

Object Biography

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A Late-Nineteenth-Century Carved Ivory Tusk from the Loango Coast

Friday 28th April, 5pm

Introduction

A late-nineteenth-century carved ivory tusk from the Loango Coast rests in the McManus Galleries, Dundee. While a dearth of documentation limits information on its life cycle, its value lies in its representation of a long tradition of exquisite ivory carvings produced by the Vili, a subgroup of the BaKongo people, and the increase of mercantilism in this society in relation to European colonialism.¹ It is imbued with typical iconographic characteristics of Vili tradition yet shows some atypical signs that differentiate it as a tourist souvenir. Donated by Dr Peter Rattray in 1913, it travelled from the Loango Coast to Old Calabar, and was eventually transported to Dundee. In its remarkably conserved condition, it powerfully demonstrates Vili craftsmanship and should be visually attributed this strength in its exhibition space. This biography does not exhaust the ambiguities of this object or claim to definitively answer all questions surrounding it. Instead, it poses possible solutions and seeks to raise questions for further necessary research and contemplation.

Part I: The Object's Form and Type Within Art History

The Loango Coast, situated in the present-day Democratic Republic of Congo and northern Angola, has a long history of ivory trade with Europe. Trading with the Portuguese from 1483, and subjected to the slave trade from 1589, the region became a main supplier of ivory, disrupting peace and undermining traditional rulers.² The intrusion of trading companies in second half of the nineteenth-century, combined with French, Portuguese and Belgian colonial interests further undermined BaKongo trading authority. The renowned skill of the Vili ensured constant demand and inflated market values of ivory, especially during the region's colonial occupation from 1885-1960, so that by the late-nineteenth-century tusks were purely decorative, designed for export to suit European tastes.³

Described as a 'carved tusk' by the 'BaKongo people' of 'Loango, Lower Congo,' on its exhibition label, of 'before 1913', little is known of this object (fig.1). However, it fits into the artistic tradition of Vili tusks, realised during the late-nineteenth-century for a European

¹ Carter Woodson, "Notes on the Bakongo," *The Journal of Negro History* 30, no. 4 (1945): 422.

² Woodson, "Notes on the Bakongo," 424.

³ Alisa LaGamma, "Kongo: Power and Majesty," *African Arts* 48, no. 3 (2015): 79.

market, which vary greatly, but share stylistic qualities (fig.2). Its figures reflect the mercantile, commercial nature of quotidian life, the interactions between traders and craftspeople; therefore, the figures depicted are both BaKongo and European.⁴ Such tusks chronicled life on the Loango Coast, inadvertently exposing colonial brutality, mercantilism, racism and ‘ubiquitous sexual predation’.⁵ Therefore, these objects were paradoxical; they both enriched the mercantilism of the colonisers, while visually criticising it.⁶ Humour fills these works, created against the backdrop of Belgian censorship of exported artworks.⁷ This is evident in the visual imagery, which elucidates the – often violent – power dynamics between merchants/Europeans and craftspeople/BaKongo, what Zoë Strother describes as ‘flattery etched with acid’ alongside ‘a touch of humour’ to appeal to a European market.⁸ On the lower spiral, the tusk depicts a (likely) European merchant, identified by his European jacket and traditional waist-wrapper, raising a long implement towards a BaKongo man carrying goods (fig.2). This indicates the scene depicts both porters – who were often enslaved – and commercial life. It is typical of Vili carving in its suggestion of violence.⁹ The upper spiral sees a BaKongo woman interacting with a seated male figure (fig.3). The nature and identity of the figures are uncertain. The clothing is culturally ambiguous. This self-reflective imagery imbues the object with historical importance; it depicts the inner-workings and violence of the colonial power dynamics within this region. The spiralling vignette creates a narrative, while also alluding to longevity in BaKongo tradition.¹⁰

The object embodies the cosmology of BaKongo belief in the liminality between life and death in two ways. Firstly, white, therefore ivory, represented the dead, thus was revered, traditionally reserved for royalty.¹¹ Early White European travellers therefore occupied a liminal state between life and death within BaKongo belief, seen as their dead ancestors.¹² Furthermore, musicians, painted white, played ivory oliphants in reverence of their

⁴ Nichole H. Bridges, “Kongo Ivories,” *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000.

⁵ Cécile Fromont, “Untitled,” review of *A Carved Loango Tusk: Local Images and Global Connections*, by John M. Janzen, *African Arts* 45, no. 1 (2012): 88.

