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**The Elephant, the Tradition of Ivory Carving and  
17<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> Century Export Products**  
(Special reference to Ceylon / Lanka)

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Historical records reveal that the Portuguese exported elephants during their one hundred year occupation of the west coast of the island. There were Portuguese individuals who had private jetties at ports like Kayts, in the Jaffna peninsula for the export of elephants. However, the total number exported is still a mystery. The Dutch did even better and exported in excess of eleven thousand elephants over a similar period of years averaging in excess of a hundred elephants exported every year. The elephants were marched from as far south as Matara to Mannar loaded onto flat bottom boats, ten at a time, for export to the southern states of the sub continent, some were marched through Elephant pass to the northern peninsular and loaded on flat bottom boats for export. There is little record of the number of boats that were lost at sea.

The British did not bother with the export of elephants instead they declared the elephant a vermin and had them shot at sight. A number in excess of five thousand five hundred were killed in a short space of ten years between 1845 and 1856, for a measly trophy price of a few shillings, merely to clear the hills and the mountains of the black leech infested virgin cloud forest to make way for the more profitable plantation enterprise. Many, many more deliberate and merciless elephant cleansings from the highlands were to follow. Tennent writing in 1867 concludes that ‘at the rate they are being killed, the species will soon be extinct in Asia’. Captain Galway and Major Skinner claimed five hundred elephants each, while, a Capt. Rodgers was the most prolific murderer, when he proudly declared that he had killed in excess of one thousand four hundred elephants that included juveniles and pregnant mothers within a short period of six years in the highlands, in Horton Plains, Moon Plains and in the Badulla area. Retribution came in a lightening strike that took his life. Eternal rest was also not for him. After he was buried, his tomb was struck by lightening on two separate occasions. We are reminded, ‘the elephant never forgets’.

The collecting of ivory instead of the elephant as a commodity for export, started with the British and the records of the Canary wharf in the London Docks at the turn of the century, is a revelation to the quantity that passed through. A single record refers to one such store, ‘the ivory storehouse is a wilderness of tusks and last year its contents represented the ivory of about 34,000 elephants valued at GB Pound’s 360,000’. In Sri Lanka, most coffee and tea planter’s houses proudly displayed a couple of tusks on the

mantelpiece above the fire place, possibly proud souvenirs' of the 'Big Game Hunt'. The elephant's feet with the nails cleaned, waxed and polished were converted to stands, stools and containers for collections of walking sticks. Never in its long existence has the elephant been treated with such disdain. On retirement many of the Planting families took their ivory and other precious collections back with them to the home countries.

In Lanka, the elephant was always regarded as special and was a protected species. Pliny, the Roman, waxed eloquent about the notable qualities of the Sri Lankan elephant. All the elephants especially, the tuskers were the monopoly of the King and the killing of an elephant was a crime punishable by death<sup>i</sup>. The Sri Lankan elephant was prized on the sub continent, for its strength, superior size and special docile qualities, however, the selective capture of tuskers over a period of two thousand years to adorn the Kings *Athgala* (stables), has reduced and suppressed the tusker gene and interfered with the breeding stock. Today a tusker in the wild is a rare commodity.

The Sri Lankan sub species, if there can be a subspecies, a doubt full proposition, as documents show that Kings in the historic period exported and even imported tusked elephants from Burma and Cambodia and there is the possibility that some biological mixing took place. Ivory is equivalent to dentine, it is not bone. It consists of an organic matrix permeated by an immense number of exceedingly fine canals. The canals start from the axial pulp and run outwards towards the periphery. To this that, ivory owes its fineness of grain and also its near elasticity. Ivory differs from bone in its finer structure and greater elasticity and in the absence of those larger canals which convey blood vessels through the substance of the bone.

The tusk of the Sri Lankan elephant is known to be harder, more solid and of a better ivory quality than the African variety. From time immemorial this special ivory was used to manufacture jewelry beads for stringing on chains, ear studs, toiletries like *Panawa-s* (combs), *Kan kura-s* (ear cleaners), *Dath kura-s* (tooth picks), *Konde Kura-s* (hair pins), small *Pilima* (statues) & shrines, *Karandu* (reliquaries), handles for *Pihi Katha-s* (knives), *Kinissa* handles (handles for water pourers), *Nalava-s* (flutes), *Kannadi* (spectacles), small *Vangedi* (mortars), handles for the priests *Vatapatha-s* (ceremonial fans) and covers for *Ola* leaf manuscripts. Ivory was extremely rare and used sparingly. In Europe and America ivory was in demand for billiard balls and piano keys, from which the notion of 'tickling the ivories' is derived. While in Myanmar the use of ivory for the carving of hip joints was common.

