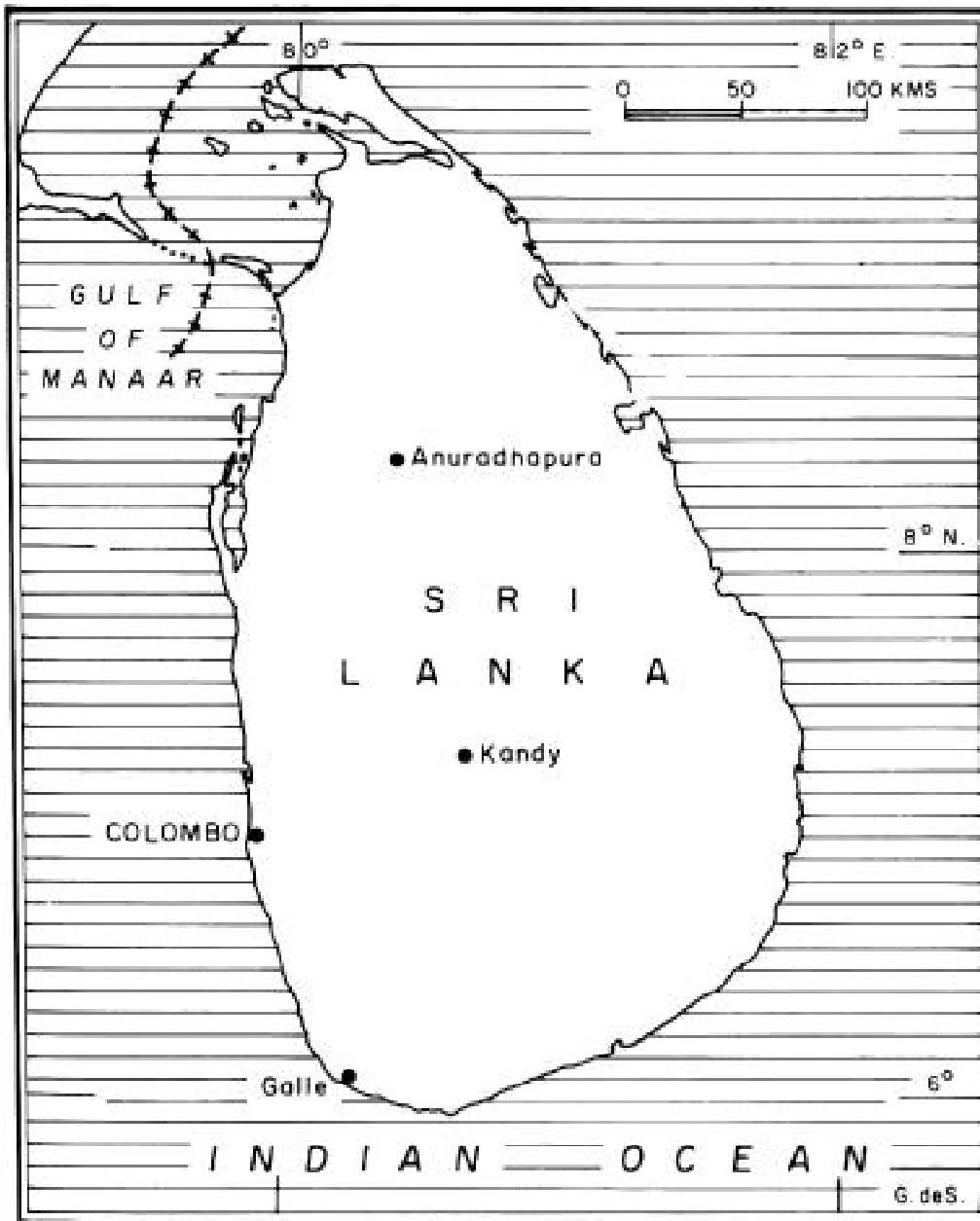


Sri Lankan Ivory Sculpture in Retrospect

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CENTRES OF IVORY CARVING IN SRI LANKA IN 1979

