



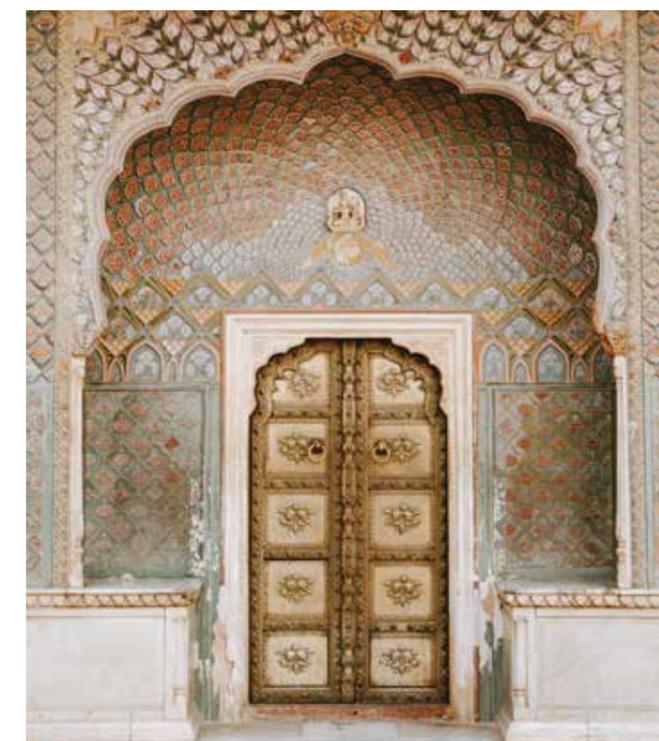
Cindy-Lou Dale discovers the depth and diversity of India's exceptional craftsmanship as she goes in search of her very own piece of hand-crafted furniture

Carving a niche in Jaipur

After agriculture, craft is the second-largest employer to India's 1.3-billion people. In Jaipur alone, there are 4000 sari makers, 35000 marble workers, 1000 bangle makers and about half as many furniture craftsmen. Any person worth their shopping salt knows that Jaipur's Bupa Bazaar to be the mecca for traditional artisan produce. I'm here to collect a piece of furniture I'd commissioned from a stall holder the previous week.

The truest picture of India is experienced at the markets, shops and bazaars of Jaipur - India's artisan capital. The pink city was always intended as a place where commerce was meant to flourish, where leathersmiths, weavers, furniture builders, and jewellers created custom pieces for the rich merchants passing through town on their way to other outposts in the Mogul empire.

The existence of immense jungles in parts of Rajasthan generated opportunities for its craftsmen, and may go some way in explaining why Jodhpur, which sits on the edge of the Thar desert, became the unlikely woodworking hub to India's much-acclaimed furniture industry. ▶





Above: An artisan tailor making cushions for an Edinburgh B&B. Top right: The Pagadi (Turban) is a symbol of pride here two Raika tribesmen greet one another.

After all, it's a city rich with magnificent palaces and forts, whose legacy in art and literature heavily influenced the work of the wood craftsmen.

Standing away from the bustle, I watch as metalsmiths work their wares at a communal polishing machine. The air is filled with dust, as marble workers drill away at stone, creating elephants or deities commissioned by temples all over the country.

In an adjoining street artisans carve motifs into wood, across the way are folk making intricate leather sandals, and nearby a father and son hand-stitching wedding garments. The one that caught my eye uses a large metal nail and a wooden plank to chisel out an elephant from a circular slice off a Mango tree trunk.

Turning a corner, I happen upon a lane filled exclusively with brass workers sitting barefoot on the floor of their workshops, which are open to the street like market stalls. These are the



artisans, the people who learned from their fathers, and their fathers' fathers, the craft that would be their livelihood.

I arrive at Sunil's stall and am given directions to his factory. I've been assured that he and my commissioned piece are waiting for me.

Furniture making has been practiced in India since 1336 AD and was considered more of an art than a trade. Craftsmen were held in high esteem by royalty as they were able to preserve legends and folklore in wood. Through the centuries, the amalgamation of European sensibilities and Indian craftsmanship became known as Anglo-Indian furniture which paved the way to Mughal style, Goanese, Indo-Dutch style and the use of ebony and ivory - like Chippendale and Sheraton. Then, in the 18th century British-styled furniture made teak the wood of choice for furniture manufacture.

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makes by hand – it's the way of life, rather than an exception to it. Here you often experience the distinct thrill, increasingly rare in the 21st century, of realizing that not only can you have something especially made for you, often within hours, but you can speak directly to the person who's going to make it. Meeting your maker, so to speak.