Ivory was also used to carve small statues of the Buddha, make small bowls, trinket boxes, *Beheth Gulli Petti* (different sizes of boxes for transport of traditional medicinal mixes in the form of small *Gulli* (balls), and at the Ridhi Raja Maha Viharaya, in Kurunegala to adorn and line with panels of carved ivory the entrance door to the shrine. Many sections of the door embellishments have been destroyed, pulled off or even stolen. However, what is left gives one a reasonable picture of the grandeur of the original door covered in intricately carved cream white ivory.

The Portuguese introduced the typology of the jewellery box and encouraged the manufacture of ivory jewellery cabinets intricately carved by local craftsmen set with Sri Lankan precious stones like rubies, sapphires, gold and silver embellishments, extremely precious and at times more beautiful than the eventual contents that went into the box, were much sort after commodities. These were highly prized as gifts to visiting dignitaries, foreign embassies and formed an essential part of the booty shipped out to the Kings of Portugal, to the homes of the senior Dutch merchants, to the British crown and as collections shipped out by the senior British civil servants.

Many museums and private collections in Portugal, Spain, Austria, Netherlands, Germany, Britain & the USA, have collections and the descendants of merchants and the families of ex-civil servants have a cabinet or two. A recent exhibition held at the Museum Rietberg, Zurich, Switzerland showed a few exquisite pieces taken from Sri Lanka, belonging to the Portuguese Queen Katherina Von Habsburg (1507 – 1578). Queen Catherina of Braganza (1638 – 1785) daughter of Joao IV of Portugal, as wife of Charles 11 introduced similar cabinets to the English court thereby starting a new trend for the British family and auction houses like Sotheby's sell fine examples of Sri Lankan ivory craftsmanship on a regular basis.

These artifacts stand as a testament to the deft craftsmanship and care for detail that existed at the time in Kotte, Galle and in Kandy. The National Museum in Colombo & Kandy and the Gangaramaya Temple in Colombo have the best collections of carved ivory, while equally fine collections lie secured and safe in numerous private collections and in a few temples scattered around the country. At present, the last of these private repositories are kept unadvertised to protect them from foreign collector instigated robberies, the type of which has seen a progressive increase in the last decade.

In the past, the ivory required for the production of these exquisite objects did not come from slain elephants, but instead, from elephants who were in service, in the King's Athgala (stables), in feudal families, when the tusk got damaged and had to be cut off or when they had broken off, from family elephants that had died or from ivory collected from elephants that had died in the forests or in the extensive *Nindagam* (privately held extensive forest land usually a gift from the King in return for some exemplary service to the crown). Ivory was rare and highly prized. Rare enough, to be given pride of place and during the British occupation extended to be kept mounted on *Kaluwara* (ebony) stands and placed as decorative arches, in the living rooms of the Company servants and in the old *Walauwa-s* (feudal homes).

While traditional design themes saw a flamboyant and free response that flowed easily from the hand of the craftsmen, the early attempts to interpret western concepts during the early colonial occupation produced stiff and visually strange representations, these are especially, seen in the newly introduced religious themes. The cherubs are obese examples of flying objects. The robed shepherds in the nativity are solid and frozen. The early attempts at carving granite grave stones in European church yards produced similar results. Consolidating the assertion that, the use of traditional designs and motifs were early examples of this art.

However, in time and with the conversion of some of the carvers to Christianity, they gradually came into their own and produced excellent examples of carved ivory jewellery cabinets depicting religious themes and bible boxes. The ivory jewellery cabinets presently displayed in the museums abroad is a testimony to the inherent and expert ability of these craftsmen to quickly adapt to the new themes. In addition, to the carving of ivory jewelry cabinets and bible boxes, the production of everyday objects like the Kura-s and the Beheth Gulli Petti (pill boxes) in demand by the more important Ayurvedha Practitioners and the Panawa-s (combs) for grooming the knee length hair of the gentle ladies, were in continuous production using the bits left over from a major carving. The Vatapatha (ceremonial fan) handles for ceremonial use by the higher echelons' of the Sangha were special.

