To the makers of the ivory sculptures of Sierra Leone: a *memento mori* for you.
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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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CROSSING CULTURES:
AFRO-PORTUGUESE IVORIES OF FIFTEENTH- AND SIXTEENTH-CENTURY
SIERRA LEONE

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The Afro-Portuguese ivories—comprised of ornately carved ivory containers
for salt (called salt cellars), hunting horns (called oliphants), forks, spoons, and liturgical
vessels—were commissioned from artists working on the coast of what is now the country of
Sierra Leone in West Africa, by seafaring Portuguese patrons during the fifteenth and sixteenth
centuries. They subsequently resided in some of Europe's most elite private collections where
they have been valued for their fine craftsmanship, rare material, and exotic appearance, but
often misattributed as Indian or Turkish.

The project focuses not only on how the ivories came into existence during this early
modern cross-cultural encounter, but also on how they have been understood, and
misunderstood, by collectors and scholars over time. An examination of two ivory salt cellars
one of which has just been made public will facilitate an understanding of how the corpus of
Afro-Portuguese ivories helps broaden the study of the art of Africa to encompass art objects
made specifically for the global market. Their culturally hybrid features defied (and continue to
defy) categorization as either "European" or "African" in collections, museums, and academia.
They occupy an ambiguous space that is both African and European in character and embody a
nebulous cultural identity, hence the continuing complication and fascination with them and the moment in world history they represent.
CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

Albrecht Dürer, a painter and printmaker famous in his lifetime and beyond for elevating the status of the artist from manual laborer to esteemed creative intellectual, was interested, as most humanists of his time were, in a broad variety of human creative endeavors. During his travels in the Low Countries he wrote in a December 14, 1520, entry of his journal while he was in Antwerp, “I bought two ivory saltcellars from Calicut for 3 florins.”¹  “Calicut” refers to Kozhikod, a major western Indian port that traded with the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century. Although the Portuguese traded intensively with India and returned to Europe with many luxury goods, ivory salt cellars from India have never in fact existed. They were, however, documented by the Portuguese in West Africa during this exact time period.² Thus, art historians today can deduce that Dürer’s salt cellars almost certainly were of West African origin. Dürer had a collection of all manner of “intriguing things” for his collection of art objects in his home city of Nuremberg.³ Goris and Marlier, in the introduction to the translation of Durer’s diary, note that the artist had an abiding interest in all things foreign:

Anything exotic made a special appeal: the treasures brought back by the Spanish adventurers from Mexico and exhibited at the Palace in Brussels plunged him into such ecstasy that he could not find words to express his admiration. This fact is significant: It


tells us how Durer’s spirit was moved when faced with the unknown, whether it was something from some distant land or from some past time.4

Furthermore, Dürer himself said, “I marveled at the subtle Ingenia of men in foreign lands … [and] all kinds of wonderful objects of human use …”5 Surely, the exotic appeal of the “Calicut” African salt cellars he bought was not lost on Dürer, the consummate humanist intellectual.

In the first systematic modern appraisal of the objects, a 1959 publication of the ivories in the collection of the British Museum, William Fagg named them “Afro-Portuguese ivories.” He coined this term in reference to the intricately carved ivory lidded containers called salt cellars and pyxes, table utensils, and hunting horns called oliphants (Figures 1 through 5). These objects were, we now understand, made in Africa for Portuguese clients between the late fifteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries.6 The name alludes to the hybrid nature of the works—they inherently encompass both European and African-derived stylistic forms and iconography and resulted from the creative input of both Portuguese patrons and African artists. Although Portuguese visitors would later commission works in ivory from Benin and Kongo carvers (Figures 6 and 7) further east and south along the coast of Africa, the ivories from Sierra Leone represent possibly the earliest and most prolific phase of production of African art for export to Europe in the first moment of the pre-colonial contact period7 (see maps, Figures 8, 9, and 10).

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5 Albrecht Dürer, Diary of His Journey to the Netherlands, p. 64.


7 According to Bassani and Fagg, Africa and the Renaissance, pp. 225-233; Bassani, “Additional Notes on the Afro-Portuguese Ivories,” African Arts 27(3) (July 1994): 35-36; and Bassani, African Art and Artefacts in European Collections 1400-1800 (London: The British Museum Press, 2000), p. 285, there are known to be sixty two salt cellars (19 complete or nearly complete; 24 with lid or entire upper bowl portion missing; 9 whose finial, lid, or bowl only survive; 1 Janus head serving as a dagger handle but which could originally have been a lid finial; and 4 that only survive as drawings or inventory records); thirty nine oliphants (32 complete; 1 that has been augmented with a silver flared end; 3 that have been broken and converted into powder flasks with metal fittings; and 3 that survive only as drawings, photo, or inventory records); two dagger hilts; three forks; eight spoons. With the addition
In the body of literature about these objects, the term “Sapi-Portuguese” ivories refers specifically to the ivories whose origins have been traced to the coast of Sierra Leone. Because the term “Sapi” is one that was ascribed by the Portuguese to a variety of ethno-linguistic groups they encountered in this area and not one, cohesive group, it is perhaps not the most accurate way to refer to these particular objects. The movements of populations during this and subsequent time periods have made it difficult to identify who exactly comprised the Sapi. Nevertheless, it does seem likely based on the few Portuguese records from that time that the makers of the ivory sculptures were the Bullom who occupied Sherbro Island and some surrounding mainland areas in southern Sierra Leone and possibly the neighboring Temne people. Because of the uncertainty of the makers’ identity and exact ethnic origin, a more practical designation for these ivories is “Sierra Leone-Portuguese.”

The Sierra Leone-Portuguese ivories are forms with both utilitarian and decorative functions. They were types of accessories that only elite Europeans used. For example, salt cellars (Figure 1) indicate that their owners had access to so much salt (a rare commodity in the sixteenth century) that they could make use of a large container in which to display it on the dining table. By storing and displaying these often ornately crafted vessels in cabinets of curiosity, the objects were removed from their ostensible practical uses as dining (salt cellars and utensils), hunting (oliphants), and liturgical accessories (pyxes)—three major aspects of early modern European elite lifestyles—and inserted into a context of exhibition and aesthetic

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9 See Valentim Fernandes, Description de la Côte Occidentale d'Afrique; Curnow, “Alien or Accepted: African Perspectives on the Western ‘Other’ in Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century Art,” Society for Visual Anthropology Review 6(1) (Spring 1990):38-44; and Bassani and Fagg, Africa and the Renaissance, p. 61.
contemplation. Their potential utility was overlaid with a primary function as a status symbol and precious object of aesthetic contemplation.

While we can place the ivories in their European context of collections and utilitarian objects that served as symbols of social, economic, and therefore political status, what if any African intention can be seen in the forms and surface decorations of the ivories? Can the ivories be read as more than African interpretations of European tastes and styles, and interpreted instead as the embodiment of complex transcultural negotiations, not only between patron and producer, but also between the objects themselves and their life stories beyond the sixteenth century?

Once removed from the context of their producers and regardless of where they actually originated, the objects were clearly initially recognized by Dürer, one of Europe’s elite humanist thinkers, as fine souvenir collectibles from a distant realm. Both the sculptures, exotic to the first Europeans who collected them, and by extension their African makers, join the cast of characters of the story of the intellectual and aesthetic cultural movement into the early modern era. This period of time was characterized by major shifts in technologies of communication and transportation (i.e. the mass reproducibility of printed material and maritime navigational tools that enabled a literally broader and more immediate view of the world).

The seemingly minor moment recorded in the diary of a prominent early modern artist marks a crucial point in the history of perhaps the earliest African art form made exclusively for export. Thus began the circulation on the world stage (that is, outside Portugal itself) of one of the earliest tangible testaments to African craftsmanship and creativity and also a foreshadowing of the ability of images to flow through and alter the boundaries of cultural identity.
Many collectors and scholars have recognized the singularity, technical mastery, and aesthetic significance of the Sierra Leone ivories and have considered them prime examples of Portuguese cultural exchange with some of the first peoples they encountered in West Africa during an early phase of the early modern era. For example, Valentim Fernandes, a Moravian living in Portugal who published an account of the experiences of Alvaro Velho, Portuguese resident of West Africa from 1499-1507, recorded in 1506-10: “In Serra Lyoa the men are very clever and inventive, and make really marvelous objects out of ivory of anything you ask them to do, for instance they make spoons, or salt-cellars, or dagger-handles, or other subtle work.”  

Damião de Gois said in 1542, “…Ivory also comes from the land of the Blacks (vases and images that are made with a certain art).”  

Centuries later, Susan Vogel admired them in her essay for the catalogue that accompanied an important exhibition of the ivories, *Africa and the Renaissance: Art in Ivory*:

> The Afro-Portuguese ivories are rare and precious not only as works of art, but as the only surviving African documents of this earliest contact. At that time as never since, the exchange between Africans and Europeans was relatively benign and untroubled by the history of domination and exploitation that followed.  

While Vogel’s assessment of the period as “relatively benign and untroubled” is perhaps oversimplified, she is certainly correct to identify the ivories as exemplary documents of a moment that sparked the historic trans-Atlantic colonialism that followed.

The possibilities for new concrete information about the ivories are few, yet the conversation about the historical and aesthetic implications of this corpus of objects in the

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process of cultural transformation that continues today has remained dormant for too long. Blier has called for a re-examination of the Afro-Portuguese ivories: "Renowned for centuries as objects of great artistic skill and beauty, the African ivories now also can be admired for the provocative insights they encode about exchange between Africans and Europeans during the initial period of contact." How, she asks, can we mine these luxury trade goods for information about the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century’s role in the process of large-scale globalization that characterizes the modern world?

A visual culture studies approach offers a new way to illuminate the “cultural biography” of the Sierra Leone-Portuguese ivories, the moment of their creation, and the subsequent path of their existence. The discipline of art history with its origins in European eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theory differs from visual culture as a tactic. Visual culture studies encompasses not only the cultural hybridity of images and their flow among and across cultures but also a melding of various disciplines, including art history, anthropology, political science, religion, and any study of human existence that manifests itself visually. The field of visual culture studies, which involves the study not only of the objects of traditional art history, but of all things visual, broadens the field of subjects to encompass visual expressions beyond the fine arts. As important to visual culture is the tendency to visualize concepts that are not inherently visual. Wealth, prestige, and social status, for example, are intangible ideas relative to cultural context. Visual and material manifestations of these social constructions, such as the intricately

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carved ivory containers discussed here, are the location of manufacture and reinforcement of the reality of such intangible concepts. The Afro-Portuguese ivories represent an ideal case to study the operation of these concepts in action.

Nicholas Mirzoeff, a visual culture theorist, considers the visual conceptualization of everyday life to be at the center of understanding culture in the postmodern world. He describes the conditions of modern life as essentially visual manifestations of the “constant swirl of the global village.” Though he writes from a decidedly postmodern, Euro-American perspective, his allusion to the “global village” is a reference to the modern era, presuming that as the world became more globalized through technologies of communication and transportation, the perception of the world as a vast unknowable sphere shrinks to one of short distances and many merging fields of vision. As the Portuguese seafarers and coastal African people they encountered gained access to their own early modern global village, they found ways to materialize their experiences, one of which was the cooperative creation of carved ivory objects for export.

Many details of the Sierra Leone-Portuguese ivories, Suzanne Blier proposes, offer tantalizing suggestions of what could be at once read as Portuguese desire for exotica and as coastal West Africans’ visual interpretation of to their own world and their relationship to their foreign patrons. Perhaps Blier’s call for a rejuvenation of the study of Afro-Portuguese ivories can best be accomplished through a visual culture framework rather than a strictly art historical one. Claire Farago, in her 1995 collection of essays, *Reframing the Renaissance: Visual Culture in Europe and Latin America 1450-1650*, calls for a “new program of study of Renaissance art

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focused on the migration of visual culture and the conditions of reception.” Like Blier’s call to historians of African art, Farago’s is an appeal for historians of early modern Europe to join the interdisciplinary debates of visual cultural studies. Because the Sierra Leone-Portuguese ivories are African innovations resulting directly from the period of first direct and sustained interaction with Europeans, they provide a means of answering both calls for re-examination at once.

