeth Davidson, she records (1790) commissioning two netting boxes on behalf of her relatives in London⁴⁰. This may be the earliest published written record of specific workboxes created for sending to England and pre dates the correspondence recording the Sadeli workbox that resides in Powys Castle.

However, there is an auction notice of the deceased estate of Henry Browning Esq. at his home in Pennington near Lymington that pre dates this by nine years (1781). It records lot 54 as "five India dressing boxes, pin cushion, brush and comb tray", which leaves little doubt that the following "lot 55- An Indian workbox", would have been a sewing box. This was a major sale, one, the auction house noted would begin on the "2nd of July and (run for) the thirteen following days"⁴¹.

By the second half of the 18th century decorative goods from Vizagapatam were sent to Bombay, Madras and Calcutta to be sold by furniture dealers, or by auction. The steady rate of illness and death amongst the English and European population also meant they would appear as second hand goods in estate sales, both in India and in Britain.

³⁸Jaffer, *Furniture*, 172.

³⁹Jaffer, *Furniture*, 173. *An Account of a Voyage to India, China etc, by an Officer of The Caroline* (London 1806):120.

⁴⁰Jaffer, *Furniture*, 173. Oriental and Indian Office Collection. British Library. Mss' Eur. 300/1A Letters March 6th and December 27th 1790.

⁴¹John Braxton (T. Baker, Southampton, 1718) *A catalogue of the Genuine and Entire Household Goods... Of the Late Henry Brownrigg Esq.* At his late dwelling house, at Pennington near Lymington. p8. Davidson Papers. 18th Century Collections Online. Primary Sources. Gale (CWO126013456) Accessed July 2018.



Figure 7. An Anglo Indian Vizagapatam ivory workbox, late 18th century. Photo via Pinterest.



Figure 8. Rare late 18th century Vizagapatam ivory sewing box in the form of a colonial house. Interior view. Photo: Pinterest.

The surviving sewing boxes from this period are few. The most easily recognised design is the ivory veneered house shaped box (fig.7). On all sides it is etched with lac to create a quaint English cottage and garden. It has a lid that performs as the roof and a slide out drawer at its base. Inside, the box is lined and has a sewing tray, both made from sandalwood. The tool tray has compartments, some open, while others are fitted with a lid veneered in ivory, and surmounted with a small metal ring, or ivory knob.

Depending on the size of the box, there may be a single pin cushion or a pair of pin cushions, as well as an ivory frame for a pair of thimbles. In addition, there are wells for thread barrels and other absent sewing tools.

An insight into what may have been in many boxes was found on line.

In July 2013 Bonham's auction house in the UK sold an early 19th century Vizagapatam ivory sewing box. It had its contents, a rare piece of luck for anyone with an eye for the history of needlework tools. From the photos and the description, the following were found.

Two ivory thread barrels, an ivory tape measure, and thimble in the top tool tray. Below, in the draw were numerous items including; a small alphabet sampler, a pressed paper needle case, an ivory tambour hook, a folding ivory ruler, a vegetable ivory egg, two mother of pearl Chinese thread winders, an ivory tatting shuttle, a bone/ivory awl, a group of netting tools, a slim double ended ivory glove darning tool and a bone (?) needle case.

However, these useful and common contents were out shone by the beauty of the sewing box. This was the period when small sewing boxes shaped like simple cottages were created, with a roof which would swing open to reveal the contents of the box beneath. They were the Indian made equivalent of a Tunbridge ware design that was popular in England at that time. By the mid-18th century and well into the early 1800s, furniture and boxes smothered in ivory veneer on a sandalwood carcass became the vogue. The Neo Classical movement and the elegance of black against white, suited both the new fashions from Europe and the climate of India. The time consuming and fiddly craft of in-laying ivory into hard wood was replaced by fixing cut sheets of ivory held in place with ivory pegs. A new carcass wood had been chosen, and would be used across a range of sewing box types in India for the next century. Sandalwood was a common wood, light in weight, easily cut and had the added very desirable quality of deterring insects. The boxes' core wood, or carcass was put together with simple butt joints, - this was village level carpentry. A carpenter trained in European cabinet work used mitre joints to cover the carcass with a veneer and to create the internal fittings. The sandalwood carcass was swiftly covered with ivory that had been decorated with refined and restrained European patterns often copied from imported prints, but not entirely excluding the buildings, and plants of the locality. The elegance of white ivory with fine illustrations in black lac was the height of fashion. Once the design was etched and the hot lac (made from the soot of burnt ivory waste) applied, the excess was cleaned off by less skilled workers.

Vizagapatam sewing boxes from this period range from small and intensely illustrated renditions of country cottages with their gardens and gates to larger, yet very restrained boxes, with swags of floral ribbons running along the edges and expanses of pristine white ivory. The fashion for ivory veneer worked very well on small items such as boxes, they were affordable, but was more difficult and expensive to apply to tables and chairs thus, these items were only acquired by the wealthy. The early to mid - 1800's also heralded the rise of Bombay with its Sadeli patterns and sandalwood carvers. In Vizagapatam, the challenge was to produce a range of new designs and textures.

At first, in answer to these stunning white boxes, the reverse was also made. Black ebony boxes with narrow bands of ivory with etched black lac patterns. Ebony with its fine texture and smooth finish is also insect resistant. Ebony and ivory were very costly materials to use in a sewing box, but the expense was further increased by the other materials used to create a luxury item.

The pin cushions which in many boxes were in pairs, were covered with red silk velvet. Beautiful to the touch, silk velvet appears in the early 17th century, it was made on a loom with the loops cut by hand to make the soft exotic fabric.⁴² The box furniture of handles, locks and hinges were all

⁴² ED. R. Crill, *The Fabric of India*. (V&A London 2015) 60.

imported, again adding to the cost of manufacture. As the 19th century progressed the problem faced was how to maintain the deluxe look and feel, yet use cheaper materials and quicker methods of manufacture.

The exterior and interior finish was improved, with subtle changes in the technical aspects of the execution of Vizagapatam work by using cleaner and more regular joints.⁴³ The use of satin wood on the interior with its shine and very pleasant, smooth, feel to the fingers would have been seductive. Internally the basic lay out of the sewing tray remain unchanged, with larger boxes provided with more compartments.

Case Study: An early Vizagapatam workbox held by The National Gallery of Victoria



Figure 9. A beautiful Vizagapatam work box, repaired and conserved by the National Gallery of Victoria.

⁴³ Jaffer, *Furniture* 174.

The largest and most impressive of these is a three tiered workbox that incorporates a writing slope below. An exact date is very hard to give for this box but it is likely to be early 1800s. The fashion for the sarcophagus shape in furniture was adopted by box makers. This fashion can be dated from the death of the great British hero, Admiral Lord Nelson in 1805.

At the time of researching this paper (pre 2018), this box was in the storage section of The National Gallery of Victoria, in a frail state awaiting restoration. The pictures below are as it was found in the National Gallery storage facility. My deepest thanks must go to Mr Wayne Crothers, the Senior Curator of Asian Art at The National Gallery of Victoria. His interest and help, plus the photos he provided were invaluable. It has now been cleaned and conserved, the missing ivory matched with new look alike material. You can now see it on show in the Asian Gallery. In the collection it is described as: French Indian / Anglo- Indian *Sewing box* (19th Century) wood, ivory, metal, velvet. 33.5 x 34.0 x 28.5cm (overall) National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Felton Bequest, 1931 (3256-D3).



Figure 10. Vizagapatam work box early 1800's. Note the change from flat ivory veneer to fluted. Photo courtesy of The National Gallery of Victoria.

Even in this distressed state it still looks a splendid object. It shows that the meld between writing slope and the top of the box with its new sarcophagus shape were still to be solved (this was overcome by starting the curve at the base of the box and placing the writing slope in a pull out draw within the whole shape of the box).



Figure 11. A corner on the pull out writing slope. Photo courtesy of the NGV.

From this picture the writing slope could have been a box on its own, as the decoration of the somewhat curious female figure and the line of draped foliage are not in sympathy with the remainder of the box's design.

Figure 12. Side. Ivory fluting surrounding the ornate silver handle. Photo courtesy of the NGV.



Side view, showing the fluted ivory veneer and the rather grand oxidised silver handle. A very European face, with its long nose and stiff rolls of hair. (Wig?)



Figure 13. Top lid raised. Photo courtesy of the NGV.

This is the top lid which has a locked inner cavity. Below is a tray that may have been used for the storage of jewellery, or as there is no mirror, perhaps for long needlework tools, such as were used for netting. Please note that the lid is held by a fold up stay that does not fit the original space allowed for it in the edge decoration of the box. This arrangement is repeated on the lower tray as well.



Figure 14. The sewing tray with a multi-sectioned thread reel, lidded compartments, holders for thimbles, a large pin cushion and spaces for thread barrels. Photo courtesy of the NGV.

Figure 14: This is the lower lid and it displays a sewing tray. The top edges of the tray are veneered in ivory and the pin cushion with its red velvet is in place before a full row of six unlidded compartments for thread barrels and also small screw lidded containers. On either side of the pin cushion are a pair of lidded compartments (with only one lid present) these could have been for

early ivory tatting shuttles. In front of these are two identical pairs of compartments with thimble holders, and it is likely that they would have had a tape measure on one side and an emery on the other. The remaining three large lidded compartments would have held other useful tools, such as scissors awls, needles, and pins. Centre front of the tray is an ivory multi-sectioned reel with space for three shades of thread.

This box shows a high degree of finish to all areas of the box. The tiny delicate knobs on the lids have broken over time save for one and it shows the care and pride taken in carving and producing such a work of art.



Figure 15. Silver feet, now black with age. Photo courtesy of the NGV.

This close up of the box's silver foot with its lion's paw design and swirl above helped to link it with another box whose photo appeared in Sylvia Groves' *"The History of Needlework Tools and Accessories"*. This illustration was of a smaller box, with large areas of plain ivory veneer, lac ribbon work on the edges and a small amount of ivory fluting on the sarcophagus shaped lid. It had been recorded as coming from Madras and dated to 1790.⁴⁴

It spans a change in design and taste. The shape has changed, no quaint houses, nor restrained rectangular ivory boxes. Instead, tall sarcophagus shaped boxes with an outward and inward curving bands of narrow ivory fluting which open to show a large tool tray. Above this a lid surmounted with a substantial carved ivory knob, the box carcass still veneered in ivory, but edged with narrow bands of ivory and lac work of flowers and vines. The larger examples of these handsome boxes were also furnished with handles and feet of silver.

⁴⁴ Sylvia Groves, *The History of Needlework Tools and Accessories* (Arco New York 1973). 64.



Figures 15, 16, 17. Exterior and interior showing the sewing tool tray of a beautiful and rare 1820s Vizagapatam sewing box. A close up of the thread barrels, emery and thimble fittings. Pearce collection. Photos courtesy of M. Pearce.

The quality and the finish in this period (1810-1820) were maintained as manufacturers turned to cheaper materials such as buffalo horn (fig 18 & 19), sandalwood, porcupine quills, and eventually elk horn⁴⁵, creating equally desirable boxes. Sandalwood remained the wood of choice for creating the carcass over which other materials were applied. The sarcophagus shaped box became a

⁴⁵ "Vizagapatam has long been celebrated for its silver, ivory, and horn wares, work boxes, tea caddies, and a variety of fancy articles made of ivory, horn, porcupine quills and of late years' elk horn". *A Manual of the 1869 District of Vizagapatam in the Presidency of Madras*, compiled and ed. D. F. Carmichael. Madras 1869. 156. Jaffer, *Furniture* 174.

dominant form, with a short lived fashion for a half round ending on the two short sides of the rectangular lid (1810 to 1820).



Figure 18. Fluted buffalo horn sewing box with a sun burst lid, from the collection of Genevieve Cummins. Photo: author's collection.

The next change appears with boxes that have a sun burst pattern either of ivory, ebony, or black horn, or a mix on the lid. Narrow vertical pieces of ivory, shaped to produce a fluted pattern along the sides or on the lid add to the overall design. At the same time lac etched pictures of grand European buildings on the ivory veneered box sides were still evident. Thus, a change in design evolved. Subsequent boxes featured the ivory and horn sunburst lids while the decoration and veneers of the rest of the box changed. The illustrations of grand buildings disappeared in favour of foliage or bare ivory.



Figure 19. The interior of the fluted horn box. From the collection of Genevieve Cummins. Author's photo.

Figures 20 & 21. Vizagapatam sewing box, ivory and ebony sun bust lid with porcupine quill work sides. Interior and tool tray with quill lids. Photo courtesy of David Perry.



This illustration, for the use of which I must thank David Perry, who restored this sewing box, is an excellent example of a sun burst pattern lid with porcupine quills and ribbons of lac etched ivory on the edges. A very similar work box appeared at auction, which had a contemporaneous note, saying it was left to S. Shotton in 1839. ([Leski Auctions](#), February 26/27th 2021- lot 279).

This sun bust lid pattern was repeated on boxes that feature porcupine quills. These boxes showed the quills in rows, cut to make use of the variation in colours along the length of the quill to make attractive patterns that were repeated around the box. The quills were gathered from the naturally discarded quills of the porcupine, a fairly common animal and hence were likely to have been very cheap. The cut ends of the quills were covered by an ivory or horn strip, or on more decorative boxes, a ribbon of lac etched into the ivory. In time, the whole box was covered with quills, leaving only the knob on the lid, plus the top and bottom edges of the quills covered by narrow bands of ivory with lac etched patterns (this usage of quills in a repeat pattern was adopted for use by the Ceylonese on their boxes). A box of this type in clean, undamaged condition is very attractive!

Figure 22: This might look like a Ceylonese tourist ware quill box, but it uses only fine quill ends. The pattern is held in place with horn edging and an ivory cartouche. The construction uses fine nails and mitre joints. Inside it is lined with sandalwood. Author's photo.



At the same time the box's feet also changed. The feet could be matched to the veneers used on the box. Buffalo horn and ebony feet were used (bun or carved feet), but as time passed, the dominant design became the carved lion paw foot with four claws. These were very sturdy and attractive, with the result that they are now often removed to be used on other antiques.

While the first half of the 19th century resulted in technical improvements and a finer finish, the demand and manufacture of workboxes increased⁴⁶

In the early mid-1800s a new material was used on workboxes. Elk horn boxes appear to date from the early 1850s. In a photo taken at the Madras exhibition of 1857 there are two workboxes of this type on sale.⁴⁷ Elk horn is not to everyone's taste, it is fawn to greyish brown in colour and has an uneven and lumpy look. In its favour there is a texture which is striking and curious to handle. There have been very few boxes of this type for sale and this may be because they were overlooked in favour of more expensive or attractive designs.

The demand for ivory not only increased its price, but also led to the importation of African ivory to meet demand. Another pressure was the start of Sadeli manufacture in Calcutta after 1850.

The solution seems to have been to introduce another design change. A new look to the sewing box and to other Vizagapatam boxes became the fashion from the 1870s, and was still being produced fifty years later. Buffalo horn, along with tortoise shell and as they became too expensive, sandalwood became the base veneer. They provided a smooth, even background to a delicate, highly intricate and very thin fretwork of ivory. The lid was no longer sarcophagus shaped, but had a gentle slope and no central knob. In its place was a rectangle of ivory which could be decorated with an illustration or a small lozenge of artwork surrounded by an intricate network of fret worked foliage (*fig. 23*). Around this central image a frame of ivory and lac ribbon work and further fretwork areas gave the lid a highly decorated look. Smaller repeats of this style of work were repeated on all other surfaces except the base, which was covered by velvet fabric. The four clawed lion foot was a standard feature of all these models. The variety of boxes was to include men's jewellery, stationary and watch boxes, to mention a few. Even hexagonal boxes were made.

⁴⁶ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 175.

⁴⁷ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 174.



Figure 23. Mid 1850s onwards-fretwork Vizagapatam sewing box. Author's collection.

The delicate fretwork was held in place with tiny, regularly spaced round headed rivets of ivory, which in later years were replaced with silver metal rivets (fig23). The style of these boxes mimicked campaign furniture, with ivory placed evenly around the edges of the box as small neat fastenings over all corners, both to the lid, sides and base. These boxes were embellished with plaques which could be of animals, flowers, Biblical scenes and Hindu deities. Illustrations of islands, sailing ships, churches and even trains were a popular purchase.



Figure 24. Later Vizagapatam boxes both with metal rivets, the larger using sandalwood veneer and the smaller box tortoise shell. Photo courtesy of a private collection.

The peak of production was in the last half century leading up to the First World War. Manufacture was broken up into specialised groups of artisans, who worked on one aspect of the box before handing it over to the next artisan. The number of families in this trade had fallen and at the time that Amin Jaffer was researching his book, only one family remained in business, using acrylic instead of ivory.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Jaffer *Furniture*. 175.

