

***Ivory Treasures from Sri Lanka in two Portuguese Museums (Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga and Museu do Oriente)
Museu do Oriente, Lisbon***

Sri Lanka¹ has a long and rich history of decorative arts, where ivory had a prominent role as one of the most important materials used. The Portuguese presence in Sri Lanka had an impact also on the local decorative arts witnessed by artworks of furniture veneered in ivory and ivory sculptures, of such technical and aesthetic advance, which we can find also in Museu do Oriente, Lisbon, Portugal.

When the first Portuguese sailors began arriving in Sri Lanka² (or Ceylon as it was called those days) in 1506 following the voyage by D. Lourenço de Almeida, the island soon began playing a fundamental and strategic role in fostering trade due not only to the sheer riches it held (cinnamon, precious stones and elephants) but also as a support and logistics base for sailing onto whether the Far East, the Gulf of Bengal or Malacca. The Portuguese court did even ponder the rationale of installing here the Portuguese India State capital given its central location in relation to the two coastlines of the Indian sub-continent and how it represented an obligatory point of call for voyages to the seas and lands of the Far East.

At the end of the 16th century, in reference to Sri Lanka, the Dutch trader and explorer, Jan Huygen van Linschoten identified the island as a place in which there was a great quantity of ivory due to the abundance of elephants living here and how they were the most excellent in all of India³ (this in the context of the “East Indies”).

For just such a reason, the Portuguese crown decreed a royal monopoly on this product in the mid-16th century and that would remain in effect throughout the period of Iberian unification (1580-1640) (Osswald 2010: 128).



Insula Zeilan olim Taprobana nunc Incolis Tenaris, Jacob e Casparus Lootsman, 1676, Museu do Oriente, FO/0788.

¹ The term “Sri Lanka” will be used by considering it the most including and current.

² In 1518, Lopo Soares de Albergaria raised a fortress in Colombo. After that, in 1560, the Vice-Roy of India, D. Constantino de Bragança commanded an expedition against Jaffna (Jafnapatão), in the northern reaches of then Sri Lanka. The Portuguese expedition ended up seizing the city. Henceforth, there was major Portuguese expansion in Sri Lanka that only fell into decline in the reign of Philip II due to the constant Dutch pressure that strove to bring an end to the hegemony of the Portuguese trading posts. Following the loss of Negumbo, Colombo falls in 1656 and, two years later, the final Portuguese trading posts, Manar and Jafna, fell to the Dutch.

³ Linschoten, 2005, vol. 1, p. 80. For more information see also vol. 2, p. 2.

The Portuguese presence in Sri Lanka (1506-1658) had an impact on the local decorative arts even while Sri Lankan society already had a long and brilliant tradition in working wood, ivory, iron, bronze, gold and silver, rock crystal, turtle shell, coconuts and fabrics. Nevertheless, this influence spread and impacted mostly in terms of the religious imaginary, the furniture, arms and weapons and jewellery.

The accounts that we know about the decorative richness of the interiors of furniture pieces and the sheer luxurious surroundings of the upper classes leave no doubt as to the technical and aesthetic advance that took place alongside all the demands made by those commissioning pieces (Dias 2009: 51).

They bear due witness to the excellence of Sri Lankan artistic skills throughout their curvilinear lines and polished surfaces (Bailey 2005: 29), the balance of the pieces, their sense of proportion, symmetry, the minute details and capacity for decoration, the gold leafing applied, the precious stones and the finest of finishing's to the clasps, handles and hinges. These pieces were indeed very often characterised by *horror vacui* (horror of the empty).

The furniture pieces were generally portable and mostly small in scale but characterised not only by their decoration in profuse and complex vegetal coils, very often in spiralling shapes (*fleur-de-lis*, bunches, shoots and rosettes framing the fantastic and symbolic animals drawn from Sri Lankan mythology (for example: the Sri Lankan royal lion⁴ or dragons) but also by their truly vast decorative grammars composed of religious and secular themes ranging from episodes from the Bible, scenes from the life of Christ, Marian symbols through to scenes featuring European knights whether doing battle or hunting as well as other decorative features from the European pantheon between borders filled with geometric or stylised vegetal motifs and in the form of sculpted ivory in low and high relief or otherwise left empty.

