

Domestic Photo-Archives of Coastal Andhra

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Abstract- This article examines two wooden-metal photo-etched panels preserved in a private family archive in coastal Andhra Pradesh, India. Combining object biography, material culture theory and oral-history interpretation, it analyses how small domestic artefacts become carriers of kinship, ritual memory and vernacular histories of visual reproduction. The panels consist of wooden supports faced with metal plates and fixed by brass nails; they retain fading ancestral images associated with priestly service, education and narratives of ritual power. The study also considers a black-and-white print taken from the photo-etching plate by Chaganti Durga Prasad and its later transformation into digital artwork. Instead of treating these materials only as damaged photographs, the study reads their thickness, surfaces, fastenings, material ageing, custody, technical mediation and narrated afterlives. It argues that the panels function as photo-objects: hybrid artefacts that mediate between image and support, domestic possession and public heritage, inanimate matter and animated memory. The paper contributes to South Asian visual culture studies by foregrounding family-held archives as significant sites of material knowledge and cultural sustainability.

Index Terms- Archive, Material Culture, Photo-Etching, South Asian Visual Culture, Wooden-Metal Panels

I. INTRODUCTION

A small wooden panel is easily overlooked. It may be treated as a support, a remnant, a damaged photograph, or an object waiting to be classified. Yet when a face appears on its surface, the panel begins to exceed inert matter. It invites questions about who made it, who kept it, who touched it, who narrated it and why it survived when other materials disappeared.

This paper studies two wooden-metal image panels preserved in a domestic archive in coastal Andhra Pradesh. One panel bears the faint image of Narayana Acharyulu, remembered as an educator. The other carries the image of P. Balarama Acharyulu, remembered in relation to priestly authority, local

charisma and ritual knowledge. Both are described in the family record as photo-etched objects. They are mounted on wooden supports, faced with metal sheets and attached with small brass nails.

The case is significant because many South Asian archives remain outside formal institutions. Family cupboards, prayer rooms, boxes, temple houses, old trunks and private shelves frequently preserve materials that do not enter museum catalogues but continue to structure memory. The panels examined here are not presented as authenticated masterpieces. They are studied as photo-objects: hybrid forms in which photographic likeness, print technology, wood, metal, oral narrative and family custody become inseparable.

The central argument is that these panels mediate between the inanimate and the animate. They are materially inanimate, but socially active. They produce recognition, reverence, curiosity and narrative obligation. This makes them valuable for material culture studies, where the social lives of objects and the material lives of images have become central concerns [1], [3], [4].

II. RESEARCH ELABORATIONS

A. Object Biography and Material Culture

Object biography offers a useful method because the panels do not possess a single meaning fixed at the time of manufacture. They have moved through different regimes of value: family possession, ancestral portrait, damaged remnant, mnemonic device and possible cultural artefact. Such movement recalls the proposition that things acquire value through circulation, classification and social use [1], [2].

A material culture approach also shifts attention from image content alone to the physical support that

enables the image to survive. The panels must be read as thickness, weight, surface, edge, nail, stain and image residue. The object is therefore not only a portrait-bearing support. It is a material body that stores traces of handling, storage, exposure and care.

B. Photographs as Objects

The panels extend debates in photography studies that treat photographs not only as representations but also as objects embedded in social practice [3]. Their photographic status is inseparable from their crafted support. The wood provides structural mass; the metal plate provides an image-bearing surface; the brass nails make the act of fastening visible. The image is not a detachable digital file. It is physically held in place by hardware.

This is important for South Asian visual culture, where printed and photographed images have long moved between devotional, domestic, political and popular settings. The history of oleographs, studio portraits, calendar images and printed gods shows that reproduction technologies were not only technical processes; they entered homes, temples, markets and affective relationships [7], [11]. The wooden-metal panels belong to this broad ecology while retaining the intimacy of a family archive.



Fig. 1. Photo-etched wooden-metal panel showing Narayana Acharyulu, family archive, coastal Andhra Pradesh. Dimensions: approximately 10.5 x 7.5 x 2.5 cm. Repository: P. S. Chakravarthi. Photo credit: Peddinti Sri Kavya, 2020.

III. MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY

The study is based on close visual and material observation of four related archival materials: two wooden-metal panels, a black-and-white print taken

from the photo-etching plate and a later digital reinterpretation of one ancestral figure. The first panel measures approximately 10.5 x 7.5 x 2.5 cm. The second measures approximately 16 x 11 x 2.5 cm. The black-and-white print operates as an intermediate image between the etched plate and the later digital artwork. The fourth image, produced as a digital reinterpretation in 2017, indicates the afterlife of the archival image in contemporary visual practice.

The method combines object biography, visual-material analysis and oral-history interpretation. The analysis records scale, support, surface condition, material joining, visual address and narrative context. Oral narrative is treated as cultural data rather than as literal proof of supernatural events. This distinction is necessary because the family memory associates the elder figure with Bhoot Vidya and with a serpent named Seshu. Such accounts are read as moral and affective memory: stories through which kinship, fear, reverence and social reputation are organised. The date and exact technical process require caution.

The family captions attribute the objects to the nineteenth century, and the metal image-bearing surface invites comparison with historical photo-etching and print processes. However, without metallurgical testing, surface microscopy or documented provenance, this paper uses the phrase family-attributed rather than definitive dating. This caution strengthens rather than weakens the study because domestic archives often preserve uncertain but culturally meaningful evidence.