Compared with the main ivory carving centres in Asia—China, Japan and India—relatively little is known about the ivory masterpieces produced in Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon). During the Kandy period (1597-1815) and for some time afterwards Sinhalese craftsmen executed some of the highest quality ivory carvings, albeit in limited quantities. The Colombo Museum displays many fine examples: statues, fan handles, panels, jewellery and relic caskets, pill boxes, scent sprayers, bullock carts, gem scales, rings, fly whisks and book covers. Among the more unusual pieces are a syringe and a pair of spectacle frames. Possibly unique are the ivory combs which are ornately carved either in low relief or with lace-like perforations.¹ Some are erotic in style, illustrating human lovers, and combs were

probably given by a bridegroom to his bride as a marriage present.² Also of special interest are the exquisitely carved ear picks called *kan-handa*. Shaped like sea-horses these have rings on top and a tiny spoon at the bottom for removing ear wax. The jewellery casket carvings were influenced by Dutch and Portuguese settlers while the relic caskets are of Sinhalese-inspired design and inlaid with rubies and sapphires. Before the middle of the 19th century most of the ivory pieces were made for the Sinhalese aristocracy and other wealthy people living on the island. In the first six decades of the 20th century, however, the market demand changed considerably and most items were made for foreigners, especially British residents.

Following the wide-scale nationalization of private businesses, the wholesale trade and almost all foreign-owned plantations during the period 1970-1977, most of the British and other European residents left the country. But at the same time the government was encouraging foreign tourists to visit the island in order to earn foreign exchange. Many hotels were built on the beaches and in the cities of Colombo and Kandy to cater for the visitors who became the principal buyers of the ivory items produced by Sri Lankan craftsmen in the late 1970s.³

In October, 1979, when we went to Sri Lanka to study the ivory carving industry, the main items being made were bangles, Buddhist sculptures, small elephant figurines, carved tusks, necklaces, ear rings, bracelets, rings and the famous Perahera elephant sculptures studded with local gemstones. This latter ornament is modelled on the large caparisoned tusker carrying the relic casket containing a reputed original tooth of Buddha, seen in the fabulous evening procession held during the annual Esala Perahera pageant in Kandy.

The extremely fine and intricate carving which distinguished Sri Lankan ivory work prior to the 20th century was rarely made in the 1970s. Although the ivory craftsmen were still carving



The affectionate couple on the right-hand side of this eighteenth century ivory comb is a typical motif

some items in a local Sri Lankan style, their output was based mainly on the demand of European tourists, not the traditional, more sophisticated tastes of the Sri Lankan aristocracy. The fan handles made for Buddhist priests were no longer produced because the last craftsman doing this work had died leaving no successor.

Prior to the 19th century, there had been a relatively large elephant population in Sri Lanka, perhaps numbering 1 2,000⁴ which had easily supported the local craftsmen's demand for raw ivory. From the middle of the 19th century up to 1937 thousands of elephants were killed in order to open areas for human settlement and for coffee, tea and rubber plantations.⁵ The worst slaughter occurred in a three-year period ending in 1848 after 3,500 had been shot in the Northern Province and from 1851 to 1855 when 2,000 were killed in the Southern Province.⁶ In 1937, finally, elephants were given full protection. By 1979 only an estimated 2,500 wild elephants remained in the country, and more importantly for the ivory trade only 7% of the males had tusks (the tushes from females are too small for most ivory carving).^{7,8}

From 1915 to 1919 very little African ivory was imported but during the 1920s an annual average

of 472 kg was legally brought in mostly from East Africa, South Africa and the United Kingdom. From the time of the World Depression until the end of World War II very small quantities were imported; from 1945 to 1955, there was an average annual import of 103 kg mostly from South and East Africa. The period 1956-1964 saw relatively large quantities of African ivory imported: 621 kg on average each year, mostly from East Africa. From 1964 to 1979 less than 20 kg was legally imported, per year. There must have been some smuggling as well, but the quantities were not significant in the 1970s. Curiously, during the 1920s and early 1930s, small amounts of raw ivory were exported from Sri Lanka, especially to Japan; these tusks were probably from Sri Lankan elephants as the Japanese artisans have traditionally preferred Asian ivory.⁹