Notably, the objects themselves are the most reliable and tangible record of the brief moment just before the period of the cross-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism. At a time before the notions of “culture,” “tradition,” and “authenticity” carried the overwhelmingly heavy socio-political baggage that they do in the postmodern, post-colonial age, the Afro-Portuguese ivories represent some of the first visual documents upon which modern scholars can base further understanding of how the present period of widespread transcultural exchange began.

Because of their hybrid origin and style, these objects have until relatively recently been excluded from the study of African art history, which until the mid- to late-twentieth century concerned itself mainly with sculpture made for traditional indigenous use. As issues of hybridity and globalization have become central to the study of art history, and particularly contemporary African art, the reexamination of these early examples of hybridized, globalized art can shed light on the current art historical moment.

The Afro-Portuguese ivories can now be seen as paradigmatic for the early development of museology, cultural anthropology, and art history as humanist disciplines. Just as Dürer incorrectly attributed his ivory salt cellars, scholars continue to grapple not only with the ivories’ identities but also interrelated issues of “culture,” “tradition,” and “authenticity” that surround

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these objects. The focus here will be to bring a provocative new example—a heretofore unrecorded salt cellar—into the corpus of Sierra Leone-Portuguese ivories, and to fill out the larger context of the transcultural transmission of finely carved ivory sculptures made by African artists, exported by the Portuguese, and eventually disseminated to collections throughout the world.

Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai proposes that “value is embodied in commodities that are exchanged … commodities, like persons, have social lives.” The following chapters will follow the social life of the highly-valued Sierra Leone-Portuguese ivories. Chapter 2 addresses the historical moment and the conditions surrounding the conception and first exchange of the ivories from both the Portuguese perspective and the African. Because the ivories are simultaneously and inherently from Sierra Leone, Portugal, and somewhere between cultures and continents, it is wise to choose multiple cultural perspectives (or at least speculate about and consider their impact) and not limit the study to an either/or, us/them approach as has been a tendency in past research. A close reading of the population of lança\#\#ados, or those who “cast themselves away” from Portugal to settle on mainland West Africa, brings an element that was both Portuguese and African, hence creating new cultural identities much like the ivories themselves. An examination of the history of African ivory (and by extension, elephants) as a prestige material for both Africans and Europeans is followed by a summary of the only known group of objects, soapstone, wooden, and clay figurative sculptures made roughly contemporaneously for local ownership (Figures 11 through 13). The nomoli and pomtan, as the figures are called by the people who live in the area today, are one of the only indigenous forms

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that we have to compare to the ivories and are therefore important in the speculative reconstruction of their African perspective. Chapter 2 closes with a general discussion of African and Portuguese aesthetic values and the specific conditions surrounding them and the functions of their forms as both utilitarian objects and transcultural aesthetic emblems.

Chapter 3 examines the social lives of the ivories once they were exchanged out of their original context of creation (Africa, by way of Portugal), and into the global collecting and academic markets. The problems of lost records, misattribution, and eventual integration into the field of African art history (as opposed to the alternative being forgotten in a nebulous past), despite or perhaps because of their inherently multicultural character, demonstrates the changing attitudes toward these ivories. The chapter concludes with an overview of exhibitions that have included the Afro-Portuguese ivories and the ways and contexts in which they have been situated in these exhibitions. The public exposure generated by these exhibitions indicates public interest in this early moment of the globalization.

A fourth chapter that examines two specific salt cellars from Sierra Leone, one well-known (Figure 1), the other the newest addition to the corpus (Figure 14), will provide a means of reading the social life of the ivories as a group and illuminate them as the embodiment of their transcultural conception, transport, and negotiation through space, time and social circles. Both salt cellars described here exemplify the cooperation between patron and artist, merging Portuguese and African cultural identities, while remaining as two examples of the only material records of this long-past and briefly synchronistic collaboration.
CHAPTER 2
HISTORY OF THE SIERRA LEONE-PORTUGUESE IVORIES

Historical Circumstances of the Ivories’ Creation

The ivory sculptures carved by African artists living on the coast of what is now Sierra Leone for Portuguese patrons between the 1490s and the mid-1500s\(^1\) occupy a gray area between local and global markets and cultures at a crucial moment in history, the reverberations of which are still felt today. The Sierra Leone-Portuguese ivories are the sole concrete visual evidence of a brief but significant moment in proto-colonial world history. At this time Europeans, experiencing what is popularly known as “the Renaissance,” (a renewed interest in Classical Roman and Greek cultural ideals and humanistic inquiry that began in Italy and quickly spread to other parts of Europe) began exploring the possibilities for imperial, economic, and cultural growth, with Portugal taking an early lead in the nascent process of large-scale maritime exploration.

In 1462, Portuguese seafarers first traveled to the western coast of Africa and disembarked on the coast of what is now Sierra Leone. At this time, Portugal was beginning its ascent as a leading economic power in Europe, and exploration of and trade with distant lands and peoples supported its economic and political agenda. Portugal sought gold and spices initially, and when they found ivory in greater abundance on the Guinea coast around Sierra Leone, they took advantage of the opportunity. Another commodity sought by Africans and Europeans alike at that time was labor. African rulers with whom the Portuguese established diplomatic relationships, and traded in a variety of goods, including slaves (either criminals or war prisoners), carved and uncarved ivory, and gold they obtained from the Futa Djallon region in exchange for luxury goods such as cotton cloth, copper and copper alloys. Over the following

eighty to ninety years, and perhaps into the early seventeenth century, the Portuguese engaged in trade of various commodities with people whom they called “the Kingdom of the Sapes.” It is unknown precisely who these people were, however, most scholars agree that they were the ancestors of modern-day Temne, Bullom (who lived on Sherbro Island and the surrounding mainland coasts), and possibly Baga (who were probably located further north than the others and were never mentioned as ivory carvers) and Kissi (who may have been located further inland, beyond the coastal areas where the Portuguese ventured). Additionally, the Portuguese probably misinterpreted the nature of the social and political situation in this area, which was not a “kingdom” in the European sense, but rather “a series of chiefdoms or lineages united by a common culture” and several languages and dialects.

During the sixteenth century, partially as a result of either sudden or gradual encroachments of inland people whom the Portuguese called the “Manes” or “Manis,” the earlier populations of coastal Sierra Leone were disrupted and their trade systems with the Portuguese were transformed, possibly contributing to the end of ivory carving for foreign markets.

Another pivotal factor that contributed to the end of production of both the soapstone figures and the export ivory sculpture was the waning of Portuguese economic power as Spain’s global reach extended with the “discovery” of the Americas. Portugal moved further south and east toward the kingdoms of Benin, Kongo, and further around the continent to the Indian Ocean in search of further economic advantage. The consolidated networks of indigenous power allowed...
Portuguese later encountered in these areas were better able to meet the growing demand for slaves, first in Europe and increasingly in the Americas as Spain and England expanded their colonial industries and the need for cheap labor grew. Some cite the trade in raw, unworked ivory as a catalyst for and contributor to the major rise in the quickly expanding (and ultimately devastating) slave trade. Ivory tusks were often transported to the coast by individuals captured for enslavement from the inland hinterland forests where both the ivory and slaves were collected. Both the raw ivory and the enslaved Africans were destined for circulation in the cross-continental economies of European empire building. These two commodities played a part in furthering both European, and (to a more localized extent) African programs of imperialism, nationalism and mercantilism.4

Peter Mark attributes the end of export ivory carving, which he estimates to have been in the early seventeenth century, to the influx of African ivory in European markets and also the over-hunting of the largest elephants, which would have restricted ivory carving to small tusks from small elephants. Mark asserts that small tusks would have been especially limiting for the production of salt cellars [which were carved from the solid narrower sections of large tusks]. Since no mention of ivory “saleiros” appears in early seventeenth Portuguese documentation, Mark concludes that their production must have ended sometime before 1600, but could have gone past c. 1530, the date proposed by Bassani and Fagg, and c. 1550, the date proposed by Curnow.5

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Why the Sierra Leone-Portuguese Ivories Are Not “Tourist Art”

Not only did Portuguese global exploration aim for economic and political power of the royal house of Aviz, but it also resulted in a smaller scale exchange of cultural goods. The problematic term “tourist art” has often been used in association with the Afro-Portuguese ivories. If we followed Nelson Graburn’s framework, the Afro-Portuguese ivories would occupy a space in what he called societies of the “fourth world,” minority societies that occupy interstitial spaces within first world (i.e. Western) systems. This is a useful idea, but though the terms “fourth world” and “tourist art” implies inferiority and undermines the cultural value of the people and objects associated with such labels. By referring to minority societies as “fourth world,” Graburn conforms to the social hierarchy implied by such well known social constructions as “first” (i.e. industrialized and civilized) and “third” (i.e. underdeveloped) world countries.

Furthermore, as Curnow points out, the Portuguese did not travel to Africa for leisurely vacation (the concept of “vacation” as defined in modern terms did not exist yet) but for commerce, therefore, “‘tourist art’ is … ill-favored because it has, to art historians at least, a pejorative meaning; tourist art has been perceived as being of inferior quality and somehow a bastardization of ‘pure’ art. ‘Traveler’s art’ would perhaps solve the nomenclature problem …” This is still a problematic term since it denies the (non-traveling) producers a role, although they were participants in the decision to export their wares. Nevertheless, European elite cultural

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interest in the first “traveler’s art” from Africa to enter the global market of collecting were directed toward these ivory carvings of the highest quality material, craftsmanship, and innovation of form. In any case, perhaps a better way to label art made for foreign audiences by local artists would be *traveling* art. This places the active descriptor on the art object itself, rather than limiting it to just the producer or consumer and avoids the negative connotations of “tourist” or “fourth world” art.

**Collecting in Early Modern Europe**

Some of the earliest European destinations for these art objects from distant lands were the *Kunst- and Wunderkammern*, precursors to modern museum collections. They were collections of natural and man-made objects assembled during the early modern era of humanistic inquiry not only by European nobility, but also by the wealthier bourgeoisie whose social status was rising due to their increasing material wealth and access to intellectual social circles.⁹

*Wunderkammer* collections were early modern attempts represent a “microcosm of God’s universe.”¹⁰ Anything that was deemed to embody the “marvelous” aesthetic, or “anything that lay outside the ordinary,” was collected, categorized, and displayed for the insight that could be gained from such groupings of objects, as well as for the benefit of guests visiting one’s private collection.¹¹

These early elaborate collections were of course not open to the general public, but the display of valuable and “wondrous” things (to use Dürer’s word) by European elites for their peers was central to reinforcing the social position both of the practice of collecting and of the

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practitioners themselves. Objects were categorized under the headings of “supernatural,” “natural,” and “artificial” (i.e. manmade).\textsuperscript{12} The Afro-Portuguese ivories embodied for Europeans numerous attributes of the “marvelous,” a multifaceted quality for which humanists strove in collecting natural and manmade objects: the substance of ivory as a rare and natural material carved by virtuoso foreign hands resulted in “surprisingly unexpected” and exotic designs.\textsuperscript{13} The mutual cultural curiosity and economic symbiosis that characterized the first encounter between coastal Africans and Portuguese patrons, and perhaps their Luso-African negotiators, the \textit{lançados}, could also have been thought of as “surprisingly unexpected” and “marvelous.” Both the coastal African societies and Portuguese \textit{lançados} were surprisingly amenable to and actively interested in interacting, trading, and developing lasting relationships with one another, which contrasts with later relationships between colonizing Europeans and the African populations they tried to subjugate.

African ivories were included in collections of Portuguese and Spanish aristocracies, the Medici family, Albrecht Dürer, and the Elector of Saxony in Dresden.\textsuperscript{14} The spread of trade in African carved ivories from Sierra Leone, then Portugal, and finally to Spain, Italy, and northern Europe indicates the broad exotic appeal foreign artworks had in these elite circles. The story of how they have been understood and misunderstood in academic literature will be discussed in Chapter 3.

\textbf{The Salt Cellar as a Signifier of High Social Status in European Culture}

Cast gold, silver, and gemstone decorated salt cellars, ornate and sculptural containers for salt, were used as centerpieces on tables of European princes and kings. Salt was a precious

\textsuperscript{12} Kenseth, \textit{The Age of the Marvelous}, pp. 31-39.