It was not only Kandy that saw the monarch gather hundreds of artists and artisans from various different decorative areas into the vicinity of the palace. Jaffna, Kotte, Sitawaka, Colombo, Galle and Maturé also stood out as important centres of production of these types of pieces (Bailey 2005: 29).

Broadly produced for Portuguese clientele, for export to Goa or even back to the kingdom, this became a genuine system of production whether in series or tailored to special commissions with some pieces going onto join the leading collections of European royal families,⁵ especially those connected to the Portuguese Queen Catherine of Austria, an avid collector of Asian ivories⁶ (Bailey 2005: 32).

The arrival of these pieces in Europe is entirely bound up with Portuguese trading networks and the interest in collecting the exotic pieces now found in the *Kunstammer*, for example, that members of the European nobility and monarchies developed during the late 16th century and the early years of the 17th century (Sanz 1998: 26).

The Museu do Oriente was inaugurated in 2008 and belongs to the Fundação Oriente, which has been engaged in its acquisition policy since 1988 and correspondingly purchasing on national and international art markets within the framework of enriching its collection “The

⁴ That in the Sri Lanka tradition represents a mythical ancestor and totem animal of the Sri Lanka, standing for majesty and power (Coomaraswamy 2012: 86)

⁵ For example the Duchess of Parma, the Princes Philip II and Rudolph II of Habsburg, Albert V of Bavaria and the King of Tyrol Ferdinand II.

⁶ The Ambassador Sri Radaraksa Pandita is believed to have brought an ivory fan and some precious stone studded combs, among other presents (1542/43) (Dias 2006: 141).

Portuguese Presence in Asia". The museum holds three works of art of Sri Lankan origin: a Cabinet, a small Chest with drawer and a Christ on the cross, subject studied by Conceição Borges de Sousa⁷ (Sousa 2008: 38-41; 57).

Cabinet⁸, Sri Lanka, middle 17th century

Cedar (?), paper, ivory, silver (some later iron fittings) and tin

H. 40 cm; W. 55 cm; D. 35 cm

Acquisition at auction in 2002, FO/0631

The first piece that we shall approach, probably dating middle 17th century, is a furniture piece with a European structure⁹, a cabinet with two frontal doors and with its wooden structure (likely to be cedar?) totally covered by pieces of sculptured ivory in low relief and also attached by ivory nails, with the exception of its reverse side that is left uncovered. The piece has no feet but does display physical traces of once having been fitted with them.

The interior featured eight drawers laid out across five levels in the following format: a single drawer on the first and second levels; on the third, two smaller drawers side by side; while the fourth and fifth appear to contain six drawers while in reality there are only a total of four.



Cabinet
(Inside)

In the early 1990s, closer analysis undertaken by the Portuguese conservator-restorer, Pedro Cancela de Abreu, revealed that paper had been placed between the wood and the ivory and similar to the example at the V&A, which contains sheets of Italian paper¹⁰, contemporary to

⁷ Entrance numbers 18, 21 and 36.

⁸ Acquired by a Portuguese private collector at a Sotheby's auction in 1992 (Sotheby's 1992: 214-215). After that, this Cabinet was put on sell by his owner at a Portuguese auction (Leiria & Nascimento, Lda, 12th, 13th March 2002) and bought by Fundação Oriente in 2002. The best examples of this typology are in the Boyman Museum (Museum of Rotterdam); the Victoria & Albert Museum, London; the Louvre, Paris; the Archaeological Museum, the Peradeniya University of Colombo, Sri Lanka; the Vatican Museum; the Hermitage or another one at the Cobourg Castle.

⁹ In this island there were no cabinets before the arrival of the Portuguese. The Portuguese took with them to the Orient, Portuguese, Flemish, Spanish, Dutch and Italian furniture (Dias 2009: 79).

