

28 April 2018–
12 April 2020

The Art of African Ivory



AGNES
ETHERINGTON
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“Nature’s great masterpiece, an elephant—the only harmless great thing.”
—John Donne (1572–1631)

“One sees all sorts of knives on the day an elephant dies.”
—Yoruba proverb

African ivory comes mostly from elephants and is prized for its colour, lustre and durability, as well as its lasting association with its source. For millennia, artists have loved how easy it is to carve: in elephants, tusks are incisors that coolly give way to incisions after being soaked.¹ The Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre holds twenty-eight artworks made wholly or partially of ivory. All the works are historical—carved from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries—and were initially traded for African use before being sold on an international art market. In the world of ivory arts, the Lang Collection represents “cultural ivory” as distinguished from “contraband ivory,” which is “generally undocumented and recently procured.”² While the latter has been subject to public destruction in ivory burns since 1989 and ivory crushes since 2013, the former is preserved for educational purposes and to honour cultural heritage.³

When Justin and Elisabeth Lang collected African art in the mid-twentieth century, the fine art marketplace favoured West and Central Africa over other parts of the continent and particular mediums such as ivory over others.⁴ *The Art of African Ivory* stages several examples from the Lang Collection in thematic clusters that exemplify the value their makers placed on ivory and elephants: Assuring Morality, Seeking Guidance, Holding Prestige and Building Community. Select objects from each theme discussed in this essay reveal why Africans chose to carve ivory over other materials and convey the high esteem that elephants are accorded within specific contexts. These objects also underline the imperative that museums face to both preserve the historical art in their care and protect African wildlife.



Figure 8
Igbo Artist, Nigeria, *Ogbodo Enyi*
(*Spirit Elephant*) Headdress,
20th century, wood and pigment.
Gift of Justin and Elisabeth Lang,
1984 (M84-168)

Figure 2

Lega Artist, Democratic Republic of the Congo, *Figure*, ivory. Gift of Justin and Elisabeth Lang, 1984 (M84-030)



Assuring Morality

Moral norms are communicated and safeguarded through cultural practices imparted within social and religious systems that span generations. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Lega men and women have strengthened their communities through initiation into societies that pass on knowledge one grade at a time. These societies, called Bwami associations, are voluntary, and elephants were long prominent within them (today, very few elephants remain in northeastern DRC).⁵ Small figurines in ivory or bone (figs. 1–3) were among the prestigious objects exchanged by the highest rank of Bwami members and thus symbolize the most advanced knowledge one can glean. They are infinitely variable in their form and features, and their finish and colour also vary. Figure 1 is particularly attractive with its warm patina, the result of handling over time. Although seemingly simple, each figure embodies multiple complex, esoteric lessons richly conveyed through actions and proverbs. Lega hold that “on ivory, mushrooms do not grow,” meaning that bones are durable if not everlasting.⁶ Since Bwami exists to ensure that moral lessons remain strong from one generation to the next, elephant ivory is equated with the indestructible essence of Lega lineage.

Seeking Guidance

Yoruba art from Nigeria is among the best known from Africa, and art is a fundamental part of Yoruba existence. Their rich cosmology holds that before birth we consult with a divine sculptor who shapes our inner and outer beings. In Yoruba lore, the *ori inu* (inner head) that drives our decisions is conical, and we project our life force upward and outward through its tip. It is thus not surprising that ivory tappers used to consult with *òrisà* (gods) through Ifa divination rites position the heads of figures at the tip of the tusk (figs. 4–5). The *iroke Ifa* (divination tapper) in figure 4 is an outstanding example. Both figures convey cool composesures. The kneeling female evokes fecundity and supplication, while the richly adorned equestrian metaphorically recalls possession trance—another avenue for honouring *òrisà*—in that *òrisà* enter us through the head to make us a “horse of the god.”⁷ For Yoruba, ivory conveys the magnificence of elephants. No other being matches their power, a notion conveyed in the saying “The only thing more vast than elephant is the earth” and in the positive traits customarily associated with these animals: endurance, age, wisdom and composure.⁸ Ivory is also the same white colour as the caul in which we begin life and thus equated with newness, freshness, coolness and purity.⁹

