

# Treasures from Sri Lanka in two Portuguese Museums

(Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, and Museu do Oriente)

## Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon

### Abstract:

This paper will consider briefly the relationship between art history and museology taking as an example the collection of the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga (MNAA) in Lisbon. The exceptional quality, date and diverse typologies of a nucleus of Sri Lankan\* objects at the museum's collection make these fundamental for any study of the cultural exchanges between Portugal and Sri Lanka during the 16th and 17th centuries. This communication will then consider two different items that reflect distinct approaches: a luxury fall-front cabinet for export and an ivory plaque with Christian theme.



Among the treasures that arrived in Europe from Sri Lanka (or Ceylon as it was called those days) in the 16th and 17th centuries, and which were highly coveted by the most famous *Kunstammer*, were the jewels made of rock crystal, precious stones and gold, a valuable group of Christian ivories, objects of adornment, and furniture made with ivory, as well as elaborately decorated arms.

Fig.1 *Small Temple*, Sri Lanka, 16th-17th century, pierced ivory, wood, MNAA, inv 1 Div.

The set of Sri Lankan objects belonging to the collection of the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga in Lisbon, includes a sizeable group of roughly ten items noted not only for their antiquity and quality, but also for the range of different categories to which they belong. These objects are of undeniable interest for the study of the Portuguese presence in Sri Lanka, from both a cultural and a commercial point of view. Basically, two main groups are to be noted in this set of pieces: firstly, small luxury objects, namely ivory-veneered pieces of furniture that were destined for export, and objects designed to be used for religious worship in the missionary context. (Figs. 1-4).

\* The term "Sri Lanka" will be used by considering it the most including and current.



Fig. 2 *Fall-front cabinet*, Sri Lanka, 16th-17th century, teak wood, ivory, copper gilt, MNAA, inv 71 cx



Fig. 3 *Virgin Mary*, Sri Lanka, 16th-17th century, polychrome ivory, MNAA, inv 2467 esc.



Fig. 4 *Medallion*, Sri Lanka, 16th-17th century, gold, rock crystal, rubies, sapphires, polychrome ivory, MNAA, inv 868 Joa.

The group of Sri Lankan objects in the museum's collection consists of the property of old convents, as well as a number of acquisitions and donations made by important collectors, such as Jacques Kughel (1012-1985) or Louis-Fidel Debruge-Dumenil (1788-1838). The collection began to increase in size after a series of studies were made, leading to exhibitions that started to examine this theme in greater depth.

Despite the publication of some reference works on this subject, such as A. Coomaraswamy's remarkable study of *Mediaeval Sri Lankan Art* (1908), and the important 1929 exhibition representing Portugal in Seville, it was mainly in the 1940s that the greatest impetus was given in Portugal to the study and analysis of items produced in the Orient and related with the Portuguese presence there. A further contribution was made with a paper written by Luís Keil, in 1935, about *Three 16th-century Indian ivory caskets* (which attributed the manufacture of two caskets now belonging to the Munich Residenz Museum to the south of India or Sri Lanka) and, above all, his article on Portuguese and Oriental Art written for the 1940 *Portuguese World Congress*.

Studies by other Portuguese Scholars, such as Madalena Cagigal e Silva, Reinaldo dos Santos, Irene Quilhó and Mario Chicó, to name but a few, were written to coincide with different exhibitions at the Museu de Arte Antiga relating to Luso-Oriental artistic production. Examples include the exhibitions *Mobiliário indo-português* (Indo-Portuguese Furniture) held in 1938; *Portugal na Índia, China e no Japão* (Portugal in India, China and Japan) held in 1954; and *Influências do Oriente na Arte Portuguesa Continental. A arte nas províncias portuguesas do Ultramar*, (Oriental Influences on Mainland Portuguese Art. Art in the Portuguese Overseas Provinces) held in 1957. Together with the exhibition of *Portuguese Art in London* held at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1955/56, these studies proved fundamental for deepening and spreading knowledge in this field, largely due to the recognition that they made of the reciprocal influences existing between Portugal and the Orient. Such a dialogue was expressed in various processes of appropriation and assimilation, as well as a number of original creations.