¹⁰ Jaffer 2002: 54.

the making of the piece and applied between the wood structure and the ivory plaques, of very fine thickness, and perhaps placed in order to facilitate adhesion (Dias 2009: 78) and protect against contact by toxic wood vapours¹¹.



Of an unusual size – this is without doubt a functional piece -, in contrast with otherwise highly similar decorative examples but on far smaller scales, this piece is finished in delicate and miniscule vegetal motifs with interwoven coils of highly fine stems with their small leaves interspersed with rosettes, a very common theme and resembling the fashions prevailing in the fabrics of this period. Double fillets of ivory finish the panel joints. The fittings are made of corner pieces, hinges and reflective locks, which may not be the originals, in cut and darkened silver and engraved with vegetal motifs.

Within, on the reverse of the doors, the same type of complex coiled foliage frames two central panels with one depicting Adam and Eve in Paradise (scene of the Temptation of Adam), flanked by the Tree of Knowledge (Genesis 3.6), and sourced from the Old Testament. Next to them, on the left is an elephant before encountering a diversity of the recently created animals experiencing peaceful co-existence in the Garden of Eden (different types of birds, fish and turtles).



Adam and Eve engraving, Albrecht Durer, 1504¹²



Adam and Eve, Mathaus Merian, 1630¹³

¹¹ It would be of interest to undertake analysis of this Cabinets's paper and it's constructive point of view among with other examples of cabinets and chests from Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, in order to ascertain a possible date of origin.

¹² Available in [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/file:Albrecht Dürer, Adam and Eve, 1504, Engraving. jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/file:Albrecht_Dürer,_Adam_and_Eve,_1504,_Engraving.jpg), accessed in 06 February 2014.

¹³ Available in <http://colonialart.org/archive/502a-502b/adam-and-eve-driven-from-the-garden-genesis-3-34>, accessed in 06 February 2014.

The theme of the Temptation of Adam and Eve in Paradise was very probably inspired on an engraving by Durer dated to 1504 and now owned by the Albertina Museum, in Vienna, Austria or, alternatively, an engraving by Matthaus Merian¹⁴, dated to 1630 and which features an Indian elephant (Veenendaal 1985:43) interlinking with the local belief that Adam actually lived in Sri Lanka (identifying Sri Lanka as the place where the first man took refuge following his expulsion from Paradise) (Sousa 2008: 40-41). Muslim believers accepted as fact that Paradise was located on the island and that Adam had been created there and to the extent even of having baptised a mountain in his name, Adam's Peak¹⁵. The Sri Lankan were thus his direct descendents (Veenendaal 1985:44).



Cabinet door, detail

¹⁴ A Swiss engraver of the 16th century.

¹⁵ A sacred place worshipped by Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus (Dias 2006: 47).

The representation of this theme leads us to believe that this work of art was produced for the Western market with a likelihood of production for a Dutch buyer. This representation falls within the logic of Protestantism, which was then defending how the only true and unique asset of the church was the Bible.

The drawer frontal sections differ between each one but are filled with local fauna and flora motifs organised in symmetry according to tree established axes. Friezes featuring elephants, lions, doe, hyenas, horses and wild boar, among other carnivores, are aligned while the upper section is given over to a design packed with the upper reaches of trees that, replete with birds, serve to unify the composition.

Similar to the ivory sculptures, these cabinets would have been produced in series and in all likelihood in the same workshops given their shared sculptural resemblances (Veenendaal 1985:41).

The first contact between the inhabitants of Sri Lanka with the Christian imaginary and the European sacred imaged took place precisely with the arrival of the first Portuguese explorers (Jaffer 2002: 54) - the first Franciscan missionaries arrived on the island in 1543, in the same year that the Portuguese reached Japan¹⁶. Subsequently, it would be the Jesuits who, through recourse to European engravings, paintings and sculptures that served as templates, trained local artists in the western techniques and iconography (Bailey 2005: 30).

These printed religious images, brought in by the missionaries, served not only as tools for conversion but also for inspiration in the decoration of a range of secular and religious objects under local production.