Unlike in India, where the toiletry objects like Panawa-s (combs) were made of gold, silver, bronze, ivory, horn and wood, the use of combs made of metal is mostly unknown in Sri Lanka. Combs were either in wood or horn for the ordinary folk or in ivory for the feudal families who had access to collections of ivory.

Combs are also symbols of affection and expressions of love. If the gift of a comb is not rejected, then even a clandestine affair could progress to the next or a more serious level. While combs remained a symbol of flirtation, the real focus of this paper is not so much on the object, but how or what was used to facilitate the making and the production of the minute and intricate carvings that created and gave life to the whole.

The manufacture of an ivory comb goes through four stages of development. First a suitable piece of flat ivory is chosen; and carefully cut to avoid undue wastage, precisely shaped to the required size and tapered in two directions. Combs are usually rectangular in shape but square shapes are also known. The piece of ivory chosen should be free of cracks or of any intrusions or formations that will affect the final carving, it should be free of vein faults, and should be prefect to the eye. The teeth are then carefully sawn into the tapering sides of the comb.

A design usually based on *Karma* (love themes) with the proud *Karma Deva* (Lord of Love) sitting erect and cross legged with his sugar cane bow and arrow made of honey bees in his hand or variations of the *Narilatha* theme is first drawn on to the sides of the comb. The carving of the design into the centre of the comb commences when the basic design shapes are approved and after being first roughly etched and incised into the two sides using drills and small chisels. Once the design of the two sides are checked and found to be compatible, the detail carving of each side commences. Stylistically, the method of seating defers between the Sri Lankan examples and those manufactured on the sub-continent. The Sri Lankan examples sit naturally in a stable form, while the examples from the mainland show people sitting of their haunches, a method that is typical of a dhoti wearer and is seen in cravings right across the vast sub continent even today.

The carving is accomplished using thin but long sharp metal chisels and knives that the craftsmen, turn out possibly using the high carbon ‘Damask’ steel produced on the hill slopes of the windswept Balangoda range. The manufacture of these special chisels are the initial training sequence that the carvers go through. These chisels will remain his personal property, placed on an altar and worshipped every morning requesting permission from the guardian deities before any work commences. They are constantly sharpened to maintain the edge required to carefully scrape away the bits of un-necessary ivory to produce the final carved design.

The Vatapatha handles (ceremonial fan handles) are produced on a small hand powered lathe carefully controlled by the master craftsman. As most production was traditionally *Paramparika* based (handed down through the family line), often younger members of the family were engaged in helping to propel the lathe, as a part of their ongoing training process. These handles are expertly carved using chisels hand held by the master craftsman to produce the precise shape and details of the mouldings. This is followed by the careful polishing of the intricate detail features of the design using the special leaf of the *ficus asperrima or exasperata* (*Buudella or Buudaliya*) tree, that we as children referred to as the ‘sand paper’ tree and found common in most gardens.

The intricate carving of a comb or similar ivory object requires a craftsman with a deft and sure hand and a very keen eye. Usually the better wood carvers graduated to carving in ivory, and never the carving by the jewellery makers. As the primary training of the wood carvers was based on two dimensional conceptual designs on timber *Kulunu* (columns), *Baalke* (beams), *Pekada* (capitals) and *Petti* (boxes) with at times the different degrees of depth carved out in the peripheral areas and even appropriate piercings creating three dimensional forms, the carving of statues in the temples was limited to the creation of the inner core of wood only, that was later built up and filled to the correct proportions using mixtures of clay, lime, cotton wool, herbal gums and different fibres finished in a lime putty and finally painted in the required style of the day.

Except for a few export items that seem to be designed in a holistic manner where the individual sections seem to reflect some appreciation of the final product pointing to the fact that the whole process was carefully supervised to completion, as seen in the pieces that were specially made and eventually found its way to the royal court in Portugal. There are many boxes and cabinets that seem to be assembled in a rather amateurish, unplanned and ill designed manner. Ill fitting, unrelated and non custom made hinges and escutsons, ill fitting locks, ill fitting panels, key holes in the wrong places and metal fixing and hinges fitted over the ivory carvings damaging the carving, all pointing to the fact that the ivory carvers may have not been involved in the design and assembly of the final box but only contributed the panels that made up the box. This attitude towards panels is also seen in the carved perforated design panels fixed over a layer of Japanese paper, tortoise shell and even the timber lining of the box itself. These boxes were possibly manufactured for a totally different and less exclusive market

The carved precious stone intaglios found around the country and the moulds made for the clay trading seals found in Akurugoda, are ample testimony to the existence of a

superior technology. The enlarging of the object for easy working requires a good quality magnifying glass and or a pair of spectacles with a clear magnifying lens. The magnifying lens was held firm between the upper eyelid and the cheek.