⁶ Fromont, “Untitled,” 88.

⁷ Zoë Strother, “Dancing on the Knife of Power,” in *Through African Eyes: The European in African Art, 1500 to Present*, ed. Nii O. Quarcoopome (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 2009), 50.

⁸ Strother, “Dancing on the Knife of Power,” 55.

⁹ Strother, “Dancing on the Knife of Power,” 52.

¹⁰ LaGamma, “Kongo: Power and Majesty,” 87.

¹¹ Bridges, “Kongo Ivories.”

¹² Suzanne Preston Blier, “Imaging Otherness in Ivory: African Portrayals of the Portuguese ca. 1492,” *The Art Bulletin* 75, no. 3 (1993): 380.

ancestors.¹³ Secondly, the spiral represents the journey of life to death, to life again in the ancestral realm, alongside aiding the object's identification as Vili; the use of the spiral in this manner was unique to the Loango Coast.¹⁴

While the clear geometric articulation and bold lines are typical of Vili carvings, the quality of the carving is substandard of traditional Vili ivories. When compared against typical Vili examples, it is evidently carved in lower relief, and includes black marks denoting lines in place of carving (fig.4). This indicates either Vili *style* carving and conception elsewhere, or, more likely, the mass-production and less intricate execution of such objects. Another carved ivory, a plaque of highly problematic imagery, holds similar features with stylised figures and black markings, reinforcing the plausibility of this possibility (fig.5).

The size of this tusk (11.7 x 4 cm) not only supports the argument for mercantile mass-production but suggests its derivation from the smaller-tusked African Forest Elephant, after the extinction of the Savanna Elephant in the seventeenth-century, due to the vast scale of ivory trading. The dearth of comparable tusks with flattened apices is interesting. Perhaps it formed part of a larger tusk, divided at an unknown time. However, the spiral line flattens, indicating it was intended this size. This compounds its touristic, mercantile function as it was neither carved most elaborately, nor much emphasis placed on its complete form. Instead, a whole tusk may have been divided to create numerous such ivories, indicating other parts of it exist. It is otherwise in perfect condition, suggesting its lack of use and supporting the argument for its collectible, rather than tactile function. With tusks' value synonymous with the number of figures it depicts - of which this tusk's current visibility allows nine to be counted - it is neither a high value nor quality example of Vili craftsmanship.¹⁵

Part II: The Provenance of The Object

¹³ Blier, "Imaging Otherness," 381.

¹⁴ Kiatezua Lubanzadio Luyaluka, "The Spiral as the Basic Semiotic of the Kongo Religion, the Bukongo," *Journal of Black Studies* 48, no. 1 (2017): 93; Strother, "Dancing on the Knife of Power," 51.

¹⁵ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 30.

The McManus Galleries state the tusk was donated by Dr Peter Rattray in 1913, however, its previous provenance is undocumented. The nature of the object's journey from the Loango Coast to Dundee is ambiguous yet possible incentives and dates for its travel can be assumed. Rattray's collection of this object, when no others from this geography, or of its nature are indicated as donated by him, is significant. Renowned for their mastery; similar (yet much larger and more intricate) Vili ivories were in the collections of Sir Hans Sloane and the Medici. Compounded with the high value of ivory in Europe, this object would have been highly collectible, providing explanation for Rattray's acquisition of it.¹⁶

A medical missionary for the Church Mission Society, first posted to Uganda for two years in 1895, then to Old Calabar from 1898-1906, Rattray devoted much of his life to the conversion of African peoples to Presbyterian Christianity.¹⁷ Both Uganda and Old Calabar were under British colonial rule during these periods. However, the Loango Coast was under private rule of Leopold II, as part of the Congo Free State, so its accessibility to Rattray was restricted. Furthermore, as the only known object from this region donated by Rattray, it can be assumed it was transported from the Loango Coast and sold in Old Calabar as a souvenir.¹⁸

The tusk was donated among a large and varied number of other African objects in 1913. Most of these objects originated locally to Old Calabar and Uganda, however multiple singular objects from locations with no documentation of Rattray's visiting are in the McManus collection. Ranging from bags to bells and armlets to dishes, from what is now Nigeria, and a variety of objects from Uganda, he acquired numerous eclectic objects from the socialisations he resided in, all donated alongside the tusk in 1913.¹⁹ However, some objects notably originate from further afield; two spoons from Mozambique, a Southern African Fly Whisk, and a pipe from Morocco, alongside the tusk.²⁰ These objects, if correctly provenanced, are reflective of not only Rattray's varied tastes, but also of trade throughout Africa and the movement of such objects throughout the continent. They legitimise the case for his buying a curious object such as the tusk at a market in Old Calabar. His collecting

¹⁶ LaGamma, "Kongo: Power and Majesty," 79.