Dead of St. Francis Xavier, Portugal, 2nd half of the 17th century, tempora and gold painting on parchment, Museu do Oriente, FO/1351

This decorative grammatical genre of vegetal motifs appearing on furniture works of art decorated with ivory plates also turns up in other Sri Lankan wood sculpted furniture production.

Small chest with drawer

Sri Lanka, 17th century

Carved teak, iron

H. 32 cm; W. 74 cm; D. 40 cm

Acquired at auction, 1992, FO/0990

¹⁶ The Franciscans are indeed the Religious Order that had most churches in Sri Lanka, 54 churches. The total of churches and chapels of all the Religious Orders that established a presence in Sri Lanka – the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians and Jesuits, amounted to approximately 415 (Dias 2006: 60). For more information see Chandra, 1972.



Chest, detail

The small chest with drawer belonging to the Museu do Oriente collection dates to the 17th century and is rectangular in format with a lifting lid whilst also containing a narrow drawer at its base and lateral hooped handles for carrying¹⁷.

The piece reveals respect for symmetry making recourse to facing or adorsed motifs in a style highly characterised by its vegetalist motifs (Curvelo 2004: 180), with the piece decorated on all its outer sides with low relief carving, with panels finished in diamond point friezes that frame a succession of delicately enrolled glass vine leaves¹⁸ and bunches of grapes centring around animals including birds (parrots?), lions and probably mongooses and set out in a symmetrical layout. This probably represents a local interpretation of a recurrent theme in Christian art, the birds picking on the grapes in amongst vine leaves and shoots, an allusion to the faithful and the word of Christ that spreads to all areas like the shoots of a vine (Dias 2006: 215).

The upper compartment contains an iron lock (a later fitting) and the drawer that opens courtesy of its central hooped iron handle.

Underneath the folding lid, there is a false drawer on the left hand side (later) that suggests the piece served as domestic purposes with evidence that it once had a fitted tray.

Christ on the cross

Sri Lanka, 17th century

Ivory

H. 33 cm; W. 31.5 cm

Acquired from an antiques dealer, FO/0992

Leaving behind the furniture and moving onto the ivory sculptures that since historical records begin we have knowledge that Sri Lanka was the source of some of the most valuable objects ever carved in ivory. Despite Goa being the flourishing centre of ivory production, some of the very best Indo-Catholic pieces came out of Buddhist Sri Lanka (Gauvin 2009: 222). The Sri Lankan ivories feature among the most delicate, displaying the most precise and clearest carved details of all Indo-Portuguese examples (Bailey 2005: 31).

¹⁷ For similar examples see Dias, 2006, p. 212-218.

¹⁸ Tendrils (vine branches).

The Fundação Oriente holds a sculpted ivory image in its collection, dated to the 17th century, portraying the crucified Christ, in agony, with His eyes turned up to heaven and His mouth half agape as if expressing some painful prayer and thereby also revealing his teeth and tongue. The figure has both beard and moustache.

The figure no longer bears a crown of thorns but does display the slot into which this was once inserted. The hair, with remains of the original brown, is long, wavy and with tips rolled up into a snail shell shape.

The body features a very simple anatomical portrayal, with the arms fitting (at the level of the shoulders and affixed by two ivory nails) almost horizontally to the head and resembling the Christ typology common to the 17th century that would subsequent evolve vertically throughout the 18th century to convey the weight of the body (Paramio 1997, 83).



Christ on the cross, detail

The hands, marked by the holes made in nailing to the cross, feature a long thumb, two fingers outstretched and the remaining two folded inwards in a symbol of blessing. The broad cloth enveloping Christ at the waist has a fold in its upper section that forms a pleat with curved and almost parallel folds.