\textsuperscript{14} Blier, “Imaging Otherness,” p. 375.
commodity and acquisition of it a prime economic agenda for both existing West African trade networks and European empires alike, including the Portuguese. The often-cited Cellini salt cellar (Figure 15) cast in gold, made between 1543 and 1544, represents an apex of both artistic virtuosity and grand positioning of salt on the tables of nobility (in this case, France’s King Francis I). Benvenuto Cellini was an artist concerned with self-promotion and a burgeoning cult of personality growing around artists as singular authors or inventors of objects.15

Conversely, the Afro-Portuguese salt cellars of Sierra Leone created during roughly the same period leave few traces of authorship, though it is not clear that at the time whether there was a focus on the individual artists. There are numerous reasons for the lack of written documentation of authorship, the main reason being that African artists worked totally outside the European system of artistic production. Recording written accounts of their own work as European artists such as Cellini and Dürer did was not an element of their artistic practice. Additionally, the Portuguese visitors, who did have means of written documentation, either chose not to take detailed account of who made specific works and how they were made or lost them in the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which destroyed all customs records from the era except one ledger recording imports from Africa between 1504 and 1505.16

Based on the fact that the ivories existed in some of Europe’s most elite collections, intermingled without distinction from exotica collected from other locations, it may have been enough for the first European collectors that they were made in exotic lands and acted as signifiers of contact and possession of prestige objects from afar. Early art historical inquiry joined hands with early collecting practices to simultaneously seek individual authorship in

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works they identified as European, while works of “exotica” were relegated to anonymity from the outset.

**Lançados: Those Who “Threw Themselves” Among Africans**

The lançados were Portuguese men who settled on the coast and assimilated into the culture despite a Portuguese law against settling on mainland Africa intended to preserve royal monopoly of trade. The derogatory name, lançado, is a past participle from the Portuguese verb se lançar, “to cast oneself away.” Lançados were a mediating factor between transcontinental Portuguese traders and indigenous African artists as well as being traders themselves.

Portuguese settled legally on the islands of Cape Verde, which they found to be uninhabited, and mediated trade between indigenous people on the mainland and Portuguese traveling expeditions for some time; many of the lançados had originally lived in Cape Verde or were related in some way to Cape Verdean settlers or their descendants.\(^{17}\) The law against mainland settlement reflected “the concern … to put a halt to the activities of the lançados … who reached agreements with the African rulers to settle on the mainland, adopt local customs, and set up as independent traders.”\(^{18}\) In the interest of greater economic opportunity and independence from Portuguese taxation, lançados settled permanently on the coast, were initiated into indigenous secret societies, and married influential local women.\(^{19}\) Hence, they generated a new multiracial population segment who spoke both Portuguese and local languages, adorned themselves with both European dress and African scarification patterns, and were thus

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ostensibly able to operate comfortably between indigenous artists and the Portuguese travelers who commissioned the ivories for export. 20

Were the lançados’ motivations for breaking the Portuguese law and becoming literally outlaws purely economic? Or were there social and political factors as well? Some have cited religious persecution as a motivating factor to leave Portugal behind forever: “And it was true that many of the lançados came from the fringes of society, especially the ‘new Christians,’ the Jews who had been converted by force.”21 This would explain the ambivalence of Portuguese enforcement of the law: on the one hand they did not want trade competition hindering their profits, but on the other hand the Portuguese authorities (and the Inquisition in both Portugal and Spain) had no desire to allow untrue Christians to remain in Portugal. No official records of the lançados were kept in official Portuguese accounts, or anywhere else, an indication that the Portuguese did not want officially to acknowledge their activities or even their existence.

Labelle Prussin recently published significant research on Jewish contributions to the traditional arts of west Africa, and the lançados, though not specifically mentioned in her article, could very well play a pivotal role in that story as well. Prussin discusses the early records of Muslim intellectuals, such as Leo Africanus, as well as various Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, French, and British pre-colonial and colonial accounts of coastal settlements of Jewish and New Christian traders. New Christians were people of Jewish descent whose ancestors, or who themselves converted to Catholicism in an attempt to avoid persecution. She notes the “complex, diverse, and paradoxical roles fulfilled by Jews in their relations with local rulers on


the West African coast.”22 The fact that the lançados were literally outcasts in the eyes of Portuguese officials leads one to the possibility that at least some of them were driven to settle on the African coast not only for the adventure and trade opportunities, but also because they were literally cast out of Portugal by the forces of the Inquisition in Europe. Were they willingly moving toward an opportunity for a new life after being expelled from their old one in Portugal?

To what extent did the Portuguese who commissioned the ivories interact directly with African artists? To what extent did the lançados act as intermediaries between the traveling Portuguese and their adopted cultures? Blier asserts that the uniform rendering of facial types of both Africans and Portuguese, especially as they appear in three dimensions on the salt cellars, indicates that the artists had little or no direct contact with Europeans and therefore little point of reference for comparing or contrasting Caucasoid and Negroid features.23 Conversely, perhaps the artists did have more contact with Portuguese, as Curnow believes,24 but did not perceive major facial differences, thereby making the Portuguese appear more like themselves. Regardless, it is not possible to determine precisely how the Portuguese and Africans did or did not interact during this period without oral or written histories. Such a vast period of time has elapsed as to make it virtually impossible to reconstruct living conditions on the coast. The presence of the lançados make close personal contact and conflation of cultural signifiers at least more possible than it was in Kongo or Benin, adding a layer of tantalizing transcultural possibilities to the production of Sierra Leone-Portuguese ivories.

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24 Curnow, “Alien or Accepted,” p. 40.
The History of Ivory as a Prestige Material: Africa and Europe

While elephants are found in both Asia and Africa, the tusks of the African elephant have historically been the most desirable due to their significantly larger size, harder texture, and purer white color. Monumental chryselephantine (gold and ivory) sculpture was a specialty of the fifth century BCE Greek architect of the Parthenon, Phidias. His thirty nine-foot statue of Athena Parthenos, for which the temple bearing her name was built, was so impressive and precious that it has remained one of his most famous works despite destroyed in antiquity. The contraction of trade networks for African ivory that have long been in place are described by Doran Ross:

Roman records document the lavish use of ivory in the classical era. It was this appetite for ivory that ultimately led to the extinction of the elephant in North African by late Roman times. Thus with the exception of small quantities traded from Ethiopia, southern Sudan, and parts of Somalia, [elephant] ivory was relatively unavailable in Europe for a period of roughly a thousand years, until the Portuguese explorations down the west coast of Africa.

Contemporaneous with the Greeks and Romans was the Nok culture (c.500 BCE-200 CE) of northern Nigeria, where a small (7 inches) ceramic elephant’s head has been found. Just as Sierra Leone’s stone figures were mostly found without archaeological context in more recent times, so was this ceramic head. Despite this loss of contextual information, its existence indicates the elephant’s importance to one of the West Africa’s earliest civilizations.

The morphology of elephant ivory is uniquely suited for especially minute and intricate carving. Shoshani explains the reasons in detail:

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26 St Aubyn, ed., Ivory: An International History, p. 44-45.


In cross section, a tusk exhibits a pattern of lines that intersect each other to form small diamond-shaped areas visible with the naked eye… This pattern has been called ‘engine turning’ and is unique to [elephants]… For example, the ivory from western and central Africa…is considered the best of all ivories because it is the hardest yet very elastic, and thus more suitable for carving than that of the Bush African or the Asian.29

Because of the coveted physical properties of the West African ivory the observed for the first time in such wondrous quantity, it is no wonder that as Europeans gained naval access to the direct source of the material, they seized the opportunity. Europeans were not the only people who valued elephant ivory; Africans who inhabited the same areas as the elephants valued ivory not just for its “hardness, color, and luster, [but also] for its obvious identification with the elephant, [which] has been the prerogative of chieftaincy or leadership in many parts of Africa.”30 Of the Temne, Fernandes says “And if they kill an elephant or buffalo they send them to the king who eats them with the elders of the village before the idol.”31 Fernandes did not mention the tusks of the elephant, but it can be inferred that they could have also been the prerogative of the elite class for the Temne as well. Material culture among the interrelated groups in this coastal trading area could have shared many values, including the use of elephant ivory in association with the elite. Wealth, prestige, and social status are dynamic ideas defined by cultural context; visual and material manifestations of these ideas reinforce their reality. Thus, all the carved Afro-Portuguese ivories inherently visually and materially embody the intangibleness of both African and European social status through their precious material alone.

By the sixteenth century and beyond, unfortunately “more ivory was exported from the continent

30 Ross, “Imagining Elephants,” p. 23.
than was ever used by Africans themselves … The standard practice was to use slaves [as porters to carry ivory from the interior] that could be sold upon reaching the coast.”

For Europeans, ivory “has long been a rare and valued material for carving. Ivory was a favorite material of the ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean, and its popularity continued in Roman art and in the art of Byzantium.” Furthermore, as Kessler states:

… like gold, bronze, and porphyry, ivory also retained political connotations through its sumptuousness and history in imperial service; and, although much ivory was delicately polychromed and, as in antiquity, detailed in gold, it conveyed fleshiness and invited handling. For those reasons, it was often used to portray Christ … Many materials were selected because they seemed, in their very nature, to negotiate between the world of matter and the world of spirit (gold, gems, and glass, for instance), which were continuously being transformed in changing light.

The African ivory carvings discussed here would have conformed to these spiritual attitudes of Europeans toward the material of ivory, as well as to expectations imposed in some of the decorative programs, such as scenes from books of hours, crosses, and biblical motifs. The Sierra Leone artists may have also held attitudes equating the material of elephant ivory with the spiritual power of the elephant itself.

**Sculptural Production in Sierra Leone for Local Markets: Soapstone, Wood, and Clay**

Following Fagg’s initial hypothesis, the most often-cited indigenous sources or are steatite figures called *nomoli* by modern Mende who find them buried in the ground along the coast (Figure 11) and also called *pomtan* by the modern Kissi and Temne, which have been unearthed further inland. The Portuguese recognized the technical skill of indigenous artists. Little

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remains, however, either physically or in written accounts, of the objects in which the Portuguese first observed African artists’ facility and aesthetic merit. While they commissioned works in ivory were brought to Europe and preserved in collections, purely indigenous art forms were not.

Contemporaneous objects made of wood and clay are now known, but they have been also accidentally discovered and only occasionally excavated archaeologically. Thus, much contextual information is lost. Valentim Fernandes, who wrote of his encounters with coastal people between 1506 and 1510, mentioned the presence of wood, ceramic, stone and ivory carvings, mostly referred to as “idols.” Fernandes, who was not a lançado and, therefore, perhaps had little or no “insider” knowledge to allow for more nuanced analysis, does allude extensively to pre-existing artistic practices in the area. The exact purpose, appearance, style, and context of these art forms remain a mystery.

Artworks in wood and ceramics, especially, have eroded and broken over time due to the relative fragility of materials. While no ivory pieces from this historical period made for indigenous use have been found extant within this region of West Africa itself, a few horns with side-blown mouthpieces have been found centuries later in European collections. Unfortunately, the Lisbon earthquake obliterated any further clues about the possible indigenous ivory horn prototypes for the oliphants made for export. Therefore, it is difficult if not impossible to ascertain if any iconographic elements may have been transferred to the ivories

36 Christopher Fyfe, *Sierra Leone Inheritance*, pp. 22-30.
37 Fernandes, *Description de la Côte Occidentale d’Afrique*, pp. 68-105.
38 See Lamp, “House of Stones,” and “Ancient Wood Figures from Sierra Leone.”
made for export from works made for indigenous use, such as soapstone, wooden, and clay figures.

The figures on the ivories, especially the undercut, fully three-dimensional figures on the salt cellars, bear facial similarities with the soapstone figures. Figures in both media have distinctively bulbous eyes, widely flared nostrils, and full lips. Presumably, motifs such as snakes, crocodiles, birds, and nude women are also locally derived, although the precise message they convey is impossible to determine conclusively. A Sierra Leone horn at the Musée de l’Homme (now the Musée du Quai Branly) bears a side-blown mouthpiece, a figure seated on the narrow end, and crocodiles carved along the wider end with no recognizable European motifs.41 This horn could have been made in a purely local style and could represent one of the only ivory examples to which we can refer for recognizably “African” motifs.