¹⁷ Andrew Proctor, *Cultures of the World: The Ethnographic Collections of Dundee Art Galleries and Museums* (Dundee: Dundee Art Galleries and Museums, 1994), 10.

¹⁸ Woodson, "Notes on the Bakongo," 425.

¹⁹ Proctor, *Cultures of the World*, 81-84.

²⁰ Proctor, *Cultures of the World*, 71-72; 85.

habits were varied, yet he obtained exclusively small objects, suggesting consideration of transportation to Dundee.

Rattray was born on Union Street, Dundee, travelling between Dundee and Africa multiple times during his life, usually for marital reasons, and worked alongside another Dundonian missionary, Mary Slessor. He was described by Slessor as her ‘ideal of a man missionary...a carpenter, shoemaker and general handyman.’²¹ Therefore, he likely had little money, reflecting the quality of the tusk. Little more is known of Rattray, although the gallery mentions now-lost letters from him to his son in 1961, which could help to elucidate his collecting incentives further. Two diaries are mentioned in the letters, however, finding them again by tracing his descendants has proved fruitless.²² Rattray’s assimilation with local cultures was limited, as evidenced by his part in suppressing the *Long Juju Shrine* of Arochukwu, between 1900 and 1901, by request of the British Government. This indicates the tusk was one of curiosity and monetary value. Furthermore, Vili carvings’ international renown indicates it was a collectible item, enhancing his vast collection indicated by his donation of many African objects to the McManus.²³

The incentive for Rattray’s donation to the McManus lies both in his Dundonian heritage and its established African collection. Despite such a collection, however, few efforts were made to understand or document the tusk, reflected in the paucity of information currently available on it.²⁴ His loan of many works to the museum in 1898 and 1902, helping to establish it as an ethnological centre, indicates it was seen as one of many representations of ‘Africa’ rather than a unique example of Vili craftsmanship.²⁵ The varied donations are reflective of wider ethnographic collecting; the negation of individual cultures in attempts to create a wider ‘African’ stereotype. The tusk probably remained on display in Dundee’s Central Museum until taken to the Dudhope Park Museum at the beginning of the twentieth-century. It would have been returned to the Central Museum, which is where it is now, when the Dudhope was closed in 1949.²⁶ The ‘prominence’ of ethnographic displays in Dundee ensured their collection grew, further establishing it as one of many examples of ‘African’

²¹ Proctor, *Cultures of the World*, 35.

²² Proctor, *Cultures of the World*, 35.

²³ Proctor, *Cultures of the World*, 35.

²⁴ “Dundee and the World: Educator’s Pack,” McManus, accessed April 10, 2023, <https://www.themcmanus-dundee.gov.uk/sites/default/files/dworldp1.pdf>.

²⁵ Proctor, *Cultures of the World*, 10.

²⁶ Proctor, *Cultures of the World*, 10.

objects.²⁷ It likely served in this socialisation as an small example of ‘African ethnology’, to instil and perpetuate African stereotypes in the Dundonian public, and reinforce colonialist notions.²⁸

Part III: What Should Happen to This Object?

As part of a collection formed on European colonialism, the tusk should be displayed with detailed and accurate background information on Europe’s invasions into and exploitation of Africa, that assumes no prior knowledge, and serves to incite a dialogue on issues related to postcolonialism.²⁹ The McManus collection needs to witness a shift from a European perspective of colonialism to a rich understanding of the African objects and the cultures they represent. The current dearth of information on both the label and in the *Cultures of the World* catalogue appears as disinterest in the history of this object which must be rectified. Furthermore, the trading of these objects before colonial interests is highly relevant; it represents the African, rather than European interest in and benefits from trade.³⁰ This would aid a necessary move away from the dominant European ideologies towards African peoples. The tusk has power in depicting how Africans viewed Europeans, and this should be emphasised. Less agency should be placed on Rattray, and more on the Vili craftspeople who created an object that evokes such fascination, regardless of cultural background of the viewer, returning agency to its creators. The collection must be curated with awareness and reflective appreciation of the colonial power imbalance between Scotland and Africa.³¹ However, this object has not been forcibly removed; it was not intended to function within BaKongo society beyond an object of trade. Its placement in a Scottish museum is therefore on that level unproblematic. This is clouded by the colonial and mercantile legacies enforcing and regulating this trade, however, and the role of European colonisers within BaKongo society. Rattray did not commission this object’s imagery; Vili agency over the tusk’s imagery subverts European perceptions of trade through its often-

²⁷ Proctor, *Cultures of the World*, 11.