Inside the Vizagapatam box

The early cottage shaped boxes were lined with sandalwood and due to the small number of those that are pictured in public domain they share similar features. The better ones include a draw, but all have a tray with open compartments for thread barrels, silk velvet pincushions, short narrow slots that were possibly for thin book-like needle holders and lid covered compartments for other small tools. The variations were in the presence or absence of thimble holders, tape measure holders and the number of thread sections on the thread roller. In all respects this layout remained unchanged. The interior was designed to look opulent, the lids of the compartments were bone with lac decorations. The satin wood used to line every surface gleamed and all the edges were covered with a ivory or ebony veneer. To look at a box that was made post 1880 is to view an internal design that appears to have never moved forward from the early 1800s.

It can be argued that some second-hand dealers could have chosen to add Georgian style thread barrels to fill up some of the empty compartments. However, as illustrated in Figures 14 to 16 the tools supplied with the box fit perfectly. From many years of experience and from collecting these barrels and tools I feel that each set were made to fit the box they were in. There are often such fine variations in size, width and finish that it is hard to collect a matching set.

From the 1860's machine wound cotton thread on small wooden reels would have fitted into the same space as an ivory thread barrel. In the Vizagapatam boxes long multi-sectioned ivory thread rollers are still present, since silk thread was still sold in small hanks, and for fine embroidery needed to be "stripped" into narrow filaments. Fine, untwisted silk is a delicate thread which will snag on rough surfaces.

Another puzzle are the pairs or more, of short, narrow compartments (5.5cm x.9cm). They seem best suited to holding packets of sewing, beading and embroidery needles. However, since there was fretwork on the outside of the box, and even the internal compartments were supplied with veneered lids, could these boxes have included small, very thin needle holders (holding a single fold of wool fabric in which to place the needles) in book form with either solid or fretwork ivory covers?

Looking for sewing tools which were made in Vizagapatam has resulted in only a few discoveries. There are thread winders and a pin cushion as detailed in the chapter on Needlework Tools made in India. The search to find a tambour hook, emery, or waxer in Vizagapatam ware is continuing!

For a popular sewing box that was made for over a century, very little accommodation was made for the change in needlework techniques and tools over the same period. The growing popularity of crochet did not result in a space adequate for storing long, thin crochet hooks (unless a large box was purchased). Yet, with the Sadeli box design, even small boxes carried long narrow platforms for a crochet hook collection.

Sadeli

It is difficult to date the period when the technique of applying a geometric veneer known as “Hatam Bandi” or, “Katam” was taken to the west coast of India, and renamed “Sadeli”. It first appears in Iran under the Saffvid dynasty (1501-1722), where it was used to decorate doors, windows and furniture.⁴⁹

A further record of interest is from the official catalogue of “Indian Art in Delhi, 1903”, compiled by Sir George Watt who wrote,

*(It was) “First acquired by the Hindus and subsequently taught by the Parsis”.*⁵⁰

Sir George also describes the mosaic work that decorated some of the doors of the Old Amber Palace near Jaipur, which dated to three hundred years earlier. The materials, he records are,

“ ivory and horn (plain or coloured green or blue), black ebony, redwood and tin or silver.”⁵¹

More information and examples of this early work are most likely to be found in Portugal, which had trade links with the west coast of India. Those examples that appear in today’s antique market show a marked similarity to Katam work of the same period.

Indian Sadeli work was centred in the Bombay Presidency (Mumbai) in the cities of Surat, Amenabad and Bilimora in the State of Baroda. Today it is only made in Surat.

What made Indian Sadeli work stand out, was the development of new patterns of micro-mosaic. The beauty of the patterns, together with the delicacy of the fine stringing work, a unique mix of materials, plus the cool, silky smooth feel of the surface ensured that Sadeli was a desirable item for well over two hundred years.



Figure 25 & 26. A small Sadeli sewing box of the 1830s period. Photo: author's collection.

⁴⁹ *The Hidden Treasures of Gujarat*. http://www.gujarattourism.com/file-manager/.../handicrafts_5.pdf.

⁵⁰ Sir G. Watt, *Indian Art in Delhi 1903: Being the Official Catalogue of the Delhi Exhibition 1902-1903*. (Google Books).156

⁵¹ Watt, *Indian Art*.157.

Recently, India's Prime Minister Mr Modi gave Ivanka Trump a Sadeli box to mark her visit to the Global Entrepreneurship Summit in Hyderabad, November 2017⁵². This shows the continuation of a valued art, although now made by fewer craftsmen and using less costly man-made and natural materials.

From the beginning the best Sadeli boxes were always made with sandalwood. It provided a pleasant scent, resisted rot and repelled insect attack. Sandalwood carvers and Sadeli workers became closely interlinked. In the Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency 1877, Surat is described as the centre of manufacture, with 60 families involved in Sandalwood carving, while five Hindu and eight Parsee families produced Sadeli.⁵³ Later, in 1902, Surat had forty wood carvers paid by piecework, but over the next fifty years this number dwindles to fifty hereditary Sadeli workers who still make boxes, but this is as a sideline to their work as carpenters.

The boxes of the post-colonial period are small, simple and appear to use few patterns. The sewing boxes described and discussed in this study were designed for foreigners and cover the period when Sadeli reached its height in quality and beauty.

What is Sadeli?

Sadeli can be defined as a

“geometric micro mosaic composed of various woods, metals, and ivory/bone as a veneer over the carcass of a wooden object, in parquetry with other materials, or as a border for carved sandalwood (chandan) or Ivory panels”⁵⁴

How was it made?

The Sadeli rods were made in the autumn rainy season when the humidity was high and then dried, sliced and worked with during the rest of the year. The rods were made up of very thin triangular shaped lengths of metal wire (low grade silver or white metal), wood (sandalwood, ebony, rosewood etc.) and ivory/bone (both plain and dyed). The rods were about two feet long (50-60cm). Each of the materials used were glued with fish or hide glue slathered on all sides and then pressed together in a sequence that would produce the desired pattern in the rod.

Next, a string was tightly twisted around the rod from top to bottom. The rod was then rolled repeatedly, with pressure over a plank of wood. The hand pressure and repeated rolling resulted in a tight fitting join that today is very difficult to replicate when repairing missing mosaic. It seems most likely that the rods were glued together side by side and the process repeated to get the patterns that we can see on the old boxes.⁵⁵ This certainly occurred with the narrow Sadeli bands that were used to decorate the edges of boxes. A

⁵² U Tube, *India Today*, *PM Modi gifted Ivanka a Sadeli Box*. November 29th 2017. Also- U Tube, *Pm Modi gifted Ivanka this wooden box in sadeli craft. What is sadeli?* 28th November 2017 published by Deanna Hafner.

⁵³ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 316.

⁵⁴ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 313.

⁵⁵ Sneha Sarang, *'Sadeli' craft process-signature of Surat* (You Tube. February 23rd 2018). <https://behance.net/gallery/52645>.

composite sheet of up to three feet wide and two feet long was made and carefully sliced to produce the ribbon like lengths of the desired pattern.⁵⁶ Needless to say, there could be a lot of waste from this exacting craft.

When one thinks about it, this process combined

‘Substances which can expand and contract according to atmospheric conditions with others that are hard and unyielding’⁵⁷

Tumbridgeware, which was created in a similar fashion was entirely wood.

The shaping at every stage had to be exact, so that from one end of the rod to the other, each of the transverse slices was a mirror copy. The Sadeli rods were sliced into thin wafers. An account from 1873 stated the slices varied from one fifteenth of an inch to one twentieth of an inch (1.6mm to 1.2mm)⁵⁸. The thin wafers were then glued in place to cover the carcass wood of the box, so creating a colourful and shimmering patterned veneer.

Sadeli patterns

In the V&A collection are two plaques with small examples of Sadeli mosaic. The simplest and most common pattern used for narrow borders was created by using round single silver/white metal dots in a line against black wood. A variation on this were pairs of silver/white metal triangles placed broad end to end to form a diamond shape against a black wood/ebony. These bands and all other bands of different widths would be edged with ivory (dyed and undyed) or wood stringing.

Wider bands of pattern, generally of 6mm width were more varied in design. The most common was a flower pattern, which had a circle of ivory made from alternate triangles of plain and dyed ivory and then further built up by a surrounding pattern of silver metal triangles and blackwood. Continuous repeats in a single line would make a shimmering and attractive edge along the borders of large and small boxes. There were at least 18 or more patterns of this type.

The Sadeli work over large boxes in the early period is also illustrated on these plaques as triangle shaped slices, together with later designs that used rods made from solid ivory and wood. It seems that there were at least fourteen versions and possibly more, as some may have fallen off to leave blank spaces.⁵⁹

Circular roundels sliced from rods of various widths were also glued to the plaque. These slices were inserted into veneers. They became very popular, easy and quick to insert into any space to give it sparkle. Sizes and patterns were numerous, there are twenty-six shown, however the gaps present would indicate more have been lost.

⁵⁶ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 313.

⁵⁷ Antigone Clarke and Joseph O’Kelly, *Anglo Indian Boxes*. Copyright 1999-2015. <http://www.hygra.com>

⁵⁸ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 313.

⁵⁹ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 325.

Each of these designs had a name, but some have been lost and others are confusing when used in translation.

What is believed to be the earliest Sadeli work box is now in the Powis Castle collection. It is a large box (12.8 cm x43.2 cm x 28cm) and it has its original contents. It also has that most elusive of criteria a written record of when and where it was made. It is thought to be one of three sent to the second Lord Clive in England in 1802 by Mr G. Taswell.

Taswell wrote of the boxes;

“as being of peculiar workmanship that is greatly esteemed here, and to be procured from only one man, a Parsee (sic) which renders them very scarce”.⁶⁰

(Taswell, however was not satisfied with the silver fittings and the frames for their “glasses”. He felt it preferable to have this work done in England)⁶¹

In a much later account, G.C.M. Birdwood suggested that it had been introduced about sixty years earlier and named a small group of seven master craftsmen who had trained Parsee carpenters and artisans.⁶²

Early Sadeli boxes, entirely covered with fine, glittering micro mosaic patterns were prized by the rich and well connected. In the sale catalogue of Queen Charlotte’s possessions in 1819, three Sadeli boxes were recorded.⁶³

Britain’s expanding economic empire sought out new and novel delights, as described by Mrs Fenton who wrote of Calcutta’s Burra Bazaar,

“You get very beautiful things for almost nothing. There are all the wonderful specimens of boxes, lacquered work, play things, shells...flowers, china, silks, chintz- in short I should amazingly like to fill a wagon indiscriminately here, and after, amuse myself for a year looking over its contents”⁶⁴

By the 1830s, Sadeli mosaic boxes were well known in England, where the technique was now known as “Bombay Work”. One comment from the pen of Mrs Postans reveals their growing popularity.

⁶⁰ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 313.

⁶¹ M. Archer, C. Rowell, R. Skelton, *The Treasures of India*, (London 1987) (NWL Clive 2153)

⁶² Jaffer, *Furniture*. 313.

⁶³ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 313.

⁶⁴ Pos, *Mrs Fenton’s*. 9-10.



Figures 27 & 28. Two views of a Sadeli work box/ writing slope from the very early 1800s set up for netting and embroidery and tatting. A flat, rectangular box covered in fine Sadeli. Photo courtesy of Vince Berry.





Figure 29. Interior view. Photo courtesy of Vince Berry.

“The Liberality of homeward bound friends has now rendered (mosaic work) so much appreciated in England, in the form of presentation workboxes, desks, watch stands and numerous other ornamental souvenirs.”⁶⁵

By the mid-1800s Sadeli work was also being manufactured in Calcutta, by a Parsee craftsman who had settled there to take advantage of the market on the other side of the Indian sub-continent.⁶⁶ The few boxes that appear can show both Sadeli veneer and the fretwork from Vizagapatam on the same box, with the ivory fretwork placed over the Sadeli. This mixing of styles also shows how dynamic the exterior design had become. As gaining a market edge with a new look, while at the same time dealing with the growing cost of the raw materials, became more challenging for both Bombay Sadeli and its older rival Vizagapatam.

⁶⁵ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 314.

⁶⁶ Jaffer, *Furniture* 314.

It is interesting to see the box below, which was inspired by the Bombay style sewing boxes, but shows an economy of materials. The sarcophagus style is mimicked by a diamond shaped and inlaid wood addition to the lid. White metal is used as dot and checker board decoration and bone veneers with Sadeli. A small, but attractive box with a mirror and tool



tray which shows that even on an inexpensive sewing box, care and attention to detail were not sacrificed.

Figure 30 From EBay, author's photo.



Figure 31. From EBay, Author's photo.

The Arts and Crafts movement also provided added interest in hand crafted wares. Indian manufactured goods were exhibited all over Europe. The catalogue of the Vienna Exhibition of 1873 lists a handful of Sadeli box makers who provided over 750 examples of their work for sale.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 314.

Sadeli boxes were also imported and sold in Britain by Liberty and Co. They were offered for sale in their 1884 and 1898 catalogues.⁶⁸

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then it is best revealed by the range of Tinware made in Britain from around 1900 onward. Huntley and Palmer Biscuits made a splendid biscuit tin in 1924 in pressed metal design to look and feel like an Indian carved and Sadeli trimmed sewing box of the post 1850s. Gallagher's cigarettes made a similar but smaller tin for their cigarettes (*fig. 33*).



Figure 32. Huntley and Palmer's pressed metal biscuit tin 1924. Photo courtesy of Jo Armstrong.



Figure 33. Gallagher's cigarette tin. Photo: author's collection.

⁶⁸ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 314.

1800

Case study: The Early 1800s Sadeli workbox.

Author's collection: 32.2cm (L) x 11.3cm (H) x 24.6cm (W).

Very few of the earliest Sadeli sewing/work boxes have been recorded in either books, museum catalogues, or in auction lists, EBay and similar sales sites. The number of examples would still be in single figures. These boxes are described as Regency period, a plain box, rectangular in shape, supplied with a lock and side handles, but lacking feet (no holes drilled into the base for feet), or any other ornamentation. The workboxes were sold with a larger box, in which they and their delicate Sadeli work would sit to be protected during transportation. There two colours of Sadeli were used. One where black is dominant over green and the other where green dominates. From those I have found it appears that the dominant green shade has been most popular, as more of the boxes of this hue have survived.

The description and details that follow are from a sewing box that has a black dominant over green colour scheme. The size of the individual mosaic elements is tiny and repeated on all sides of the box (except the base), with ribbons of ivory stringing separating the dominant mosaic pattern from the mosaic bands that decorate the edges of the box (fig. 28). Workboxes from this early period were set up for embroidery and netting. This box had lost both the netting and the multi-sectioned thread reels. It still had the fittings to hold a reel in the largest central lidded compartment. From other boxes it is evident that the smaller netting roller was positioned in the central compartment in front row.

Even in its distressed condition on arrival, it still contained a complete set of the thread barrels, a pair of larger screw-on lidded containers, a tape measure and a thimble. These were the original items included in the box at its sale in Bombay. In particular, the thread barrels are possibly of an early type as they lacked a small hole at the side to allow the thread to escape. Where this has occurred with sets of barrels from Chinese sewing boxes, the reason commonly given is that the craftsman who made it had only seen illustrations of the tools and did not fully understand the way they were used. The question of course is, does this indicate that these too are a prototype?⁶⁹

By looking closely at this early 1800s box, one can imagine the process to create it and to reveal what a complex piece it was to create. It would appear Mr Tazewell's Parsee businessman would have first bought the looking glass (mirror) that was held by a frame inside the underside of the lid. It would have been imported from England at a time when large mirrors were expensive, but small, light thin ones, protected by a box (for the mirror and frame were removable and so could be hung

⁶⁹ The Powis Castle Sadeli workbox has a full set of ivory thread barrels, they are however every different to those found in all other Sadeli boxes seen to date. It is possible that the barrels were made as a special order in England or in Europe. They are crank handled and appear to have thicker and more numerous scored rings running around the outside of the barrel which vary with different depths used as they were turned on a lathe. The barrels also had a hole in the middle for the thread to exit.

on a wall or used on a dressing table) were valued as looking glasses, as well as a way of increasing the light cast by candles while sewing.



Figure 34. Early 1800's Sadeli workbox/writing slope. Author's collection



Figure 35: Early 1800's Sadeli workbox, interior.

Small jade beads have been used as replacements of the wire ring pulls for the compartment lids in the center row of the tool tray. Extra tools have been added which sit on the trays and ledges. The three thread barrels in the center front compartment are additions and not original to the box. The mirror is missing from the lid and only its frame remains, but this shows off the beauty of the panel behind, with its inlay and Sadeli. Author's collection.