This later gave rise to the concept of the monocle that gained popularity with the British gentry in the colonies. Many have the notion that the concept of spectacles and its use is a European invention. Interestingly, in this part of the world, considering that, intricately carved combs, statues, receptacles for medicines, weighing scales, beads and seals and intaglios, carved into minute precious and semi precious stones, were in use as far back as the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, this contention is furthest from the truth.

The fact that a special methodology was in use from time immemorial and the fact that it was in indigenous use is immensely clear. The carving and faceting of the *Chudamanikaya* (the crystal phinial), that adorns the pinnacle of the *Stupa-s* great and small found scattered around the island, is in the able hands of the lens maker, who was responsible for the finding and choosing of the clearest and purest crystal and cutting and grinding down the facets to afford the greatest reflective index with the least wastage.

Once the suitable crystal good and clear enough to make a lens was sourced, usually found from the *Kuruwita* area and cut to the required size, the lens is ground down to a shape fixed by the age of the wearer. Usually fashioned and polished for a minimum of three hours in one of three carefully constructed concave *Ridhi-Thiriwanagal* (silver thiriwana stone) moulds. A single mould fashioned for each important life cycle of man, one each for those over thirty, forty and fifty years and over.

Unfortunately, there is only one such *Diyatharippu* (crystal) craftsman alive in Sri Lanka today. *Gunasoma* learnt his trade at the feet of *Siridoris* his father, who I remember from the 1960's wearing a pair of monocle like spectacles that he had made for himself working on a range of shapes in crystal. He was the craftsman responsible for making the *Chudamanikaya* for the *Ruwanweliseya*, one of the large *Stupa-s* in Anuradhapura that was restored by the faithful in the 1930's.

His only son is an angry man, angry with his *Paramparawa*, because his father died without passing on all of his *Paramparika* (the ancestral) knowledge to his son, who was born afflicted with a speech defect. The father believed that *Gunasoma* his only son was not a complete being, and therefore unsuitable to carry forward the *Paramparika* knowledge and died carrying with him, one of his greatest secrets.

The chips of stone left over from the manufacturing process was normally carefully collected and mixed with a herbal composition, a concoction that softened the stone. This soft stone was then compressed to reconstitute an opaque consolidated mass, which when hard could be reused to create beads, pendants, etc. The son's anger is greater because he has seen it done, but does not know how it is done. This herbal composition was not divulged to his afflicted, incomplete son.

Interestingly, about thirty five years ago, a priest from an *Aaranya* (forest monastery) near *Ritigala*, reacting to my question as to why there were no pieces of broken sculpture littered around any of the sacred sites in Sri Lanka or even in India, stated, “that is because, the craftsmen applied a herbal mixture on the surface of the stone, to soften the stone sufficiently long enough, to carve it without damaging its composition.” He then looked me straight in the eye and stated, that as I was the only one he had met, who was inquisitive enough to seek an answer, to my horror he rattled off the composition, but only just once. It is worthy of note that many of the herbs mentioned are well known and still used in special ayurvedha treatments, some even in the mending of broken bones, etc.

It is further worthy of note that, the confirmation from two sources consolidates the view that the ancients had a higher knowledge base than the arrogant us of today. Some *Paramparika* knowledge is so sacred that it will never be divulged. The carving and creating of the lenses that facilitated the magnification required for carving the intricate and exquisite ivory combs, the prized jewellery cabinets, the *Chudamanikaya*, etc will be lost for ever, when this the last *Diyatharippu* national treasure, yes, national treasure, is no more.

Thank You, for your time.

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<sup>i</sup> The popular story of the ‘Voyage of Sinbad the Sailor’, is a mythical and over exaggerated story. He mentions that he slaughtered thousands of elephants and gifted the tusks to the King of Sarandib. If he had indulged in the killing of any elephant in the forest especially tuskers, The King would have had him quartered using one of the methods so well described by Knox, using one of his favourite elephants.