²⁸ Zachary Kingdon, *Ethnographic Collecting and African Agency in Early Colonial West Africa: A Study of Trans-Imperial Cultural Flows* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 4.

²⁹ Gitti Salami, “Through African Eyes: The European in African Art, 1500 to Present,” *African Arts* 44, no. 3 (2011): 89.

³⁰ Kingdon, *Ethnographic Collecting*, 5.

³¹ Kingdon, *Ethnographic Collecting*, 1.

violent nature.³² Therefore, the label should be changed; the tusk's agency returned to the Vili, and questions of the nature of the relationship between mercantile Belgians and Vili craftspeople further explored to fully understand its history.

The McManus would benefit from greater information on the peoples it displays the work of. The current lack of cultural context reiterates the colonialist notion of imposition of European culture forcibly. Despite being in Europe, the museum can aspire to transcend this notion with increased information and sensitive displaying techniques, especially as it formed an early centre for education on the ethnographic 'other'. Furthermore, a clear and accurate description of the work of missionaries such as Rattray and Slessor should be exhibited, identifying their role within colonialism and the complexity of notions of 'white saviours' within missionary work. These changes would initiate a step towards both an increase in respect for the objects' cultures and a more informative gallery space.

A small object, placed in a deep glass cabinet, in its current socialisation the tusk is hard to view in detail. When viewed with a torch, its texture is exposed, as is the extent of its relief. However, its material conservation requirements contradict its optimum display requirements. As an ivory object, the tusk's dentine material should be tested to establish the best treatment for conservation. Despite being in visibly excellent condition, its nature should be definitively clarified to ensure its survival; if it is indeed Savannah Elephant ivory, it should be regulated in assimilation to its needs. Its uncharacteristic whiteness could owe to over-exposure to light, however the level of its socialisation's humidity and temperature must also be monitored to ensure no cracking or swelling.³³ These essential needs of ivory indicate it could benefit from being displayed among other ivory objects, for economic conservation purposes, as it is currently. The current display case will protect the object from degradation through temperature and humidity fluxes, despite limiting its visibility. However, the current arrangement of display is formal, which reduces the cultural significance of such disparate objects (fig.6). Instead, thematic display by cultural significance, or by objects of prestige, or by those depicting trade would be more suitable. Perhaps the most significant visual and contextual change would be by region, as the collection has multiple objects from the Kongo.

³² Kingdon, *Ethnographic Collecting*, 3.

³³ "Care and Handling of Ivory Objects," Smithsonian, accessed April 10, 2023, <https://mci.si.edu/care-and-handling-ivory-objects>.

However, this would reinforce European division of geographic borders and diminish the impact of cross-cultural trade and movement of peoples across Africa.

This object is also designed to be seen in the round, to show its full narrative. This lack of current visibility could easily be solved by the imposition of a mirror behind it to allow three-dimensional viewing. Furthermore, the gallery would benefit from three-dimensional photographing. A shallower display case would enable detailed observation.

The advice of scholars and curators would clarify the display requirements and unanswered questions surrounding the tusk. Following in the footsteps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, for the exhibition *Kongo: Power and Majesty*, I would suggest the advice of Lubangi Muniania, senior instructor at Kimpa Vita Institute and President of Tabilulu Muniania, concerning the role of this object in the museum space and the BaKongo traditions that are imbued in it. Additionally, Zoë Strother, Riggio Professor of African Art at Columbia University's extensive research into such objects places her in an excellent position to offer greater historical clarity on this object and others of its type.

Conclusion

Therefore, the tusk's life demonstrates the commercialisation of traditional objects through trade and colonialism on the Loango Coast. It offers historical insight into the quotidian scenes of this period, and the actions of missionaries in collecting, exposing the commodification of cultural objects and the imposition of European power on African cultures. Its excellent preservation, despite its movement to Dundee, allows this complicated past to be viewed in the McManus Galleries today. With changes to the exhibition space and its label, it has the potential to be not only an educational facilitator, but fully representative of the history of its conception place.