Figure 36. A glimpse of another box, showing the wood carcass and lock normally hidden under the sandalwood lining. Photo: author's collection. The carcass wood of the box was cut and joined and sanded by village level carpenters who were capable of making very fine boxes with mathematical precision. The sides are made with simple butt joints, while hand forged nails secure the top and base. The wood for this varied over time; but the early boxes were sturdy rosewood, or padouk, which over the last two hundred years has cracked with what seems to be at least one crack for each century.

The next set of hands would have been those of craftsmen, who excelled at carving and cabinet making in sandalwood. The mirror, which was light and thin (about 1mm thick) was set into a frame and fitted into the lid. The sewing tray and the writing slope below were made with dovetail joints. Each lid for the compartments in the sewing tray was cut and sanded to fit exactly, while resting on triangular slivers of wood glued into the corners (this method was also used to keep the ivory frames in place).

These tasks followed the lining of the box with sandalwood, so that from the inside none of the carcass wood could be seen. The sandalwood interior shows a higher level of sophistication and knowledge of European techniques, with dovetail joints and in the case of the removable pincushion with a sliding lid, minute “biscuits” which hold the mitred corners together. The tools to work at this level, would have been far more in number than a poor village carpenter would have been likely to own.

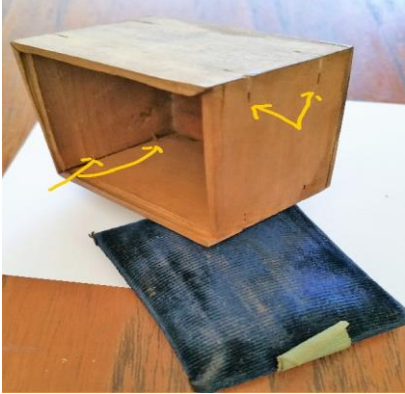


Figure 37. 'Biscuits' are used to stabilize fine joints. Photo author's collection.

From the boxes I have had the opportunity to study closely it appears that each box was an individual work of art. Parts cannot be interchanged, even lids from the same box cannot be swapped as they will not fit exactly, even to the point that there is a right way and a wrong way for the placement of a lid in its compartment.

Once the sewing tool tray was made it was the turn of the carvers to fill the box with sewing tools. First they cut thin, light, simple fretwork frames to hold the thread barrels and screw lidded containers, tape measure and thimble, the ivory for this was very smooth and white but underneath it is rough and discoloured, thus possibly the outer most layer of the tusk and so a cheaper material to use in this way. The frames had tiny diamonds cut into them, later boxes (1820s onwards) would have drilled holes. The carvers also worked on the thread barrels and other sewing items shaping each to fit perfectly in its frame.

In this box and many others like it, the first row of compartments held the tape measure, thimble and thread barrels.

Over the years I have collected a few stray thread barrels and there are no set sizes or shapes in any direction, each is an individual barrel; can be slightly slimmer or thicker, shorter or taller than its fellow. The design of the thread barrels at this time were similar in style to those made in England and Europe. The Indian design had a lid which unscrewed from the top with a small hole in the lid to allow the top of the vertical thread spindle to turn freely inside the barrel. The sides were decorated with a series of narrow carved/turned rings at both the top and base of the barrel. An area of plain smooth bone around the middle of the barrel and a single small hole for the thread to escape. At this early period there was no Sadeli work inlaid in the lids of the thread barrels.

Each box had one ivory thimble which had plain smooth sides and a flat top. It was perfect for working with fine silk thread as it would be unlikely to catch on the filaments and distort the thread being used. The final polish that leaves such a smooth, slippery surface was

originally given with the dried tongue of a fish (Kanava). In later years, the central rib of the leaf of the bread fruit tree was used.⁷⁰

Figure 38. The original barrels, containers, tape measure (tape replaced) and thimble belonging to the 1800's work box. Photo: author's collection.



A tape measure case in ivory was also included. The lid of the tape measure would be turned to wind or unwind the tape. It is rare to find a tape measure with its original tape still in situ, however, the one example that I have found (c.1820s) has an unmarked tape of approximately 70cm length, which is made from hand loomed pink silk. Its margins are not uniform and the tape is an exact match to the remnants of similar tape used to lift up the pin cushion and the sewing tray of the box it belongs in. The base of the tape measure case does unscrew and allows the tape to be removed if desired. Another feature of these tape measures is that the end of the tape would have been glued to a thin sliver of ivory to stop it being wound up inside the tape measure's case. This 'stop end' hung outside the round case and even though a "v" shaped indentation was made in the frame that held it, care had to be taken when lifting it out as it would catch. There are more than a few holding frames that have been broken when removing a tape measure too forcefully.

In the next row are three lidded compartments. The Sadeli lids would have had thin metal rings with which to lift them (replacements for two missing rings have been made using jade beads). These compartments were separated by long narrow shelves where other tools could be left. In a similar box sold by Christies Auction House, which is pictured on Pinterest, a pair of bone knitting needle ends were shown as part of the contents. Any serious sewing devotee would have had a box full of useful tools such as tambour hooks, knotting shuttles, an emery, small sharp scissors, a needle case, an awl; these were just a few of the items needed for embroidery and sewing. Netting boxes needed a wide roller and a pair of thread holding clamps at the very least.

⁷⁰ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 167.

At the back of the tool tray on each side were shallow ivory lined trays that could be lifted out to reveal compartment space below. Beside them, on either side of the pin cushion and held in place by ivory frames were a pair of large cylindrical containers with screw-on lids. In this box they are topped by Sadeli work to match with the rest of the box. Other boxes of the 1800 to 1820s period had similar containers, though they can have plain lids and be oval shaped (oval shaped containers have lift off lids). Small beads, buttons and sets of hooks and eyes are very likely to have been kept in these.

A removable pin cushion stood in the centre of the back row. In this sewing box it is fitted with an ultramarine blue silk velvet cushion covered lid that can be easily slid off for access to more storage below (Perhaps for hiding tiny valuables? Jewellery? Gold?). The velvet on the pin cushion matches the velvet of the writing slope directly below. In the Sadeli boxes where green was the dominant colour the pin cushion and writing slope were covered by a matching green silk velvet. One of the most interesting quirks of this velvet, due to their being hidden from light, is that the colours have remained very bright and not faded. It is possible that this velvet was imported. However, India had the expertise to make such a luxury fabric from the early seventeenth century (probably from Iran).⁷¹ The silk could also have come from China, but it was the most difficult and expensive weave made on a drawn loom, with the loops cut by hand.⁷²

The writing slope would have been made at the same time. The sandalwood tray would be joined with dove tail joints with an ivory pen rest on the left side of the velvet covered writing slope. The writing slope could be raised or lowered with a simple pair of triangular shaped pivots. To the right hand side were compartments. The middle compartment has a Sadeli lid (for inks, pounce and spare nibs?). Placed across the rear of this tray was an area for storing pens, pencils, and rulers.

At this point the box would have been in the hands of the Sadeli artisans. The most expensive work was always the finest mosaic, with tiny patterns that were so finely judged that the pattern pieces began and ended complete, with no extras slipped in. Close fitting mitre joints in the wood veneers used for the edge, as well as the mosaic stringing, fitted around the Sadeli which lay as an even pattern, meticulous from start to finish. The finishing touches to the sewing tray with the lids decorated with Sadeli, the mirror frame with its edge band, then the writing slope beneath. Every visible surface polished and inlaid, glinting in the light lustrous, cool and smooth to the touch.

The hinges on this box were made from silver/white metal. It is most likely they were imported as they are of a type that was already well known in Britain and Europe. 'Stop hinges', allow the lid to rest at a right angle to the box by the addition of strips of metal that meet as the lid reached the upright position. The hinge is screwed to the interior rims of the box and lid.

⁷¹ Ed. Rosemary Crill, *The Fabric of India*, (V&A Publications London 2015). 60.

⁷² Crill, *The Fabric*, 60.

When looking at any box from the Georgian and Victorian periods, take some time to inspect the hinge, and all other box hardware.

All hinges will fail over time if the wood holding them cracks, and many boxes have been unsympathetically fixed by a new and unsuitable larger hinge, often making the situation worse as the weight of the lid fully open and no longer held up is a greater strain on the already frail and aged wood.

On this early 1800s Sadeli box the silver handles are in place, the lock is original, but the long pin and the key are missing. Little is known of the protective, larger box that would have held this Sadeli workbox. Only rarely do they appear.

The 1800s Sadeli work box was purchased from Northern Carolina. It had been in dry storage for some time, its additional contents of a button and early corset hook, plus dried fern fragments and dirt. It had sustained some water damage, as well as two large cracks in the carcase wood of the lid, that had swallowed some of the Sadeli mosaic. Then, at some time it had been shot at with an air rifle. The Sadeli was a mess with tiny, round silver pellets buried in the wood. The seller, when asked if there was a family history to go with this box was loathe to help, but his description of its age had been correct.

This is a box that always greets you with a delightful whiff of sandalwood and pine. It is now filled with a suitable collection of Georgian period sewing tools. A replacement mirror to fit in the Sadeli frame has not been fitted. The age correct mirrors were thin and light, but modern mirrors are thicker and heavier. As it is the box is heavy enough!



Figure 39. A rare example of an early (1820s) sarcophagus shaped Sadeli sewing box, with rod ends on the lid and its protective outer box. Photo: Pinterest.

1810-1820s

The fashionable shape for boxes progressed from the simple, flat sided and topped rectangular box to an elegant sarcophagus shape. The lid now had a shallow slope up to a narrow, but low central rectangle of wood. Another variation was to add a rod running from the front to the rear at each end of the box and to cover all surfaces with fine Sadeli work (fig 39). Box feet were added, often of carved ivory, in a ball shape and with fluted sides. Metal feet also appear, however, these could date to a later period (1860s onward). It is possible for ivory feet to be snapped off and lost, with the ivory feet plugs, cut flush with the base.

The colours and patterns used in Sadeli mosaic started to develop. The use of equal amounts coloured and plain ivory to balance the black of the ebony in the Sadeli rods produced a lighter shade that was neither dominated by green or black, and had an attractive silver sheen. Inside the larger sewing boxes, the small ivory lined trays at either side of the back row were retained to hold on one side a tatting shuttle. Tatting shuttles had developed from knotting shuttles and these smaller and shorter tools were used to create delicate lace work. A few examples have survived and from Pam Palmer's excellent book, *"Tatting Shuttles Related Tools and Accessories"*, two are illustrated. The back cover has a photo of an early (1810) wooden Knotting shuttle covered with very fine Sadeli. In the text a similar, but smaller ivory shuttle, inlaid with very fine Sadeli is shown fitted into the small tray shaped to hold it in place (which is all that has survived from that particular sewing box).⁷³ Where larger sewing boxes of this early period have retained their tools, a plain ivory tatting shuttle can sometimes be found.

Bombay had a long history as a major trading centre, and the market for Sadeli ware continued to expand. The range of articles made in the growing number of Sadeli workshops was vast, and sewing boxes were just one part. The demand for less complex and cheaper, yet very attractive boxes to take home to England as gifts, meant that there was a wide range of sizes available. There were large boxes topped with a jewellery casket, a sewing tray beneath and a writing slope below. Then those of just a writing slope and sewing tray, while the cheapest would have been a sewing box with perhaps a very shallow void below the tray (enough to hold knitting needles, or as time progressed crochet hooks).

All beautiful, all well-crafted and all utterly exotic. As Mrs Postans has earlier remarked, Bombay work was the premier choice for the "liberality of homeward bound friends"!

⁷³ Pam Palmer, *Tatting Shuttles Related tools and Accessories*, (Neil Terry printing, Rugby England 2003), 49.



Figure 40. Sadeli sewing box around 1840's. Photo: author's collection.

1830-1850s

The competition to have the latest novel pattern would have been keen amongst the Sadeli workshops, but to avoid waste, and the increasing cost of the materials used to create the rods (most of which were imported) would have led to experimentation. Innovation and the mixing of textures colours and patterns can these days be most easily seen from the variety of tiny boxes sold for use as stamp, tobacco or calling card/ business card cases. These boxes were quick to make and could take the off cuts left from Sadeli used on bigger boxes. How well they sold could also indicate the popularity of a pattern. Card cases are also a great source for understanding the direction the workshops were taking.



Figure 41. An arrangement of small Sadeli items showing a selection of patterns. Boxes, card cases and a page turner, the latter displaying the use of Sadeli roundels inlaid in ivory. Top right corner is an excellent example of sheets of ivory veneer with Sadeli roundels, a pattern which was very popular over the mid 1800's. The fourth box from the left on the bottom row shows a sun burst pattern. Author's photo.

Time, or rather the amount of time it took to make the Sadeli appears to be holding back the output and this period sees two new designs that shortened the manufacture time. The first was the advent of the pattern that is as old as antiquity. It is a rhomboidal pattern (*fig. 37*) found on the floor mosaics of Rome and known as 'Opus Scutulatum', best known today as the quilting pattern called 'Tumbling Blocks'. This 3D pattern took three diamond shaped rods, one of ivory, one of wood- (ebony or rosewood, or padouk) and a third a small Sadeli rod with a star pattern. The bundle to be cut into thin segments was now much simpler to assemble. At first this pattern was very dainty in size, but grew larger over time, thus

speeding up the time it took to cover a sewing box. Most popular was the black and white of the ivory and ebony which was continued inside the sewing box to produce a sewing tray of great beauty.

Figure 42. A larger pattern in later Sadeli compared to the early use of this pattern. Photo: Author's photo.



Figure 43. Tape measure ready to be reassembled. Author's collection.



The second change took its lead from the ivory clad boxes of Vizagapatam. From the all over micro mosaic pattern a new simplicity took hold. The use of large, but thin slices of ivory, glued as a veneer over the box saved time. The focus on black and white, but with large transverse sliced 'roundels' of Sadeli rods, in full circles, half circles and triangles placed into the ivory veneer created a crisp, decorative pattern

(fig. 42). Another feature of this period was the prolific use of wide bands of Sadeli ribbon work to decorate the edges of lids and panels.

The effect of the white and black with the sparkle of silver was enough to keep this pattern in steady production for the next decade and beyond. How the Sadeli roundels were fixed inside the bone with such a tight fit is unknown, but it could have been that the rods were pushed into predrilled blocks of ivory and then the whole sliced into even sheets.



Figure 44. A small sewing box that illustrates the use of ivory in sheets. Photos from EBay. Authors photos.

Figure 45. Exterior of Midshipman Hammond's sewing box 1848. Liveauctioneers.com, accessed June 2020.



This box has a dedication from Midshipman Washington Hammond to his mother in September 1848, East Indies. The exterior shows a shift towards smaller ivory veneers.

Inside the box the thread barrels are now topped with Sadeli, though which the head of the spindle appears. Note also the edge decoration that decorates the lids of the large containers in the back row (fig. 46).



Fig. 46. Midshipman Hammond box 1848. Interior. Live auctioneers.com, Conestoga Auction Company, Manheim PA USA, accessed June 2020.

A remarkable example is the Benson Sewing box. It too has that very rare primary document, a letter of gift dated January 1854. It was given to Captain Benson's wife, while they visited Calcutta. The steamship Hydaspes, launched only in 1852 was on a return journey to England.

A family history has been recorded with documentation and research of this period. This sewing box was an item that I was able to help identify and explain.

At the time of writing it is still held by family descendants and is in original, untouched condition. The Benson family went on to found the tobacco company of Benson and Hedges.



Figure 47. The lid of the Benson box 1854. Photo courtesy of D.Murrell.



Figure 48. Benson box- complete with all its internal tools and lids. Note a small netting roller center front. Photo courtesy of D. Murrell.



Figure 49. Early thread barrels only opened at the top. Author's collection.

While the layout for the sewing tray was unchanged, the plain thread barrels were redesigned. At first, the barrels adopted crank handles for winding thread in and out. Next, small, dainty, extension knobs stood above the Sadeli roundels which were now fitted decoratively into the lid. This winding mechanism was soon replaced by a turning top that was decorated with a Sadeli roundel. A similar mechanism and decoration was applied to the tape measure.



Figure 50. A selection of Sadeli thread barrels, in order of age. (L to R) Early 1800s to 1860. Photo: author's collection.

To open the barrel and wind thread on to the spindle, the bottom of the barrel was unscrewed. This innovation became the standard for the following fifty years (Later thread barrels in cheaper boxes would end up with huge discs of lids, with tiny barrels below, as the thread barrel became more for decoration, than needed for use). Thus, the post 1840s boxes featured matching tops to create a uniform decorative look to the front row of the box.