Suzanne Preston Blier proposes several tentative possibilities for determining the meanings of other African-derived motifs.42 Throughout West Africa in general, snakes have represented messengers between the human and spirit realms and their downward dangling positions on many of the salt cellars could indicate that similar iconography could have a similar meaning or intention in the ivories.43 Crocodiles also carry widespread symbolism: they are powerful amphibious predators and could play a similar role as the snakes, especially on the lid of a salt cellar which depicts crocodiles devouring nude women.44 This type of motif is not characteristic of portrayals of human relationships to nature in European depictions.

42 See Blier, “Imaging Otherness.”
43 Blier, “Imaging Otherness,” 393.
44 See Bassani and Fagg, *Africa and the Renaissance*, cat. no. 32.
Cross-Continental Aesthetic Migrations: Collaborative Efforts

Portuguese visitors began commissioning ivory carvings from African artists working in what scholars have assumed to be pre-existing canons which the Portuguese patrons and the aristocratic Europeans who later owned them appreciated them for their sophisticated technicality and exotic visual appeal. What exactly these pre-existing ivory carvings made for local use looked like is unknown since none are extant.

Among the forms that the Portuguese requested were salt cellars, oliphants, pyxes, and eating utensils such as spoons and forks. Each of these forms was readily recognized in a European context as a signifier of elite social and economic status that are at once decorative and ostensibly utilitarian in function. The salt cellars with flared bases closely resemble European lidded metal cups (Figure 16), but the porosity of the ivory and delicate projections that comprise the decorative programs on the salt cellars preclude their practical use as containers for drinking liquids (Figure 17). For African artists, perhaps they were little more than novel forms made to cater to a new and lucrative market. Conversely, Grottanelli hypothesizes that the form of salt cellars such as one at the L. Pigorini Museum in Rome (Figure 1), for example, predate the arrival of the Portuguese, and in fact could conform to a “genuine tradition” rather than a novel hybrid style based on their stylistic difference from the structures, material, and “general conception” of other European salt cellars.45 If Vogel is correct in her assertion that this shape is related to a gourd or ceramic vessel atop a cylindrical pedestal construction common in many West African cultures, then perhaps the skilled maneuvering of ivory into complex vessels did in fact pre-date the arrival of the Portuguese.46

Oliphants, or hunting horns, were also prestige items for Europeans. As Bassani and Fagg discuss in their 1988 catalogue, horns were used by Europeans during hunts to signal to the rest of the party that the prey had been killed. 47 The images carved in relief on the sides of the African oliphants depict hunting scenes, including men in European dress with European weapons and usually stags as prey among verdant settings. Bassani and Fagg present several highly convincing visual comparisons between hunting scenes from the margins of books of hours and the adornment of several of the oliphants. In the transfer from two- to three-dimensional rendering, carvers seem to have eliminated the illusion of receding space in the prints in favor of stylized leaves and branches and uniform stippling of figures rather than stippling and hatching as a shading device in the prints (Figures 18 and 19). Additional European motifs that appear on oliphants are those related to Portuguese (and sometimes Spanish) heraldry: coats of arms, armillary spheres (a navigational tool appropriated into the personal coat of arms of Manuel I), and textual mottoes (Figures 20 and 21).

Another form, the pyx, was used as a ritual box for holding the Eucharist. Intricately decorated surfaces and precious materials used to construct these boxes reinforced and made visible the Church’s authority and prestige as well as the Eucharist’s holy status as a Catholic ritual substance. The surface designs of the cylindrical ivory pyxes mainly pertain to liturgical scenes, again derived from European imagery. For example, one of the pxyes is densely carved with the Tree of Jesse, which depicts the biblical genealogy of Jesus Christ (Figure 22), “a metaphor for the militant and triumphant Church,” the model for which can be closely compared with the Tree of Jesse print from the book printed in France in the late fifteenth century, *Horae*

Beatae Mariae Virginis (Figure 23). Perhaps the commissioning of these religious scenes on foreign art created in distant lands signified for the receivers of the gifts in Europe a spreading of the influence of Christianity throughout the world and affirmation of its righteousness. What this imagery signified for African artists is impossible to know.

Judging by the strong affinity between European printed material and the iconography on the ivories, and the fragmentary first- or second-hand written accounts of Portuguese authors such as Valentim Fernandes, Duarte Pacheco Pereira, and André Alvares d’Almada, it appears that many of these works were commissioned directly by the Portuguese explicitly for export. Bassani and Fagg have hypothesized that during periods when Portuguese visitors were not present, African artists produced works to keep in stock based on previous designs as well as on innovations and motifs drawn from their pre-existing repertoire. This may explain why some works (Figures 1 and 17) bear little or no recognizable European imagery. These objects might have demonstrated that the artists could anticipate what would sell to the Portuguese traders and possibly how far they could stray from the prescribed body of models provided to them.

Could the variety of surface decorations indicate a varying market and different segments of collectors in Europe? Certainly, pyxes decorated with relief carvings of biblical motifs (Figure 2) were meant for and could have been gifted to officials of the church in a formal setting. Others, such as certain salt cellars that depict nude exotic women (Figures 1, 14, and 17), may indicate a niche market of aristocratic European gentlemen who may have perceived and enjoyed tantalizing and bawdy imagery in the privacy of their collection rooms. Prints of displaying

explicit scatological and sexual humor were quite popular in Italian and northern European aristocratic humanist circles, and artworks from exotic lands with explicit motifs could have held a similar, if not even more exotic and tantalizing appeal. Landau and Parshall discuss this early modern niche market: “A deepening obsession with remote occurrences was a feature of sixteenth-century life.”51 They further assert that, “the private enjoyment of prints also helped proliferate another genre of images: the erotic, sometimes pornographic, subject.”52 Who knows whether the nudity of female figures, and particularly the graphic nude detail of Figure 24, was created to express local attitudes toward female nudity or with awareness of the circulation of erotic printed imagery so popular in Europe at the time?

Since European iconographic sources are identifiable, they have been a focus for speculation on artistic processes behind the ivories. Most scholars agree that many of the motifs that appear to be non-African (such as stag hunting scenes, biblical iconography, and heraldic symbols) appear to have been transferred through printed materials that the Portuguese brought with them.53 At this time in Europe, the printing enterprise was expanding such that ownership of books was no longer only the prerogative of the elite or clergy. Perhaps many of the travelers and some of the lançados owned prayer books, known as books of hours, which contained both text and small woodblock prints along the margins. These images resemble almost precisely some of the imagery on the ivories, especially on the oliphants. For example, Ezio Bassani and W. Fagg identify a book of hours originally printed in France by Philippe Pigouchet for the publisher Simon Vostre, Horae Beatae Mariae Virginis, which contains hunting scenes almost

53 Bassani and Fagg, Africa and the Renaissance, pp. 111-121; Curnow, “Alien or Accepted,” p. 39.
identical in composition and figural positioning to hunting scenes on several of the extant
oliphants (Figures 18 and 19). Bassani has subsequently published extensively on printed
sources for Sierra Leone ivory designs. Based on his numerous and varied comparisons of
prints and ivories, it is now virtually irrefutable that African artists had some visual reference for
images conceived and printed originally in Europe.

It is not clear precisely how these images were conveyed to African artists as models. In
Europe during this era, the circulation of prints provided the most important and common means
for the transmission of artistic ideas, and producing expendable copies of printed images to
supply as models for foreign artists is entirely plausible. Certainly, books were not expendable
and easily replaceable at this point, and commissioning individuals would probably not agree to
part with their books to leave with foreign artists. Bassani and Fagg have hypothesized that
printed images from books were most likely copied through drawings and then given to artists as
models. In this way, the image is far removed from the original, once from the plate on which
it was carved, again in its transfer from reproducible print to singular drawing, and once again
geographically and culturally re-inserted into an entirely different carving practiced by artists
who had no a second-hand point of reference for what the images meant in their European
context.

The question of what factors caused the end of ivory sculpture production in this particular area yields answers as unclear and complex as other issues surrounding this moment in time, place, and material culture. Scholars have implied that around the mid-sixteenth century, the coast of Sierra Leone experienced an invasion by the Mane people from the interior.\(^{57}\) It has also been suggested that the Manes gradually encroached into Sapi areas, to settle in new territories and collect slaves for local use and some for export to Europe and the Americas. These included skilled Sapi workers, such as artisans, ironically for sale to the same Portuguese who were trading with Sapi artists.\(^{58}\) Collection and exportation of slaves became a central economic agenda for Portugal’s King Manuel I in his uneasy alliance with King Ferdinand of Spain in the sixteenth century.\(^{59}\) This explanation of gradual encroachment and disruption of cultural practices as a cause for ivory sculpture decline is reasonable. It implies the deeply ambiguous nature of the development of early trade between Portuguese and Africans.

Once the ivories arrived in Europe and began circulating and appearing in collection inventories, they were attributed variously to either Indian or Turkish artists,\(^{60}\) as our Dürer salt cellars reveal. The ivory carving traditions of Islamic peoples were known to Europeans since the Middle Ages, and the Portuguese did indeed bring numerous and varied ivory carvings back to Europe from Asia during the sixteenth centuries. These attributions do not match the Afro-Portuguese ivories stylistically, formally, or ideologically (Islamic doctrine often, but not always, inhibited figural depiction in art). Additionally, the few Portuguese trade accounts that survive


\(^{58}\) Aldo Tagliaferri summarized in Hart and Fyfe, “The Stone Sculptures of the Upper Guinea Coast,” p. 83.


from this period point to West Africa as the source of these particular ivory carvings.  

Ultimately, some of the African ivories themselves speak through their formal affinity with the 
roughly contemporaneous steatite, wood, and clay figures, pointing to a specifically Sierra Leone 
origin, as researchers in the twentieth century have revealed.  

Historians and museum 
connoisseurs have struggled with locating specific possibilities of origin within West Africa. 

This elusiveness of even the broadest continental attributions has direct repercussions on how we 
can conceptualize the elusiveness of defining African art in general.

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“Ancient Wood Figures from Sierra Leone,” pp. 48-59.
CHAPTER 3
BIOGRAPHY OF THE IVORIES THROUGH LITERARY SOURCES AND MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS

Igor Kopytoff, in Arjun Appadurai’s groundbreaking 1986 volume, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, speaks at length of the “cultural biography of things.”¹ He says, “Biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure. For example, in situations of culture contact, they can show what anthropologists have so often stressed: that what is significant about the adoption of alien objects—as of alien ideas—is not the fact that they are adopted, but the way they are culturally redefined and put to use.”² To take this idea further and to borrow from Mirzoeff’s idea of “diasporic visual culture,” a reference to the visual cultures of dispersed human populations,³ populations of objects such as the Afro-Portuguese ivories also experience diasporas or broad dispersals and transformation of identities in the process of their travels.

Understanding the arts of Africa has always required multidisciplinary and multicultural inquiry rather than strictly conventional art history. In fact, the field of African art history and aesthetics, as exemplified by this particular corpus of works, can potentially lead traditional art history in new and broader directions. The discipline of art history was founded on eighteenth and nineteenth century European experience; with the introduction of aesthetic systems and realities that lie outside those of conventional Eurocentric methods of art history, a fuller understanding of “art” can be developed. Visuality embodies a “culture labyrinth” in which

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¹ Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things,” p. 64.
multiple paths of politics, identity, race, and religion clash and rebound on one another. By tracing sources associated with the Sierra Leone export ivories and ways they have been treated by scholars and museum exhibitions, many of these broader points can elucidated, and a picture of how discourse around the ivories has unfolded can be formed.

**Early Sources on the Afro-Portuguese Ivories**

The Portuguese first reached the coast of Sierra Leone in 1460, and after the death of the famous Portuguese Prince Henry the Navigator, began trading seriously there in 1462. There are no first-hand accounts of the interaction that occurred there until 1506-1510, when Valentim Fernandes published an account of lifestyles and customs on the Sierra Leone coast based on the experiences of Alvaro Velho, a Portuguese trader who lived in West Africa from 1499 to 1507. While much interaction between Africans and Europeans must have transpired during the late fifteenth century, including the development of oceanic trade networks of raw materials, as well as the possible trade in cultural goods, the record remains tantalizingly fragmentary. Fernandes described that the coastal people made fine objects in ivory, but also made woven palm mats, as well as wood, clay, and stone figurative sculpture referred to pejoratively as “idols.” We can see that, though the information is fragmentary and biased, Africans made and used their art in everyday life to fulfill immediate secular and spiritual needs, much like the interdependence between art and life for Europeans at that time.

