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Did you know papier-mâché could be used on walls and ceilings?

While this traditional craft is popular for its objet d'art, a book documents its architectural heft

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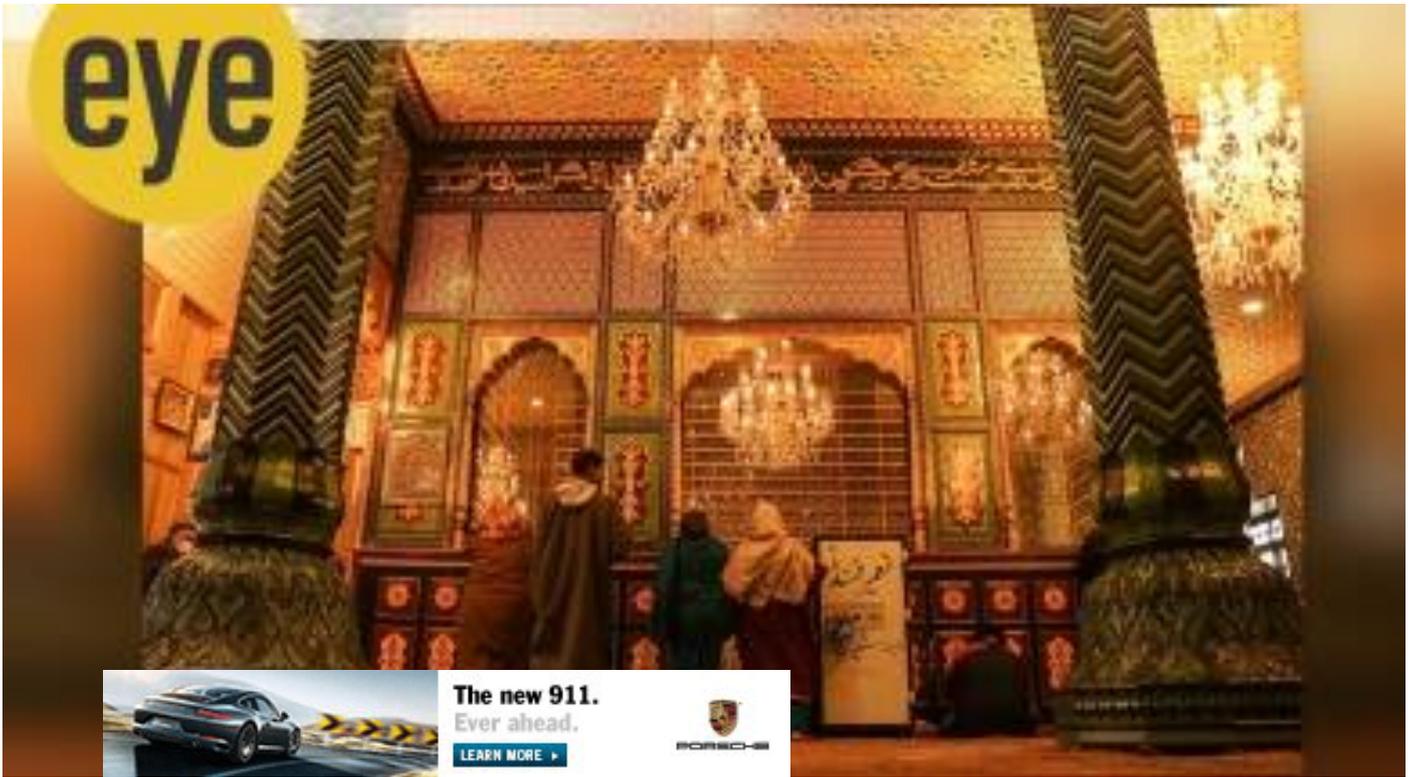


Written by [Shiny Varghese](#)

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NewsGuard





The ornate central hall of the Peer Dastgeer Sahib's Khanqah-cum-mosque in Old Srinagar. (Photo credit: Intach-Heritage Craft & Community Division)

Srinagar-based Mohammed Yousuf Lone was in Class IX when he won the first prize for a painting of a rice field. Later, this talent would win the arts graduate a government-sponsored training at Sir JJ School of Art, [Mumbai](#). Lone returned to join School of Designs, a [Kashmir handicrafts](#) initiative from the '50s, as assistant designer. It's here that he was inspired by head craftsman Ali Mohd Banka, who practised papier-mâché. Lone soon found himself veering towards the technique in his spare time, working on miniatures, [Mughal figures and flowers](#). Today, the 90-year-old national-award winner is the teacher who taught his own family and many others to preserve the art of papier-mâché in Kashmir.

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Most of us are familiar with this ancient craft, made from pulped paper and resin binders — we have often seen it on small objects such as vases, boxes, trays or ornaments. However, its majesty lies in the way it has adorned

walls, ceilings, brackets and pillars. A recent book by the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (Intach), “*Papier Mache as Building Craft of Kashmir*”, is an insightful documentation, and the latest addition to their 2014 initiative of documenting building crafts across India. These include “*Punjab & Haryana: Building With Bricks*” (2020) and “*Saurashtra: Lime Plaster, Wood Carving, Roofing Techniques and Flooring*” (2018). This book on papier-mâché is the fourth in the series and has been researched and written by former journalist Bharati Bhargava.