In the back row of the tool tray were pairs of lidded containers. They too reflected a move from plain tops to decorated tops with Sadeli roundels of multiple sizes. The larger, more costly ones ornamented with lines of red lac and fretwork edges.



Figure 51. A selection of lidded containers. Early 1800s to 1870s. Authors collection.

The pattern on the outside of the box was matched in the interior. Both in the roundels on top of the tools and in the compartment lids. These boxes were soon challenged by the rising cost of their materials. From the 1850s onwards, new methods and a different look were poised to sweep through the market.

The sun burst pattern was the third pattern of note at the end of this period. Was it a Bombay interpretation of the ever popular sun burst pattern made in Vizagapatam? There are no records that link these two. These boxes were made from sandalwood and decorated with a central disc or roundel of ivory and Sadeli, from which radiated alternate bands of inlaid ivory and sandalwood in which a line of tiny to ever growing larger Sadeli roundels which marched across the box (*fig.52*). In the two examples of sewing boxes noted to date, one is rectangular and the other hexagonal. Both boxes have flat lids with their sun burst pattern continued down the sides of the box. The sewing tools are topped with Sadeli roundels, while the compartment lids are sandalwood inlaid with small Sadeli roundels in various patterns.

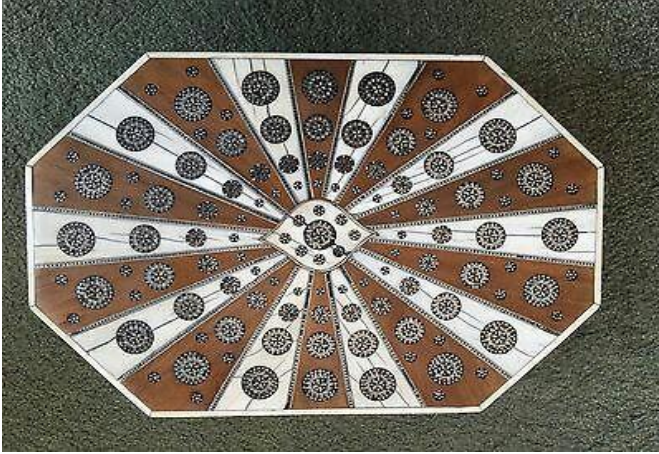


Figure 52. The sun burst pattern in Sadeli. Photo: Pinterest.

Another rare variation on Sadeli ware is one that shows a stronger awareness of the popularity of Vizagapatam ivory fretwork decoration. The exterior use of fretwork ivory panels carved in either of two designs. One was a four petal flower in between wavy lines (*fig.53*), the other can be best described as ivory cut away into lines of narrow, overlapping ovals.

Fig. 53 Fretwork and Sadeli card case. Author's collection.



These panels of pierced bone were backed by either brightly coloured Indian silk, or by sandalwood and ebony. In a sewing box of this type in the Victoria and Albert Museum (02271-IS) the silk is green, however, in another example - a fold up case was royal blue. The only other seen so far was a chess board which used sandalwood and ebony.

A further economy overlooked by purchasers may have been the change from silk velvet to cotton velvet in the box interior. As a generalisation; shades of plum (1840s), purple (1850-1890s) and red (1880 - post 1900), plus a faded aqua (which could have been blue) were used. Metal box feet, often in the shape of lion's paws began to replace ivory carved feet on more expensive boxes, while simple bone balls on less costly boxes were in time replaced by small locally made brass feet. Box handles were now only used for larger boxes, and they too changed from silver to silver plated and finally to brass.

1850-1900

Most of the materials for making a Sadeli sewing box were shipped to Bombay and as costs rose, a new direction in sewing box design appeared. It began with carved panels and Sadeli used as decorative bands along the edge. The early ones appear to be carved from ebony, a hard to work wood but, very valued as it did not rot. The carvers created landscapes of jungle foliage, with temples and other buildings setting a peaceful scene. Foliage alone was popular too, and mimicked the Kutch designs that were commonly found on the silver ware made for the same Western market.

An interesting example from this period can be found in "*Antique Boxes Inside and Out*", written by Genevieve Cummins. The exterior photo of this box shows a sarcophagus shaped box with ebony carving all around. Its unique look comes from the lid where four triangular inserts of light brown sandalwood carving are set off with a thin zig-zag band of Sadeli at their edges. The interior of the sewing box tray looks as if it could have been designed for a sewing box covered with ivory veneer inlaid with Sadeli roundels.⁷⁴ A bold mix of texture, colour and design.

The box design that grew out of experiments such as this, became the standard design for the next half century.

Post 1850, the trade in Sadeli expanded. Firstly, because Bombay was not caught up in the internal strife of the Indian Mutiny of 1858. In fact, it probably benefited, as it was the nearest port from which to disembark the regiments needed to regain control over the northwest of India. Secondly, Bombay had for over a century been the port of entry for silver and many other valuable goods. As a trading port with an established mercantile class, it in turn had attracted talented craftsmen, and so was ready to take advantage of the influx of foreigners and their needs. Bombay was given an additional boost when the Suez Canal opened in November 1869. This was swiftly followed by a railway service in 1870 that linked Calcutta (this was the capitol at this time) on the east coast to Bombay on the west coast. Sailing around India was now no longer necessary once the railway expanded. Vizagapatam and ports like it faded in importance in terms of the tourist trade, their wares now had to be sent to distant markets instead.

A standard Bombay box evolved. It was carved with fauna, foliage, temples and jungle- the dominant style of Surat. The boxes were made in a number of sizes, and could vary in cost, quality and size. Those with the most Sadeli work, of the more complex patterns were possibly made to order. Carved panel boxes with their edges decorated by ribbons of thin Sadeli became the standard replicated in large numbers over the next five decades.

The largest were split into three levels.

⁷⁴ Genevieve Cummins, *Antique Boxes Inside and Out*. (Antique Collector's' Club, Suffolk UK 2012).317. Colour plate no. 587.

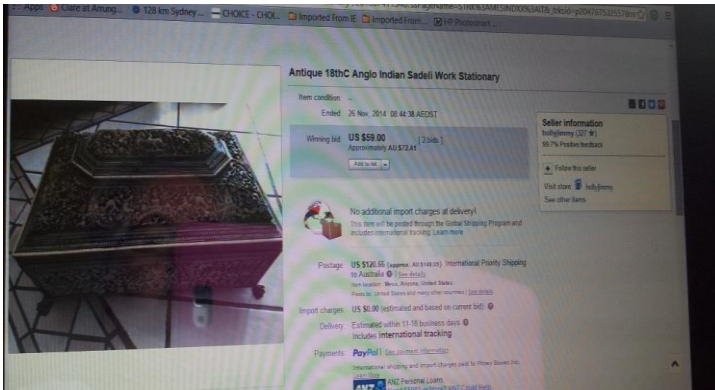


Fig. 54. EBay Author's collection

Fig. 54 is a photo of an early purchase that never arrived. It was carved in 3D (the only one like it that I have found) and had a top compartment, a middle sewing tool tray and from memory, a writing slope below.

The next photo, *fig.55*, shows an example of a box style that best shows the features of the late 1800s (1880 onwards). It has a fold out writing slope that would have held inks pens and paper. Above it was a sewing tray set out in a design unchanged from the 1850s. This box may have been a shop display item as the thread barrels and tool set are solid painted wood dummies. Thus, it could indicate that such boxes were made to order.

At the end of the 1800s, fashion had moved on and large boxes were no longer desired. Small etuis and sewing kits were more portable and practical. Thread was now sold on wooden reels rather than in hanks, while netting, tambour work and embroidery were falling out of fashion.



Figure 55. A Late 19 century Bombay sewing/writing slope box. Author's collection.



Fig. 56. Internal view. The sewing tray has painted wooden thread winders and tools. Each lid has lost its Sadeli center. The wire rings on the lids have been lost and are now replaced by jade beads. The pin cushion is just a wood block covered in fabric. The wood is roughly carved, there are no ledges to rest sewing tools on and the mirror and its frame are absent. The wood used looks like sandalwood but is not. Author's collection.

A Case study: The 1859 Mutiny Sewing Box



Figure 57. 1859 Sadeli sewing box. Photo: Author's collection.

Author's collection: 33cm (L) x 13cm (H) x 23.3cm (W). Sarcophagus shaped box with carving. Rosewood/padouk and sandalwood. Brass handles, hinges and lock.

This is a sewing box with a provenance and a mystery. The middle left hand side lidded compartment has a signature in ink, but so badly written that it has been so far impossible to decipher. The date remains clear: 16th/11/59 and the word "Jansi". Jhansi (Jansi) was in northern India and a long march from Bombay! It became one of the centres of the Mutiny, led by a brave young Indian woman, the Rani of Jhansi. Her death and the defeat of the Indian rebels ensured British control of the area and Jhansi became a military settlement. From the postcards and photos of the area it looks as if it would have been a hot, dusty plain in summer and very cold in winter at night. In one early postcard called "Jhansi-Palipaheri Camp", lines of large tents, and groups of elephants (they would pull the cannons) are spread across the plain.

This sewing box was well used and cared for, it has the unmistakable smell of coal fire smoke. Its contents were near complete, with the wear on the cotton tapes that were used to lift the sewing tray out nearly worn away with repeated use.



Fig.58. Sadeli sewing box side view. Photo: Author's collection.

The Mutiny Box is an early example of what became known as the standard 'Bombay Workbox', a design that work so well, it was still being made, if in a cheaper form well into the early 1900s. Carved wood panels became the main feature of the workbox exterior. They were placed on the box carcase and around them bands of Sadeli, which were invariably set off by ivory/bone stringing and edges. The panels featured animals (elephants,

hare- like beasts, deer and monkeys), birds, and even forest scenes with temples or villages. Very grand boxes with multiple uses would have superior carving, with panels that were carved in the round. Only the most gifted of craftsmen could create dense, detailed work that stood out from the surface of the box. On one box from this period the carver had created in the centre of his dense profusion of foliage, temples and elephants, a pair of rampant lions grasping the British flag. After many years of searching there has only been one example, only briefly seen online before it was stolen or lost.

The imaginative carving still works in their favour, for boxes with heavy Sadeli damage are sold with all the mosaic removed, the wood cleaned and then polished to present a useable and still attractive box.

It appears carving was more economic since it would be faster and the wood used less costly. In the late 1800s carving of the highest quality was paid at a piece work rate of 4 annas per square inch ⁷⁵(16 annas to 1 Rupee).

The tradition of covering Sadeli boxes with mosaic did not disappear. Instead, the application was adjusted. Bands of Sadeli were glued around the carved wood panels to present an even surface that sparkled in the light and matched the contents within the box. The top of the sarcophagus lid was a rectangle of carved wood, from which sloped gently the sides, presenting a carved panel to all four sides, all edged in silvery Sadeli bands. The box sides matched the lid. The design of the handles had not changed since the early 1800s but were made from cheaper material, brass which over the years goes black with age. The lock too, was now brass. The box feet were possibly made of brass, although wooden or bone bun feet could have been originally in place. This was a sturdy, heavy box, capable of surviving being dropped on its corner and it was, even without a writing slope, a very useful item of women's 'campaign' furniture.

Like the Sadeli boxes of the early period (1800-1820) the lid held a removable mirror inside an attractive frame of Sadeli banding, with a pair of metal latches with tips that could be swung in and out of small slits in the sandalwood lining of the box's lid. Not only was the mirror useful for reflecting candle light, it could be hung from its ring on a wall, or leaned against the box when in use. The box protected the mirror during transport and also allowed a narrow space for paper and letters to be stored. The original mirror from the Mutiny box is missing.

The lid area behind the mirror was lined with dark, plum coloured velvet, which in later boxes is replaced by bright red velvet.

Thin boards of sandalwood were used to cover the coarse unfinished carcass wood on the inside of the sewing box, their oils were also a repellent to insects in addition to proving a pleasant perfume.

The tool tray was made from sandalwood and its overall layout was the same as those made a half century before. The back row still had a pin cushion at its centre, flanked on

⁷⁵ Jaffer, *Furniture*, 316.

either side by large screw lidded cylinders with Sadeli inlaid in their lids. The trays on either side now had carved sandalwood lids, edged with Sadeli, and fitted with a small metal ring for removal. The middle row still provided the largest compartments. The centre compartment was the largest and had holders for a multi-sectioned thread reel. Flanking these compartments were long and short narrow trays for tools, which at this time were covered with Sadeli work, but in later boxes were left as plain wood. The carving on the lids of the compartments was very detailed and varied; flowers, fish, beasts and birds were the dominant motifs. Sadeli borders around each lid, sometimes incorporated up to three patterns. In later boxes this level of decoration dwindled to a single line of dots or diamonds.

The front row still held ivory frames, to hold a thimble, tape measure and thread barrels. A small compartment in the centre had no lid, nor any indication of its possible use.

In sewing boxes from the late 1890's these ivory frames were replaced by wood, while the Sadeli lids of the thread barrels (which by now all unscrewed at the base) expanded, hiding a shrunken barrel beneath.



Fig.59. The 1859 Mutiny sewing box, interior view. Photo: Author's collection.

Under the sewing tray was a shallow space (1.5 cm to 1 cm), lined in plum coloured velvet to match with the pin cushion. Deep enough for knitting needles, patterns and a few extra tools. This area in later boxes became deeper and some boxes could hold a pocket watch and other objects (cosmetics, Jewellery?).

Monghry

It seems to me that very few people in both the antiques trade and among avid box collectors have heard of Monghry woodwork. It is as if nearly all trace of this type of wood work has turned to dust and been swept away by time.

Monghry work is an inlay of bone on ebony that took its name from the riverside town where its manufacture was centred. The distinguishing design was of very thin curling and curving trails of simple, leafy flower vines. The vines have small, dainty leaves evenly spaced along the vine or at the end of short stalks. The leaves are about 2mm in diameter. At the ends of the vine are either small dainty bunches of flowers or a single flower, which are very often composed of four petals and a tiny dot centre (1mm). Ivory stringing is also used to outline larger leaf like decorations. In addition, ivory stringing was used to draw large patterns more suited to Western tastes. Ebony was resistant to insect attack, a hard, heavy wood that would have been grown in southern India or Ceylon. It can be a dense black, striped, even multi coloured and has a fine textured, smooth finish and shine. Calamander and Coromandal are other names by which it is known.



Fig. 60 .On the left a Monghry sewing box of the 1840s or earlier, to its right one from the 1850s. Photo: Author's collection

It may seem safe to assert that the sarcophagus shape common to both Sadeli and Vizagapatam styles was not adopted by the wood carvers of Monghry, however with only one jewellery box and few sewing boxes appearing for sale and in books, it would be a rash assumption.

A case study: 1840s sewing box

Author's collection. 2.5cm (L) x 14.5cm (H) x 19.5cm (W). Figures 61 and 62.



Fig. 61. 1840's Monghry sewing box on the auction floor disguised as "good vintage Japanese". Author's collection.

This sewing box is a lovely example of simple lines and elegance. It is decorated with inlay to the lid and front only. The draw at the front was secured by a long metal pin operated by the box lock. Both the key and long pin are lost.

It was found in an auction, where it was described as "Good Vintage Japanese". It was grubby and had a long deep run of cracks to the lid running lengthways with the wood grain and to the full thickness of the wood.

The inlay is very fine and delicate when compared to the box on the right in Fig. 60. This, and the use of 12 petal flowers are only found on one other example in the V&A Museum collection which has been dated to the 1840s.⁷⁶

Commented [Ma1]:

Commented [Ma2R1]:

Commented [Ma3R1]:

⁷⁶ Jaffer. *Furniture*. 236.



Fig. 62. Interior of a Monghry sewing box 1840s. Photo: Author's collection.

Mitre joints were used with ebony veneer and butt joints/nails were well hidden, either on the base of, or in the carcase wood.

In the interior of the box, all visible surfaces were lined with ebony. The box was padded under the lid with the brightest red velvet, which set off the ebony sewing tool tray below. Of all the sewing boxes made in India this was the most craft focused. It had two scissor shaped spaces, a small, fitted pin cushion in red velvet, a multi sectioned thread roller with space for two rolls of thread, a small, shallow, carved tray for beads, pins etc. with a thimble holder (for a child sized thimble). An ebony multi-sectioned thread reel. Five solid ebony compartment lids were decorated with a delicate vine inlay topped with a small ivory knob on each. One lid has been carved to hold two pairs of very small scissors. There are two long, narrow compartments where packets of needles, or thread winders could be stored. The tray compartments were made by slim, interlocking, rectangular ebony panels. The draw below may have been used for more sewing tools such as tambour hooks, bodkins, patterns etc.