Roughly contemporaneous with Fernandes were the 1505-1508 writings of Duarte Pacheco Pereira, a Portuguese trader who later became the governor of São Jorge da Mina, better known as Elmina, the infamous gold and slave port located further east on the coast. Pacheco Pereira

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5 See Fernandes, *Description de la Côte Occidentale d’Afrique*.
described the palm mats called ‘bicas’ by the Temne and Bullom, carved ivory necklaces, and sharp filed teeth of the Bullom he encountered in the Sherbro area. He described their dwellings as “simple thatched huts” and their trade of sea salt for gold with the Susus and Fulas to the north.7

In 1594, André Alvares de Almada confirmed earlier accounts of the types of handicrafts found in the ‘Sapi’ coastal areas, and additionally described the use of masquerade for judicial and civic ceremonial purposes8 (much like the function of Poro and Sande societies in modern day Sierra Leone and Liberia). Although he wrote three to four decades after the cultural and political disruptions caused by the inland Manis, he revealed that some “Sapi” cultural customs continued in some form.

**Colonial Era Discourse on Afro-Portuguese Ivories**

Serious consideration of this early period in the life cycle of the ivories in the modern era began with an 1851 conference of the Archaeological Institute in London, where a range of scholars posited an origin in either Africa or India for sixteenth century Portuguese agents.9 This symposium coincided not only with the famous Great Exhibition World’s Fair in London in that year, but also with the budding industrial and political colonization of Africa under mainly French, Belgian, and British rule which began in earnest in the late nineteenth century with what is now known as the “Scramble for Africa.”10

In 1897, the fateful Benin Punitive Expedition resulted in the British sack of Benin City. The atmosphere of British triumph following the event, which included the acquisition of a

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8 André Alvares de Almada in Fyfe, *Sierra Leone Inheritance*, p. 30.
plethora of treasures (including whole carved ivory tusks and bronze plaques), led many
European scholars of that era to place a Benin attribution to the antique ivories already in Europe
since the sixteenth century. Charles Read and Ormande Dalton were the first to do so in their
1899 publication, *Antiquities from the City of Benin and from Other Parts of West Africa*, in
which they theorized that all of the ivory salt cellars, spoons, and oliphants were originally from
Benin based on formal similarities they saw.\(^1\) While their conclusions have proven to be true in
some cases, not all of the Kunstkammer Afro-Portuguese ivories were made in Benin.

That same year, German Franz Heger posited the possibility of a Loanda origin in the
Kongo region of what is now Angola, which was a hub for ivory carving for local use and export
of raw ivory at the time of his research.\(^2\) Heger echoed a scholar with whom he consulted,
hypothesizing that in light of the recent Benin discoveries (i.e. looting), they must actually all be
from Benin: “Before one knew Benin, one attributed everything that was Portuguese-influenced
to the Kingdom of Kongo.”\(^3\) That is to say, the Benin Punitive Expedition convinced him of
Read and Dalton’s Benin theory over the Kongo theory. The next year, and again in 1919, Felix
von Luschan emphatically asserted a Benin origin for all of the known Kunstkammer ivories\(^4\) an
attribution later scholars assert was supported by flawed and contradictory evidence clouded by

\(^{11}\) Curnow, “The Afro-Portuguese Ivories,” p. 34.

\(^{12}\) From article by Franz Heger, “Alte Elfenbeinarbeiten aus Afrika in den Wiener Sammlungen,” *Mitteilungen der
34-35.

\(^{13}\) From article by Franz Heger, “Alte Elfenbeinarbeiten aus Afrika in den Wiener Sammlungen,” *Mitteilungen der
34-35.

für Völkerkunde, 1919).
the British euphoria following the Punitive Expedition of 1897. Wilhelm Foy challenged the Benin origin theory by posing the possibility that the ivories were carved in Europe by African sculptors. Curnow observes that the “authoritative tone [of early twentieth century scholarship] helped establish the theory that the ivories of the curiosity cabinets were made in Benin, and museum authorities and scholars subscribed to this point of view for the next forty years.” In the turn-of-the-century, which coincides with the program of colonialist and industrialist propagation, the Benin theory became the blanket attribution for the Afro-Portuguese without regard to differences in style and form that range from obvious to subtle.

**The Post-Colonial Era: New Tactics of Systemization**

William Fagg, who was the head of the Department of Ethnography in the British Museum (among other distinguished subsequent posts), published a catalogue of the Museum’s large collection of Kunstkammer ivories in 1959, entitled *Afro-Portuguese Ivories*. This work has proven seminal for contemporary scholars of the subject of Afro-Portuguese ivories. He was the first to divide the production centers into three distinct locations: Sierra Leone, the Kingdom of Benin, and Lagos/Porto Novo area of Nigeria. One of these attributions, the Lagos/Porto Novo area, was later discarded by Fagg and others. This short volume would prove critical in moving toward a more focused picture of the original milieu for the Sierra Leone ivories. For those who cannot travel to the British Museum, the 10” x 13” book conveys a larger-than-life impression of all of the ivories that belies their diminutive scale. Problems with the tone of language he used to

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17 Curnow, “The Afro-Portuguese Ivories,” p. 36.
describe the hybrid nature of these export goods are indicative of pervading attitudes toward African arts at the cusp of African nations’ independence. Fagg says resolutely, “Anyone may see, from a comparison of the traditional and the tourist art of a tribe, that quite apart from the changes in outward form something more fundamental has been lost.”18 His comment is indicative of the narrow conceptions of “tribal,” “traditional,” and “tourist art” that were so prevalent at that time.

Historian Alan F. C. Ryder published a short article in 1964 on the fragmentary official accounts from the Portuguese Casa de Guiné from 1504-1505 which record the purchase of ivory salt cellars and spoons by individual travelers to the Sherbro/Bullom area of Sierra Leone. He says that rather than being part of the official loads of goods imported for the government, these ivories were bought by and for private ownership.19 Based on these important records that solidify the case for a Sierra Leone origin, one can only imagine how the patrons interacted with the artisans they met or under what circumstances the novel designs were conceived.

Scholars have sought ways to compare this pioneering traveler’s art with something “traditional.” Soapstone, clay, and wooden sculpture provided such a means of comparison. William Fagg first suggested a stylistic connection between the ivories and stone figures, but not until John Atherton and Milan Kalous published their article in 1970 asserting a “Sapi” origin for the nomoli was there serious and detailed consideration of how and why these figures were created. The authors claim that the stone sculptures were intended to represent ancestors, though they do not offer definitive evidence to prove this.20 Another who has published important work on dating and attributing the nomoli is art historian Frederick Lamp, who discussed some

18 Fagg, The Afro-Portuguese, p. xvi.
indigenous cultural practices surrounding the circumstances of existence of not only stone sculptures, but also wooden and clay figures.\textsuperscript{21} William A. Hart and Christopher Fyfe provided a chronological overview of all publications that have discussed the stone figures of Sierra Leone since 1852. They discuss the reliability of these sources for researchers now, concluding that the production of stone carvings probably predates the short-lived ivory carving industry. This is not to say that the ivory carvers did not have access to or were not influenced by the style of the stone figures.\textsuperscript{22}

Kathy Curnow’s 1983 two-volume Ph.D. dissertation delineates workshops, points out the hybrid construction of the ivories as “traveler’s art,” and brings all works together in a catalogue raisonné of all known extant works to 1983. She further hypothesized that in Sierra Leone, there were two main centers or workshops that specialized in particular forms and styles of ivory carvings for sale to the Portuguese.\textsuperscript{23}

George E. Brooks has analyzed geographical, ecological, and commercial circumstances that occurred in the pre-colonial period that resulted in a new population of what he calls “Eurafricans” beginning with the \textit{lançados} (“Luso-Africans”) and later including British.\textsuperscript{24} He provides particularly insightful information about the interactions of these settlers, who they may have been and how they later integrated into coastal West African societies, permanently transforming them. \textit{Lançados} were therefore probably major players in the early life of the ivories.

\textsuperscript{21} See Lamp, “Ancient Wood Figures from Sierra Leone,” and “House of Stones.”

\textsuperscript{22} See Hart and Fyfe, “The Stone Sculptures of the Upper Guinea Coast.”

\textsuperscript{23} See Curnow, “The Afro-Portuguese Ivories.”

The first and only major exhibition to focus solely on a large number of the extant Afro-Portuguese ivories was produced by the Center for African Arts in New York in 1988-1989.\textsuperscript{25} Significantly, it was a venue for African art, not ethnographic materials or Western fine art that launched this project. For the first time, the works were arranged and displayed as examples of a specific moment in the history of art production in Africa. Curated by Ezio Bassani and William Fagg under the directorship of Susan Vogel,\textsuperscript{26} the exhibition was accompanied by an exhaustive and beautifully produced catalogue that included full discussions of sources, a catalogue raisonné of all known extant ivories, and even some that are only known through drawings. Ezio Bassani, an Italian historian of African art in Europe, published various articles on individual ivory pieces in European collections, published in Italian throughout the 1970s.\textsuperscript{27}

Curnow published one of only two reviews\textsuperscript{28} of the exhibition itself in a 1989 issue of *African Arts*. While she praised the harmony between the exhibition design space and the objects themselves, she took issue with the imbalanced “preoccupation with European sources and contributions, [which] while undeniable and interesting, seems disturbingly like an apologia, a way of making these examples of African art more acceptable to Western viewers by stressing their non-African elements.”\textsuperscript{29} She went on to conclude that more references “traditional …

\textsuperscript{25} The Center for African Art is now called the Museum for African Art.


religious and social practices” would have enhanced and reinforced the strengths of the
exhibition.

The Bassani/Fagg-Curnow Episode and the New Era of Discourse on Afro-Portuguese Ivories

Scholarly disagreements played out in the publishing arena are valuable for advancing
discourse on the ivories. Occasionally, these exchanges devolved into personal invective, yet, an
exchange among several scholars in the review and correspondence sections of the journal
African Arts between 1989 and 1990 echoes the shifting confusion of attribution surrounding the
Sierra Leone-Portuguese ivories. The exchange shifted the focus from elucidating the ivories to
questioning the scholarly and ethical integrity of the two comprehensive works on the ivories,
namely Curnow’s dissertation and Bassani and Fagg’s catalogue, as well as the reviewer of the
catalogue who brought some of the similarities between the two works to light. 30

In her review of the exhibition catalogue for Africa and the Renaissance, Barbara Blackmun,
ated that “it is particularly unfortunate that its publication has raised important
questions that must be addressed … Although Curnow’s dissertation appeared five years before
Africa and the Renaissance and is listed in the bibliography, not a single direct reference to her
exhaustive treatment of this subject has been made in the text,” 31 and that “there are sixty
statements in Bassani and Fagg’s text for which a reference to Curnow’s dissertation would have
been courteous, and in some of these cases the lack of citation is extremely unusual.” 32

30 See heated exchange in African Arts beginning with Barbara W. Blackmun, review of exhibition catalogue for
12-20; Susan Vogel, “Responses to the Review of Africa and the Renaissance,” African Arts 23(3) (July 1990): 10;
16, 93; Curnow, “Rejoinder from Curnow,” African Arts 23(4) (October 1990): 16-22, 89-90; and Roy Sieber,


32 Blackmun, Review of exhibition catalogue for Africa and the Renaissance, p. 16.
Blackmum never actually used the word “plagiarism,” but her statements and detailed comparisons between many of the specifics of each publication were understandably not ignored by the authors and organizers of *Africa and the Renaissance,* three eminently accomplished scholars of African art and museum practice.

