

DIGITAL **AGNES**

Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University
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Ivory and African elephants

AGNES Learns
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SPEAKERS

Charlotte Gagnier

KEYWORDS

Ivory, Congolese Artist, Lega Art, Ivory Trade, Grade 7-8, Agnes Learns, School Resource

TRANSCRIPT

Charlotte Gagnier: This ivory figure was made by a Lega artist, whose name was not recorded, the Lega are from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Ivory is a type of dentine, which is the hard, dense, bony tissue that makes up the teeth and tusks of animals such as elephants. Elephants have long been honoured in Lega communities due to the traits they feel that elephants embody wisdom, kinship, character and morality. Morality is an understanding of what's right and wrong. The Lega reserved ivory objects for people who are very moral in their society, the Kindi. Once you had reached this high level of morality and education, you'll be able to own and touch ivory objects such as this figure, as you were considered among the most intelligent and powerful people in the community. This object would have been handed down generation to generation. What's something in your family or community that's been handed down? As you may know, the African elephant is a threatened species, in part, because of the ivory trade. Ivory carving has been an art form practised for thousands of years by civilizations in Africa, Asia, and Europe. In the 1400s, Portuguese navigators established several trading posts along Africa's West Coast, and European demand for ivory started to rise. Over the next 500 years, elephants were hunted in great numbers across the continent, leading to the decline of their populations. Although several colonies passed laws limiting hunting, this was not enough to quell Western interest in ivory. Today, elephant ivory cannot legally be traded for commercial purposes. But illegal poaching and trading still occurs. We continue to see the destruction the ivory trade causes. Today, there are less than 1 million elephants alive, as opposed to the estimated 26 million elephants alive in 1800, making them a vulnerable species. It's important to know this information as we view and discuss historical ivory works such as this figure. However, we should not look at them negatively because of it. The carved ivory in Agnes's collection is a teaching tool. Through these works, we can learn about the communities in which they were made, such as the Lega, who have historically used ivory in a sustainable way. They also teach us about the plight of African elephants. By educating ourselves, we are able to make informed, positive change.