

TALES OF TIMBER: COROMANDEL

OCTOBER 29, 2021



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Continuing with our Tales of Timber series, we are focusing on a most beautiful and exotic wood called Coromandel.

Coromandel is characterised by its warm dark brown colour resembling a black rosewood, having warm, light-coloured hazel brown streaks. In fact, Coromandel belongs to the family of the variegated ebonies such as Macassar ebony, and as such it is a heavy, fine-grained hardwood.



[A Mid Nineteenth Century Lady's Travelling Dressing Case, circa 1850. Butchoff Antiques, London.](#)

The first recorded use of the name is from Thomas Sheraton's *Cabinet Dictionary* of 1803, where he described it as "...*lately introduced into England.*" Named after Coromandel and its jungles (located on the coast of the Indian peninsula), the timber fell almost exclusively into the hands of English craftsmen as British trade with southern India and Ceylon increased markedly at the beginning of the 19th century.

Imported in small logs, often no more than 6 inches in diameter and a few feet long, Coromandel was always a valuable wood used as veneers and for crossbanding in the Regency period, and most commonly found on small items like boxes.

Throughout the reign of Queen Victoria, it became known as one of the most exotic and luxurious materials to use in cabinetmaking. A steady, albeit very limited, output of fine decorative boxes was complimented by an occasional luxurious and unique piece of furniture, such as the cabinet illustrated below by Gillows and dated circa 1874.



An Exhibition Quality Coromandel Side Cabinet, by Gillows of London & Lancaster, circa 1874. Butchoff Antiques, London.

With the rise of the Aesthetic movement and the popularization of ebonizing furniture (a way of artificially staining a wood to resemble ebony), coromandel became undoubtedly one of the most desirable timbers to use by the top designers and craftsman of the movement including designers such as Owen Jones and firms such as Jackson & Graham, and Lamb of Manchester.

It is interesting to note the relative prices of Coromandel throughout this second half of the 19th century. Adjusted for inflation the cost of the timber fluctuated anywhere between £36 - £55 per lb in 1853. By 1909, a thin veneer no more than 1mm thick and nearly a foot long cost at least £80, if it could be obtained at all!

Today, the scarcity of the timber means it is no longer available for new work in any quantity, making these antique items and pieces of furniture all the more unique.

See below for some of the finest Coromandel pieces currently in our collection.



A Superb Cabinet of Exhibition Quality made by James Lamb of Manchester, circa 1880. Previously with Butchoff Antiques, London.



A Very Fine Writing Desk, firmly attributed to Wright & Mansfield, circa 1860. Butchoff Antiques, London.



A Very Fine Quality Music Cabinet in the Aesthetic Manner, by Lamb of Manchester, circa 1885. Previously with Butchoff Antiques, London.



A Fine 19th Century Inlaid Etagere, attributed to Holland & Sons, circa 1880. Previously with Butchoff Antiques, London.



A Louis XVI Centre Writing Table in the Aesthetic Taste, firmly attributed to Holland & Sons, circa 1875. Previously with Butchoff Antiques, London.

By Rainier Schraepen