Susan Vogel, who was then director of the Center for African Arts as well as author to the introductory essay for the catalogue, immediately replied to Blackmun’s review. Her letter, also in *African Arts,* brought counter-allegations of unsound research on both Blackmun as well as Curnow, who had not been involved with Blackmun’s review of the catalogue. In the same issue of *African Arts,* Bassani and Fagg defended their research by stating that “scholars conducting independent research in the same area and on the same corpus of materials will sometimes make similar discoveries and reach similar conclusions.”

In her response in the following issue of *African Arts,* Curnow acknowledged the fundamental differences in approach between her “Afrocentric” perspective and the “Eurocentric” perspective of the *Africa and the Renaissance* exhibition and catalogue. In the end, Roy Sieber’s short but authoritative note stressed the importance of young scholars in the continuance and propagation of the discipline of African art history:

> For the growth of a discipline, for the deeper understanding of a subject, I believe that the elders must credit and honor those who follow as rigorously as they expect the young ones to honor them … I believe that the scholarly community must consider these questions most carefully, not as much to judge or condemn one ‘side’ or the other, but to reflect on where our discipline is being taken and what self-imposed and self-regulative rules we all must scrupulously follow to avoid both the reality and the appearance of wrongdoing.”

Following Sieber’s letter, the matter was not pursued further.

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34 Curnow, “Rejoinder from Curnow,” p.18.

An unfortunate result of this brief but heated episode has been a stagnation of published research on Afro-Portuguese ivories. Curnow has continued to publish periodically on the subject (among others), and remains an “Afrocentric,” while Bassani has continued to publish on the European sources for the ivories as well as numerous newly discovered extant works. Both perspectives are valid and valuable in revealing the complete biography of the ivories. The question of “Afrocentric” or “Eurocentric” perspectives and which is more appropriate in the study of the Afro-Portuguese ivories does not have a clear answer because of the mixed perspectives that contributed to the production of the ivories. The nature of visual culture studies, which encourages the crossing of borders between disciplines and perspectives, is a way to refresh this discourse.

Suzanne Preston Blier wrote an exploratory article published in *Art Bulletin*, “Imaging Otherness in Ivory: African Portrayals of the Portuguese ca. 1492” on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of Columbus’s “discovery” of the Americas as a way not only to revise how we may read possible perspectives of the African carvers of the ivories on their Portuguese patrons, but also how we may rethink the entire moment of European exploratory expansion *through* them.36 Indeed the fifth centennial of Columbus’ navigation of the Americas was the occasion to explore that moment for several major museum exhibitions.

In anticipation of this historical milestone, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. launched the 1991 exhibition, *Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration*.37 This exhibition used the now-iconic and fateful year of the “discovery” of America and also the rhetoric of Europeans exploration of lands they encountered as they expanded their commercial enterprises as a

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framework to display the collected objects from Africa, Asia, and the Americas that are now the visual and material residue of that era.

Africa was represented by a Jenne terracotta equestrian figure, Benin cast brass figures and plaques and ivory carvings both for local use and export, a Kongo-Portuguese carved horn, and several Sierra Leone-Portuguese ivories (including the Rome executioner salt cellar). Homi K. Bhabha wrote an essay addressing the overall message of the exhibition, called “Double Visions” reprinted in a volume, *Grasping the World: the Idea of the Museum*, edited by Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago. His insights about the power dynamics in motion in the exhibition and how the past should be told, and who gets to define it was important in questioning the power of the blockbuster exhibition in conveying undertones of cultural dominance to museum goers. Bhaba states:

> What was once exotic and archaic, tribal or folkloristic, inspired by strange gods, is now given a secular national present, and an international future. Sites of cultural difference too easily become part of the post-Modern West’s thirst for its own ethnicity … The global perspective in 1492 as in 1992 is the purview of power. The globe shrinks for those who own it; for the displaced or the dispossessed, the migrant or refugee, no distance is more awesome than the few feet across borders or frontiers.

It could be said that the Afro-Portuguese ivories themselves were preordained to be distanced from their geographical point of origin and they have been further displaced by great temporal distances as well. They are a dispersed “migrant” object population with no original home to which to return.

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While *The Age of theMarvelous* exhibition of 1991 did not display any Afro-Portuguese ivories, its theme and timing reflect an abiding interest in European visual culture at the quincentennial landmark year (in actuality, a rather arbitrary bookmark in history upheld by the rhetoric of Columbus’s “discovery”). The exhibition, organized by the Hood Museum, traveled to three other venues from 1991-1993. The show and accompanying catalogue are valuable for their in-depth analysis of the methods of object categorization of the *Kunst-, Wunder-*, *Raritaetenkammern*. The catalogue attempts to reflect the varied types of objects in the spirit of *Wunderkammer* display aesthetics, except this time with didactics as part of the display for more critical understanding, unlike the practices of the early private collections which sought merely to categorize and display the objects themselves without contextual understanding.

Several other exhibitions have dealt with framing or reframing the idea of the Renaissance, with particular focus on Portugal’s effect on world exploration during the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Portuguese political zenith. For example, *Os Descobrimentos Portugueses e a Europa do Renascimento*, a five-venue exhibition in Lisbon in 1983 was cited as a source of inspiration for *Africa and the Renaissance* in Bassani and Fagg’s letter in response to Barbara Blackmun’s review of their catalogue. However, the Portuguese exhibition was not cited in Bassani and Fagg’s catalogue. Bassani cited it in his 2000 publication, *African Art and Artefacts in European Collections 1400-1800*. Perhaps the explanation for the confusion around this seemingly minor point stems from the scant availability of the Portuguese exhibition catalogue.

41 See Kenseth, *The Age of theMarvelous*.


and its publication in Portuguese, a language not well known to many English-speakers. Nevertheless, the inconsistency in Bassani’s citations of this exhibition that so inspired him is peculiar. Importantly, this exhibition did feature Sierra Leone-Portuguese hunting horns and salt cellars, but within a context similar to that of Circa 1492—that of conqueror displaying the cultures of the conquered.

*Exotica: Portugals Entdeckungen im Spiegel fürstlichen Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Renaissance,* was an exhibition held at the Schloss Ambras in Innsbruck, Austria in 2000 that displayed many of the same objects as the current *Encompassing the Globe* exhibition, including several of the same Sierra Leone-Portuguese ivories.\(^{44}\) In this case, the exhibition focused on the encyclopedic collecting practices of Austrian nobility in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries rather than on the heroism of Portuguese world exploration, but the denial of perspectives of non-European cultures (whose visual and material culture is was fundamental to both exhibitions as well as the *Circa 1492* exhibition) is still the tendency in each of these visually stunning but prospectively limited exhibitions.

Another exhibition to focus on the heroic achievements of early modern Portugal is *Encompassing the Globe: Portugal and the World in the 16\(^{th}\) and 17\(^{th}\) Centuries,* a 2007 exhibition organized by Smithsonian Institution and shown at the Sackler & Freeer Galleries and the National Museum of African Art.\(^{45}\) As in the *Circa 1492* exhibition, the order of display (at least within the catalogue) begins with discussions of European (in this case, Portuguese) artistic and technological achievements that set the stage for the story of their naval explorations and then presents geographical regions in the order Portuguese explored them: first Africa (Sierra

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Leone, then Benin and Kongo), then Brazil, Indian Ocean, China, and Japan. Many maps and navigational instruments are illustrated and serve to demonstrate Portugal’s leadership in these technologies. With a forward by Portugal’s President and another by the Minister of Culture as well as chapters addressing “Portugal and the World” and “Christians and Spices” the catalogue makes clear that the perspective is firmly Lusocentric.

As discussed earlier, the only exhibition to focus on the Afro-Portuguese ivories in a venue exclusively for African art was *Africa and the Renaissance: Art in Ivory* in New York at the Center for African Art in 1988-1989. The exhibit was open for a short period at its home venue and traveled briefly to the Museum of Fine Arts Houston in late 1989, but its impact, and that of its catalogue, has been monumental. While it has been criticized for being too “Eurocentric” in perspective, by the very virtue of its venue and limit to only the African-made ivories, it is still groundbreaking for firmly locating the works in the history of African art and underscoring the great and lasting ability for formal and cultural synchronicity found in many visual cultures of Africa. The inclusion of Afro-Portuguese ivories in the college survey textbook on African arts\(^4\) as well as general Art History survey textbook sections on African arts\(^5\) attests to the consensus that they do belong to the study of African art as much as that of art history in general.

Finally, *Incisive Images: Ivory and Boxwood Carvings 1450-1800* (March 13-November 25, 2007) is a small-scale exhibition in the Wrightsman Exhibition Gallery on the first floor of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, that focuses on the Museum’s collection plus several borrowed pieces of small ivory and boxwood carvings circa 1450-1800. This show contains a small section of various Afro-Portuguese ivories includes the surprising public debut of a Sierra Leone-

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Portuguese salt cellar. Its only previous appearance was when it was sold to a private collector through a British art dealer. The situation of these Afro-Portuguese pieces among the other European small-scale but virtuosic works in ivory downplays their “African” identity, while attesting to their ability to seamlessly meld into a “European” context without losing any of their distinctive visual presence.

The over-arching question raised by scholarly research and museological practices surrounding these ivories: Who is and was discovering whom? Exhibitions can help perpetuate or dispel biases in the possible answers to this question for the overall public perception. Museums today play an important role in sending messages to people about how to perceive the world, just as carefully considered scholarship can take the study of the ivories into new territories of implication.
CHAPTER 4
TWO SIERRA LEONE-PORTUGUESE SALT CELLARS: EMBODIMENTS OF A
TRANSCULTURAL CONCEPTION AND LIFE CYCLE

Salt cellars of Afro-Portuguese origin embodied triple layers of value for Europeans: the precious material of ivory and its association with the elephant, their utility as a receptacle of salt (another precious commodity for both Europeans and Africans), and their value as an exotic memento of distant exploration. A detailed discussion of two distinct ivory salt cellars with several traits in common will provide a means of unpacking these layers. One of the salt cellars is well-known to scholars and is owned by the Museo Nazionale Preistorico e Etnografico in Rome (Figure 1), while the other makes its first prolonged public appearance currently at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Figure 14). Each is likely carved from a single piece of ivory, with the exception of restoration or addition to the finials. They have similar formal structures: a globular container rests atop cylindrical structure that features a series of seated human figures each facing outward, and with arms extended to hold decorative posts while various forms of macabre disembodied human heads crown the tops of the dome-like lids. Kathy Curnow surmised that this type of salt cellar was the specialty of a particular workshop or group of carvers who worked together or at least influenced one another. 1 Ezio Bassani and William Fagg posit that the various types of formal configurations were used across the workshops.2

The interpretation of subject matter of the ivories is as vague or unknowable as the identities of the artists. While the Cellini salt cellar discussed in chapter 2 references Classical motifs related to the sea, the source of salt, the mysterious figures and motifs on many of the ivory salt cellars defy definite interpretation. Just who the figures were and what the other

1 See Curnow, “The Afro-Portuguese Ivories,” ch. 4.
decorative motifs referred to or meant was likely just as mysterious to sixteenth-century Europeans as it is to scholars today.

**The Rome “Executioner” Salt Cellar**

The salt cellar at the Museo Nazionale Preistorico e Etnografico (also known as the L. Pigorini Museum) in Rome is the tallest (17 inches) and perhaps one of the most finely carved, graceful, and iconographically perplexing pieces in these types of objects. An image of it was used in the frontispiece illustration for Farago’s volume, and it has been pictured in numerous other publications of African art and other varied topics since its rediscovery in 1975.³ For example, it was also featured in the encyclopedic and highly publicized quincentennial exhibition and catalogue, *Circa 1492*, at the National Gallery of Art in 1991-2.⁴ Its singularity and prominent appearance in some of the contemporary era’s important publications and exhibitions on art from the period propel its continued social status in the upper echelon of the Afro-Portuguese ivories.

The egg-shell thin cylindrical hollow base is smoothly polished and interspersed with two rows of minutely carved nodules and flares sharply at the bottom to provide a stable resting surface. Four evenly-spaced three-dimensional figures with elongated torsos sit on the edge of the base in an alternating male-female fashion (Figure 25). Each of the two females grasps in her right hand a slender vertical weight-supporting column decorated with the same rows of beading that appear on the base. Another, identical column is parallel to these, which are grasped by the left hands of the male figures. The sculptor has positioned the two pairs of columns on exact opposite sides of the edge of the base, as he has done with each of the other paired elements (two

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³ Grottanelli, “Discovery of a Masterpiece,” pp. 14-23;
⁴ Levenson, *Circa 1492*, cat. no. 67.
women, two men, two pairs of columns, etc.). Climbing down each of the four vertical column pairs is a small, schematically textured crocodile with miniscule rows of sharp bared teeth.