Also in 1955, John Irwin published a short text entitled *Reflections on Indo-Portuguese Art*, in which he summarised all that had been speculated and written about the topic up until that point. In the same article, he made a fresh attempt at synthesising and systematically organising the information available about the various categories that had been identified up until then in the production of Indo-Portuguese pieces. These consisted of:

Objects produced independently by local craftsmen, denoting only a secondary influence in terms of Portuguese themes (the most diverse examples can be found in this category);

Objects made by native craftsmen working in the territories under Portuguese rule. Such work was alien to their own cultural heritage (an export-oriented production) and, according to Irwin, these craftsmen were probably recent converts to Christianity. It is difficult to specify the exact centres of production of the objects included in this category (ones that were adapted to European prototypes);

Objects made by Portuguese craftsmen based on oriental prototypes.

In more recent years, a close analysis of the entries made in exhibition catalogues or of individually published texts about Indo-Portuguese or other centres of production, has shown that the term has gradually fallen into disuse among scholars, especially in the context of international historiography, and has been replaced by another attributive expression, namely that of Indian (or Sri Lankan) export production for the Portuguese market. By respecting international cataloguing criteria, such a choice affords greater prominence to the place of manufacture of the articles displayed and pays less attention to questions relating to the artistic and cultural relations that lay behind their production. (Ferreira, s.d.)

It would seem to me, also, that this designation is somewhat limited in its scope and needs to be rethought, since it is known that the works produced were destined for use in the places where they were manufactured, and that those which were in fact exported were not only destined for the Portuguese or European market, but at the same time proved that an enthusiastic Asian market already existed for luxury goods. The different artistic, cultural and commercial relations existing at that time played a decisive role in ensuring that traditional skills were used to adapt the new formal, symbolic and decorative languages to local tastes.

After this brief introduction, I should now like to move on to the collection itself:

Although, as already mentioned, the museum was aware of the interest and value of the pieces relating to the period of the Portuguese Discoveries, there was no coherent exhibition section reflecting the complex relationships that these objects had not only between one another, but also with the other production centres. Pieces were exhibited randomly, being mixed together with European painting and furniture. (Fig. 5)



Fig 5 Museum's hall (1962)

It was only in 1986, three years after the holding of a large-scale exhibition in Lisbon (XVII, 1983), that the conditions were created at this museum for exhibiting pieces originating from the Portuguese diaspora according to chronological and geographical criteria.

The conceptual formal and decorative symbiosis found in the artistic testimonies that make these pieces so fascinating is quite clear, for these are the ones that best highlight the “geography” of the various artistic contributions and the wide range of different influences that were evoked.

Let us now re-examine the production of Sri Lankan items, in which various artistic influences mingled with one another. Besides the ancestral influence of the south of India, one can note influences from other centres of production, such as Goa, along with clear evidence of Mogul and Chinese inspiration (at the National Museum in Colombo, there is an inscription in Persian, Chinese and Tamil, discovered in Galle, that provides useful information about Indian Ocean trade in and around the 14th century). These influences obviously make the classification of some pieces rather difficult.

It is, however, possible to point to certain characteristics that display a coherent homogeneity in the production of these different centres. The first of these was certainly the sophistication displayed in all the works produced, which was so admired by Linschoten: “The natives or Sri Lankans show great skill and workmanship in gold, silver, ivory, iron and other metals, which is marvellous to behold. They are highly valued throughout India and appreciated more than all the Indian products... [and] they circulate around the whole of India in order to make money.” (Itinerário, 1997: 105)

Thus, these pieces soon became part of the market in *exotica* at the royal Portuguese court. In the list of precious objects that Dona Catarina Queen of Portugal gave to her chambermaid in 1545 were two caskets from Sri Lanka “made of ivory and gems”. These caskets were given to Albert V of Bavaria on the occasion of the marriage of his daughter to Dom Sebastião of Portugal. With the help of Meyting, an agent for the Fugger family, they arrived in Munich in 1574 (Gschwend, 2012: 21-22, in Silva, 2013: 92).