Christ on the cross, head and back details

The depiction of the crucified Christ represents one of the typologies of Sri Lanka ivory sculpture¹⁹, which also extends to images of Our Lady of Immaculate Conception; Our Lady of the Rosary (particularly popular among the Jesuits); Our Lady with Infant Jesus; the Child Jesus or Saviour of the World; Sleeping Infant Jesus; Child Jesus as the Good Shepherd; Child Jesus with the *Vara Crucifera* along with diverse sculpted plaques portraying the Tree of Jesse, Our Lady of Immaculate Conception, the Nativity Scene, the Flight into Egypt, the Holy Family, the Calvary or the *Pietá*. Among the rarer representations come the Saints from the Religious Orders engaged in missionary work in Sri Lanka such as St. Anthony and St. Francis of Assisi or that of St. Sebastian²⁰.

The origins of this art interrelate with Portuguese missionary actions in the Orient that had to cope with the scarcity of pieces coming from Europe for practices of worship in the colonies. They were thus compelled to proceed with commissioning local artists to produce works for religious purposes (Osswald 1994: 65) and thereby also revealing the importance of the function that ivory sculpture played in facilitating the conveyance and learning of the Christian message through describing and propagating themes that would otherwise only have been more difficultly understood by the newly converted Christians. These sculptures are a testimony both of the transfer of western models to the East, and of the training of native artists (Estela 2002: 34).



Child Jesus as the Good Shepherd, Goa, 17th century, ivory, Museu do Oriente, FO/0994



Christ on the Cross, Goa, 1743, ivory and silver, Museu do Oriente, FO/0995

¹⁹ A large part of this imaginary was carved in ivory sourced from the coast of East Africa (African elephant tusks provided a far greater amount of working material, softer in nature and therefore correspondingly easier to work with), or even in Sri Lankan ivory (Osswald 2010: 130).

²⁰ Dias 2009: 100.

Conclusion

In parallel with the Portuguese influence and certainly of no less importance, Sri Lanka was also influenced by the artistic and cultural traditions of southern India. The fact that South Indian craftsmen were working in the same style at home and in Sri Lanka has sometimes made it difficult to distinguish between articles made in the two places (Jaffer 2002: 53).

Furthermore, the almost total absence of any existing documentation directly dealing with this furniture output, whether in Portugal or other European countries or in modern Sri Lanka, limits the work of researchers who are instead forced to make exclusive recourse to stylistic factors and comparisons between the morphological and iconographic aspects that chronologically and geographically categorise and classify these works of art (Bailey 2005: 30). Contrary to what happens with other Indo-Portuguese furniture²¹, some of which bears the coats of arms of its owners and with strong certainty around their respective origins, whether in Sri Lanka or from Sri Lanka, we have nothing. We might have, as in Goa, for example, religious artefacts on which we may undertake an extrapolation to their domestic counterparts but unfortunately this also is not the case here (Dias 2006: 218).

Remaining with civil furniture, one factor that may confuse our analysis is precisely the simultaneous domination of the Dutch and the Portuguese in regions of India and Sri Lanka in the first half of the 17th century. As the Portuguese researcher Pedro Dias states, “the clients were the same and the results of their demands might bear the same or very similar results”. There are thus undoubtedly more doubts than there are certainties (Dias 2009: 87).

The same happens with the ivory pieces carved for export in large quantities and not for the specific occasions for which we are able to ascertain their origins based on records. However, analysis of these models does enable the conclusion that the most productive period of ivory carving in Sri Lanka began in around the mid-16th century and lasted for around another century. Despite the production of ivory pieces having continued during Dutch rule, the quality levels fell as the decades passed by and the number of pieces in production dropped off significantly in the late 17th century (Bailey, 2005: 32).

Contrary to the Indo-Portuguese universe as a whole, the Sri Lankan examples, whether of furniture or of ivory pieces, are comparatively low in number in Portugal. The Portuguese population on the island of then Sri Lanka was always very small in scale and which ensured that the production of pieces for local utilisation was correspondingly limited in total quantity (Dias 2009: 88).

Raising awareness of these and other pieces of Sri Lankan origins at events such as this one staged by Lanka Decorative Arts is fundamental to their better understanding, especially in accordance with the epoch – the 16th to the 18th century and works of art produced for the other countries with a presence in Sri Lanka and hence Holland and later Britain.

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²¹ For more information about Indo-Portuguese furniture see DIAS, 2013.

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