IV. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

A. Composite Materiality

The most striking quality of the panels is their composite structure. Wood gives the object a sculptural and tactile body. Metal gives the surface its ability to receive and hold an image. Brass nails connect the two. The panels therefore stand between photograph, print, relief object and family relic. Their objecthood is not secondary to their image; it is the condition through which the image continues to operate.

The brass nails are especially important. They show that the metal surface was not simply pasted or printed onto wood. It was fastened. This makes the labour of construction visible and places the object closer to a crafted artefact than to an ordinary paper photograph. In a digital image culture where pictures circulate without visible support, these panels insist that image survival once depended on material infrastructures: plates, wood, nails, boxes, cupboards and hands.

B. Surface Damage as Historical Evidence

The panels carry marks, stains, scratches, fading and possible corrosion. These signs should not be dismissed as mere damage. They are part of the biography of the object. They indicate environmental exposure, handling, long storage and the gradual transformation of materials. A clear image gives information; a fading image asks for attention. It forces the viewer to come closer and participate in an act of recovery.

The elder figure appears seated frontally, with a covered head, beads and adjacent ritual attributes. The image is difficult to read in places, but this difficulty produces a specific presence. The viewer receives not a stable documentary portrait but a charged impression of authority and distance. The encounter confirms that images involve relationships among picture, medium and body [9].



Fig. 2. Photo-etched wooden-metal panel showing P. Balarama Acharyulu, family archive, coastal Andhra Pradesh. Dimensions: approximately 16 x 11 x 2.5 cm. Repository: P. S. Chakravarthi. Photo credit: Peddinti Sri Kavya, 2020.

C. Oral Memory and Animate Address

The oral account around P. Balarama Acharyulu is central to the panel's significance. He is remembered as a ritual specialist whose life was associated with local narratives of extraordinary power. The story of the serpent Seshu, treated in the family narrative as part of the household world, introduces themes of sacrifice, social fear and moral responsibility. Whether interpreted as legend, ritual memory or family narrative, the account transforms the panel from portrait into charged object.

The panel appears animate not because it literally possesses life, but because social practices animate it. Mitchell's question of what pictures want is relevant here: the panels seem to want recognition, protection and narration [4]. Gosden's question of what objects want is also useful because the panels' capacities emerge through relations with people [5]. They act by prompting the custodian to narrate, the viewer to look and the researcher to interpret.

V. DISCUSSION

The case contributes to material culture studies in three ways. First, it demonstrates that domestic photo-objects can function as complex cultural artefacts rather than merely personal memorabilia. Their hybrid form invites analysis across photography, printmaking, metalwork, woodworking and family collecting. Second, it shows that object agency may arise through fragility. These panels are powerful not because they are monumental or institutionally certified, but because they are small, damaged, difficult to read and saturated with narrated absence.

Third, the case foregrounds the ethics of small archives. A family archive is not a neutral source from which a researcher may simply extract data. It is embedded in relationships, reputations and permissions. The custodian, narrator, photographer, researcher and viewer all participate in producing the object's public meaning. Responsible documentation therefore requires provenance, consent, accurate credit and care in describing belief narratives without sensationalizing them.

The panels also complicate the distinction between evidence and belief. Academic method should not authenticate supernatural claims, but it should not erase the social worlds in which such claims matter. The narrative of ritual knowledge, serpent memory and sacrifice explains why the elder figure is not remembered as a mere portrait. It shows how belief systems can organise material value and custodial care.

Between the etched panel and the later digital reinterpretation, the black-and-white print taken from the photo-etching plate works as an intermediate visual record. It preserves tonal contrast, plate texture and the damaged photographic presence of the original object while making the ancestral image more legible for comparison.



Fig. 3. Black-and-white print from the photo-etching plate of P. Balarama Acharyulu. Print and image credit: Chaganti Durga Prasad. Repository: P. S. Chakravarthi / artist archive.

Following this intermediate print, the later digital reinterpretation of the elder figure demonstrates another finding: archival objects can generate new visual production. The digital image does not simply replace either the etched panel or the black-and-white print. It extends the image's life by translating a fading surface and its printed tonal structure into a renewed colour form. This movement from photo-etched metal to black-and-white print and then to digital artwork reveals a chain of mediation: ancestor, panel, oral account, photo-etching plate, print, digital reconstruction and scholarly interpretation.



Fig. 4. Digital reinterpretation of P. Balarama Acharyulu, 2017, developed from the black-and-white photo-etching print and oral memory. Repository: P. S. Chakravarthi. Digital artwork: Chaganti Durga Prasad.

VI. CONCLUSION

The two wooden-metal panels from coastal Andhra Pradesh show how small domestic objects can open large questions in material culture. They connect image and support, wood and metal, archive and story, family memory and technological history. They are best understood as photo-objects rather than simply photographs or prints.

Their significance lies in composite materiality and social animation. They are inanimate in substance, yet animate in effect. Their damaged surfaces do not weaken this effect; they intensify it by making looking an act of recovery. The panels therefore propose a method for studying domestic archives: careful description, object biography, oral-history interpretation, ethical documentation and attention to material form.

The future of such objects depends on preservation within and beyond the family. High-resolution photography, condition reporting, oral-history recording and basic conservation can help domestic custodians protect fragile materials without removing them from their cultural context. The panels reveal how a modest object, small enough to fit in the hand, can make the past materially present.

VII. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors acknowledge P. S. Chakravarthi for preserving the family archive and permitting documentation of the wooden-metal panels. The authors also acknowledge the oral memory shared around the objects, which forms the basis of the object-biographical interpretation developed in this paper.

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