Holding Prestige

Another cluster staged within *The Art of African Ivory* highlights how people across cultures rely on ivory to convey their wealth (figs. 6–7). Most objects were once decorative pendants suspended from the neck by cord or threaded beads. Oils from the skin change the colour of ivory over time. Worn edges of carved features are the by-product of cleaning; Luba people, for instance, would scrub their pendants with water and sand daily. Prized for being cool to the touch and for the contrast of colour when worn, all the pendants from the Lang Collection were made in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Other prestige objects—a Bamileke pipe from Cameroon, for example—were handheld and belonged to people of high rank and title. Little is known about the beautiful Mende side-blown horn, an oliphant (fig. 6), but objects of this kind were once used in military celebrations and also to announce the arrival of important people or simply entertain guests. When blown, an oliphant has the deep resonance of an elephant trumpeting. The instrument's features evoke multiple sources. It is topped by a representation of a *sowe* helmet mask made for the Sande society (famed for being completely operated by and for females), and the patterned rectangles resemble amulets worn by Sande maskers. The unfurling scroll is intriguing since it imparts cross-cultural borrowing from Europe where it indicates education gained over time, a perfect match for Sande since education is its purpose. The Dallas Museum of Art holds a similar example in which the circular orbs, also seen here, are equated with British symbols of royal power.¹⁰ The Lang oliphant is fascinating for all these reasons.

Building Community

Across Igbo territory in Nigeria, councils of elders, both male and female, govern communities and embody the symbolic might of elephants. To “take the horn (tusk)” is to achieve a titled rank within councils that make extensive use of elephant parts, from ivory jewellery and trumpets to beads strung from tail hair.¹¹ Though not made of ivory, masks that represent elephants convey the centrality of these animals within Igbo society. Elephant masks have five distinct regional variations that loosely interpret the animal's features. The Lang Collection includes two *Ogbodo Enyi* (Spirit Elephant) headdresses that differ in form but are among the largest in a hierarchy of four sizes (fig. 8). Danced by males of all ages and sized to fit their bodies, *Ogbodo Enyi* headdresses build community both literally and figuratively. At funerals, they prepare the space for burial rites. During the dry season, they announce that the time has come to clear the marketplace and prepare it for

Figure 3

Lega Artist, Democratic Republic of the Congo, *Figure*, ivory and pigment. Gift of Justin and Elisabeth Lang, 1984 (M84-031)



business; other communal spaces are also restored. Depending on its tonal pronunciation, the word *enyi* also means “friend,” so elephants are friends of those who honour their toughness and endurance.¹²

Preserving Objects, Protecting Lives

The tusks of elephants have been exported from Africa since ancient times. Indeed, the appetite for ivory in imperial Rome was so enormous that it led to the elephants’ extinction in North Africa, then a forested environment. Thereafter, for about a thousand years, Europe had no source of ivory until the Portuguese sailed south along Africa’s west coast and established multiple trading posts along the shore.¹³ Serving as launch sites for the sale of humans into slavery across the Atlantic Ocean, these fortresses also shipped all manner of goods in and out of Africa. Humans, gold and ivory were Africa’s primary export from the late fifteenth century until the nineteenth century, and from Europe, Africa imported brass, woollen and cotton cloth, glass, iron, pottery, firearms and gunpowder. Africa’s east coast had a similar history: along with ebony, ivory was the commodity that was most desired by Muslim traders, one of whom, writing in the tenth century, described the tusks he sent to India and China.¹⁴ Copper, gold and tortoiseshell were also exported in exchange for cloth, beads, brass, porcelain and other luxury goods from across the Indian Ocean. By 1850, weapons and humans were also trafficked. At every stage and in every region of Africa, multiple parties enriched themselves through networks of global commerce. From 1885 until the 1970s, European colonialists regulated the supply of ivory, thereby affecting its trade and use.¹⁵

