

# PUNJĀLĪ

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Punjālī is a kind of decorative woodwork which is exquisite, refined and delicate. There is as much skill and artistic feelings required in designing and creating a punjali panel as a carving, *naqqāshī* or inlay. In the old times, Peshāwar used to have a great reputation for delicate and intricate punjālī screens.

The name that the old gazetteer of 1897–1898 uses to describe this particular decorative woodwork is 'Pinjāra' which is a misnomer. The correct name is 'Punjālī' and this is the name the local artisans use.

## *Technique*

Punjālī is a kind of latticed work in which the design consists of small pieces of wood arranged in a geometrical pattern. These pieces are balanced so artfully that these remain in position by the pressure they exert over each other. In some designs there are certain main lines which are dowelled together to offer support for the pressure. The angles where the pieces of wood meet, further enhance and absorb the pressure of the delicately hewn lathes, thereby providing strength to the composition. A frame is provided around the Punjālī panel which further helps in holding the pattern together. In an elegant work they are so accurately fitted and balanced that they do not fall apart even when the frame is removed. The patterns created are in a great variety. Often different woods like ebony, walnut, sandal and olive are used to create a beautiful assortment of colours.

## *Historical Background*

Punjālī woodwork was developed and perfected by the Muslim artisans. In Ottoman domestic interiors, perfect craftsmanship is displayed in the assembly of small pieces of wood fitted together. Mamlūk windows in Cairo have punjālī screens in a wide variety of ingenious patterns which consist of small pieces of turned wood socketed together. The art arrived in Peshāwar from Central Asia with the boat builders who accompanied the armies of different invaders from time to time and eventually settled here. When Sultān Maḥmūd Ghaznavī arrived with the intention of crossing the Indus so that he could conquer India, he too brought his own boat builders along. These were 'Awans', who stayed back and settled in Peshāwar. Punjālī was introduced in the region as decoration on the boats. In the earlier times, Abāzai, Charsadda, Prāng, Jahāngīra and Khairābād were the centres of the boat building trade. About thirty families were employed in this craft. They had the monopoly for building boats and passed the craft on to their own children only. So boat building remained an exclusive business of these families. The boats these families built were usually adorned with carving and Punjālī work. Decorated with this delicate decor, each boat had to steer its way through the ordous Indus water where the embellishment soon got disfigured. By the time it reached its destination in the south, the entire boat would be badly damaged. Indus is so fast that the boat could not be rowed back and towing it back was uneconomical. Every boat had to either be abandoned at the end of the journey or sold as scrap. Yet boat builders of old Peshāwar always decorated their craft with delicate Punjālī work and took special pride in their craft. The demand for new boats in the district remained constant, keeping the families prosperous and busy. They never would condescend to

carpentry which they considered a lesser trade. They only built boats, created Punjālī screens and remained proud of their heritage. The fact that this decor was quite out of place on such a craft never deterred them from creating the exquisite woodwork to embellish their boats.

In the Peshāwar city the famous artists of Punjālī screen usually trace their origin to the A'wāns who arrived with Sulṭān Maḥmūd Ghaznavī to build boats for his army and then settled here.

### *The Famous Punjālī Artisans*

The most famous wood carver of Peshāwar city was 'Abd al-Ḥakīm Jān. He not only carved wood remarkably well but also created exquisite Punjālī screens. He was A'wān by clan. His family came from Afghānistān with the army of Maḥmūd Ghaznavī and settled here. He was tutored and groomed in the art of wood carving and Punjālī by a Kashmīrī craftsman. As a young boy he was adopted by a Kashmīrī *ustād* who had no children of his own and taken to Srinagar where he spent many years learning the art of wood carving and Punjālī. Mohallah Sethiān has a few Punjālī screens which are a creation of 'Abd al-Ḥakīm Jān.

The other famous Punjālī expert was 'Abd al-'Azīz. He was a friend of 'Abd al-Ḥakīm Jān, married to his cousin and had worked with him on various projects. His work is excellent and Peshāwar city in its old houses still has a few pieces left created by this remarkable artist.

Introduced as a decoration on boats, the Punjālī panels soon became an architectural decoration with which many houses in the old city were decorated. It appears that this trend was developed as an influence of Kashmīr culture. Kashmīrīs developed Punjālī art further. Their artisans played great attention to minute details and produced beautiful Punjālī panels. With these they decorated their windows, balconies and walls. In the past, Kashmīrī artisans would often travel to Peshāwar to work on projects here. So the refinement of their skills was absorbed by the artisans of Peshāwar and left for us as exquisite Punjālī panels so that we could see and marvel at its workmanship.

