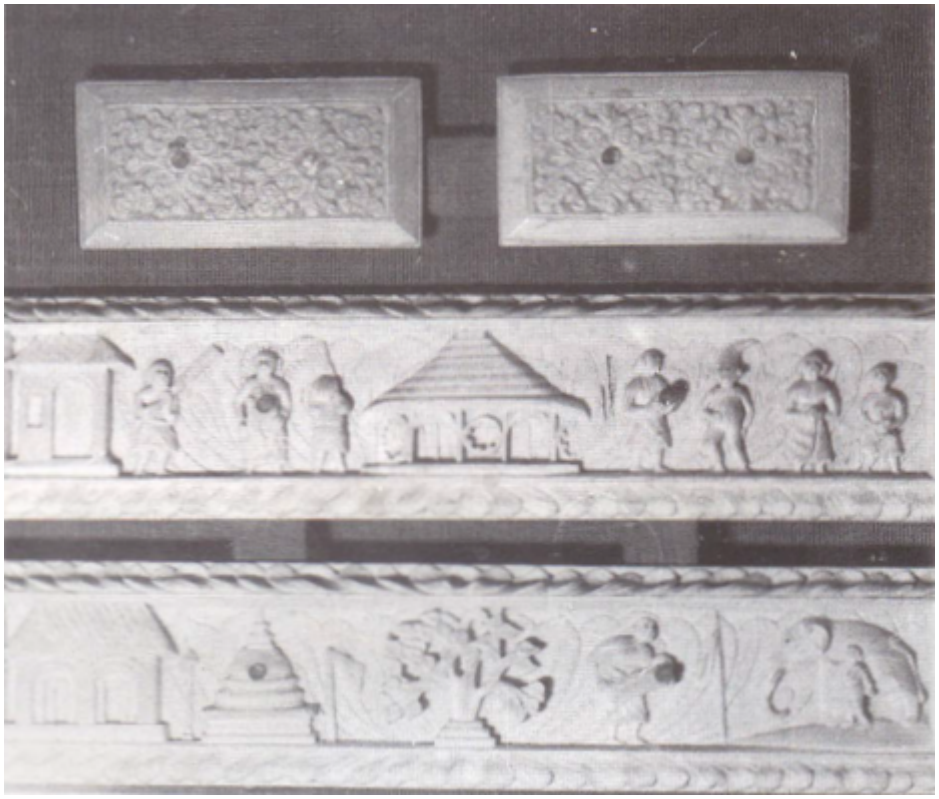
The Exquisite Ivories of Sri Lanka

Posted on

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In the range of creative handicrafts in Sri Lanka, ivory carvings have taken a very important place. Ivory seems to have used lavishly for personal ornaments, for decorative personal embellishment of shrines and religious halls and buildings, as whole doors and inset in wooden door panels, in domestic use as spoons, boxes, vessels, combs and other artefacts and as curiosities much treasured by their owners. The ivories displayed at the Colombo Museum date from the 3rd century A.D at least and cover a span of nearly two thousand years of Sri Lanka’s history. The ivory carver’s art seems to have been known and practised here from atleast the 2nd century B.C. when Asoka, the Indian Emperor sent along with the gift of the bodhi sapling numerous representatives of the handicraft guilds of India to live and work in Sri Lanka. There had, of course been earlier migrations: the bride of King Vijaya, the first historical ruler to be consecrated here, according to the Mahavamsa, chose his bride from a royal family in Pandya in South India. Along with the princess came members of all the Craft Guilds in Madhurai at that time to settle down in our island. Ivory carvers would surely have been among their number.



Panels of intricate carvings on ivory.

History also records that of such excellence was this craft that no less than a king of Lanka, Jetthatissa II (circa 331 – 340 AD.), was an “extraordinarily skilful” ivory carver. “He carried out many difficult works and taught the practice of his art to many people…he made a beautiful, charming figure representing the Bodhisattva as beautiful as it it had been produced by miraculous power, as well as a chair of state with a back, an umbrella, a mandapa (hall) with jewels. Here and there (were) all kinds of work by him splendid ivory.