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Vandana Bindu Manchanda, head, heritage craft Intach, says, “While old buildings are appreciated has been lost. Historic buildings haven’t been made by craftspeople, who have had the scientific knowledge to make them. These can’t be replicated by technology or architect. For instance, we can’t make large durbar halls, or forts with their traditional systems anymore, these were made with centuries of knowledge. The beautification of these structures is for a purpose. We hope that the series will help architects and governments, at the state and national level, to save

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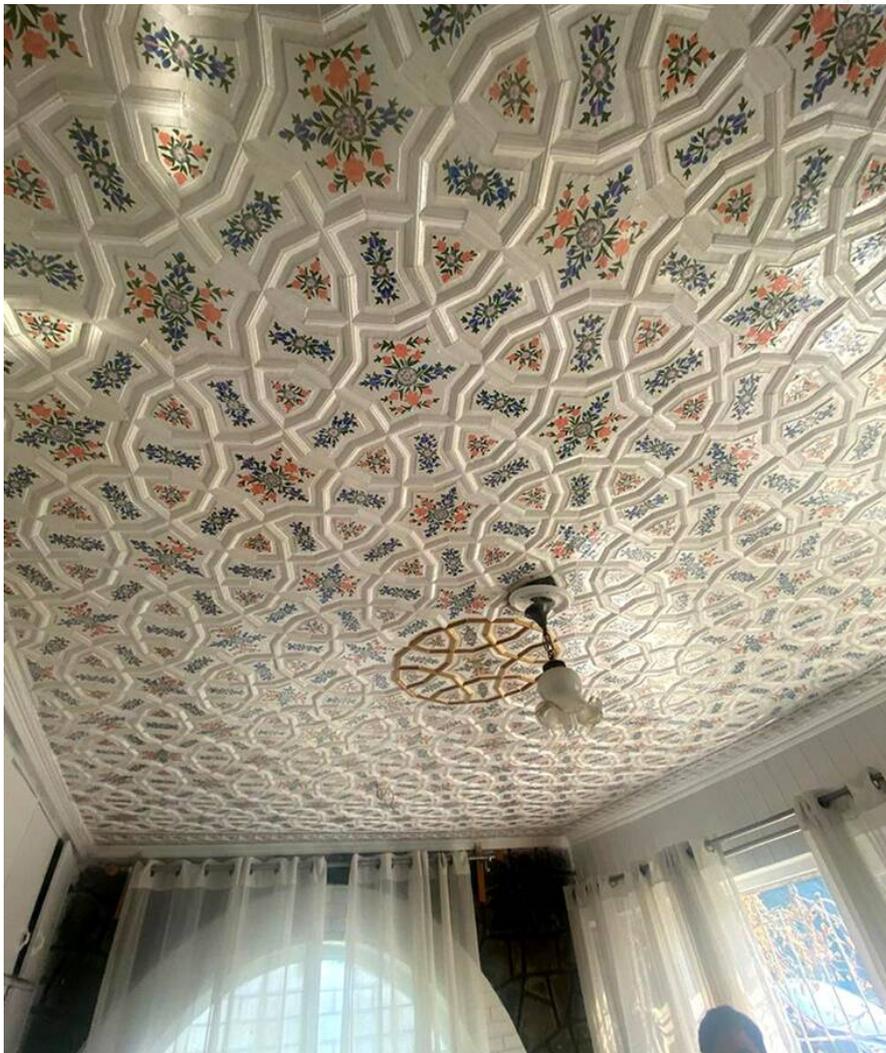


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A katamband ceiling in a home near Nageen Lake by Muzzafar Hussain Sheikh, a *karigar*. (Photo credit: Intach-Heritage Craft & Community Division)

While much of the book relies on information from Intach's encyclopaedic volumes on old papier-mâché buildings, many of the new buildings in the book find their way from friends and through *karigars*, who have worked on these projects. Bhargava has also referenced paintings from Kashmir and visited *karigars'* homes to observe how they worked and lived. They have, in many ways, been the guides in presenting how the craft has evolved in architecture.

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There are details about patterns in papier-mâché, which were derived from two types of Kashmiri shawls — the *badam* (paisley) and the *chand-dar* (moon). The valley's flowers, too, have been showcased in motifs, using intricate combinations. When one sees the detailing in each of the patterns, it is remarkable to remember how papier-mâché was once used in Europe as an alternative to plaster, for wall and ceiling mouldings and to complete columns and corbels. The paper, called chewed paper in French, was pulped, mashed and pounded and then put into moulds, it was almost

made to be like clay. These moulds would then be painted white or gilded, as one would with wood. They were used instead of lime or gypsum plaster moulding, primarily for decoration.

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The book documents that “many papier-mâché karigars came from Persia to Srinagar in the middle of the 19th century”, and the artform done in Srinagar at the time was similar to what was done in Persia. “Earlier, the patrons of the technique were princes and the elite, who had this ornamentation done in their private mansions. Shawl merchants funded this work in Sufi shrines, as well. Currently, many of the clients are from the upper and middle classes, who are getting this work done in their homes and offices. In addition, religious trusts are also financing this in new shrines and private organisations in their establishments,” says Bhargava.

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The Shah Abbas Hotel is a case in point, which is said to be the first private hotel in Srinagar that used papier-mâché as an architectural element in its building. The photographs of the suites, the lobby, and the furniture are resplendent with floral motifs. Though the floods of 2014 swamped the lobby and the entire ground floor, these works of art remained intact. Meanwhile, in an older building, the Khanqah-e-Moula, which had to be renewed after the 2012 fire, the interiors were restored, with original

katamband ceilings and papier-mâché surfaces. Over 12 public and private projects have been documented in the book, which includes Shalimar Bagh's royal pavilions, the regal pavilion at Nishat Bagh, Gurdwara Maharaj Gunj, besides numerous residences. It affirms what the poet Ghani Kashmiri said: "Kashmir's beauty sparkles through its fairness". Lastly, contact details of the karigars and their experiences round up the book to make it a perfect document on architectural papier-mâché.



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