In our time, poached ivory is what art historian Sidney Littlefield Kasfir calls “a disturbing echo of those times, a reminder that scarcity incites greed and that power and profit are still to be had by the exploitation of the elephant.”¹⁶ These magnificent mammals were once common across much of Africa, but today their numbers and geographic range are starkly diminished.¹⁷ Poaching is a problem of great moral weight as elephants are now endangered and on the path towards extinction. The Yoruba proverb cited in the epigraph above is relevant since its meaning is this: extraordinary events prompt extraordinary behaviour.¹⁸ African elephants are indeed great things to behold as they are the largest beings that walk the earth and are utterly majestic. Their size, strength and intelligence make them ideal subjects for fables in which humans can claim these traits as their own. Like humans, elephants care for their kind from birth to the grave and show empathy for others. They love



Figure 4
Yoruba Artist, Nigeria, *Iroke Ifa (Divination Tapper)*, ivory.
Gift of Justin and Elisabeth Lang, 1984 (M84-435)

Figure 5

Yoruba Artist, Nigeria, *Olori Ikin (Head/Leader of Palm Nuts)*, mid-20th century, ivory. Gift of Justin and Elisabeth Lang, 1984 (M84-278)



play and leisure, but they also work hard and establish social structures. They can learn human languages, have superb memories and mourn beloved friends that have died. Although they can damage crops, by and large the English poet John Donne had it right: elephants are among the most harmless creatures. Regardless, and despite the commonalities we share, African elephants have been killed for hundreds of years because their tusks are a valued commodity internationally.

Today, museums worldwide are home to thousands of ivory objects carved by artists from nearly every continent. These objects are multiple things at once. They are works of art, whether exquisitely carved or roughly hewn, and they are lessons in history both local and global. As the plight of African elephants gains attention and nations respond, museums (and universities) are well placed to influence policy. Establishing historical value is important since traders of illicit ivory objects have developed techniques to make a new object appear old. Museums have an obligation to consider the role of ivory in their collections with the dual aim of preserving historical works and protecting elephants.¹⁹ For, as a Yoruba proverb has it, “When an elephant crosses your path, you don’t need to inquire, ‘Oh, did something just pass by?’” In highlighting exquisitely carved historical ivory objects from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection, *The Art of African Ivory* also raises concern for the fate of the African elephant, “nature’s great masterpiece.”

—Dr. Shannen Hill, Curator

1 Historians make no distinction between bone and teeth in artwork from Africa; both are called “ivory” in material terms.

2 Johnnetta Betsch Cole, “Historical Ivory Arts and the Protection of Contemporary Wildlife,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 61, no. 1 (January 2018): 29.

3 The government of Kenya staged its first ivory burn on 18 July 1989 when it set twelve tons of contraband ivory alight in Nairobi. This burn occurred before CITES listed the African elephant as endangered in 1990. Kenya staged a second ivory burn in early 1992 (Doran Ross, “Epilogue: The Future of Elephants, Real and Imagined,” in *Elephant: The Animal and Its Ivory in African Culture*, ed. Doran Ross [Los Angeles: Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1992], 387). Since then, dozens of nations have staged burns of tons of ivory (Jani Actman, “Does Destroying Ivory Save Elephants? Experts Weigh In,” *National Geographic*, 2 August 2017. <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/08/wildlife-watch-ivory-crush-elephant-poaching/>). The US Department of Fish and Wildlife Services first pulverized six tons of ivory in Denver, Colorado, in 2013, and about one ton of ivory in New York City in 2015. At a similar event in 2017, also in New York City, a Smithsonian curator saved two examples of cultural ivory before they could be crushed (Cole, “Historical Ivory Arts,” 30).