The vast majority of the other pieces of furniture were not made of solid ivory, but of wood that was either carved and decorated with floral motifs or with the Portuguese coat of arms (such as the fall-front cabinet belonging to the Museum of Caramulo inv 265) or veneered with plaques of carved or pierced ivory on a gilt background. The delicately carved and pierced plaques varied in size and in their themes, and were frequently cut without any great attention being paid to their pattern or design (fig6).



Fig 6 *Fall-front cabinet*, MNAA inv 66cx(detail)

This suggests that, as far as certain details were concerned, these pieces were produced in quantity by local workshops for use as luxury items. Despite being made primarily for export, they were also offered to the new Indian converts as gifts (Bailey, 2004: 107).

Let us now take a brief look at a precious piece of export furniture: the fall-front cabinet. (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7 *Fall-front cabinet*, Sri Lanka, 16th-17th century, teak and ebony, gold, ivory, copper gilt mounts, MNAA, inv 66 cx

The formal model that gave rise to this type of furniture was taken abroad by the Portuguese, who, as we have seen, settled in Sri Lanka from 1506 onwards.

The famous ability of the Sri Lankan artisans, abundantly referred to in the documentation of that time, facilitated the reproduction of all types of foreign objects presented in the markets. Major centres in Gujarat and along the Malabar and

Coromandel coasts were inhabited not only by Indians and Europeans, but also by countless other Asian merchants.

In the various centres of production where there was a strong European influence, all types of pieces could be commissioned, with it being common practice to provide the artist with the material or to give him the amount of money that was needed to purchase it, and above all to give him the model: “muster”, from the Portuguese “mostrar”, meaning to show. (Jaffer, 2002: 11) This procedure explains why there was such a flagrant similarity to Portuguese pieces in the case of furniture, which began to have a much wider use, as revealed in the creation of specific Sri Lankan terms such as: *mesa* (table – *mesa* in Portuguese), *iskottorya*, (fall-front cabinet – *escritório*); *istrduva* (dais – *estrado*); *sopavo* (sofa – *sofá*); *bankuva* (stool – *banco*); *almariya* (cupboard – *armário*); *gavetta* (drawer – *gaveta*). (Coomaraswamy, 2012: 137-138; Cosme, 1990: 486)

The fall-front cabinet is one of the oldest pieces of Portuguese furniture, having been recorded in inventories since at least 1522 (Pinto, 1999: 10). It generally takes the form of a box, fitted with a fall-front lid, containing drawers inside that were used to store the writing utensils (inkstand, sand-box, pen and a larger compartment for the paper), as well as various objects of value, including jewels and other valuables or documents. The production of easily transportable and functional pieces of this type was necessarily related to the permanent mobility of Portuguese merchants: “they [the Portuguese] rest not a minute in one place; they walk here and there” (Coomaraswami, 2012:10).

In the pieces produced there at that time, attention is drawn to those that, in detriment to their functional aspect, began to form part of a production of luxury pieces, being decorated with inlaid work, gilding or veneers made of the most diverse exotic materials. Above all, we are interested here in a set of caskets and fall-front cabinets with ivory plaques, which clearly reflect the Portuguese presence in Sri Lanka and offer us the possibility of dating and identifying a theme for them. A special mention should be made of the famous casket (Schatzkammer, Residenz, Munich, inv 1241) that depicts the embassy sent to the Portuguese king Dom João III, for the coronation of Dharmapala, in 1542-43. On other well-known caskets or fall-front cabinets, belonging to museums or private collections, from roughly the same period, we can see carved decorations depicting court scenes with Portuguese and Sri Lankan figures, themes from local mythology and various Christian themes. As has already been mentioned, they served as diplomatic gifts offered to European royal families connected to Catarina of Austria (the wife of the Portuguese king Dom João III), an avid collector of *exotica*, with these gifts bearing symbolic and material testimony to the control of an empire.