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Images

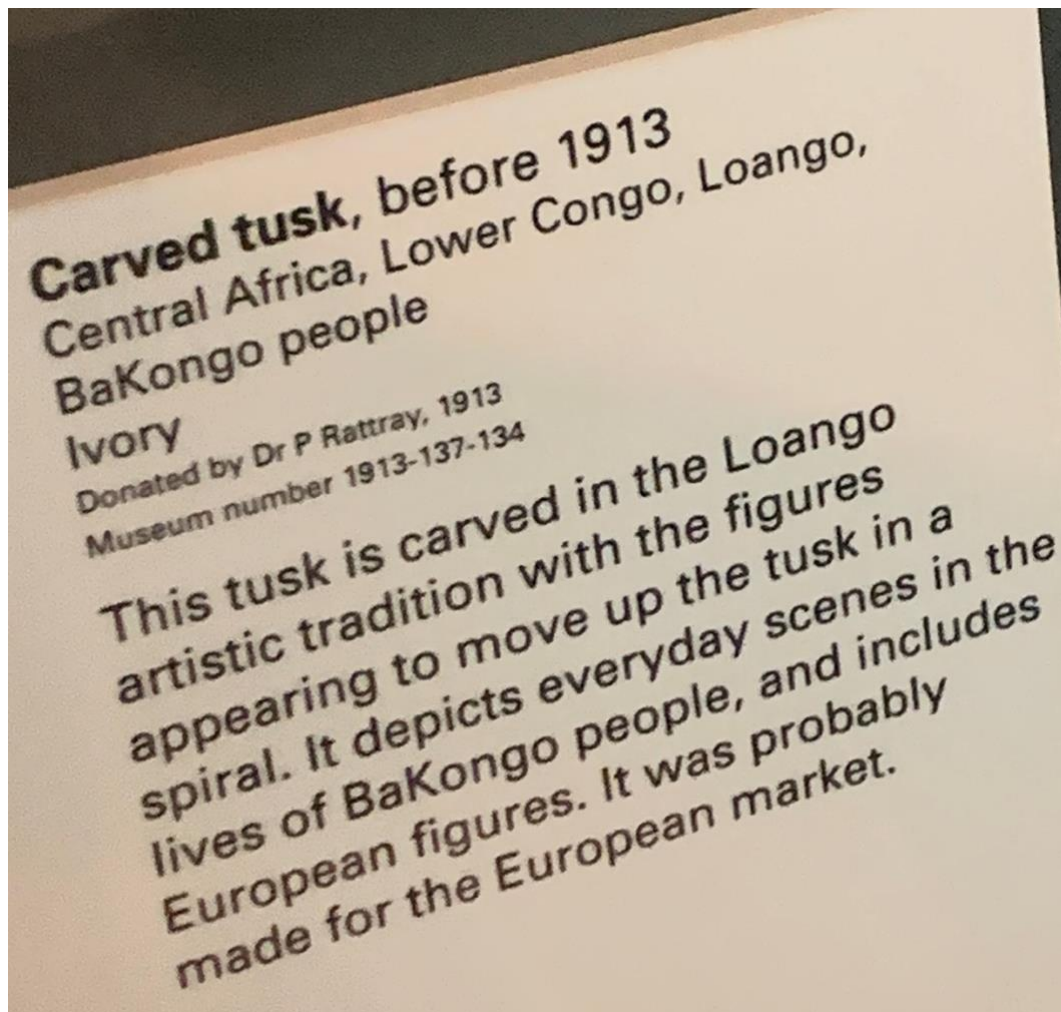


Figure 1, Object Label, *Carved Tusk*, Dundee and the World, The McManus Galleries, Dundee.



Figure 2, Unknown Vili Artist, *Carved Ivory Tusk*, c. 1850-1900, Loango Coast, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, African forest elephant tusk, L. 117 x W. 40 mm, The McManus Galleries, Dundee, no. 1913-137-134.



Figure 3, Unknown Vili Artist, *Carved Ivory Tusk*, c. 1850-1900, Loango Coast, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, African forest elephant tusk, L. 117 x W. 40 mm, The McManus Galleries, Dundee, no. 1913-137-134.



Figure 4, Unknown Vili Artist, *Carved Ivory Tusk*, late nineteenth-century, Loango Coast, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, elephant ivory, L. 570 mm, private collection.



Figure 5, unknown artist, *Carved Ivory Plaque*, nineteenth-century, Loango Coast, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, elephant ivory, L. 120 mm, private collection.



Figure 6, Current Cabinet Display of *Carved Tusk*, Dundee and the World, The McManus Galleries, Dundee.