Fig. 63. 1850's Monghry sewing box with its second replacement interior. The original compartment divisions and lids have been lost over time. The interior padding and decoration are the work of the Author. Author's photo.



Fig. 64. Monghry sewing box with original intact sewing tray. Photo: Pinterest.

What appears common to all known published examples of Monghry work is the fine, thin single line of ivory inlay and the swirls and tresses of small, dainty leaves and flowers. Short curving sprigs of flowers were used to decorate the edges, corners, internal lids and surfaces. The furniture and furnishings made in Monghry were copies of European pieces and showed little influence of their maker's customs, beliefs, or culture.

The ebony used on the exterior was generally a dark black, but as the wood also had mottled brown areas, these were not wasted but used in less obvious areas. The ebony was cut into thick veneers and applied to the carcass wood with careful, mitre joints. Ebony is a dense wood with a good resistance to insect attack. As it ages it can crack and split. Many restorers relate that it is hard to work on. An added complication is that the dust created from cutting or sanding is injurious to health.

A case study: Monghry sewing box 1850- 1855

Author's collection: 30cm (L) x 15cm (H) x 20.5cm (W). As pictured in *Fig.60 & 64*.

This sewing box came from a family that had a military link to India. It is an attractive box that shows many signs of repair, as well as losses over the century and a half of its existence. Externally a little

of the ivory inlay has fallen out, but its feet and octagonal handles are intact and present. Inside the box, the original padded red velvet under the lid had been replaced with cotton wool and stuffed with lavender (which had reached the end of its useful life and was ragged and torn, - this has been replaced).

This sewing box was valued by its owner. It has had a number of careful repairs. A major repair was made to the inlaid lid when top of lid came away from the lid's side frame, and the decorative, narrow ivory edge was lost, or broken. A thin pale wood was substituted and the whole glued and clamped together neatly, to restore the lid.

Inside the sewing box the tool tray has lost its contents, together with the dividers and their compartment lids. There remains an indication of the tray design from the indentations along the tray sides. Below the tool tray is a deep space for more sewing tools.

A corner of the box is slowly opening up at one of its mitre joints, but not sufficiently to clearly see and identify the carcass wood.

Overall, the box is heavy and strong, with the ebony still glossy and a delight in its smooth surface. The handles are strong and have not weakened over time.

Monghyr still exists. Today it is a town at the end of a branch train line, built around a sharp bend in the Ganges River.

Two hundred years ago it was a busy river port which was taken by the British from the Mughals, in spite of its fortifications and its strength as an armoury. The craftsmen who had decorated guns and other weapons with precious inlays for the Mughal Empire now turned their skills to decorating furniture and furnishings for a European market. Each time a sailing ship arrived on the arduous river route from Calcutta to Delhi (and on to central and north Western India) and return, Monghyr traders flocked to the wharf to surround the passengers with goods to buy.

Bishop Heber commented in 1828, that he was, 'beset by a crowd of beggars and artisans'.⁷⁷ Mrs Fenton a few years later remarks, 'How beautifully they work in wood! The tables etc. which they carry down on their heads to induce you to buy are really curious'.⁷⁸

The prices were inexpensive⁷⁹ and the range of goods grew to satisfy the passenger trade. In 1836 Fanny Parkes wrote of chairs, worktables, boxes, straw hats and bonnets, birds in cages, forks, knives, guns, pistols, and kettles as amongst the goods for sale.⁸⁰

By 1851, Monghyr work was included at the Great Exhibition and again in 1873 work was sent to Vienna for exhibition and sale.⁸¹ The range of goods included, cabinets, envelope and paper cases, desks, and work boxes.⁸²

⁷⁷ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 235.

⁷⁸ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 235.

⁷⁹ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 235.

⁸⁰ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 235.

⁸¹ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 235.

⁸² Jaffer, *Furniture*. 235.

Monghry work was inexpensive, designed for everyday use and for a clientele who would carry the goods away with them. Sadeli work made for the same market has become reasonably common as an antique while Monghry is much harder to find. A search of the Victoria and Albert Museum catalogue, years of watching eBay, Pinterest, auction sites and contacting restorers has found few examples. There are no blotters, only one jewellery box, a few sewing boxes, three cabinets, a pair of writing slopes and a watch stand that have come to light. What could account for this?

It was the railway which broke Monghry's hold on travel to the interior of India. So much faster, and safer than sail or steamers. The river side market declined and while some families continued to make Monghry wood work, the demand had fallen away. Work on the railways provided a higher, more reliable source of income than work shop carpentry.⁸³ In a letter addressed to Mr Hellyer (a British engineer), dated 30th July 1857, he is warned that his timber for railway construction is under 4 to 5 feet of water.⁸⁴ The writer has given orders for it to be moved to higher ground. The Indian Mutiny disrupts this work, but it does show how soon major changes to transport and communications would disrupt the economy of this area.

The second-hand furniture market absorbed much of the auction trade in goods. It was common practise to buy second hand and then sell on quitting the area, or returning to Britain. The furniture would be repaired and in some cases brought up to date by adding modern handles and fittings. But a hard climate and age would have thinned the number of boxes and cabinets that have survived.

The last and hardest to prove is that much of this work was simply lost and burnt during the Indian Mutiny of 1857, or as it is now known as the 'first war of Indian Independence.' In all the first-hand accounts read for this paper, the destruction and burning of homes and barracks is mentioned.

The three examples of Monghry work that I have handled, two sewing boxes and a writing slope have had many repairs. The repairs have been done with care and to maintain the original look of the box, they carry the sense that the owners were both proud of their items and used them well. The lock mechanism on the writing slope when taken apart showed a previous soldered repair, its design dated the slope to the Georgian period. Internally it too had lidded inlaid compartment lids with small bone knobs and the same method used in fitting the trays panels to create a variety of compartment sizes.

⁸³ Jaffer, Furniture. 235.

⁸⁴ India: *Sultanganji folded letter 1857 to Monghry*, forwarded. Railroad contents. Seller wbamike(5758) eBay item no. 382554696360.

Sandalwood

Sandalwood is a sweet smelling wood that produces boxes that are light in weight, yet strong and also insect repellent. Only the heartwood was used, but it was graded according to colour and markings. White was the cheapest (I suspect that this is the wood seen in the sewing trays and lining of Sadeli boxes), next was red, followed by Naga, known as 'cobra' (dark brown) and most desirable, navilu or 'peacock'.⁸⁵

The new wood carves easily, but as it ages it does become brittle, and older boxes need to be handled carefully to avoid breaking or splitting the wood. Boxes that already have splits in the wood can be patched (keeping the box away from heaters and out of direct sunlight applies to all old boxes).

Compared to the number of Sadeli and Vizagapatam sewing boxes, there are fewer examples in Sandalwood alone. The standard of carving indicated the price of the object. Very small, delicate and intense carving, done with great care, of a continuous scene that was balanced and where the ends of the lid and body of the box/card case met, continued uninterrupted, - were art works. As Dasgupta explains in "Catalogue of Wood Carvings in the Indian Museum",

"the artist strove to attain perfection...through carefully preserved tradition and heredity".⁸⁶

These boxes are at last being appreciated and recently their value has risen in the antiques market. Mysore, known today as Karnataka, Canara which has become Kanara and other towns in Southern India are linked with this industry. However, as the Indian railway and steam ship routes expanded before the First World War, so too did the opportunities for many types of master craftsmen to move into more urban areas, change cities (Agra sold south India style wood carved boxes featuring the Taj Mahal on the lid) and even countries (Burmese silversmiths found work in Bombay).

Sandalwood boxes which were carved in areas away from Bombay relied on the strength of the carver's artistry. Methods and techniques were handed down through families. Many generations of the Gudigar caste had carved and painted the magnificent and ornate Hindu temples.⁸⁷ These subjects were used on their boxes. The principal motifs of Hindu gods and goddesses either set as single portraits in archways, or in groups to present scenes well known to Hindus through their mythology, were popular subjects. These talented carvers had two markets to please, they had their fellow citizens and they had the Europeans, which meant sending their carved work to towns and cities all over India. They carved numerous animals such as parrots and peacocks, monkeys, fish and interesting hybrid creatures. Foliage and flowers too, with a focus on the lotus used in a stylised form where rings of petals spread in concentric circles (often as centres for pull rings/bone knobs on lids, or in

⁸⁵ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 150.

⁸⁶ Kalyan Kumar Dasgupta, *Catalogue of Wood Carvings in the Indian Museum* (Indian Museum, Kolkata. 1981).

2

⁸⁷ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 149.

larger boxes as a motif on the underside of the lid)⁸⁸. The only areas of uncarved wood were on the base. Carved lions paw feet were often used to lift the box, however over time these may have been broken and replaced.

Internally, all compartments had carved lids. In one example most of the lids are left in place but a long multi- sectioned thread reel is seen where one lid has been removed. An interesting sewing box, described by the seller as 'sandalwood' (figs. 65 & 66) was made for a Bombay exhibition in 1869. The carved exterior is a masterwork which fits in with the style of the north (Surat). The thread barrels were based on those in Sadeli boxes, but had solid ivory lids carved with concentric circles for decoration. A small pin cushion, a multi sectioned thread roller, tape measure and thimble were included. There was also a mirror set into the lid in "Bombay style".



Figure 65. Sandalwood workbox. Photo: courtesy of Vince Berry.

Sandalwood boxes could be the work of one man or many.

In Canara to the south of Bombay, a customer's commission would start the process, as it seems that most carvers were restrained by a shortage of wood. In Mysore however, where the state monopoly raised funds for the government by selling through depots,⁸⁹ there was an abundance of sandalwood and so Mysore sandalwood items were made to be traded on the local market and sent all over India.

⁸⁸ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 149.

⁸⁹ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 150.



Figure 66. Sandalwood sewing box interior and contents. Photos: courtesy of Vince Berry.

Once the wood was bought, it was the carver who cut it into panels and put the box together before disassembling it, so each panel was ready for the design to be drawn or copied on to it. From this point it was hours of chipping away wood, using finer and finer chisels, then sanding for a smooth finish, and finally putting the box back together again with hinges, a lock and feet if needed. One man could do all the work, or in a bigger workshop many hands took their turn to create each item. In 1851, *'The Proceedings of the Madras Central Committee'* recorded that a box could take from three to six months to complete.⁹⁰ In 1904 a basic wage for a carver in Canara was from 12 annas to just over 2 rupees per day, while in Mysore a carver could earn 10 annas per square inch.⁹¹

The work from Mysore was elegant and minute, according to tradition these carvers came from Goa⁹². Early Mysore sandalwood boxes were sought and bought by the British. A record for one is noted and illustrated in Mary Andere's "Old Needlework Boxes and Tools.

A young Maria Russell wrote in her diary of 1854,

"Uncle William opened the tin box and there was a beautiful workbox carved in sandalwood. It was for me.....I think it is the most beautiful thing I have seen. It is perfectly lovely in all its parts. It is incomparable! Its beauty is inexpressible. It is a chef d'oeuvre..."⁹³

The box was in the Welsh Folk Museum in 1971. Andere records that there were no tools fitted in the box. There was a tray with 9 loose lidded compartments with ivory knobs for handles and two small open compartments.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 150.

⁹¹Jaffer, *Furniture*. 150.

⁹² Dasgupta, *Catalogue*. 5

⁹³ Mary Andere, *Old Needlework Boxes and Tools* (GB. 1971)

⁹⁴ Andere, *Old Needlework*. 32.

A case study: Mysore Sandalwood box



Figure 67. Mysore sandalwood box. Author's collection.

The wood on the exterior has darkened with age, while inside it is golden in hue. The box has been assembled from intensively carved dove tailed panels. The lid has been shaped to have a slight rise to the central rectangular image of four parrots and a lotus flower (*fig. 66*). An edge beading that would have over hung the edge and hidden the hinges has been removed and lost.

Figure 68. Mysore box lid with parrots. Author's collection



The sides have been carved in a series of paisley like patterns, the front and rear panels display a seated monkey eating fruit. A very different, very delicate and detailed work of art, perhaps made in the Islamic tradition. The finely carved wood beading that is nailed over the bottom edge of the box has been damaged and lost in places. The extra beading sold with the box was not a match in colour or length.

Inside the box, just two of the four triangular rests for the tray remain. The original tray has been lost and its replacement too, with only the sides remaining as a set of panels. Below the tray, the base of the box has been lightly carved with a pattern of three diminishing rectangles, at the center is a circular lotus motif.

The outside of the base is undecorated, but shows several age related splits.



Three original feet are present and a fourth one is an old cork. The original feet are sandalwood paw feet. Each has five toes and dewclaws either side of the leg. The carver has worked a lifelike pattern along each leg to resemble fur.

Figure 69. Carved foot with claws. Author's collection.

To illustrate fully the delicacy of this level of carving, a sandalwood card case and the top of a sandalwood photo frame are placed against the carving of the box lid (*Fig. 70*). All items would have been carved before World War I.



Figure.70 Author's collection.

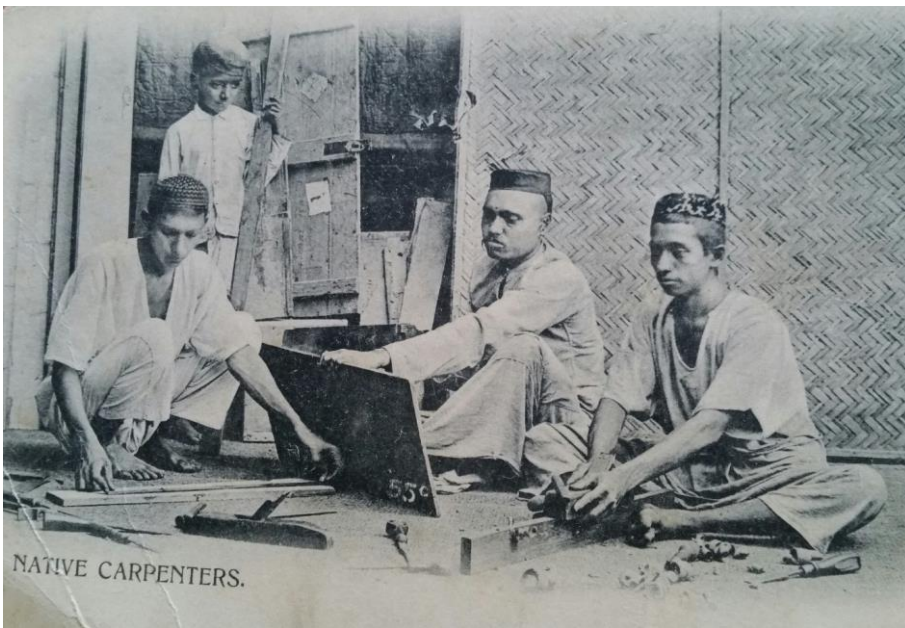


Figure 71. A postcard of Indian carpenters with their tools. Author's collection.

Ceylon

For such a small island Sri Lanka, or Ceylon as it was known had magnificent forests. Numerous species of trees provided timbers of great beauty and variation. Figures 71 and 72 show a few of the best known timbers.



Figure 72. Author's photo.

Figure 73. Author's photo



Ebony was prized and today is a rare wood seldom seen for sale. Much of the carved wood sold last century as Ebony was at best, possibly king ebony, or another wood painted and polished to look like ebony.

Ebony as it ages develops splits and cracks that go right through the wood panel. It is difficult to restore I am told. It is one of those woods that will shine when polished with a soft cloth, it is delightful to handle as it is so smooth, so heavy and dense. It is the heart wood of the tree.



Figure 74. An early and traditional style of carving ebony. It is a hard wood. Author's photo- National Museum of Galle.

A second wood that was popular in the pre 1850s period was coconut wood. So far no sewing boxes made with coconut wood have appeared, but a number of writing slopes still can be found. Generally large in size, they are often plain in decoration and a number reeded, that is a pattern of parallel lines carved into the wood around the exterior.

A third sewing box type was made which dates to the 1820s. It was veneered in turtle/tortoise shell on an unknown wood with a decoration of triangular patterned edge banding. . It was made on the island and had a tray of lidded compartments, the colourful ivory and wood lids were decorated with an edge band of inlay similar to the exterior. Boxes like the ones in the photos following (figure 74 and figure 75) are small in size, less than 30cm in length, with a single layer tool tray.



Figure 75. Author's own photo, taken in the National Museum of Galle. Sadly, the staff on duty had no interest in opening the box. Nor any knowledge of what was inside.