Until 1965 the government held public auctions to sell ivory which the Department of Wildlife Conservation collected from dead elephants or confiscated from poachers and traders. In 1965 the government ceased to hold auctions and began to stockpile the ivory. By 1979 the Department held 84 tusks weighing approximately 455 kg; no policy on what to do with this ivory had been decided.¹⁰

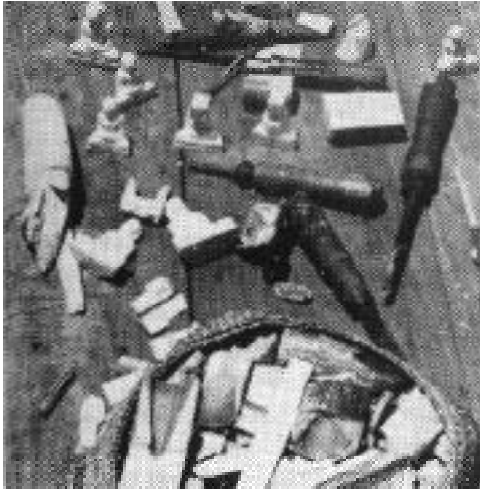
In 1979 the traders in Sri Lanka obtained almost all their ivory from illegal sources or from the owners of domesticated elephants. Poachers shot some of the 60 or so elephants killed illicitly each year in the 1970s but most were despatched by farmers and plantation owners protecting their crops.¹¹ The latter did not, however, usually kill tuskers but just chased them away.

The 575 domesticated elephants¹² provided the major portion of the ivory available to the Sri Lankan market.¹³ Their owners pruned tushes and tusks and removed the ivory from carcasses. In 1979 craftsmen paid between US\$ 142 and US\$ 171 a kg for raw ivory. This high price, twice as much as the world market figure, was due to the shortage of tuskers on the island, the limited amount of legally or illegally imported ivory and the fact that the government was not selling from its stockpile.

There were then approximately 107 artisans working ivory in Sri Lanka. The largest group, comprised of 45 men, worked in and



In the Kandy area domesticated elephants are regularly taken to rivers to be bathed and washed.



Raw ivory, Buddha statues and tools used by an ivory craftsman living near Kandy in 1979

best known for making elephant sculptures, many of which are encrusted with gemstones by jewellers who are mostly Muslims. It is not known for how long these elephant figures have been made in Galle but at the St. Louis (USA) Exposition in 1904 several of these ivory elephants, some adorned with elaborate mountings of gold and gemstones, were exhibited.¹⁴ The ivory historian, George Kunz, writing in the early part of the 20th century praised highly the workmanship at Galle:

The finest Cinghalese ivory carving is done at Point de Galle ... and here many highly artistic ivories have been produced, the designs being in some cases derived from specimens of old Buddhist art and others inspired by scenes of the life of to-day in Ceylon.¹⁵

Although the workmanship in Galle was not as superb as it had been, when we were in Sri Lanka the carving of the Perahera elephant sculptures was probably still the best work done on the island.¹⁶ In the late 1970s, a typical carver would take about five days to make an elephant 12.5 cm long by 10 cm high, using files, rasps and chisels. Normally he would sell it to a Muslim jeweller who would adorn it with gold. A local shortage of this metal often meant that the jeweller had to purchase US dollars on the black market and then, by fishing boat, seek a rendezvous with a steamer on which the hard currency could be exchanged for the gold necessary for his work.

After gold was applied to the elephant sculpture, a variety of local gemstones would be added: blue and pink sapphires, rubies and cat's-eyes. Finally, a fine wooden box upholstered in velvet and satin as made to hold the jewelled elephant. When we were on island, Perahera elephant sculptures were being offered

around the old town of Galle which has a long history of making jewellery and carving ivory. During the Portuguese era (1505-c.1640) this was the island's main port and during Dutch rule up to 1656 Galle was the capital. The ivory carvers of Galle are

retail sale in Galle, Kandy and Colombo for between US\$ 325 and US\$ 6,400, depending upon their size and the value of the gemstones.