Besides the characteristic and highly delicate carving of the ivory plaques decorated with floral elements identical to those found on the caskets, this precious fall-front cabinet shows scenes in which the iconography focuses on the Sri Lankan world (with divinities and mythological animals) alternating with themes that depict everyday aspects of the Portuguese presence. Above all, it reveals a remarkable attention to detail in the characterisation of the figures in their costumes and in the objects that surround them, such as the chair (Figs. 8 and 9), or even in the depiction of everyday life, showing the Portuguese hunting (Fig. 10). This piece is of undeniable interest, for it is included among the small group of objects that visually portray the Portuguese presence in the Orient.





Fig 8 *Fall-front cabinet* (Back)

Fig 9 *Armchair*, Goa, 17<sup>th</sup> century, teakwood, MNAA, inv 1523 mov



Fig 10 *Fall-front cabinet* (detail)

In order to increase our knowledge of this type of production, it is very important to make a closer study of the materials, techniques of construction, decoration and metal fittings used in the manufacture of the fall-front cabinets, caskets, chests and other cabinets (with one or two doors) already known to exist. These objects can then be more usefully compared with items that have already been restored, analysed and studied, such as the V&A cabinet (V&A 1067-1855) and, more recently, an exceptional ivory altar cross, on display at the exhibition *Vita Christi, Luso – Oriental Ivories* at the MNAA. (Fig. 11). (Sousa, 2013, *Vita Christi*).



Fig 11 *Crucifix with Calvary* Sri Lanka, 1610, teak and other exotic woods, natural, polychrome and gilded ivory, rubies, rock crystals, coloured glass, velvet, lacquer, gilded copper, silver, paper, lead white. Private Collection.

Let us now look at the group of pieces used for worship and missionary purposes. It is known that each missionary order had its own specific action strategy. The attitude of the various missionary orders towards the variety of different people that they successively made contact with, shifted from a position of intransigence towards more accommodating and sophisticated methods, adopting local habits, customs and behaviour, insofar as these were compatible with Christian doctrine. Teaching with the aid of visual supports was one of the missionary approaches referred to in the decree issued by the 25th Session of the Council of Trent.

In this sense, the sculptures or paintings taken to the Orient, above all isolated religious engravings or those included in books of worship, played a central role in the evangelisation of the local populations and the spread of the Christian doctrine. (Sousa, 2013: 29) In the circulation of engravings, further strengthened through the introduction of the art of printing into Goa (1556), attention is drawn above all to the Flemish and German workshops. Among those with the greatest output, the name that stands out is that of the Wierix family, a dynasty whose founder was Anton I Wierix (1520-1572) (Sousa, 2011). In the field of artistic production, the circulation of Indian and Mogul drawings also needs to be re-examined.

In the illustration of the Christian message, ivory artefacts included not only sculptures, but also some small altarpieces and isolated carved devotional plaques depicting a variety of themes, their two-dimensionality expressing a more obvious relationship with western engravings. Although Goa was an important centre of production, it was, above all, the Sri Lankan artisans who stood out because of their masterful skill and attention to detail

The exquisite carving of the ivory, the drawing of the haloes and the faces with almond-shaped eyes and slender noses (some with the three Buddhist wrinkles on the neck), the folds of the drapery, the bands of pearling, the succession of floral and animal motifs and the symmetry of the pieces, these are just some of the most distinctive features differentiating this type of production from that of the Indo-Portuguese production. (Fig12)

Fig 12 Examples of decorative motifs in several items produced in Sri Lanka





Crucifix with Calvary (detail), private collection



Nativity (detail), MNAA inv 625 esc

Small temple (detail), MNAA inv 1Div



Nativity (detail), MNAA inv 625 esc

I should now like to present a precious ivory plaque (Fig. 13). The theme of the Nativity, so dear to St Francis of Assisi, was spread by the first missionaries in Sri Lanka: the Franciscans. They also understood the value of using images as a strategy for evangelisation, a method that was reproduced shortly afterwards by the Jesuits. The importance of the artistic role played by the Franciscans also needs to be re-examined, and the above-mentioned *Crucifix with Calvary*, a piece that was commissioned by the Franciscans, stands as a clear example of this. It should also be added that, in 1628, there were 55 churches in the kingdom of Kotte and more than 70,000 Christians. (Távora, 1979: p. 88)

In the piece from the MNAA, the composition draws on certain features to be found in the engravings of Albrecht Durer and Hieronimus Wierix (who also copied Durer) (Figs.14 and 15). The way in which the whole theme has been recomposed is significant, as, for example the presentation of Child Jesus, or the *pala peti* border on the base of the Virgin.