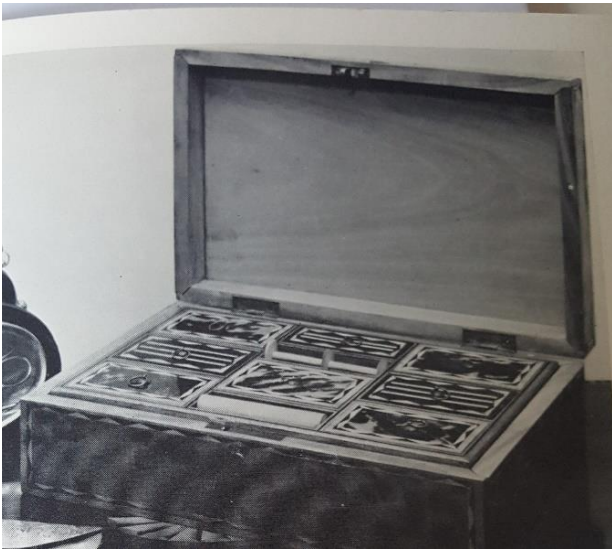


Figure 76. From *Old Needlework Boxes and Tools* by Mary Andere p89.

The high quality of carving and the long exposure to European carpentry methods and tools through the Portuguese (who had intermarried with the Sinhalese), meant, that when the entire island came under the control of the EIC in 1815, furniture manufacture and export was set to expand into new, overseas markets.

The earliest sewing boxes found so far, date from the late Georgian/William IV period (1820-1837). There are few proper sewing boxes as defined for this research, which can be identified as wholly made on the island from this early period.

However, there are beautiful boxes which were sent back to Britain empty, ready to be fitted with a silk lined sewing tray and silver fittings. This occurred as

Calamander/Coromandal wood (ebony) became increasingly rare and hence expensive by the mid-19th century⁹⁵.

Figure 77. A high quality Ebony /Calamander/Coromandal wood box. Note the fruit and nuts that are carved on this box, they are still grown in Sri Lanka. Wood apple, Jack fruit and cashew nut are clearly depicted on the box. Photo courtesy of David Adams.



Figure 78. Photo courtesy of David Adams. Internal view. Mirror in the lid. A top tray for the storage of thread reels and beneath, space for a pin cushion, a fitted needle book and lidded storage. All in violet silk. Utterly de lux!

⁹⁵ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 376.

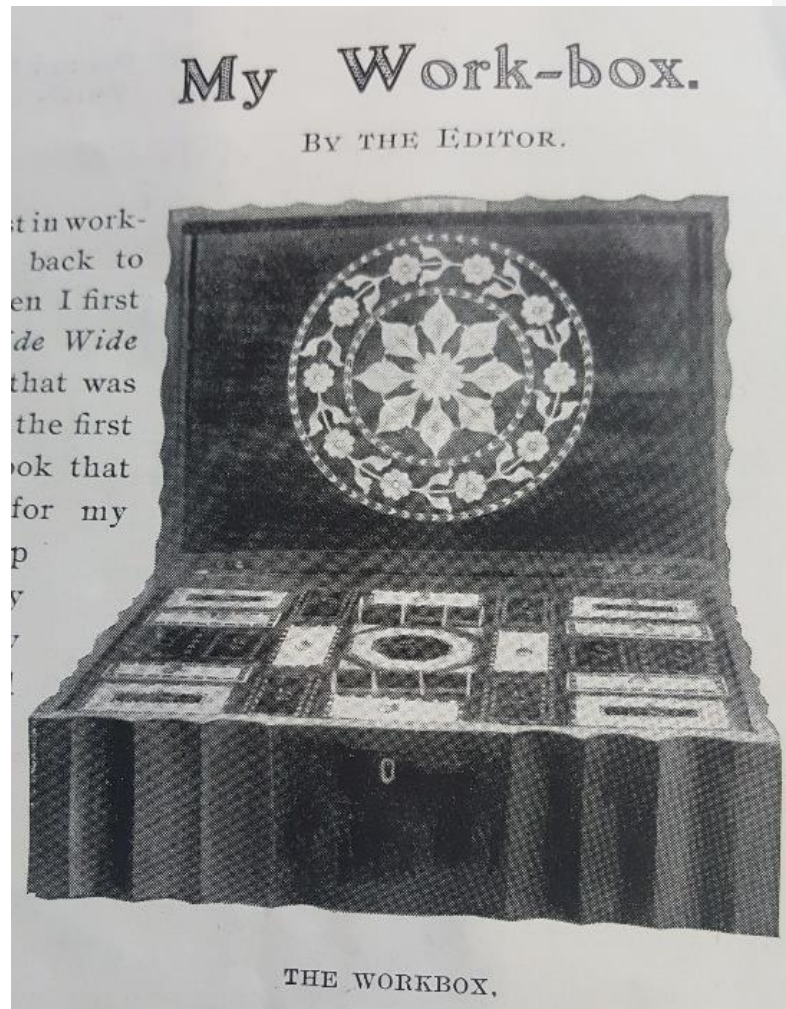


Figure 79.
Flora
Kilckmann's
sewing box.
Author's
photo of
"Stitchery",
edited by
Flora
Klickmann
p30.

The sewing boxes made in Ceylon in the second half of the nineteenth century had a solid, plain look (no feet and no handles), lifted by the

thick Ebony/Calamander veneer shaped with a scallop pattern to emphasise the swirl of colours that ran through the wood grain. This contrasted strongly with the internal wood work and inlays which were picturesque, designed to be a great attraction in themselves. Those boxes sold in Ceylon were fitted with one or more trays, the top most displaying a range of woods⁹⁶ in the compartment lids, or else with swirling, etched and lac coloured patterns on ivory lids. In some boxes tortoise shell was also used. Generally, the lower tray would be less ornate with a small metal rings fitted to the rows of compartment lids. Such

⁹⁶ Jaffer, *Furniture*. 373. One commentator believed there were "99 species of costly wood". There is a Calamander box in the Museum of Economic Botany, Kew, UK containing 96 wood samples. Jaffer, *Furniture*. 369.

sewing boxes were often over 30cm in length with the large size adding to the luxury feel and look of these boxes.

Flora Klickmann's sewing box is an excellent example (*Fig.78*), it has tortoise shell and ivory compartment lids, with a substantial rosette of ivory inlay under the box's lid. There are two multiple thread reels and all the compartment lids have wire rings as pulls. There is no mention of a second lower tray, though from her essay on the contents it held an abundance of sewing tools, treasures, and haberdashery.

Nineteen sewing tools are pictured in the article, and they cover the hundred years previous to 1913-14 when this magazine was published. The box, she describes as an

"antique , and was evidently made in the East....Inlaid most exquisitely with ivory, tortoiseshell silver, in addition to light and dark wood; the workmanship of the whole is wonderful. There are twenty three roomy compartments in the top tray, and a vast space below. "⁹⁷

Flora adores her workbox, but shows little knowledge of its heritage.

The increasing rarity and expense of Ebony/ Calamander wood resulted in a handsome, but much cheaper and more sustainable exterior. Boxes were decorated with patterns of porcupine quills. The quills, naturally shed by porcupines, were collected, trimmed and used in patterned rows held in place by narrow bands of ebony inlaid with dots of bone/ivory. These 'quill' boxes were produced in all shapes and sizes and are easy to find in trash and treasure markets. They were made in numerous sizes and this work is still available today for sale to the tourist market. The centre for this work was the Galle district. A number of boxes have "Matara" inscribed under the lid, this is the name of an old fort, around which a larger town grew. The better boxes had large areas of floral patterns in bone with red and black lac etched into them on the underside of the box's lid.



Figure 80. A large sewing box decorated with quills. It is somewhat distressed and in need of cleaning and repair. EBay

⁹⁷ Klickmann Flora ed. *Stitchery: A Quarterly Supplement to the Girl's Own Paper and Woman's Magazine. No 1. London. 1913-14.*



Figures 81 & 82. Internal decoration beneath the lid and the tool tray. This shows how attractive the quill boxes could be, even though this box will take many hours of restoration to regain its original splendour. EBay.

A Case Study: Late Georgian Period Ebony Sewing and Netting Box

Author's collection: 35 cm (L) x 14.8cm (H) x 25.5cm (w), add 5cm to (L) and (W) to include feet.

Calamander and Coromandal are names used to describe a types of ebony wood that were grown in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Southern India, but are now rare. The wood can have tight curls of colours, or meandering bands that are multi coloured- black through to a rich honey colour, and even ash grey.



Figure 83. Ceylonese netting/sewing box. Photo: Author's collection.

A straight sided rectangular box, the lid has a flat top that is inlaid with thin brass stringing which divides the solid central panel from a cross banded veneer edge. The underside of the lid shows the same hair line split in the wood as is seen in the top of the lid. It has a repair to the split that is just visible. The top of the lid has been separated from the lid's sides, repaired and fitted back in place. Thus, it could be that the lid is a single piece of wood with its outer edge parred away to fit a decorative cross banned edge with brass stringing (This cross banded veneer is only 1mm thick, which is possibly an indication of a repair, but one that has been done many decades ago, as the glue has dried out and the veneer has lifted along the edge).

The veneer used on the rest of the box measures 3mm in thickness and is comparable with veneers used for the Georgian and Victorian periods. Mitre joints with a lap over the corner edge on the outside are used to enhance the veneer, while below, dove tail joints hold the box together. A very fine, small headed nail was used at the time the box was made, later repairs are noted to have been carried out using nails with larger heads (The lid top shows a number of these nails).



Figure 84. Lapped mitre corner. Photo author's collection.

It has elegant, solid calamander side handles (carved in a fluted and scroll design) and a full set of large carved feet, which at first look out of place, until similar carving is noted on the feet of furniture which had also been made in Ceylon in the Regency period.

The base of the box is a sturdy plank of reddish wood - possibly Mahogany. It has split and dried out, with one split running almost the full length of the box.

There is no decorative image as part of the underside of the lid. Although the depth of the lid does indicate enough space to have had one fitted.

Inside the box is a sturdy, but well used tool tray, with generous storage space below. The wood used has proved to be very stable, - there are no cracks or twists, despite a worn and dented patina. The tray has twelve lidded compartments. There are also two open compartments, both with a small hole at one end near the top and a slit at the other for fitting a netting roller and a multi-sectioned thread reel. The arrangement of these two open areas also allows one to grip the tray when lifting it out of the box. Instead of the usual lay out of lines of rectangular compartments, pairs of boxes end in a point on either side of the tray (a right and left trapezium). These oddly shaped lids have their own edge pattern of ivory triangles and ebony diamonds to further delineate them from the standard look.



Figure 85. Interior showing tool tray. Photo author's collection.

The tool tray uses dove tailed joints and fine nails, the divisions for the compartments are decorated with ebony stringing and fit together (in a fashion similar to that found in the trays of Sadeli and Monghry boxes), the wood coming to a point and resting in a V shaped groove in the next piece. The tools tray measures 33.2cm x 23.4cm x 5.2cm. The base of the tray is the same wood as the base of the box and displays two smaller and shorter cracks.

Lids

The lids of this early example are much plainer than the later Victorian and Edwardian examples. There are four lids made from ivory, 2.5 cm thick, topped with small ivory knobs and a simple lac border design of crosses. The remaining lids are of calamander wood, decorated with a chevron pattern in ivory and ebony along the lid edge. Four of the larger lids of this type have a large inlaid ivory panel below the ivory knob. All the calamander wood lids are 8mm thick.

Storage area

A 4cm deep area provides generous space to store tools such as knitting needles, embroidery hoops, patterns and works in progress. The size of this box allows the owner to store a wide range of useful equipment, in addition to netting tools.

Feet

The first reaction was to suspect that the feet were replacements. More modest and plain feet, perhaps with a similar, fluted pattern to the handles were to be expected. However, there are other furniture items from this period, made in Ceylon that have a similar pattern carved onto the feet. The feet are attached with old rusty screws, which are screwed from the inside through the base and into the foot. This looks rather unsophisticated and at odds with the craftsmanship displayed in the rest of the box. (It is possible that the first set of feet broke off, or were lost/damaged and a second, more robust set made or reused from another piece of furniture). The feet are carved from a block of calamander and are 8cm at their widest point running underneath and across the boxes corner, while 6.5cm in length if measured along the sides of the box.

The contents of an ivory sewing box circa. 1810

This list records a sewing box's contents, one that had not been added to with more recently made tools. The box and its contents were for sale on an auction site in 2015. If you wished to recreate an authentic period sewing box, then this list would be a guide.

2 thread barrels

Tape measure (twist top, the tape can be rewound in to barrel container)

Thimble

"Token of love" alphabet sampler (printed)

Ivory needle case

2 Chinese mother of pearl thread winders

Vegetable ivory egg (opens to store a small thimble)

Vegetable ivory needle case

Ivory tambour hook

Folding ivory ruler

Ivory tatting shuttle

Ivory bodkin

Lacemaking needles

Fan shaped pin cushion (fabric and card)

Needlework Tools made in India

Silver

Thimble: 2.6 cm high x 1.9 wide at the base. The best known Anglo- Indian sewing tool would be the thimbles that appear regularly for sale. They are always distinctive, with a floral pattern which places them as originating from the western side of India in an area just above Bombay that produced 'Kutch/Cutch silverware. In comparison to the high quality repousse silverwork found on more valuable pieces, some of these are poorly finished and the seam or join in the silver is visible.

Crochet hook: 11.4 cm length x 1 cm width at the finial top and 0.5cm width along the handle. Good quality Kutch silver repousse work from the finial to the start of the hook section (8.3 cm). Plain fine silver hook with signs of distortion around the hook from frequent usage.



Figure 86. Silver sewing tools. Photo author's collection.



Figure 84 (left). A handsome Kutch work silver finial on a wood handled crochet hook. Figure 85 (right). A quality Kutch work silver crochet hook. From the collection of M. Pearce. Photo by T. Sier.



Figure 86. A silver chatelaine in the Madras area 'Swami' style with clips to hold useful tools. This was designed to hang from the belt or top of a woman's skirt. Author's collection.

Indian silver styles were varied and reflected the Indian art found in the surrounding temples and mosques. Bombay and the north-west produced 'Kutch', while there were patterns unique to Kashmir (Chinar leaf), Lucknow (the jungle and the hunt), Calcutta (village life), Madras (swami style), just to name a few.

Sadeli

While the boxes were sold with a tray of useable sewing tools, there was a trade in additional items sold for sewing and craft. Locating any of these items is difficult.

Knitting and Tatting Shuttles

Shuttles combined thread and tool in one portable object. The thread was wound around a central post that joined a pair of parallel identical diamond shaped blades. The idea was to catch and manipulate the thread in one's hands then pass the shuttle through. The result was a decorative lace like edging.

The earliest sort was the Knitting shuttle. It was longer (7 cm to 12.5 cm) and had ends that were not curved in towards each other. A knitting shuttle turned plain thread into a ribbon of close knots which could be sewn onto a fabric to represent flowers and foliage. After the early 1800s the design of the shuttle changed. It became smaller, shorter and the ends now curved inwards to almost meet. This was the 'tatting' shuttle, which produced a lace made from interlinked chains and rings. Tatting soon over took Knitting in popularity.

Humidity, moist hands and Sadeli covered shuttles are not a happy mix. Hence there are few to find. An early Knitting shuttle from a private collection which has Sadeli applied to ivory measures 8 cm long and 1.7 cm wide, with a distance of around 1 cm between the blades.

Three examples are illustrated in Pam Palmer's very readable and interesting book, *"Tatting Shuttles Related Tools and Accessories"*. There is a large colour photo of a fine green hued Sadeli tatting shuttle and the little tray it fitted into. Likely to be dated at around 1830-40. It was once part of a Sadeli sewing box. This separation is unusual. There are more boxes with the little fitted tray still in situ and occasionally a plain ivory shuttle fitting neatly therein.

A larger Sadeli knitting shuttle of 10.2 cm and a tatting shuttle of carved sandalwood of 64mm are also illustrated.⁹⁸

Tatting was a perfect 'hot weather' occupation, it was easy to carry and had no bulky fabric or wools to manage. A century later and the influence of an Anglo Indian experience can be seen in Marjorie Willis's 1930s pamphlet, *Furness Tatting Designs No.3*. There is a "Cashmere Collar", a "Durie Duchesse Set", and the major work, "Kandallah Luncheon Set".

⁹⁸ Palmer, *Shuttles Tatting*, 25, 26 & 49.



Figure 87. An early Sadeli knotting shuttle. Photo Jo Armstrong

Disc shaped Sadeli and ivory pin cushions, plus a Sadeli needle case.

Pink silk ribbon -5.6cm diameter x 1.5cm high. Black velvet ribbon- 1.2 cm high x 4.5cm diameter. Foreground with a blue ribbon- 5.5cm x 1cm high, with many lathe turned rings around the Sadeli. A large Sadeli roundel in the middle of both top and bottom discs.

