Lanka’s ivory boast

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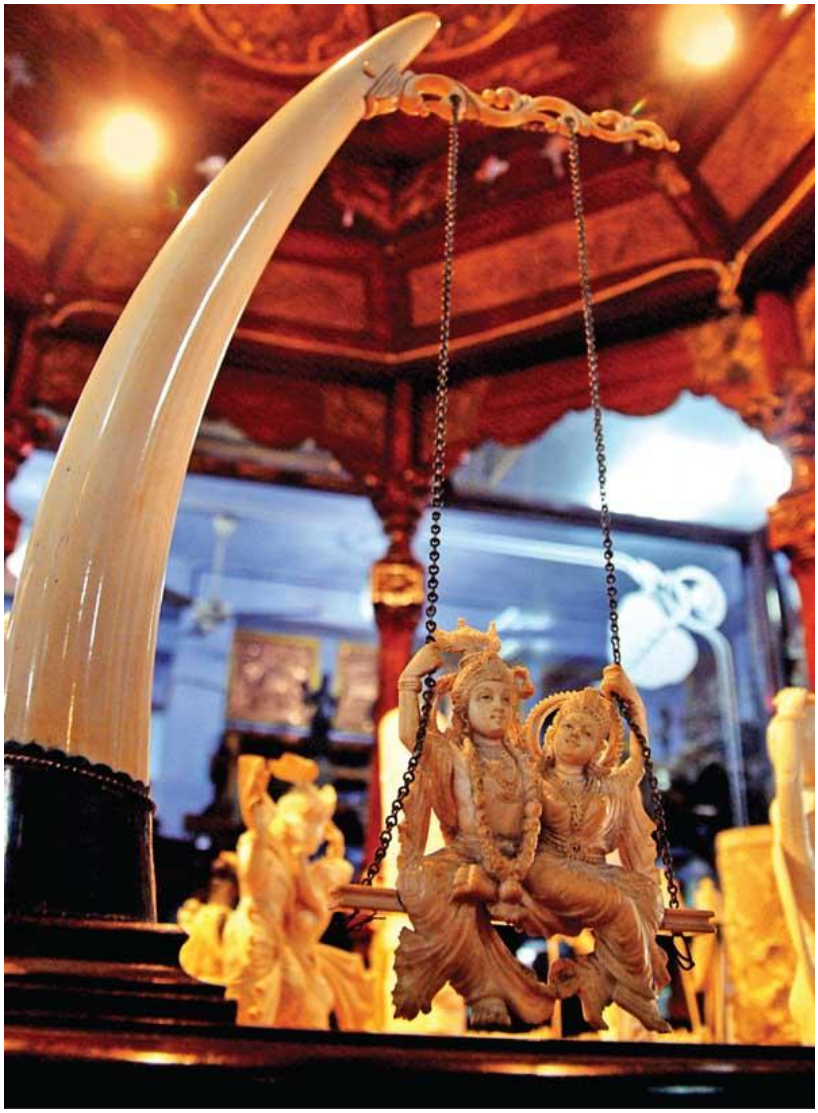

A couple on a swing atop a jewellery or safekeeping box. The swing dangles from a single tusk

Imagine ivory and feel the stirrings of the senses at the mere whiff of the material that has held enthralled both the artist and the art connoisseur.

Words Manu Gunasena ***Photographs*** Tavish Gunasena

Ivory rich tusks, borne with grandeur for life by only a few male Asian elephants, are used by these majestic tuskers as a rest for the trunk, as a tool to bring trees down, as an imposing juggernaut to intimidate big cats; and, most of all, to be blatantly flaunted as the ultimate manifestation of macho elephant perfection to woo the

female of the species by projecting themselves as the peerless progenitors of the next generation of elephants.

It is with scarce resources of ivory that the artisan has had to make do throughout the ages to wrought exquisite works of art in ivory. A flawed work in gold can be melted down, the gold reused. With exacting ivory there are no second chances for any such failure is fatal. It is under such austere conditions that the sculptor has been forced to use his artistic genius; and it is in celebration of this inspiring spirit that a leading Buddhist temple in Colombo has decided to play host to an exhibition of its own ivory collection.

The present ivory exhibition, which began in October and which will continue until January next year, is mainly to provide the masses the opportunity to behold Lankan ivory creations along with those from India, China and Japan

Gangaramaya Temple, situated in Colombo 2 for the last hundred years and more, has been the centre of many exhibitions, the most recent one being in September where the sacred Kapilavastu Relics of the Buddha brought down from India courtesy of the Indian Government were displayed for a million or more people to pay their respect and reverence. The present ivory exhibition, which began in October and which will continue until January next year, is mainly to provide the masses the opportunity to behold Lankan ivory creations along with those from India, China and Japan.