Fig 13 *Nativity* (plaque) Sri Lanka, 16th-17th century, gilded ivory (wooden frame), MNAA, inv. 625 Esc



Fig 14 A. Durer,  
*Nativity* c.1510,  
engraving



Fig 15 H.  
Wierix,  
*Nativity*,  
engraving, The  
British Museum  
London, inv  
1859.0709.2994

While, on the one hand, the choice of Christian images reflects a conscious strategy of communication, on the other hand the greater or lesser accuracy of their plastic materialisation by local artists, tells us a great deal about the way in which these elements were assimilated and interpreted, in turn “paganising” Christian art and informing us about the completely reciprocal awareness of the power of the image.

M.C.B.S.

English version: John Elliott

## Bibliography

BAILEY, Gauvin, A, 2001. *Art on the Jesuits missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542-1773*. Canada: University of Toronto Press.

\_\_\_\_\_, 2004, «Religious encounters: Christianity in Asia» in *Encounters the meeting of Asia and Europe, 1500-1800*. London: Victoria & Albert Museum.

COOMARASWAMY, Ananda K., 2012, *Medieval Sinhalese Art*. Colombo: Pantheon Books, Re-published by Ministry of National Heritage Government of Sri Lanka

COSME, O.M. da Silva, 1990, *Fidalgos in the Kingdom of Kotte, Sri Lanka(1505-1656)*, The Portuguese in Sri lanka, Colombo, Harwoods Publishers

DIAS, Pedro, 2006. *Portugal e Ceilão, Baluartes, Marfim e Pedraria*. Lisboa: Santander Totta.

FERREIRA, Maria João, [s.d.]. «Arte Indo-portuguesa», in *Enciclopédia Virtual da Expansão Portuguesa* [consultado em 18/09/2013]. Disponível em <http://www.fcsb.unl.pt/cham/eve/content.php?printconceito=744>

FLORES, Jorge, 1998, “Um império de objectos” in *Os construtores do Oriente português*, Lisboa e Porto: ed. Jorge Flores, p15-51

GUERREIRO, Pe. Fernão, 1604 a 1606, “Das coisas de Goa” in *Relação Anual das coisas que fizeram os Padres da Companhia de Jesus nas suas missões*, Coimbra, Imprensa da Universidade, tomo 2º, . ed. dirigida por Artur Viegas, 1931

GSCHWEND, Anne Marie Jordan and Johannes Beltz, 2010, *Elfenbeine aus Ceylon: Luxusgüter für Katharina von Habsburg (1507-1578)*, Museum Rietberg, Zurich

GSCHWEND, Anne Marie Jordan, 2012, “Exótica for the Munich Kunstkammer. Antonio Meyting:Fugger agent, art dealer and ducal ambassador in Spain and Portugal in Georg Laue (ed.) 2012: Exotica, München: Kunstkammer, p21-22

IRWIN, John. “Reflections on Indo-Portuguese Art”, in *Burlington Magazine*, 1955, nº 633, p. 386-388.

*Itinerário, Viagem ou Navegação de Jan Huygen van Linschoten para as Índias Orientais ou Portuguesas*, 1997. Edição preparada por Arie Pos e Rui Manuel Loureiro. Lisboa: CNCDP.

JAFFER, Amin, 2002. *Luxury goods from India, the art of the indian cabinet maker*. Londres: V&A Publications.