In ancient and medieval times some ivory -the raw material -would have been available in Sri Lanka with its large elephant population. The Asian elephant is not as notable for its long ivory tusks as is the African species, but it is on record that ivory was one of the exotic exports from Sri Lanka, along with spices and gems. Arab traders, as the middlemen in these trading enterprises, must have taken away huge tusks of ivory along with other valuable commodities. However, the skill of our ivory carvers was known far and wide and ivory must have been imported not only from the African countries but from India, Burma and Thailand to be worked upon here.

The excellent collection of ivories in the Museum includes ivory jewellery and combs carved in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. Many of these have been retrieved from the “digs” at the Jetavanaramaya and Abhayagiri sites in Anuradhapura in the last decade, in the Cultural Triangle Excavation programmes. Exquisitely carved chandelier earrings, as well as earstuds in floral shapes, pendants and chains of ivory beads, all delicately carved and of graded sizes strung together, are some of the other finds. Combs of all sizes and shapes in pure ivory have been found as well and can be seen in the display. Statuettes of the Buddha have also been unearthed. It is evident that most of these are carved in-the-piece, as it were, and jointings, if any, are so perfectly executed that they can hardly be seen by the naked eye.

Jewellery of a later date -from the 15th to the 19th centuries -is also exhibited, most of the pieces having emerged from the Kandyan provinces and carved during the Kandyan period (circa 1500 -1800). The thick, chunky-type bracelets of this period were the fashion of those times. Rings from the very early period as well as from early and late medieval times have also been identified and displayed. Ivory rings worn on the fingers were believed by the ancients to bring luck to the wearer! The poor contented themselves with wearing chank-shell jewellery for the same purpose: it was the colour (white) that was propitious -that gleaming ivory white with its creamy patina that time alone lends to all ivory.

Ivory boxes of the Kotte period, finely incised and dating from the 14th to 16th centuries AD. can also be seen. These were used as money and jewellery containers; also as betel boxes by the royal family and the great chieftains. The designs are representations of gods and goddesses, of the Jataka stories, of popular myths and folk-tales; designs from nature, floral emblems and the auspicious animal figures.

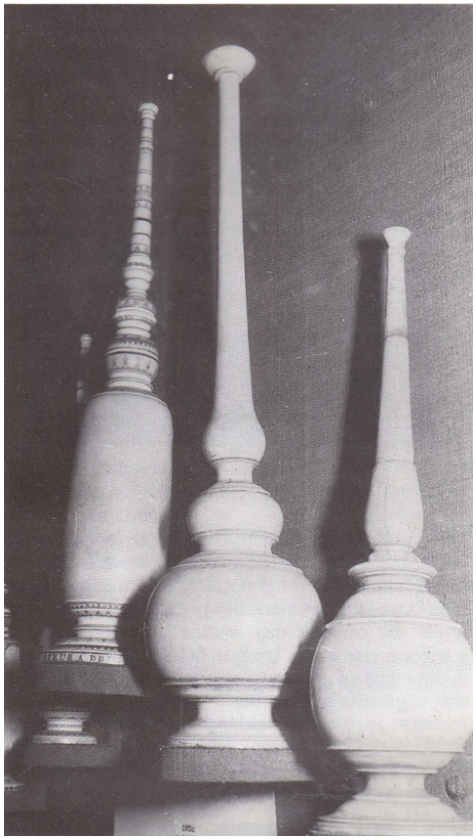
The combs take pride of place in the whole collection and they are richly carved in low relief or in lace-like perforation. According to experts, some are carved with the image of the Hindu god of love, Kamadeva, and could well have been the gift of some romantic young lover to his lady. The bow-string with which the god sends out the arrow of love to pierce the heart of a maiden is visible in these finely wrought carved combs.