Elephant bone, mostly from the leg and distinguishable from ivory by its yellowish colour, was also used by Galle craftsmen.¹⁷ As it cost only some US\$ 11 a kg there was a huge price difference between carvings in bone and those made of ivory. An undecorated model of an elephant 5 cm high sold for US\$ 13 if bone, some US\$ 65 if fashioned from ivory.

Carvers of genuine ivory earned in 1979 an average of about US\$ 40-50 a month, which was higher than the wage of a shop-girl in Colombo or a stenographer working for the government, but less than the salary of a Class II civil engineer employed by a state-owned enterprise. The ivory artisans, however, supplemented their income by selling ivory shavings waste to traditional medicine shops at US\$ 1 a kg and, on occasion, they or ivory traders would also sell elephant jaws bought from poachers. Local practitioners of medicine would prescribe the former for a customer suffering from skin disease, the latter provided a nostrum to alleviate the sufferings of mumps.¹⁸

The second major ivory carving centre on the island was Kandy, again a former capital of the country. As in Galle, most of the ivory craftsmen worked in the suburbs or outlying villages. One such village was Kalapura where the government built new houses and let them at subsidized rents to carvers and handicraft workers in order to encourage production in ivory, silver, copper and brass. We talked to one artisan who was working full time at carving ivory which he bought from a jeweller in Kandy at US\$ 170 a kg; he generally made small Buddha figures. A 5 cm high sculpture would take him about three days to carve and polish, the final lustre being obtained by burnishing with scouring powder and water applied with a fine sandpaper. Such a sculpture of Buddha would earn him US\$ 32 when sold to the government handicraft shop called Laksala in Kandy.



A Perahera elephant carving in ivory and encrusted with jewels Copyright



The manager of Laksala told us that he dealt with four artisans, three in the Kandy area and one in Colombo. He bought mostly Buddha figures and elephant sculptures because these were the items most in demand by his customers, 95% of whom were foreigners; all good quality pieces were purchased and he would buy more if they were available. The manager said that usually the shop put only a 25% mark-up on ivory items but was selling no more in 1979 than in 1974.

In the area of Kandy near the Queen's Hotel most of the jewellery shops sold ivory items. Perahera elephants were costly but the highest-priced modern piece we saw was a single tusk carved partly with elephants and encrusted with fine gemstones at US\$ 20,000. Some antique ivory pieces, such as a balance (US\$ 1,935) ear plugs, fan handles, combs, boxes and elephant figurines were also on offer and the quality of craftsmanship was high. In contrast, at the cheap end of the market in Kandy, the majority of the so-called ivory items displayed, such as animals and women's rings and bracelets, was not made out of genuine elephant ivory but from a variety of bones.

In addition to the concentrations in Galle and Kandy, craftsmen were to be found elsewhere on the island. Near Anuradhapura there was an ivory 'factory' which employed a few carvers

although most were working ebony due to the shortage of raw ivory. The workers had been recruited from Galle and were paid a monthly salary of US\$32 to US\$39 to make animal figurines, rings, bracelets and bangles. The 'factory' owner used these items as stock for his shop in one of the principal Anuradhapura hotels catering mainly for the foreign tourists visiting the magnificent and impressive ruins of this 2,000-year-old Buddhist ancient city.

Despite its long history by 1979 the Sri Lankan ivory industry was one of the smallest in Asia, the decline exacerbated from the middle 1960s by the shortage of raw material. Although the craftsmen in ivory, who were all men, still did most of their work with traditional tools instead of the electric dentist drills commonly used in northern India, Singapore, Hong Kong, Macao and China, the quality of workmanship had deteriorated. The decline in excellence over the past 80 years was undoubtedly due to the lack of patronage by the aristocrats and wealthy of Sri Lanka, and their replacement as clients by tourists from North America, Europe and Japan, amateur customers commonly possessing little knowledge of fine ivory carvings. However, Sri Lankan craftsmen still managed to produce one item carved from ivory which was both unique and of high quality: the jewel-encrusted Perahera elephant.

