

IVORY AND ITS WIDESPREAD USE IN CULTURAL ARTIFACTS

Elephant ivory in large and small quantities has been incorporated into cultural artifacts for thousands of years. As long ago as 1600 BC workshops in Mycenae were producing ivory boxes and furniture inlaid with ivory for export to the Greek mainland. In Egypt during the reign of Tutankhamun it was used as inlay in luxury goods, such as chests or head supports.

Ivory has been carved, valued and appreciated in Africa, Europe, India, the Far East and America. Its use charts and reflects the changing culture of the world over many centuries and over widely differing cultures.

The items illustrated in this short document illustrate the widespread use of ivory in a range of antique objects, objects which were created at a time when elephants roamed Africa in their millions and the source of the material was primarily animals that had died from natural causes. To the uninitiated, antique ivory conjures up images of carved tusks or figures made entirely of ivory, but these are in a minority. Its use is far more widespread, ranging from small pieces of inlay on wooden tea caddies through to thin slithers used as a stable base for the portrait miniatures that were so popular in 18th-century Europe and North America.

GREEK & ROMAN IVORY

Ancient items, such as this Greek couch-end ornament in the form of a satyr's head dating from about 200 to 100 BC, have survived the centuries. Couches made of wood and bronze were often decorated with a pair of satyr's heads in bone or ivory, inlaid into the ornamented sides.



This Roman ivory figure of Aphrodite Pudica was also probably an attachment from a banqueting couch and dates from 100 to 200 AD.

Further examples of Roman ivory can be found in Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore.

Objects such as these demonstrate not only the extent of trade between the Romans and Ethiopian merchants, but also the social development of Roman society. At this time a Roman of consular rank would have worn a crescent-shaped ivory buckle attached to his sandal as an outward sign of his high rank.

PORTRAIT MINIATURES

In the 18th and 19th centuries it was common for the middle classes to carry small oval portraits of their loved ones or family members on their person. Many thousands of such portraits were painted, sometimes in oils and sometimes in the delicate medium of watercolour. The portable nature of the portraits meant that although protected in a metal and glass case they were subjected to fluctuations in temperature and humidity, as well as knocks.



It was therefore important that they were painted on a stable medium. One favoured medium was thin slithers of ivory.



Many artists specialised in portrait miniatures and their style can be recognised. Above is a portrait of General Foot, painted in watercolour on ivory, by Andrew Plummer (1763-1837). It measures just 2½ inches in height. Shown left is a portrait of a lady by Nathaniel Plimmer, dated c. 1800, again watercolour on ivory.

Sitters for such portraits include some of the most famous and influential people in the history of the last 300 years.

A portrait of **George Washington**, wearing the blue uniform of a general and the Order of the Cincinnati, in watercolour on ivory in 1789 by John Ramage (c. 1748-1802), achieved the highest price ever achieved at auction for a portrait miniature (\$1.2 million). [Not illustrated for copyright reasons].



On some occasions portraits are carved as an ivory relief. This example is mounted on glass and dates from between 1790 and 1810.

IVORY INLAY IN WESTERN EUROPEAN AND INDIAN DECORATIVE ARTS

In Western European culture ivory has been used for hundreds of years to adorn a wide variety of objects, both commonplace and important.



Small amounts of ivory were often used to decorate the keyhole escutcheons of chests of drawers or tea caddies, such as this Georgian caddy, c. 1800, in satinwood.

Items incorporating ivory are often commonplace antiques, made hundreds of years ago and still in widespread ownership and use in Europe and America.



From France is shown (right) a Louis XVI period mahogany & brass banded tric/trac or games table. The interior features a backgammon board inlaid with ivory & ebony.



This very high quality English desk made by Hamptons of Pall Mall dates from 1870. It features small ivory escutcheons around each lock.



For many centuries craftsmen in the Indian subcontinent have been working ivory, some of it Asian and some of it African. One such important example is shown here and dates from Goa in the late 16th century. This object, the Hohenzollern cabinet (after the family name of the Prussian monarchs), is made from Indian coromandel, sumptuously inlaid with scrolling designs of mythical sea creatures, and nagnas with double coiled trails, all exquisitely formed of natural and stained ivory. Objects such as these are of great cultural importance.

The influence of the Portuguese was prominent in encouraging the creation of furniture under European influence. This then spread to the British.

Shown here is an important Anglo-Indian inlaid ivory and teak writing or dressing table, made in the Indian south-eastern coastal town of Vizagapatam. It dates from around 1740.



More examples of ivory's use can be seen in inlaid cabinets, including this early 17th-century tortoiseshell & etched, ivory, walnut, table cabinet made in Antwerp.



Illustrated on the left and dating from 1743 is the elegant Walpole Cabinet made by William Hallett, incorporating carved ivory reliefs.

Even on large items of furniture, such as this exquisite English Regency jappaned side cabinet, it can sometimes be possible to find small amounts of ivory. In this case the drawers display ivory handles.



Historical events have provided the subject matter of the craftsman's art.

Shown below is a rare English gold and tortoiseshell snuff box mounted with a fine carved ivory "micro miniature" depicting Admiral Horatio Nelson's historic battle of Trafalgar formation of a double line of frigates on a blue-stained ivory sea. Contained in a contemporary gilt tooled red Morocco box this item will have been made between 1805 and 1810.



Ivory was used for many everyday objects. In the early 19th century subscribers to theatres would gain admission to their seats using ivory tokens, such as this one shown right.



Walking canes frequently displayed ivory handles. This is a late 17th century English Puritan-style cane and features a malacca shaft, silver collar and cord hole.

THE USE OF IVORY IN MEDIEVAL AND LATER RELIGIOUS OBJECTS

In Europe ivory was valued for centuries as a foil to the blaze of metals and stones used in devotional religious objects.

Workshops produced magnificent carvings that demonstrated the highest pinnacles of European design and craftsmanship, which were displayed in churches and other religious foundations.



The ivory diptych (right) depicts seven scenes of the Passion of Christ, and dates from 1360-1370. It was made in the workshop of the Master of the Passion Diptychs, in Cologne, Germany.



To the left is an early 17th century German ivory relief of the Madonna and the Sleeping Christ attributed to the craftsman Kriebel, Jürgen, ca. 1580/90-1645, possibly from Madgeburg.

To the right is a fine Flemish carved ivory figure of Christ Crucified 'Christo Vivo' dating from the second half of the 17th century.



AFRICAN INDIGINOUS IVORY

It is only natural that African indigenous craftsmen have drawn upon the ready availability of elephant ivory as a medium for their work. Because ivory is not durable under hostile environmental conditions few ancient carvings from African sites have stood the test of time. However, the arrival of European traders on the west coast led both to the preservation of late medieval African ivories and to the influence of European tastes on African traditions over the last 500 years.



Shown left is an example of a 'Loango'. These form part of a tradition of ivory carving from the West African coast which goes back to the fourteenth century. This example dates from circa 1860. Typically the scenes depicted on them are vignettes of life at the time when they were carved. Not only are these carvings breathtakingly executed, but they also give an historical insight into life on the slave coast. The scenes show missionaries, trade (including slavery) and everyday activities; they are an important visual and graphic record of life at the time.

Examples of these carved tusk are in numerous museums worldwide including The British Museum.

THE ART DECO MOVEMENT

Ivory has been used as a heat insulator in tea and coffee services, as well as cutlery handles for more than 100 years. This beautifully designed Art Deco tea set by Stower & Wragg dates from 1938 and demonstrates the highest quality craftsmanship.