Figure 6

Mende Artist, Sierra Leone or Liberia, *Oliphant*, 19th–20th century, ivory and pigment. Gift of Justin and Elisabeth Lang, 1984 (M84-065)

4 Today, works from all of Africa representing a wide range of materials and practices are collected internationally. In addition to modern and contemporary art by artists in and of Africa, important collections of historical African art on the continent are also analyzed and historicized. For instance, see Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbachie, *Making History: African Collectors and the Canon of African Art* (Milan, Italy: 5 Continents Editions, 2011).

5 Lega hunters traditionally trapped elephants in large holes and sold all parts (Elisabeth Cameron, “The Stampeding of Elephants: Elephant Imprints on Lega Thought,” in *Elephant: The Animal and Its Ivory in African Culture*, ed. Doran Ross [Los Angeles: Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1992], 295). Once Muslim traders introduced firearms to this region in the mid-nineteenth century, the elephant population began to drop dramatically.

6 *Ibid.*, 302.

7 Henry J. Drewal, “Image and Indeterminacy: Elephants and Ivory Among the Yoruba,” in *Elephant: The Animal and Its Ivory in African Culture*, ed. Doran Ross (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1992), 194.

8 *Ibid.*, 191.

9 *Ibid.*, 195.

10 “Side-blown horn,” Dallas Museum of Art, accessed 11 January 2018. <https://collections.dma.org/artwork/4148776>.

11 Herbert M. Cole, “The Igbo: Prestige Ivory and Elephant Spirit Power,” in *Elephant: The Animal and Its Ivory in African Culture*, ed. Doran Ross (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1992), 213.

12 *Ibid.*, 220.

13 Doran Ross, “Imagining Elephants: An Overview,” in *Elephant: The Animal and Its Ivory in African Culture*, ed. Doran Ross (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1992), 7.

14 Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, “Ivory from Zariba Country to the Land of Zinj,” in *Elephant: The Animal and Its Ivory in African Culture*, ed. Doran Ross (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1992), 309.

15 European nations divided and claimed Africa at the Berlin Conference of November 1884–February 1885. By the mid-1970s, most Africans had won independence and formed nations. Portions of South Africa became British protectorates in the late nineteenth century and only shed this status in 1994.

16 *Ibid.*, 326.

17 A recent census conducted by three partners—Elephants Without Borders (a Botswana-based NGO), Save the Elephants and the African Elephant Specialist Group (both in Kenya)—found that only 352,271 savannah elephants are left in 93 per cent of the species’ range. Forest elephants were not included in the study since surveyors used planes and the animals are nearly impossible to count from the air. A 2012 ground census confirmed that forest elephants, too, are under great threat. Paul Steyn, “African Elephant Numbers Plummet 30 Percent, Landmark Survey Finds,” *National Geographic*, 31 August 2016. www.news.nationalgeographic.com.

18 Oyekan Owomoyela, *Yoruba Proverbs* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 497.

19 The January 2018 issue of *Curator: The Museum Journal* (a free online publication from Wiley Periodicals) is dedicated to this matter (vol. 61, no. 1). See <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/toc/21516952/61/1>.

Figure 7

Songye Artist, Democratic Republic of the Congo, *Pendant*, ivory. Gift of Justin and Elisabeth Lang, 1984 (M84-010)

COVER: Figure 1

Lega Artist, Democratic Republic of the Congo, *Figure*, ivory. Gift of Justin and Elisabeth Lang, 1984 (M84-017)

Curator: Dr. Shannen Hill

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Copy Editor: Neil Smith

Design: Vincent Pérez

Printing: Flash Reproductions, Toronto

Photography: 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8 Paul Litherland;
4, 6 Bernard Clark

ISBN 978-1-55339-414-3

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and Shannen Hill, 2018

Published in conjunction with the exhibition *The Art of African Ivory* at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 28 April 2018–12 April 2020, and generously supported by The Justin and Elisabeth Lang Foundation Fund.

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