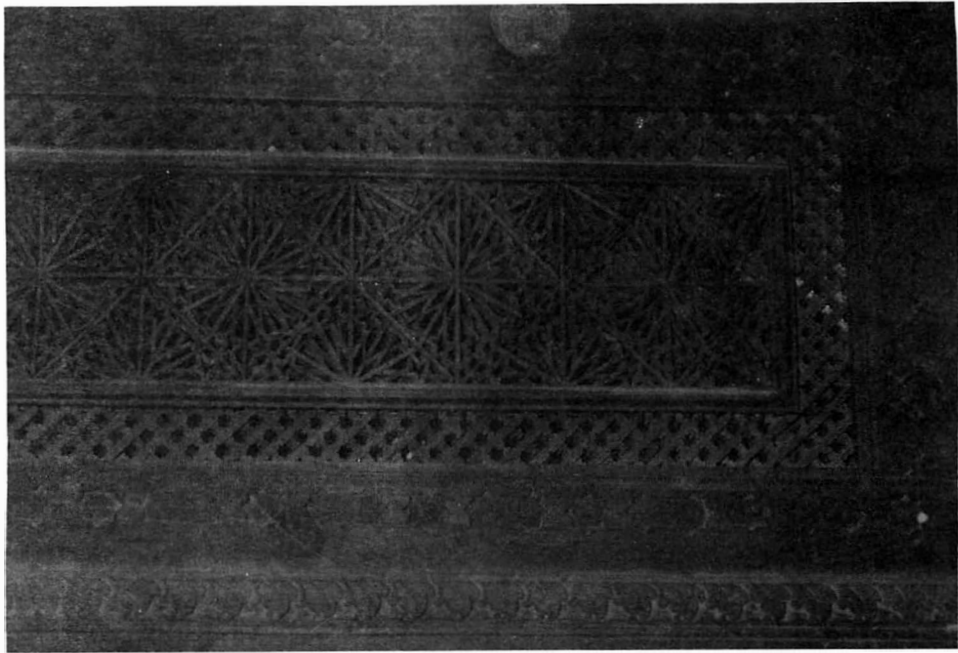
### *Price of a Punjālī Screen in the Old Peshāwar*

Punjālī screens used to be in great demand in Peshāwar. No good house was considered complete unless decorated by a few of its panels. Viewed from within the room, the Punjālī screen present a different effect. Through its openings a gentle breeze silently enters the room and keeps the environment fresh, cooling it in summer and warming it in winter. Light penetrates through its apertures and forms patterns on the decorated surfaces of the interiors dissolving the boundaries between solid and void and creating a mystifying effect.

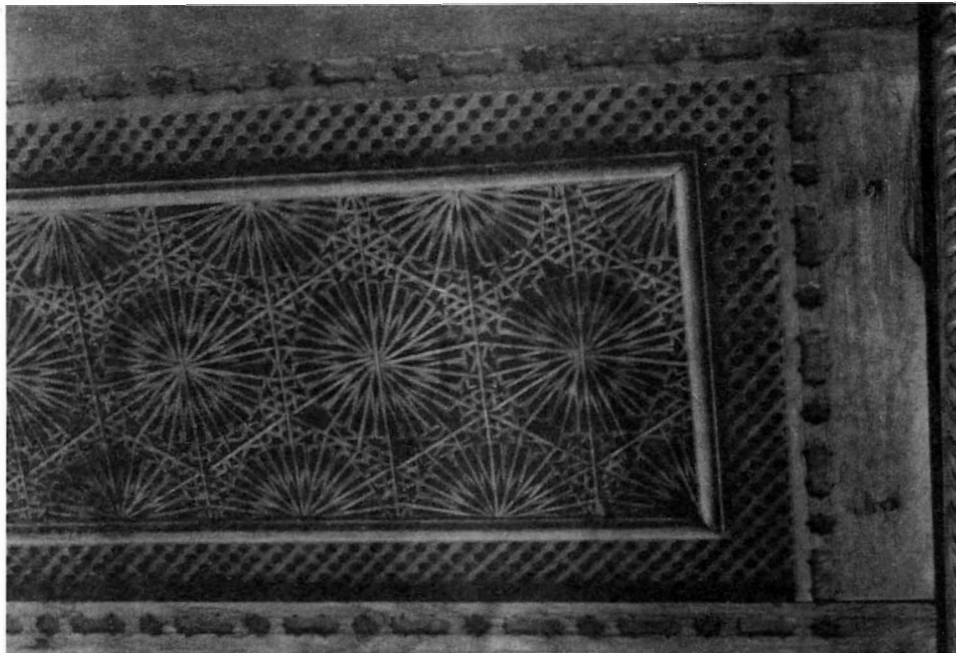
In 1897 – 1898, the price of a good Punjālī screen was Rs. 625. Small Punjālī screens were sold for Rs. 50 to Rs. 80. This shows how highly valued this art was and how economically and culturally rich Peshāwar society was that they could afford to place high value on this art. Today there is not a single Punjālī expert found in the Peshāwar city. This exquisite art has simply vanished from among us. It took centuries for such a refinement in handicraft to evolve and reach an amazing perfection, but it has all been lost in a few decades only. It makes one sad to realize that we are losing rapidly such rich cultural heritage and are acquiring nothing progressive in its place. As a society we are complacently settling for filth, slums, ignorance for the majority and barbarism of a rich minority.

## SOURCES.

1. *The gazatteer of Peshāwar Dist.* 1897, 1898. P. 228.
2. George Michell, *Architecture of the Islamic World* Thames & Hudson, p. 167.
3. Mahrukh Yusuf *Woodworks of Pakistan*, A catalogue. Lok Virsa, P. 35.



Pl. I. Punjali panel in Mohalla Sethian



Pl. II. A Punjali panel in Mohalla Sethian