Another rare and valuable ivory artefact in the Colombo Museum is the panel depicting the traditional scene of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The panel had been purchased in 1909 from a family of Portuguese ancestry in Negombo and it is assumed the panel was carved during the Portuguese period of our history

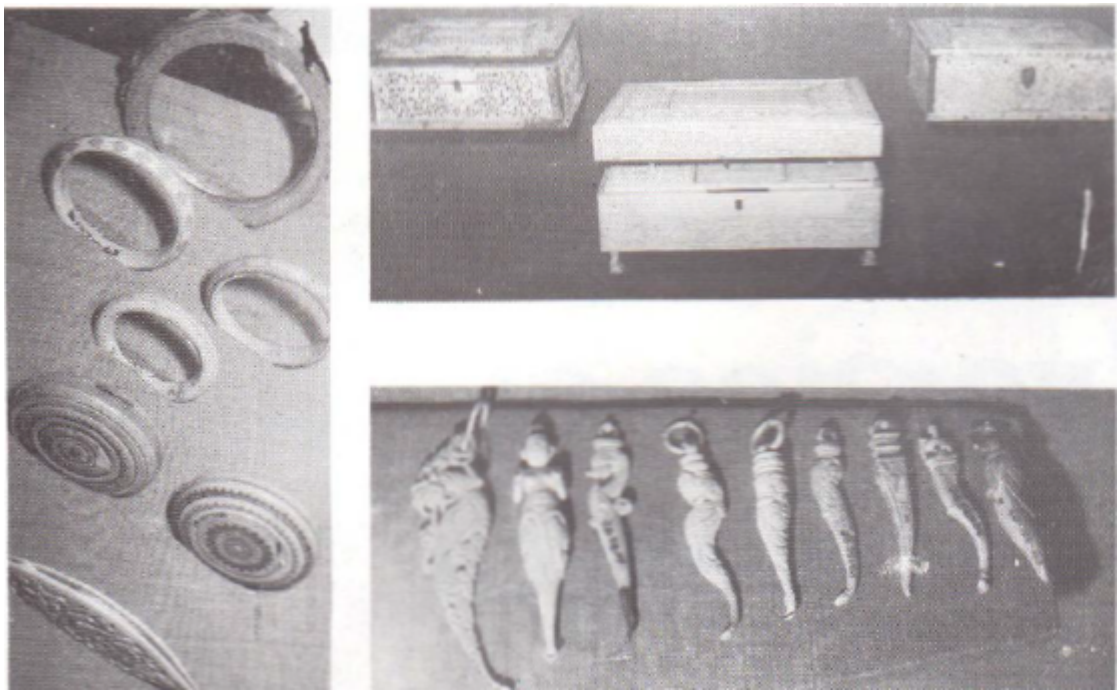
(circa 1505 – 1648 AD.). According to experts, four such pieces are known and two are in the Louvre in Paris, one in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the fourth in the Colombo Museum. It is probable they were all carved by the same skilled craftsmen or in the same workshop. Among the animals in the garden surrounding Adam and Eve is an Asian elephant, much like those one finds in Sri Lanka today. The panels were carved as doors for ivory boxes so greatly in demand by the Europeans who had imposed their rule upon the maritime provinces of Sri Lanka, engendering a resurgence in wood and ivory carving and gem-set jewellery in the coastal areas, inducing local craftsmen to work in Western (Christian) themes as well as their own traditional designs.

Doors and window panels of ivory were not unknown in Sri Lanka from very early times. One of the finest examples of an ivory door is found at Ridi Vihara in Kurunegala. Parts of door panels are among the Museum exhibits and most of them date to the medieval period. Among the numerous ivory figurines displayed are the two statuettes of a Kandyan king and queen dating to the 17th or 18th century. These superb carvings, brightly inlaid with lacquer (in the case of the male figurine) give a compelling idea of the style of dress worn at the time by Kandyan royalty; also of the king’s staff and crown. The fine and precise work is much to be admired and even the cast of the human features and expressions has been captured on the ivory by this master-craftsman anonymous like most of his kind.

Among the other ‘treasures’ are pill boxes, broaches, quills, snuff boxes, little boxes to hold ‘lime’ for a betel chew, replicas of the Buddha, of stupas and relic caskets and a great deal of inlaid ivory ware as well.



Ivory scent sprayers



A variety of bangles, jewellery boxes, and ear-cleaners all made of ivory.