Table I
SRI Lankan Ivory Carving Centres in 1979

Place	Number of Artisans
Galle	45
Kandy	30
Anuradhapura	12
Colombo	10
(Elsewhere)	10
Total	107

Source: Survey taken by the authors

Table II
Retail Prices for Various Ivory Items in Sri Lanka In 1979

Item	Price in US\$
Ring (small)	1
Ear rings (pair)	3
Beaded necklace	18
Carved bangle (thin)	34
Buddhist sculpture	40
Elephant sculpture (without jewels)	65
Carved tusk, called an elephant bridge, 40 cms long	209
Ghanesh (elephant-headed Hindu god). 10cm tall on wooden stand	430
Jewelled ivory elephant sculptures	325 – 6,400
Elaborately carved tusk, encrusted with jewels	20,000

Source: Survey taken by the authors

References

- H.M.A.B. Herath, "Carving of an Ivory Comb: Saman or Kamadeva", Journal of the National Museums of Ceylon, Vol I, Part I (March 1965), p 20.
- P.H.D.H. de Silva, *Illustrated Guide to the Colombo Museum. Part I-G round Floor Galleries*, Colombo, 1976, p 75.
- Occasionally, some wealthy Sri Lankans obtained a pair of ivory tusks to put into their house for decoration.
- Robert Olivier, "Distribution and Status of the Asian Elephant". *Oryx*, Vol XIV, No 4 (November 1978), p 415.
- J. Emerson Tennent, *The Wild Elephant and the Method of Capturing and Taming it in Ceylon*, London, 1867, p6.
- Olivier, p414; and Tennent, p78.
- Interview with A.S.A. Packeer, Senior Deputy Director, Department of Wildlife Conservation, Colombo, 12 October 1979. This figure of approximately 2,500 elephants in Sri Lanka is the same given by Ainsley Fernando, Assistant Director, Elephant Conservation, Department of Wildlife Conservation (interviewed by EBM in Lausanne, Switzerland, 17 October 1989) and by Olivier (p 416).
- At a government ivory auction held 28 March 1951 59 kg from three pairs of tusks fetched 108 rupees a kg, compared with just 17 rupees a kg for tushes (B.W.M. Gooneratne, "The Ceylon Elephant: Elephas Maximus Zeylanicus. Its Decimation and Fight for Survival", *Loris*, Vol XIV, No 5, June 1978, p 269).
- Official published Customs figures; and Esmond Bradley Martin, *The Japanese Ivory Industry*, Tokyo, 1985, pp 17, 19 and 31.
- Interview with A.S.A. Packeer.
- Interviews with Robert Olivier and A.S.A. Packeer.
- The figure of 575 domesticated elephants for 1979 was given in the interview with A.S.A. Packeer and is close to the number Olivier quotes for 1969 (Olivier, p 414).
- A large tusker in 1979 was worth between US\$ 6,500 and US\$ 9,500 and could be hired for US\$ 10 to US\$20 per day, of which the owner received from a third to a half with the balance going to the mahout. (interviews with mahouts in Sri Lanka, October 1979). The larger the tusker, the more valuable he was for ceremonial occasions, and for this reason the biggest ones usually did not have their ivory trimmed.
- George Frederick Kunz, *Ivory and the Elephant in Art, in Archaeology, and in Science*, Garden City, New York, 1916, pp 117-118.
- Kunz, p 117.
- Sir Emerson Tennent wrote that the Muslims of Galle in the middle of the 19th century cut the raw tusks from local elephants into plates from which they made knife handles, card racks and 'presse-papiers' (Tennent, p 89).
- Bones from fish, dogs and cows were also carved in Sri Lanka during the late 1970s.
- The powder from the jaw is mixed with lemon juice and applied externally to the swollen areas.