

BOOK REVIEW

José da Silva Horta, Carlos Almeida and Peter Mark, eds. *African Ivories in the Atlantic World, 1400–1900/Marfins Africanos no Mundo Atlântico, 1400–1900*. Lisbon: Centro de História da Universidade de Lisboa, 2021. 705 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Bibliographies. ISBN: 9789898068361.

This work came out of a fairly long history study, largely by art historians, of the so-called “Afro Portuguese Ivories,” that is, works executed in ivory by sixteenth-century African carvers, initially believed to be from greater Senegambia and West Central Africa. Organized initially as a Portuguese and Brazilian project that grew out of conference papers presented in Lisbon in 2019, the explicit aim of the book is to broaden the scope of the study of the ivories. As befits its origin, the chapters are in English and Portuguese, following a bilingual introduction by the editors.

A cluster of chapters that open the book take on a long-established controversy of where, when, and by whom the Senegambian ivories were carved. They were distinctive because although executed by Africans they often presented European and sometimes hybrid Afro-European themes. In some ways they could be likened to “airport art,” that is, work produced by Africans as souvenirs for passing foreigners, or perhaps commissioned by them. William Hart, outlining three possibilities—production in Portugal by Africans resident there (perhaps as slaves), production in the Cape Verde Islands also by African craftsmen, and finally production in Senegambia itself—leans toward Cape Verde.

Peter Mark contends that Sapi artists in Sierra Leone got their images from books, which had a supernatural element for them. Ivories, however, were not just to put on the shelf, for archaeological work in Portugal by Cláudia Manso, Tânia Manuel Casmiro, and Mário Varela Gomes found at least some of the ivories were put to everyday use.

Others took the debate elsewhere; Cathy Curnow looked closely at iconography and found good evidence to seek a Benin component to add to the regional mix. Inês Meira Araújo claims the Benin group can be dated to 1540–60 by looking at subtle changes in clothing styles of Europeans represented on them.

Following this the discussion takes off in directions that carry it far from this original discussion: Carlos Almeida, for example, proposes that looking to elephants themselves as symbols of power in Central Africa might be as telling as what the ivory presents (particularly since the art work on Central African ivories is largely geometric figures).

Aside from art historical studies, the book also explores the possibility of sourcing ivory through archaeology, albeit, as authors Ashley Couto and Paul Lane contend, after reviewing the extant studies, that at present there is little to

help on the question, nor are ancient DNA studies yet advanced enough. Archaeologist Yusuf Juwaweyi proposed that ivory discovered in the capitals of the Maravi Kingdom (in Malawi) demonstrates the reach of that kingdom.

As a reminder that ivory is precious even in unworked form, Felipe Silveira de Oliveira Malaocco studies ivory as a commodity in global circulation, and to drive the point home, Rogéria Cristina Alves explores (unsuccessful) Portuguese attempts to create a monopoly in ivory trading. Spanish records examined by Maria de Graça A. Mateus Ventura show a contraband trade in ivory found in confiscation records of Portuguese ships in the Spanish Indies in the sixteenth century. Commerce in ivory is highlighted by Jelmer Vos, who shows that the Ivory Coast was well named, and eighteenth-century Dutch traders were active there, primarily to export ivory, and rarely for slaves. Ivan Sicca Gonçalves looks at the records of nineteenth-century trader Silva Porto to see the movement of ivory in this late period.

Felipe Silveira de Oliveira Malaocco reminds us that ivory is not only a commodity or even an art form but had a role to play in diplomacy.

Lest we forget that ivory for artistic purposes was not confined to the early Atlantic, Silvio Marcus de Souza Correira demonstrates that it was also highly prized in Art Nouveau in nineteenth-century Europe. An important final chapter by Fernando Loureiro Bastos reminds us that the ivory trade continues to be a subject of legal inspection, now for ecological and animal welfare as well as art and profit, hence, of course, the continuing demand for it.

This overview of the wide range of topics can only begin to do justice to the project as a whole, which makes a considerable contribution to our knowledge of all things ivory, and especially in Africa (one could easily imagine a companion volume for Asian ivory). These chapters are all of very high quality, both in terms of their research and their contributions to the larger discussion.

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