Figure 88. Sadeli needle case and disc pin cushions. Photo: author's collection.



Sadeli needle case

9.2 cm long x 6.5 cm wide. Examples of the carved wood and Sadeli needle case in the photo above, have appeared more often in collections and for sale. The needle case is carved both on the front and the back with foliage and peacocks. It is held together with a canvas spine and lined with red silk.

Ivory

Indian carving in ivory has a long history. Over 200 years of trade links between Europe and the Princely States of India had brought craftsmen from many nations together in the early factories of the Portuguese and British traders.

In this way, techniques and tools were shared, as well as an understanding of the size, shape and method of usage for the items that were created. Unlike the bulk of the tiny needlework tools from Chinese lacquer work boxes of the mid to late 1800s, Indian tools were of a practical size.



Figure 89. A collection of four Vizagapatam thread winders showing a range of patterns

Here again it is difficult to record with great certainty that these items came from India. It is more the style and the way the carving is done that hints in this direction. In many respects it helps to have studied the work done by the best silver and goldsmiths and wood carvers. To gain an understanding of the range of designs, look at the work produced for the royal courts, much of which is now held in private collections and museums outside India.

Thread Winders

Ivory thread winders are often found scattered though Victorian period sewing boxes, rarely in sets, but more often as single items. Unlike the Vizagapatam lac decorated thread winders above in *fig 89*, they cannot reasonably be identified as Indian. Were they made in India or were tusks imported into England and Europe to be turned plain and carved slices for winding silk thread into neat rows? The number of patterns and variations in sizes appears endless. Bone examples also used the same patterns. While wood reels were used for cotton and linen, they were too rough for the fine silk used in embroidery. Recently a set of 5 ivory thread winders was sold off, it had been taken out of a 1850s Monghry cabinet which held a writing slope in addition to two deep draws, one of which would have held a sewing tray.



Figure 90. A small collection of ivory thread winders. Author's collection

Crochet hooks

My favourite crochet hook heads this collection of 5. It is 12.8 cm length x 1.1 cm width (at carved top) x 2mm (hook end). The tiny crochet hook finial has a tiger attacking a large hare/goat? The way the tiger is carved expresses an Indian hand rather than any other. The tiger is 1.1 cm high and very detailed. There is a wonderful double swirl carved along the handle. The last photo is a close up of the tiger and its prey (*fig. 91. numbers 1 & 5*).

Next to it is a well-made, heavier piece in the Indian style with carving the length of the shank. Number 2 is a rare, prisoner of war crochet hook made in 1902 in Ceylon at the Boeren Kamp (internment camp for Boers) at Diyatalawa Military Base. It is carved ebony and bone.

Figure 91. A collection of crochet hooks. Nos. 1, 2 & 5 author's collection. Nos. 3 & 4 courtesy of M. Pearce. Photos T. Sier.



1.



2.



3.



4.



5.

Number 3 and 4 are close ups of finials. The first shows a leaping animal, it is very light and thin with the drilled holes used in Chinese decoration. Number 4 is thicker, more of a tool than a toy and could be Indian or from a Chinese workshop/ Chinese carver in India.

Awls / stiletto

These examples are all reversible, with the pointed end screwing back into the handle for safety. The longest is 11.9 cm extended and 9.1cm closed, 1.1cm wide. The smaller awl is 8.2 cm extended and 6.1 cm closed, 0.9 cm wide, it has a green stone set into one end. Both exhibit a range of carved patterns suitable for a good grip and are pleasant to hold, as one's fingers curve comfortably around the grip.



Figure 92. Awls. Author's collection.



Figures 93 and 94. Thimbles and pomanders. Author's collection.



Figures 95 & 96. Close up photos of the damaged pomander with painted decoration. EBay.

Pomanders

Less than 5cm in length x no more than 1.8 cm in width. These flower shaped pomanders have little handles that unscrew from the bulb end, allowing for a twist of sheep or goat's hair soaked in perfume to be inserted. The pin holes in the bulb end are provided for the fragrance to escape. Where the perfume has soaked into the ivory there are signs of staining. Repeated soaking has turn one of the pomanders brown (fig. 93 &94).

These pomanders are included because there is one with has four incised lines around the bulb that are filled with a pinkish-red lac, very reminiscent of the lac used on Indian made ivory items. A number of others came with an Anglo Indian sewing box and lastly there was one sold on Ebay decorated with Indian art. The painting covers up the cracking and staining it has undergone over time (fig. 95 & 96).

This sewing tool can also be used for holding talc with which to dry ones' fingers before sewing.

Thimbles

All three examples came in 'fitted' Sadeli boxes. They are smooth, with no carving so as not to catch on the delicate fibres of silk thread. The size, shape, length and diameter of all are very closely matched. That they have not been lost perhaps indicates that the need was for metal thimbles to use with more durable fabrics, rather than the pleasure of silk embroidery.

Tambour Hooks

The longest tambour hook is 10.5 cm long (N.B. This tambour needle is missing its cap) by 0.9 width. Tambour needles/hooks were popular tools in early sewing boxes. These examples are of Indian manufacture with the uppermost carved and the lower tambour hook decorated with circle and dot work and pink coloured lac. There is a tightening screw at one end to hold the Tambour needle in place. The needles when not in use were stored in a hollow within the handle (fig .97).



Figure 97. Author's collection.

Sandalwood

Sandalwood thread holders are not as plentiful as maybe expected. There are three examples illustrated in Diane Pelham Burns' book, *'Thread Winders – A Collector's Guide'*⁹⁹. Two are single thread winders which would be around two inches in diameter and carved with a flower pattern. The third example is a six-and-a-half-inch multiple winder, carved to take four colours of thread. This is a magnificent example, the carving is in the Mysore style, with a central lotus like flower and trailing foliage to the sides.

Figure 98. A Vizagapatam Sandalwood and ivory pin cushion 1900. Photo curtesy of Claire Cordell.



An example of Vizagapatam sewing tools, this pin cushion is 6 cm x 5 cm x 5cm. Fretwork is held on with metal studs, so of a later manufacture. It stood on silver ball feet (now squashed down).

Sandalwood pin cushion

Pin cushion base 2.8 mm high x 4.3 diameter. Turned and carved with a fluted pattern.



Figure 99. Sandalwood pin cushion. Photo: author's collection.

This was from my Grand Mother's sewing box and the cushion part was in poor condition. Originally, it had a purple velvet cover over a cotton wrapped ball of very fine wood shavings. The wood base has remained whole, but has suffered the loss of small chips around the edge.

⁹⁹ Diane Pelham Burns, *Thread Winders – A Collectors' Guide*. (No publication data or date in the book). 34, 36.



Figure 100. A rare sandalwood thread winder. Photo: Author's collection.

A carved sandalwood thread winder 6cm diameter. The only other examples viewed to date three Indian winders in Diane Pelham Burn's *Thread Winders*, pgs. 34 & 36.

Base metal, paper mache and paint.

Knitting needle tube. 38 cm x 3.5 cm.



Figure 101. Author's collection.

This is not strictly speaking a sewing tool, however it is a rare example of Kashmiri work and would have been very useful for protecting sets of ivory knitting needles.

An Indian influence? ‘Hot Needle Decoration’ or ‘Madras Work’

It is a style of decoration which can be seen on little Indian cosmetic pots, the tiles used in the Chinese game of Mah Jong (which evolved from the game of Ya Pei invented in the Song dynasty), and used as a decoration on sewing tools made in England and Europe.¹⁰⁰

Early Georgian pieces are lightly coloured and somewhat smaller and daintier than later items. English manufacture copied this design as it was attractive. Later sewing items with this design tend to be larger and to have a stronger black colour in the etching.

Figure 102. A collection of lightly decorated circle and dot work items. Georgian period



¹⁰⁰ N Taunton, *Antique Needlework Tools and Embroideries*, (Antique Collectors Club Suffolk 2007). 87.

Figure 103. A collection of Circle and Dot work with heavier marks, plus an Indian container with similar decoration for comparison. Georgian to Victorian period



However, the design was popular and used in India, as it was acceptable to both Hindus and Moslems. Much of this type of work was made in Northern India.

Sir George Watts wrote,

“The colours most fashionable, as with ivory staining and colouring in nearly every part of India are red and green, with black lines and circles.... One of the most striking peculiarities of Jodhpur (Pali) ivories is the manner in which they are ornamented, namely, by circles and lines loaded with pink, green, or black lac,”¹⁰¹

Strangely, it seems it was never used on the tools supplied with the sewing boxes made in the port of Vizagapatam (which lay between Madras and Calcutta on the east coast of India). The tools, mainly thimbles and thread barrels in these boxes remained plain and undecorated, save for the carving of a layered series of four uncoloured rings around the circumference both on the top and bottom of the thread barrels making them very similar to the barrels of sewing boxes sold in England.

¹⁰¹ Watts, Sir George. *Indian Art at Delhi 1903. Being the Official Catalogue of the Delhi Exhibition 1902-3*. <https://books.google.com.au> Accessed May 2020

A further observation of the circle work done on Indian wares shows a more detailed and time consuming design, with the circles placed in triangular patterns, diamonds and flower like shapes, using both black and red lac. Only time, and the discovery of untouched sewing boxes may solve this mystery.

One recent discovery from eBay was a small tape measure with an unmarked pink tape in situ. It was of the daintier and lighter marked, thus earlier circle and dot items. It had on its base an inscription in French, "Toujours le meme", - always the same-

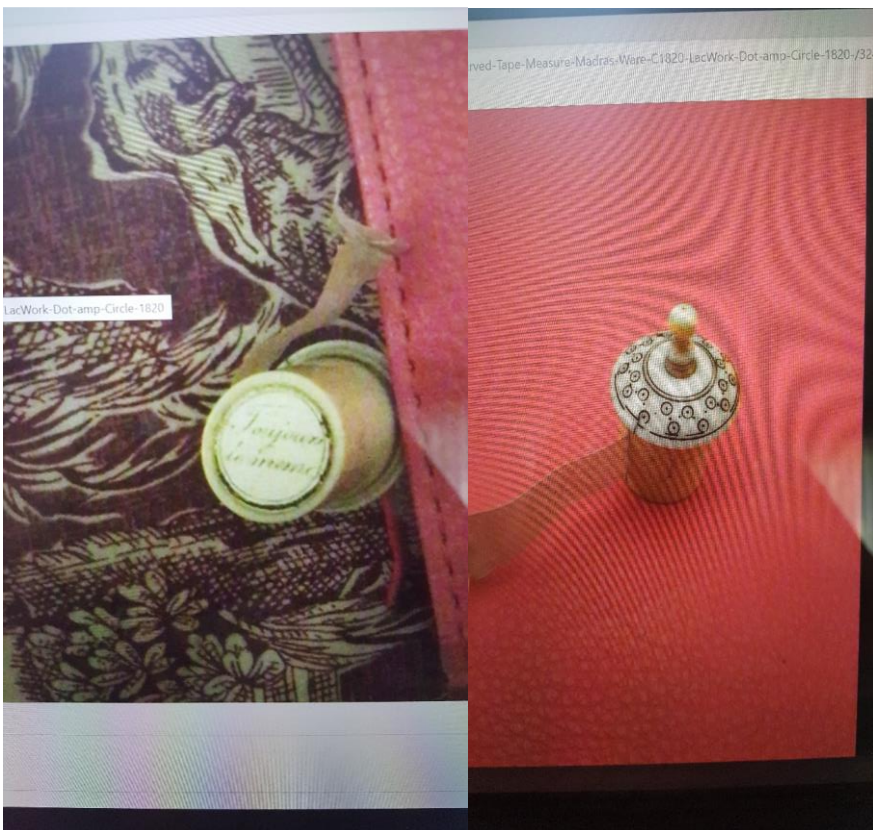


Figure 104. eBay item- circle and dot tape measure.

The only other way to explore this without finding any more primary evidence is to look at how earlier writers had described such examples in their books.

Sylvia Groves¹⁰² in 1966 had examples in plates 75 and 78, dates them as 18th century but does not mention a descriptive name, or their country of manufacture.

¹⁰² Groves, S *The History of Needlework Tools and Accessories*. Country Life Books GB 1966

Mary Andere¹⁰³ in 1971 includes a dot and circle needlebook, (page 143), but does not mention a descriptive name, or country of manufacture.

Gay Anne Rogers in 1983 included a number of examples, described as coming from English work boxes (plates-41, 52, 88, 128, 140, 145, & 180). However, she goes on to describe the technique of manufacture;

“The dots and circles are made by pressing and smoothing hot coloured wax into holes pierced in the needle cases by hot needles.”¹⁰⁴

In her Index there is no reference to “Dot and Circle work” or, “Madras work” or “Hot needle / dot work”.

By 1997 these descriptive labels are in use. Nerylla Taunton has two examples, but in her index they are entered under ‘Madras work ‘and ‘Hot Needle decoration’ and ‘Dot and Circle’.¹⁰⁵ All three terms are in use at present, one geographic, another technical and a third descriptive.

I have no idea where the term “Madras work” originated, but without primary evidence that this was a center of manufacture, it would be safer to use the term ‘Dot and Circle work’. The same caution can be applied to “Hot needle decoration, until proven through experimental methods. It is most likely that the marks were hand drilled, and/ or turned on a lathe, then filled with lac.

Figure 105. Author’s collection. Georgian period. Likely Indian made? Pin wheel, small lidded pot and tambour hook. If only the center of the pot lid was still in place, was this Sadeli?!



¹⁰³ Andere, M *Old Needlework Boxes and Tools*. David and Charles. Devon 1971.

¹⁰⁴ Rogers G. A. *An Illustrated History of Needlework Tools*. Murry. London 1983. 72

¹⁰⁵ Taunton. N. *Antique Needlework Tools and Embroideries*. Antique Collectors Club. Suffolk. 1997.

The repair and restoration of Anglo Indian sewing boxes

It is essential to maintain the authenticity of the box, if you wish it to be valued and conserved in the future. I aim to avoid using modern, or unsympathetic materials to patch or replace I feel that it is better to leave a damaged area bare. Mainly because my level of expertise is low and the tools I use very simple. In the future they may receive the attention of a trained conservator who is far more skilled and has a work bench and tools to match.

The advent of computers and 3D printers to build missing pieces are an interesting alternative, but over time these may not have the stability in colour, nor would they have the feel of an authentic replacement from the same age.

It is still possible to find old boxes that are beyond repair and to harvest material from them. In the UK these boxes are known as 'breakers', this may not be a cheap exercise but it will pay off with the finished item. I have been told about one drum table covered with Sadeli that took six months of work and over £1,500 in 'breakers' to restore. No wonder a similar small table sold at Christie's auction in 2017 for over £16,000!

Using breakers also means that while there is little wasted, the number of surviving boxes decreases. For those boxes that are not quite ready for the tip, the rescue of a 'breaker' and its repair can be a pleasant task. My work bench is the kitchen table where the light is excellent. Working in a family setting, near food preparation areas and the need to clear away my clutter for meals, has shaped the way I work and the methods I use. This means, like the Indian carpenter my tools are simple and nothing toxic is used.



Figure 106. My work bench. Author's photo.

Most of what I will describe is focused on Sadeli micro mosaic, but the overall directions can be applied to all boxes.

This is not the only method, nor are the processes used followed by all other restorers.

If the purchase has come by post then always request that the box be placed inside a large plastic bag, before being packed in a layer of crush proof material and placed into a strong carton. This protects it from moisture, and if any parts of the box fall away they are not lost in the packing or disposed of by accident. Sadeli is prone to do this, especially around age cracks in the wood carcass.

Once in your hands and unpacked, sit down and inspect it. Note the amount of dust and detritus, this will inform you of how it has been kept. In untouched condition even tips of foliage can be found in a box. It's the fine brown soil, the silt blown in by years of use in India that will find its way into the smallest of cracks that tells you where it has served its time. Lean over the open box, is there the faint scent of sandalwood? Can you note a tarry wood or coal tang? Or, do you turn away from the musty odour of mould?

It is useful to have a large cloth underneath the box to collect the dust, dirt and any other loose pieces. An old table cloth is perfect and gives you the space in which to remove the sewing tray and any other contents included in your box. Take your time to now look more closely at the box, how strong are the hinges? Are they stop hinges or replacements? Look at the base, and all around the box for age cracks in the carcass wood and butt joints that are weak and have moved away from each other. A box is said to 'smile' if the lid and box no longer meet. This could be a twist in the lid or that the butt joints at the sides of the box have parted. Decisions on what to reglue need to be carefully considered.

A further consideration is whether to alter repairs that have already been made. In some cases, the repair will be part of the box's history, it underlines the value of the box and its usefulness to its original owner. Such repairs can show a great deal of care in the shaping and choice of materials and subsequent wear that helps it to meld with the original material of the box.