I enter Sunil's dusty workshop, a shabby-looking shed based in the outskirts of Jodhpur. Here are some of the best craftsmen in the world – all quietly chiselling away at their respective inventions. Shards of dim sunlight filter through tall windows, caressing the shoulders of the gifted artisans who are upholding centuries-old traditions, continuing ancient practises taught to them by their forefathers. The results are distinctive and unique – all glorious masterpieces that would grace any room. Each piece bespoke, with meticulous and elaborate designs. From dazzling ethnic pieces, inlaid with floral patterns and latticework, fit for the interiors of a Mayfair mansion, to lustrous hardwood furniture that would work in any modern Dubai hotel.

Squatting near an open doorway sits master carpenter, Sunil Shaikh, bronzing the hand-carved scrolls on a newly-made mango wood chest of drawers. It's been painted exactly as I asked – colonial khaki shades – a mustard coloured frame, ten olive green drawers and a deep, terracotta-coloured top, all polished up with black wax. He tilts the piece of furniture this way, then that, examining it closely in the

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shadowy light. He retouches an edge adding just a dab more bronze, then inspects it again. Outside, a camel, tiered to a wooden flat-bed cart, patiently waits for its load, which would deliver my piece for onward freight and forwarding.

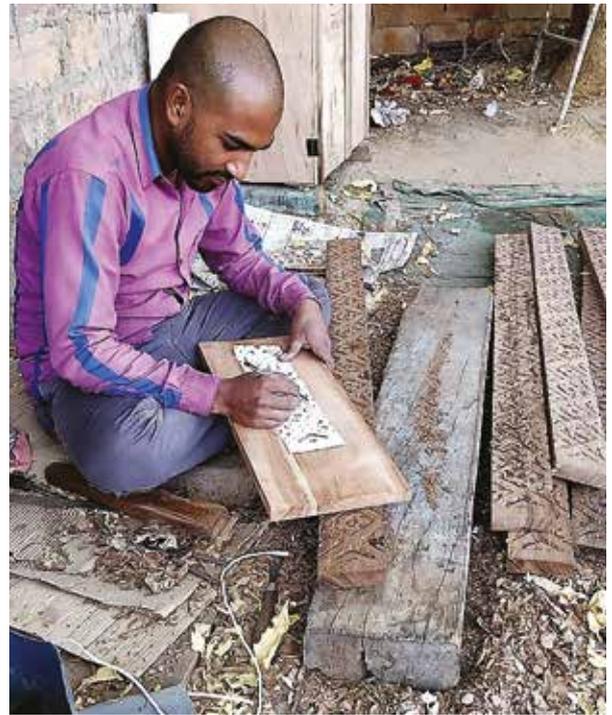
When he sees me Sunil, a tenth-generation carpenter, straightens up. He places the palms of his hands together in front of his chest and bows his head in greeting. We exchange pleasantries then start speaking about his work.

He explains that most of India's modern furniture is made from Mango, Rosewood and Acacia, then adds, pointing around the cavernous room that some of the furniture is salvaged from inside crumbling Indian palaces and mansion houses, which he and his team restore, recycle or upcycle to make new pieces.

Lavish items like charpais (string beds), almaris (cupboards) jhulas (swings) and conventional round tables with swollen legs, are seeing a revival. He demonstrates this by introducing me to an old, damaged table and explains that after new parts for the table top and its legs are cut to size, they are marked for

Below: An apprentice artisan carefully paints the hands of Goddess Kali.





“Despite the development of modern production technologies which need little to no human intervention, India’s artisans uphold traditional methods”

carving; then specialist hand tools are used to engrave complex detail. The finished pieces are united on what could pass as an assembly line - each craftsmen adding his specialism. Completed, the item is then sanded, stained, painted in distinctive styles (often inspired by Mughal artwork), sometimes aged, and always polished.

He claims that craftsmen use only the best of India’s hardwoods - Sheesham, Mango and Acacia are amongst his favourites. The colours, the textures, the tone, and grain of each piece - it’s as unique as the skill that goes into creating the furniture. Each piece is handcrafted and joined, right down to the hinges and hardware, using

ancient techniques taught by grandfather to father, son to grandson.

Despite the development of modern production technologies which need little to no human intervention, India’s artisans uphold traditional methods - ways of using the humblest of tools to develop ethnic, hand-carved and timeless pieces of furniture

Sunil leans across my bespoke chest of drawers, closely inspecting his ‘aging’ of it, then steps back and takes a wider-angle look at his work. What he has done is taken an already beautiful chest of drawers and turned it into something that looks like a genuine and much-loved antique, something that’s been around for a while. This is a one-off piece, there’s nothing in the world that looks anything like this, and it will live for generations... and cost no more than its Ikea equivalent, but a piece I’ll bequest to my grandchildren.

Sunil smiles broadly, snaking his head from side-to-side. “I think she is ready for the Aunty. I’ll get the camel man.” 🐪

Above: Artisans working. A camel en route to a factory to collect wares for the market.