Whilst the caskets containing sacred Buddhist relics take centre stage, it is flanked by a whole host of valuable ivory artifacts numbering over five hundred. This is the single largest collection of ivory art within the confines of one temple; and, for being the repository of this nation’s ivory heritage, and for preserving it in pristine condition, the Gangaramaya Temple, headed by its tireless Chief Priest the Ven Galaboda Gnanissara, deserves the nation’s thanks and gratitude.

Amongst the plethora of items on display are many of Indian, Chinese and Japanese origin. One Indian work is a chariot drawn by four horses with the Vishnu avatar Krishna depicted as the charioteer and Arjuna as the princely riding figure. This is the moment wrought in ivory where Krishna, on the threshold of battle, exhorts the prince to do his martial duty and recites the Bhagvad Gita, India’s greatest philosophical Song of Songs. Another depicts a god and a goddess, their bodies intertwined in perfect symmetry in a divine pose of harmony exquisitely captured by a skilled craftsman. Another has a couple on a swing flowing carefree in their

garden of love atop a jewellery or safekeeping box. A single tusk is used to hold the string of the dangling swing.

Foremost place is given to the many Buddha statues originating from China. These statues are intricately carved with demanding attention paid to the minutest detail; and, considering the very small amount of ivory available in Asia and the Far East, an ornate sculpture of this nature and style would have exacted the genius and patience of the artisan to its limit.

Another ivory item on display, the curator of the exhibition the Ven. Pallegama Rathanasara Thero explained, was a commissioned artifact. About 75 years ago a high ranking representative of the Japanese Emperor had visited the Island and during his stay had befriended members of the de Soyza clan, well know for their philanthropy. At the end of his sojourn, they had presented him with a natural unbloomed ‘pol mala’, a coconut flower, and explained its use at auspicious occasions to blossom prosperity on the occasion and the receiver.

The coconut flower had bloomed on his voyage home and the Japanese had entrusted it to a craftsman to make an exact replica of it in ivory. On his return to the Island some years later he had presented it to the members of the de Soyza family who had subsequently gifted it to the Gangaramaya Temple.

Out of the many Lankan creations on display special note must be made of the standing ivory Buddha statue and the beautifully carved ivory handles of the ‘vatapathas’, the half circle, hand held fans used by Buddhist monks at ceremonious functions. There are also many delicately carved vases, their thin ivory covering embellished with elaborate designs. Other articles of day to day use given the ivory treatment are a spatula with a flat silver spreader adorned with an ivory handle, a rickshaw for two, a bullock cart sculptured in detail, a half peeled plantain with an ivory fly half embedded in the fruit’s flesh, a set of ladies’ hair pins and two eerie human beings with their rib cages opened to depict the stark reality concealed beneath Maya’s illusory bewitching beauty.

Pride of place is given also to the elusive ‘gaja muthu’, the ivory pearl born and matured within the hollow of the elephant tusk. A cross section of the tusk, also intricately carved, is on display showing a half formed pearl within. Two large pearls, resembling two polished rotund eggs, rest beside it. They are of oval shape with a smooth surface of pale white hue, tinged with brown streaks.

Ivory pearls are extremely rare and even when a discolouration on the outer tusk appears – this being a possible sign that a pearl exists within – the elephant must live for more than 75 years for the pearl to form fully. And even then a dilemma confronts the owner for the tusk has to be sacrificed to obtain the pearl; and the ‘egg or the omelet’ scenario ensues.

Barely two yards away from the finely crafted ivory artifacts, are the two seven foot tusks once borne by Navam Raja, the temple’s majestic tusker who died a few years ago at the age of 55 years, too early for the ivory peals within its tusks to have fully matured. Presently awaiting a more fitting presentation, the tusks manifest the timeless beauty of nature’s natural creation from which source spring all the man made ivory delights so elegantly displayed above it.

Almost all of these articles are invaluable gifts presented to the Gangaramaya Temple by Lankan philanthropist families, some of them comprising even the families’ entire ivory heirlooms; and, unfortunately, the history and the background pertaining to each article are lost in the hazy mists of time. So too, are the names of the talented sculptors for whom their creations were enough recompense for loss of fame. But, though their ivory artifacts may be relatively miniscule, their selfless donations in the true spirit of altruism reveal their boundless monolithic munificence.

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