In the case of Sadeli work, the condition of the micro mosaic and necessary steps taken to conserve it would have to be completed first. This is discussed further on.

Sometimes the timber is too delicate to correct and in the case of ebony this is very true. It is, I am informed a 'nightmare'.

Animal or fish based glues are preferable, they are non-toxic, authentic and reversible with water. Kitchen bake paper is very useful to protect surfaces when using glue as it will peel away easily if too much glue has been used. Clamps are useful, but make sure to buffer them with another piece of wood to spread the pressure and thus avoid indentations. For really fine clamping jobs, pegs off the clothes line can be very handy. Box lids that have had the top catch removed, generally indicate that the lid and the box are no longer in alignment. Correcting this can mean pulling apart, then cleaning the joints and regluing. This is well beyond what I do, so my boxes are never locked and each has their own quirk of closure.

Be very happy if the original feet (if it had some) are still in place, but replacement feet can be fine, especially if they too are within the period when the box was made.

Inspect the sewing tray and writing slope (if there is one). Be very gentle if parts of the box are stuck and leave them if you are frustrated by their lack of movement. It is always better to tackle these types of problems when you are in the mood for it and reasonably fresh. Keep the tray and slope in place unless you are working on it. It is impossible to predict how the changes in humidity, temperature and cleaning will affect the box. It is best to keep it together so any changes are minimised. However, expect to find that the tray and its lids will only fit in one direction.

Lift off the dust and dirt with care, small silvers of damaged wood can catch on any soft cloth. My method is to wipe over all outer surfaces with a well wrung out cloth if the box feels tacky to touch. Cleaning inside the box is done with an empty box, using a soft dry paint brush, and by turning the box upside down so the dust falls out. Delicate silk velvet must be kept dry as it will shrink when wet and it will also thin dramatically if brushed. Go slowly and always remove any pins left in the pin

cushion. Resist the temptation to replace them. Cotton velvet can also be delicate, but it can withstand some cleaning and brushes up well. If it is stained, first test the stain with a cotton bud and a little water. Large stains may be better to leave and possibly cover with a second, removable layer of new fabric.

Please do not generously apply wood oil or olive oil to bring up the colour of the box. This can cause the dry wood to expand and for example, result in sewing trays that are jammed inside the box. Bees wax mixed with olive oil rubbed in with your fingertips in small amounts and then rubbed over with a soft dry cloth is preferable.

When cleaning any animal material, sweep away built up dust with a small, clean, paint brush with soft bristles or fur. Avoid one seller's mistake of using a household cleaning paste to whiten the fretwork on a Vizagapatam box, - it had left a residue around every edge of the fretwork, which would entail more work to remove. A better method would have been to (If you can) use filtered water, but only on the end of a cotton bud to lift off dirt or to soften a stain.



Figure 107. A good solution for thread barrels that have very damaged, or lost their Sadeli roundels. Photo Pinterest.

Conservation of Sadeli work.

Cleaning my Sadeli and experimenting with the techniques that are described below began with a desire to discover what lay below the rough surface texture and how to uncover the colourful Sadeli patterns. I started with a small area on one of my boxes to see if it could withstand the possibly destructive method of cleaning I had planned. It worked! I was excited by the transformation and beauty of the micro mosaic, thus catching the 'bug' to work on more boxes.

My thanks to Joseph O'Kelly at 'Hygra' for the help and advice that guided me on this adventure and to David Perry whose years of experience also added to the information in this section. I have been very fortunate when advice has been sought to have found the most wonderful and generous guides. This is not the only method for restoration, but it fits with the constraints of space and the tools that I have access to.

A Sadeli box in its untouched state will have in addition to loose and missing micro mosaic, a rough (It feels like shark skin), blackened surface that is made up of oxidized material from the triangles of white metal used in the Sadeli pattern. White metal is the best description of what could be for some pewter, and for others a low grade silver. It is possible that more, tiny black dots of this material will fall off, collect and keep them all as they are easiest to work with when filling in missing Sadeli.

_Two areas of concern:

Clare Muzzatti 2021

Sadeli work that has opened up to form holes with lose edges of micro mosaic.

Areas of Sadeli that have lifted away from the carcase wood but still maintain adhesion to the micro mosaic around them. The Sadeli appears to have ripples or aerial bridges.

Method

Collect all the loose mosaic that has fallen off the box and store for later patching.

The first method I will describe is the approach I have developed with advice from Joseph O' Kelly, who kindly described his approach as I was on the other side of the world and really did not want to ruin a rare, first period Sadeli work box.

The next stage can be slow as you must work panel by panel, but it is rewarding as you discover the original colour of the box. It is important to work around all areas where the Sadeli is weak and falling away. Always try to work outside as a fine powdery dust is produced from the oxidization of the white metal decoration in the Sadeli. Also, be aware that ebony when it is sanded produces a very fine dust that is not good for your health and can linger in the air.



Figure 108. A Sadeli box lid at different stages of cleaning. Untouched panels show rows of dark dots. The central panel has been fully cleaned and the Sadeli pattern is revealed. Author's photo.

I like to clean away the layer of oxidization first, the main reason is that this way I can tell which side of the stringing (long, thin edging of ivory) metal dots, triangles and other components of the Sadeli is the upper side and which is the lower. This is never done with an electric sander as the Sadeli is very thin and the glue delicate and weak. A small square of sandpaper held in one's fingers and patience is all that is needed to remove the layer of oxidisation. The sandpaper is not very abrasive; it could be most closely described as only a little more abrasive than the roughest emery board used to file one's nails. In Australia it is

'P240', but this will not apply to other parts of the globe. A lot of fine grey powder is produced and this can be wiped away with one pass of a damp Wettex (take this and wash it under a tap before reuse) and then allow the box to dry for at least a day. Repeat this process if needed, before changing to a softer sandpaper (P2000) for a final light rub. Sadeli that feels silky- smooth with patterns of colour and shimmering metal are the reward for your aching and stiff fingers.

The next step starts with a dry box, a small clean paint brush, a pot of hide glue and water mixed to a 3 parts glue to 1 of water (this works with my ready- made American glue) and a roll of veneering tape. The veneering tape is about an inch wide and studded with holes, (do buy a non- holey one it's easier to remove) and comes in small rolls. One side will have a dry adhesive and this is the side that you place face down onto the wet glue.



Figure 109. Glue and veneering tape.

Kitchen bake paper and an iron set on medium heat (or a craft iron which is smaller and is able to get into corners).

To one section at a time apply a light coat of the glue mixture.

While it is wet, apply long strips of veneering tape to cover the glued area.

Next, place the Bake paper over it.



Figure 110. Sadeli box covered with veneering tape and with a sheet of bake paper, ready for the heat of the iron. Author's photo.

Take an iron set on medium heat and use firm pressure apply the iron to

the Sadeli. The heat and moisture will penetrate through the micro mosaic to destroy the bacteria in the old glue. Areas that have lifted will subside or begin to lie flat.

Clamp down any lifting area: use thin piece of wood with bake paper on the Sadeli side to even the pressure. If you lack clamps this process can be repeated once the box has dried.

As the tape and glue dry, the tape shrinks and brings the Sadeli and the box wood back into contact.

Once the box is dry, the veneering tape can either be dampened and peeled off, or lightly sanded off. I prefer to wet the veneering tape and gently pull it away. It will lift up the dirt you have missed or cannot see. The micro mosaic always feels very fresh and clean afterwards. (I hate tape removal as you cannot avoid getting sticky fingers)

This is the time to check those areas of weak and lifting Sadeli and stringing. More work may be needed to reposition the stringing or to fill a wood crack. For large wood cracks, O'Kelly advises epoxy wood filler (glue will not stick to a wax filler). My backyard fix was a non-toxic wood filler (wood derived) which I mixed with vinyl brown paint to match the colour of the wood. Using a tooth pick, small amounts were packed into the void and then smoothed over.

Depending on the size of the hole in the Sadeli, either use a tooth pick or a cotton bud (thin it if necessary) moisten with water to gently and carefully lift away the dirt from the old glue underneath. The old glue will with water become tacky and at this stage more mosaic can become loose. Try to avoid disturbing the surrounding mosaic. Allow the box to dry.

Depending on the Sadeli pattern, there may be tiny triangles of Blackwood that fit between the triangles of white metal. It is very hard to fit all these pieces back in place. I do try to fit as many as I can so the background is blackish and hope that the repositioning of the white metal dots fools the eye. David Perry's tip is to use black wax to position the white metal dots so the spacing matches the dots still in place.

A second method:

David Perry recommend as the first step using an iron set to medium heat and press down over the Sadeli to reactivate the glue so that everything becomes flat again. He would then apply a coat of hot glue and let it dry. Then onto dealing with the oxidisation of the white metal using sandpaper 120 grade (UK). This method is suitable so long as the surface is not "badly raised", otherwise he warns it will be Sadeli confetti. His next step involves cleaning the surface with a strong soap solution to remove the excess glue.

David has also cut out Sadeli from a 'Breaker' box to cover large patches. This requires a very good quality band saw and a lot of nerve. It sounds dangerous and I would not advise it. This is one technique for the professional restorers. He goes on to describe coating both sides of the Sadeli with superglue, before cutting out the shape needed for the patch. A patch will continue the pattern, however there can be a rise or drop in the level of the Sadeli as the thickness of the slices varied between workshops.

Polish

This is the last process and one that I repeat at regular intervals throughout the year. Sydney can have low humidity year round. I use a polish made from bees wax and olive oil, and a drop or two of rose of lavender oil. Applied lightly and rubbed in with one's fingers, then wiped away with a clean soft, cotton cloth. Always work slowly and carefully around areas of loss. It is a good opportunity to check repairs and to see if any stringing is lifting in new places.

Monghyr Box Conservation

All surfaces were cleaned with a soft tooth brush dipped in water with a little dishwashing liquid added. A gentle scrub in small sections and frequent washing as the toothbrush and water went brown very quickly! A wipe over with a clean cloth so that the wood did not stay wet for long. Repeated until no more dirt came away. The dry ebony was treated with oil and bees wax polish, rubbed in and then wiped over with a clean cloth.

Removal of the velvet covered pad beneath the lid allowed access to the full thickness crack running length wise along the lid.

The split was cleaned and filled from the underside with black wood filler. Finally the missing ivory from around the top of the lid was repaired.

A missing ivory knob on a compartment lid was replaced with a hand sanded and shaped spare knob.

Not quite Sadeli!

The rising price of quality Anglo Indian objects has provided a new market for the sale of similar, but not quite right 'fakes'. The quality of the workmanship is often poor, as is the design. Camel bone in large oblong blocks is used and can be aged, painted or etched with black ink to look two hundred years old. This is a growing market and boxes appear on sale online and in antique shops. It mimics Vizagapatam style, but are fairly crude in their finish and lack care and exactitude in execution. Many are described honestly as 'new', but once they enter the second hand market they may be regarded as old/antique/authentic in years to come.

Occasionally second hand dealers make 'improvements' which can hide the original use of the box. While this can be a smart reuse of an old box, always ask if all the parts are original. It is also possible that the dealer may not have the knowledge, or interest to look too closely at what they have bought, but just want a swift sale.

There are very good dealers who describe with accuracy the goods they are selling, but doing your own research is essential before spending large amounts of money.

Many boxes for sale have incorrect details and descriptions, this is especially so in Sadeli ware. Some beautiful antique and modern boxes from Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon etc. have been described as Anglo Indian Sadeli, although they are made with different materials.

Antique dealers' knowledge in this area can vary and some will have very little experience in this field. Anglo Indian Sadeli ware did not have mother of pearl or brass inlay in the micro mosaic.

Museums are an excellent place to start in learning about this ancient tradition.



Figure 111. Rear left: Antique Persian box with silver and enamel lid fittings. Right rear box: vintage, mother of pearl and wood box. Centre front: modern box with pasted paper and lacquer. Author's photo.

Signs of quality

This list does not apply to all boxes, but highlights aspects of a variety made in India during the Raj.

Delicate and well carved wood that has been sanded smooth. Careful detailing of feet, hands, feathers, fur etc.

Ivory knobs or very fine metal rings

Sadeli: The finer the micro mosaic, the more expensive the work. This only applies to boxes where the Sadeli covers all surfaces and there is no wood on display.

Carved ivory box feet rather than simple brass stud feet. All feet should be in keeping with the age of the box.

European "stop" hinges, handles and locks.

Silk velvet vs cotton velvet

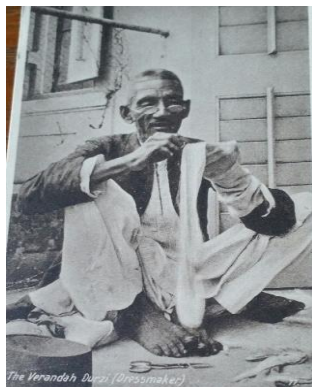


Figure 112: Old postcard of an elderly 'Durzi' or Dressmaker, mending the Memsahib's stockings. Author's photo.

Glossary

Awl: also called a *stiletto*, it is a tool for making small holes in fabric, usually for decorative embroidery.

Breaker: a Sadeli box that has sufficient damage to be worth more in its remaining parts than as a repair project.

Bristol card: A small paper card with regular perforations designed for cross stitch, with a lace like punched edge.

Crochet: the manipulation of thread into a lace like fabric using a crochet hook.

Ebony: also known as Coromandal or Calamander. A rare wood with rot and insect resistant properties.

Emery: a fine black powder, wrapped in a fabric ball and used by pushing needles through to remove burrs and to sharpen the point.

Filament: a single strand of silk. Several strands are twisted together to make a thread.

Glass: a looking glass or mirror.

Knotting shuttle: larger than a tatting shuttle and used for making a decorative chord. The blades at both ends end in a point which does not touch. The thread is wound around a centre post which joins the blades.

Lac: a liquid used to stain etched ivory. Made from the secretions of a scale insect, and also from burnt ivory and soot.

Multi-sectioned thread reel: a thread holder. The horizontal wooden roller is divided by disc shaped spacers.

Netting roller: a plain roller with a narrow slit running along it almost to the ends. There is a small disc with carved star like points, which can be caught by a hook and held in place while making a row of netting.

Pomander: a small container for perfume soaked fabric/wool or solid perfume.

Tambour hook: a very small needle sized hook for drawing thread through a fabric, which with repetition will decorate the fabric in chain stitch and also attach small beads, spangles etcetera, to the fabric. Tambour work was done on a frame.

Tatting shuttle: a small pair of pointed ended blades joined in the middle by a post around which thread was wound. Tatting grew out of "Knotting", in the early 1800s. Tatting produced a fine lace like fabric. It was very easy to carry in a pocket or a bag and not unpleasant to work on in hot weather.

Shako: tall cylindrical military cap usually with a visor and ornamented with a badge, plume or pompom.

Stringing: a very thin (less than 1mm wide), long rod of ivory used to fill in or to divide areas of Sadeli.

Veneer: veneer uses a valuable and rare material as a thinly cut panels to cover a cheaper carcass wood. Veneers used on Georgian and Victorian objects are thicker than those used in later periods.

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Clare Muzzatti 2021

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Clare Muzzatti 2021

Postscript:

I hope this research paper encourages more interest in this area, with the discovery and conservation of more Anglo Indian boxes before they rot and crumble away. I am also keen to record the work of Indian craftsmen whose carving has out lived them. This research is a work of respect, freely given to all to enjoy.

My work covers only a few types of Anglo Indian sewing box. There are many other localities that could have and did produce sewing boxes. For example, Kashmir produced carved boxes and sewing tables that could be folded up for transport. I saw one many years ago at an auction and sadly could not top the winning bid.

If you have a sewing box that has been handed down through the family, please write a record of its history and place it in the box. It will be a joy to those in the future.

Lastly, here is my Grandmother's sewing box. It is still in use today, a solid mahogany box, stuffed with reels, needles and lace. I believe it had been made by her father's carpenter. Possibly while he (Great grandfather) an old steamship captain, whose last years before retirement were spent in charge of a workshop that built and repaired the steam ships which sailed along India's rivers and coasts.

The initials are of her married name and so it is likely this was either a gift to celebrate her engagement, or her marriage in 1916. It has a simple removable top tray divided into compartments and was painted black on the exterior. It is a simple box with no feet, but carved with flowers somewhat in the style of Naginia work.

This box is not mine, but my sisters', so in part explaining why I now have a collection! But then I do have to thank my Grandmother for giving me my first set of needles and thimble at the tender age of 6 years old. Now, how did she guess that I would be a life-long embroiderer?



Figure 113. Grandma's Indian sewing box. Author's photo.