The women’s left hands (and men’s right hands) grasp a curved, slender knot form, two of which also appear opposite each other dictated by the circular base. These knot forms, like the column pairs, are also weight-bearing and are decorated with tiny rows of bead-like nodules, the effect of which lends an added layer of visual unity and three-dimensional radial symmetry. The knots are formed by V-shaped rods extending vertically toward one another from both the base below and above from the underside of a horizontally circular disk form that acts both as a roof over the heads of the figures and a secondary flat base for the bowl situated above. A circular rope form unites the confronting pairs of V shapes. The stacks of thin rings carved around the terminating points of the columns and V sections of the knots echo the carving of the tiny fingers wrapped around each supporting element as well as the series of rings carved around the women’s ankles.

The two male figures also wear gender-specific costume and retain the same elongated torsos, short limbs, and proportionally large heads in keeping with the female figures. The males each wear close-fitting above-the-knee breeches with articulated codpieces (genital coverings), a rimmed hat, and a short vest that leaves the midriff bare. The female figures are carved with smooth close-fitting dome-shaped caps, each with a small flap hanging a short distance down the elongated cylindrical neck. Each wears a smooth-textured knee-length skirt with a narrow border at the bottom carved with a continuous sunken-relief zig-zag line. Their bare chests are decorated with crossed bands of beaded rows that mimic those appearing throughout each element of the piece—and possibly represent stylized keloid scarification patterns.
Both male and female heads are larger and more pronounced in the proportional scheme, and their meticulously articulated facial features, including eyes, ears, flared nostrils, and full lips convey an internalized and standardized image of the human face with which the maker (or makers) canonized. The remote, unreadable expression conveyed by each face is lent an otherworldly quality by the “archaic smile.”

Above the openwork midsection comprised of the alternating seated figures and weight-bearing elements rests a disk surmounted by a spherical vessel whose lid bisects horizontally. The smooth surface of the sphere is balanced by radiating vertical bands of tiny rows of the same bead-like nodules that appear on both the base and the openwork midsection elements. About a quarter of the way up the sphere, a horizontal band of nodules circumscribes the sphere, as does another band at the edge of both the lower part of the container and lid.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the saltcellar is the fully in-the-round form of the group of figures atop the lid. A large kneeling figure surrounded by six disembodied heads and a smaller seated figure that appears to be subordinate to the large hat-wearing figure (Figure 26). The larger figure holds an axe (an addition by a restorer) over the neck of the smaller seated figure as if in mid-execution. One clue to the group’s meaning is provided by Frederick Lamp’s discussion of the contemporaneously produced soapstone sculptures, today referred to as nomoli. Lamp cites Fernandes’s account of “Sapi” burial customs for a male notable:

They place the deceased seated in a chair with most of the garments he owns … and they place a shield in his hand and in the other a spear and a sword in his belt … And if he is a man who has killed many men in battle, they put all the skulls of the men he has killed in front of him.6

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Lamp relates this description of routine Sapi burial customs to a clothed male figure in steatite surrounded by decapitated heads (Figure 27). The striking similarity between the verbal description and visual manifestation relates closely to a more recent Temne and Kissi concept, *krifi*, a term that refers to ancestral spirits who are thought to be turned to stone upon death.\(^7\) Though it is methodologically risky to connect a twentieth-century cosmology to sixteenth-century sculpture and descriptions of burial practices, separated by such a vast expanse of time and lack of continuously reliable written records or oral history of the Temne and surrounding “Sapi” peoples, nevertheless this correlation or affinity between ephemeral words and concrete sculpture is too close to discount.

Just as their material encompasses visual signs of wealth and prestige, so too do the forms and surfaces of Sierra Leone-Portuguese ivories. For example, the composition on the lid, through its hierarchy of scale, likely represents a social hierarchy between the executioner and his smaller victim. The largest figure is shown in the act of executing a smaller subordinate prisoner.

Social perspective is a device used in art from all over the world to denote the comparative social status of individuals represented. A steatite carving from Sierra Leone shows a male figure with three smaller figures lined up in front of him approximately half his height, while the larger standing figure places his hands on their heads (Figure 28). In the kingdom of Benin, bronzes plaques made for palace decoration also employed a similar hierarchy of scale to indicate social rank (Figure 29). The Benin Oba (king) is shown more than twice the height as his retinue who stand on the same ground line, while the figures of Portuguese appear even smaller, in profile, and less distinct flanking the Oba’s head. The presence of the flanking Portuguese figures serves

\(^7\) Blier, “Imaging Otherness,” p. 391.
as a signifier for the political and economic supremacy of the Oba, referencing his ability to access the wealth that Europeans brought as well as his use of Portuguese mercenary traders to assist in military victories.

As Grottanelli suggests, the execution scene on the Rome salt cellar is possibly a representation of an African ruler in the guise of a Portuguese man surrounded by symbolic victims.⁸ Alternately, it could represent a living African chief wearing appropriated clothing style of the Portuguese who were perceived, as they were in Benin, to possess worldly and spiritual powers. Such references may well have been used to reinforce and to magnify the chief’s own power over his African subjects. Another possible (perhaps concurrent) meaning is that the larger figure is an actual Portuguese man—or lançado—who holds power of justice over the smaller African individual. However, no other historical records point to this type of political or judicial power between Africans and Portuguese at this time and place. Regardless of the specific reading, clearly one figure holds ultimate prestige and power of life and death over the others.

Blier’s hypothesis is that the Sierra Leone ivories, which represent early sustained exchange between Portuguese and Africans, indicate that Africans associated the seafaring Portuguese with the realm of the dead and with regeneration in the world of the living. She argues that the coastal peoples of West Africa have historically constructed their beliefs about the continuum between life and death around bodies of water, where “the color white was associated at once with the spiritual world and the world of the dead.”⁹ That the ivory—an essentially white material—salt cellar depicts a man in a Portuguese hat, whether he is African,

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Portuguese, *lançado*, or *filho da terra*, holding a shield and surrounded by decapitated heads is so similar to Fernandes’s description, with the addition of Portuguese elements such as helmet and breeches, indicates that Blier very well may be correct.

The skin of the Portuguese was indeed much paler than that of the indigenous Africans; they also arrived in ships from the vast Atlantic Ocean. Furthermore, they displayed great wealth. Thus, the ivory carvings may have corresponded with pre-existing “Sapi” beliefs about the “other” realm. In this case, the artwork may have been more an indication of an African artist’s perception of the visiting Portuguese, rather than a case of Portuguese dictating their perceptions of Africans, as the more “European” motifs on many of the other ivories might suggest.

Warfare and execution as justice were expected occurrences in the lives of both Portuguese and Sierra Leoneans. Early accounts of the peoples of coastal Sierra Leone speak of localized warfare, capture, enslavement, and execution of prisoners. Meanwhile, in Europe at the time, many crimes were invariably punished by either expulsion or execution. Therefore, the depiction of a Portuguese-garbed African (or an “Africanized” *lançado*) meting out the ultimate justice could resonate visually both for African artist and for Portuguese patron in different but converging ways.

**Perception of the Self as the Other Made Visual**

In his *Introduction to Visual Culture*, Mirzoeff considers the visuality, or visual conceptualization, of everyday life to be at the center of understanding culture in the postmodern

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11 This was infamously true on the Iberian Peninsula where the Inquisition pervaded judiciary government. See David Fintz Altabé, “The Significance of 1492 to the Jews and Muslims of Spain,” *Hispania* 75(3) (Sept. 1992): 728-731.
world. What, if anything, can be learned of the now-extinct “everyday life” of the early modern Africans who produced the objects in question here if the only record is the object itself? The Rome “executioner” saltcellar provides some important, though speculative, insight.

Around the base of the salt cellar, the male figures wear Portuguese helmets and codpieces. These figures and their reference to things European help to reinforce the idea of Portuguese prestige invoked by the scene on the lid. The female figures that appear between the helmet-wearing males do not wear Portuguese clothing. They are depicted bare-breasted with geometric markings and ringed anklets. These attributes underscore their local identity since European women of the time would not appear with short skirts, much less bear breasted.

The alternation of Portuguese-dressed men and African-adorned women might also allude to various transcultural scenarios such as marriage between the new population of lançados and elite native women. Or do the men represent Africans who have appropriated the dress of Portuguese as it has been suggested the ruler-figure on the lid has done? The fact that both male and female figures are consistently depicted with negroid facial features and standardized body proportion shows that the African carvers could have envisioned themselves as the same as their Portuguese counterparts.

The New York Salt Cellar

An enigmatic salt cellar has just made its first public appearance, adding significantly to the corpus of Sierra Leone-Portuguese ivories (Figure 14). The salt cellar conforms to a similar basic formal schema (ball-on-openwork figural pedestal) as the Rome “executioner” salt cellar and is on loan from a private collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art for an exhibition called *Incisive Images: Ivory and Boxwood Carvings 1450-1800*, organized by Johanna Hecht.

Both Hecht, curator of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, and Alisa LaGamma, curator of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, confirm that the piece fits squarely
within the style of the Sierra Leone-Portuguese ivories and is surely from that era of exchange.\textsuperscript{12} Hecht further notes that the form and style is “particularly close to the example in the Museo [Nazionale] Preistorico e Etnografico in Rome.”\textsuperscript{13} Here, she is referring not to the “executioner” salt cellar (Figure 1) but to another salt cellar with a conventional Janus head finial in that collection (Figure 30). However, the New York salt cellar also resembles the Rome execution scene example in several ways that enforce its place within the group of Sierra Leone-Portuguese ivories.

Like the Rome example, this container has a short, diagonal base that angles directly at a 45° slant without the curved effect of the Rome “executioner” container’s flared base. A sunken relief narrow zig-zag line traces both the top and bottom edge of this base, while a wider zig-zag pattern made of a single line of inset bead-like nodules circles middle band of the base. Four male-female alternating seated figures also perch at even intervals around the edge of the circular base, though these are weight-supporting caryatids with spiral rods extending from their heads to meet the base of bowl above. The figures each grasp two supporting openwork knot forms located opposite each other along the base which are nearly identical to the supporting knot forms on the Rome “executioner” salt cellar. A short rod decorated with a closely spaced spiral ridge pattern extends from the top of the four heads to the disk shape which is surmounted by a sphere bisected horizontally between bowl and lid.

Two large cruciform pillars rise upward from either side of the base and each is decorated with a small twisting oval carved in relief at the point of intersection. Holes have been bored through many of the smooth planes on both the base and bowl, some of which are filled in with

\textsuperscript{12} Johanna Hecht, “Re: grad student at UF, inquiry about an Afro-Portuguese ivory in Incisive Images exhib.,” e-mail to the author, Sept. 25, 2007; Alisa LaGamma, “RE: student of Vicki Rovine with question about an ivory object in Incisive Images exhibition,” e-mail to the author, Sept. 19, 2007.

\textsuperscript{13} Hecht, “Re: grad student at UF.”
an unidentified substance. Mottled oxidized green patina point to the probable presence of copper coverings,¹⁴ possibly added at one point in time and removed sometime later.

Rows of beads set between thin ridges give the appearance of a textured woven material. Portuguese, and later British, records mention local production “beautiful mats of palm-leaf,”¹⁵ and the bead-row and zig-zag patterns on both of these salt cellars are potentially modeled after these supposedly ubiquitous raffia weavings. Overall, the piece demonstrates many of the same formal conventions, decorative elements, and sense of balance and restraint as the Rome salt cellars. The Rome example described in detail in this chapter exceeds the New York salt not only in size and surviving condition, but also in the consistency of finished surfaces. It is entirely possible that our two examples plus the second Rome salt cellar come from the same or closely-working artist or workshops.