KEIL, Luis, 1938. *Influência artística portuguesa no Oriente, três cofres de marfim indianos do século XVI*. Lisboa: Boletim da ANBA, vol. III, pp. 39-44.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1940 “A Arte Portuguesa e a Arte Oriental”, in *Terceiro Congresso do Mundo Português*. Lisboa, Comissão Executiva dos Centenários, , pp. 161-172

LOPES, Rui Oliveira, 2011. *Arte e Alteridade. Confluências da Arte Cristã na Índia, na China e no Japão, sec. XVI a XVIII*. Tese de Doutoramento em Belas Artes, Universidade de Lisboa, Faculdade de Belas-Artes. Lisboa.

MARCOS, Margarita Mercedes Estella, 1984. *La escultura barroca de marfil en España, Las escuelas europeas y las coloniales*. 2 vol. Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Instituto Diego Velazquez.

MAUCQUOY-HENDRICKX, Marie, 1978. *Les Estampes des Wierix Conservées Au Cabinet Des Estampes De La Bibliothèque Royale Albert I*. Catalogue raisonné. 1.<sup>a</sup> parte: *Ancien Testament, Nouveau Testament, Dieu Le Père, Le Christ, le Saint-Esprit, Les Anges et La Vierge*. Bruxelas: Bibliothèque Royale Albert I.

ORTA, Garcia de, 1891. *Colóquios dos Simples e Drogas da India*. Conde de Ficalho (dir.). Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional.

PINTO, M.<sup>a</sup> Helena Mendes, 1999, *Escritórios, Contadores e outros móveis indo-portugueses*, Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian (separata)

SCHURHAMMER, G. and Voretzsch E.A., 1928. *Sri Lanka zur Zeit des Königs Bhuvaneka Bahu und Franz Xavers 1539-1552*. 2 vol. Leipzig: Verlag der Asia Major.

SILVA, Madalena Cagigal e, 1966. *A Arte-Indo-Portuguesa*. Lisboa: Edições Excelsior.

SILVA, Nuno Vassallo e, 2001. «Precious objects and marvels: the Goa-Lisbon trade», in *Exotica: the Portuguese discoveries and the Renaissance Kunstkammer*. Lisboa: F. C. Gulbenkian, pp. 27-37.

\_\_\_\_ coord. 2013 *Marfins no Império Português*, Lisboa: Scribe

SOUSA, Maria da Conceição Borges de, 2011. «A influencia da gravura europeia nos marfins orientais» in *Actas do III Colóquio ESAD-FRESS / IHA- Artes Decorativas Portuguesas: Iconografia e fontes de Inspiração. Imagem e memória da gravura europeia*. [CD]

\_\_\_\_ 2012/2013, *A arquitectura imaginária, pintura, escultura, artes decorativas*. Lisboa: MNAA-INCM, p. 166-171.

\_\_\_\_.2013 , (coord.) *Vita Christi, Marfins Luso-orientais*, Lisboa:DGPC

TÁVORA, Bernardo Ferrão de Tavares, 1979. «Meninos Jesus cingalo-portugueses e seus protótipos flamengos» in separata da Revista *Universitas*, nº25, abril-junho. Coimbra: [s.n.].

\_\_\_\_ Bernardo Ferrão Tavares e, 1983. *A Imaginária Luso-Oriental*. Lisboa: INCM.

The Illustrated Bartsch, vol.10 *Sixteenth century german artists*, 1980 b, New York: Abaris Books.

*XVII Exposição Europeia de Arte, Ciência e Cultura, Os descobrimentos dos portugueses e a Europa do Renascimento*, “A arte na rota do Oriente”, 1983, Jerónimos 2ºvol, Lisboa: Presidência do Conselho de Ministros

### **Photos :**

Biblioteca de Conservação e Museus, LJF, DGPC guia L/99: Fig 1,12

DGPC-LJF/ Luís Piorro : Fig 2,3,6,7,8,10

DGPC-ADF- Giorgio Bordino Fig 4; Luís Pavão Fig 9; José Pessoa Fig 12, 13

©Trustees of The British Museum: Fig 15

Arquivo MNAA :Fig 5

José Paulo Ruas:Fig11, 12