**Life and Death Envisioned in the Janus Head**

As in the Rome salt cellar, the lid of the New York salt cellar is the most striking feature with its crowning reference to disembodied heads, death, and triumph. This particular Janus-head finial is unique in the corpus of Sierra Leone-Portuguese ivories: While Janus-heads often appear on the salt cellar lids¹⁶ (for example, Figure 30), they are always carved with the sinuous curvilinearity of soapstone *nomoli* and other ivory human figures—both African and Portuguese—depicted on all other salt cellars. Additionally, most Janus-headed saltcellars consist of two near-identical human faces, sometimes with Portuguese helmets, sometimes with the more typically African textured head band or coiffure. The Janus-head on this container, in

¹⁴ Hecht, “Re: grad student at UF.”


contrast, depicts Christ crowned by thorns with a human skull (presumably Christ’s) on the other side (Figure 31). A twisted line encircles the finial on the lid echoes the twisting ovals on the crosses below.

Spiritual and moral realms, although intangible and invisible, were believed by both Africans and Europeans to be ever-present in everyday life. The belief in witchcraft or sorcery was subscribed to by both Africans and Europeans as a major cause of disease and misfortune, and amulets and other visual/material talismans were employed to ward off such real and ever-present threats. While decapitated heads do appear in the Sierra Leone artistic oeuvre, the fleshless skull does not. This drastically different Janus head was most probably added by a later, less skilled restorer. If this finial was in fact carved by an African, which is extremely doubtful, it is the only indication of a desire to show the face of Christ in the same style Europeans would have and did depict him.

A more effective point of visual comparison with this finial is the tradition of French, Netherlandish, and German carved ivory rosary beads in the form of double-faced memento mori heads. A small head dated to 1500-1525 with the face of a young but emaciated man on one side and a skull crawling with worms on the other side (Figure 32) at the Detroit Institute of Arts provides an excellent example. It is much finer in detail and anatomical correctness than the salt cellar finial; however, the theme is quite the same—a reminder of the fleeting nature of human life. As a rosary bead, it would have encouraged its owner to accept his (or her) inevitable fate while at the same time reinforcing his own social status with an expensive decorative object. Furthermore, both the rosary bead and the finial with its macabre exaggerated grimace of the

skull face display a preoccupation with morbidity and mortality that was common to art from these areas in Europe at the time.\textsuperscript{18}

As a comparison for the manner of Christ’s depiction in period European art, the cloth of Saint Veronica, who wiped Christ’s face for him as he struggled to carry the cross to Golgotha, was a commonly depicted motif within Christian iconography. When Veronica pulled the cloth away, a miraculous imprint of Christ’s face remained, a miracle that was depicted in many European prints.\textsuperscript{19} The most famous of these brings us back to Dürer, who published numerous prints with the Veronica cloth subject (also known as the \textit{Sudarium}) (Figures 33 and 34). Although Dürer’s two-dimensional rendering of Christ’s face is more finely detailed than that of the sculptural ivory finial, the flat-featured bearded face, long straight hair, doleful expression, and twisting crown of thorns are essentially the same. Since we do no know who restored the finial (and took great liberty with it), we can only infer that they were familiar with and influenced by the ways in which Christ has been historically depicted. Furthermore, the restorer could have been familiar with the other salt cellars with original Janus heads, and deliberately chosen to continue the Janus form, but treat it in a completely different way. More likely, the restorer was familiar with European treatment of Christ’s face and \textit{memento mori}.

The exact provenance of this container is unknown. However, its overall form, surface decoration, and integration of figures in the base in the so-called “\textit{nomoli}-style” indicate that it is of Sierra Leone-Portuguese origin. The lids of both the Rome and New York salt cellars constitute a sort of \textit{memento mori}, or reminder of death, which was a popular and common theme in many forms of art in late-medieval/early-modern Europe.\textsuperscript{20} While the reminder of death (as

\textsuperscript{18} St Aubyn, ed., \textit{Ivory: An International History}, p. 112.

\textsuperscript{19} Kenseth, \textit{The Age of the Marvelous}, p. 446.

justice) appears from the multiple perspectives of African artist and Portuguese patron on the Rome ivory, the *memento mori* on the lid of the New York salt cellar is decidedly European. In combination with the prominent cross with thorn crown appearing on the base, it seems that perhaps the Portuguese patron wished to see a graphically Christian vision of death and its meaning of salvation through Christ’s suffering. The base includes the same openwork male and female figures as those of the both Rome ivories discussed above, alternating with a vertical element to support the vessel above, except this time, it is a crucifix with crown of thorns instead of straight columns with crawling crocodiles. In light of the proposed reading of the other motifs, it is unclear how these hybrid Afro-Portuguese elements fit into the overall program. It appears that both salt cellars reflect transcultural views of death and an attempt to connect to or at least depict the spirit realm.

The Western art historical canon contains various forms of *memento mori*, ranging from the literal (consider the skeleton laid upon the Latin-inscribed coffin in Masaccio’s *Trinity* of the early fifteenth century, Figure 35) to the symbolic (Caravaggio’s basket of decaying fruit and foliage balanced precariously on a ledge painted in the late sixteenth century, Figure 36). Masaccio painted his *memento mori* at eye level, visually competing with the holy Trinity painted above, which emphasizes Christ’s transcendence from the misery of crucifixion. Although the configurations of motifs (the cross, the stylized crowns of thorns, the suffering face of Christ, the macabre skull) on the salt cellar are unrelated to these European works, the themes resonate visually and conceptually.

The modern people who unearth the *nomoli* figures buried in the soil could also be said to be reminded of death through the association with ancestors from the past turned to stone
manifested in the present. Incidentally, these non-visual, ephemeral themes converge visually in each of these examples—African salt cellar, Italian fresco, mysterious stone figure.

Both salt cellars are useful in showing not only the first moment of cultural exchange with Europeans in coastal Sierra Leone but also the forces of agency at work in their inceptions. Their importance within the corpus of Afro-Portuguese ivories is evident: the Rome “executioner” salt cellar has been recognized as one of the finest (if not the finest) example of the salt cellars, while the New York piece is the newest and one of the most anomalous pieces for the way in which it was restored. Its somewhat rougher manner of carving, though still skillful in its design and execution, provides a foil to the supreme refinement of the Rome “executioner” salt cellar. The damage done to it over time actually reveals more of its life story than if it had survived intact.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION: DIASPORA OF OBJECTS: TRANSCULTURAL MEMORY AND MOTION

This project strives to delineate shifting contexts of display and collection of the Afro-
Portuguese ivories, and particularly those from the earliest coastal people who produced these
objects in Sierra Leone. Homi K. Bhabha states of the *Circa 1492* exhibition, “[It] is an exhibit
with a double vision: the eye expanding to hold the world in one space: the eye averted, awry,
attenuated, trying to see the uniqueness of each specific cultural tradition and production. The
show is crafted from a creative tension deep within the early modern moment.”¹ His statement
encapsulates all that continues to be important about the Afro-Portuguese ivories in the ongoing
tension of between understanding the conditions of their original existence and their relationship
to complex and sometimes conflicting cultural identities.

By thinking of the Afro-Portuguese ivories as objects with a life cycle that is ongoing as
long as the works continue to exist and circulate, we can see that they acquire meanings and
values their original makers may never have intended or even imagined. In the examination of
the lives of the objects as they have been interpreted by scholars situated at various points in
history, layer upon layer of significance accrues onto the body of knowledge about the ivories
and becomes inscribed on the objects themselves.

By examining two salt cellars, utilitarian-turned-decorative objects that held particular
prestigious significance for their early modern European owners, this project elucidates how they
became embodiments of a transcultural moment. Details of iconography, restoration, and
synthesis of meanings come into a different kind of focus than has been seen before. The recent
re-emergence of a salt cellar that carries so many visible marks of its rich and what must have
been varied life into the corpus of the ivories is particularly fortuitous. Even if we never know

¹ Bhabha, “Double Visions,” p. 236.
the complete story, the object itself carries its history visibly and invisibly as it circulates in the public sphere of awareness and acquires additional contextual meaning.

The struggle to categorize and properly contextualize the Sierra Leone-Portuguese ivories evokes elusive concepts. “Culture,” “Identity,” “Authenticity” are all words that have been used to discuss the ivory sculptures, yet they are the concepts that become more and more complex as we continue to unpack them. The Sierra Leone-Portuguese ivories, despite or perhaps because of the puzzling circumstances of their existence and visually forceful presence, embody the ongoing usefulness in considering both fine art and “mere” utilitarian objects (these are both at once) as examples of shifting cultural expression of identities.

Museum exhibitions including the enigmatic ivories reflect an abiding public interest in their meaning and value. Exhibitions provide a public space for speculation about the new visual culture that emerged as a result of the global character of the Renaissance period. They also shed light onto how we conceptualize the global visual cultural environment today whose roots are located in the expansive modes of inquiry begun in the early modern period.

The conundrum of how to conclusively identify the ivories and their originally intended meanings exemplifies their nebulous identities as diasporic objects. They were destined to be dispersed from their place of manufacture to elite European collections. Today they reside not only in Europe, but in museums and private collections in the United States and Australia, themselves nations founded on dominantly European cultural and political models. Furthermore, unlike cultural heritage objects from the present period, these diasporic objects cannot be claimed for anyone’s cultural heritage, since the African and Portuguese cultures that produced them no longer exist as they did in the sixteenth century.
Delving into these issues produces more questions than answers: What was the identity of the ivory carvers? From what culture(s) did they come? Are the ivories authentic African art? Who defines “authenticity?” Does “African” art denote a geographic or a cultural identity (or both, neither)? By what criteria do we determine identity? Is it a productive endeavor, or does it ultimately lead to biased assumptions about race, class, and gender?

Since the seminal and infamous exhibition, *Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, in 1984, the word “affinity” has taken on negative connotations when applied to artistic exchange between “the West and the Rest.” Africanists and other scholars of non-Western art have since noted and condemned the Eurocentric insinuation that affinities between supposedly ahistorical non-Western “primitive” art and Western Modern art (inherently more “civilized”) somehow occurred on an imagined mystical and exotic level. The exhibition excluded such culturally hybrid objects as the Afro-Portuguese ivories, which would have been anathema to what its organizers considered “authentic” African art untouched by “modernizing” European influence, as though authenticity can only come from hermetically sealed uncivilized peoples. It is significant that Western artists such as Pablo Picasso (ironically Iberian, like the Portuguese explorers of the fifteenth and sixteenth century) appropriated non-Western visual forms because of their primitively unlearned and spiritual qualities without regard for accurate religious or ideological contexts.

However, in the case of the early contact ivories, perhaps the word “affinity” is in fact appropriate. While the ivories are by no means primitive in composition, technical execution, or conception, they do represent a prime moment in history where exchange between two distinct cultures drastically transformed not only an artistic practice, but also a way of visualizing new

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perspectives of the world. The merging of imagery sources and possible conflation of the pale, seafaring Portuguese with the pale, aquatic realm of the dead indicates a genuine affinity and reciprocity between Portuguese and coastal Sierra Leonean peoples. Perhaps African artists in reality had little or no interest in the intended Catholic meanings of the printed images that the Portuguese brought with them, and instead formed their own ideas about the meanings of the arrival of the Portuguese and the images they supplied as models into their own subjective and ethnocentric ideologies.

Mirozoeff asserts that visual culture is defined by “the modern tendency to picture or visualize existence”\(^3\) however, this project hopes to extend the definition to include the earliest moments of modernity and the diasporas of objects that emerged in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Mirzoeff’s definition of transculturation as a “three-way process involving the acquisition of certain aspects of a new culture, the loss of some older ones, and the third step of resolving these fragments of old and new into a coherent body, which may be more or less whole”\(^4\) can be applied directly to the body of export ivory works from sixteenth-century Sierra Leone. The Sierra Leone-Portuguese ivories alone remain as records of early modern transcultural movements of visual forms and visualization of the first commercial, political, and technological collaboration between coastal Africans and seafaring Portuguese.

\(^3\) Mirzoeff, *Introduction to Visual Culture*, p. 5.

LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Eugenia (Genia) Soledad Martinez earned a B.A. in art history at Appalachian State University in Boone, NC in 2001 where she graduated summa cum laude. Following her completion of the M.A. in art history with a concentration in African art in Fall 2007, Ms. Martinez will begin the Ph.D. program in art history at the University of Florida.