Double Historiography—France and Sierra Leone: The Luso-African Ivories at the Quai Branly

by Peter Mark

The Musée du Quai Branly in Paris hosted a small but charming exhibition, “Ivoires d’Afrique dans les anciennes collections françaises,” from February 19 to May 11, 2008. This show was put together by Ezio Bassani, who also wrote the short, well-illustrated catalogue. Over the past two decades, Bassani has established himself as an expert on the history of early European collections—particularly French and Italian—of African art. Both the present exhibition and the accompanying catalogue—really more a collection of short, scholarly essays—provide ample evidence of the depth of his knowledge about French collections from the seventeenth century onward. The ivories are complemented by a series of original documents including drawings, paintings, and book illustrations, which together establish the historical presence of carved African ivories in France by the seventeenth century.

The exhibition showed the Quai Branly at its best: the scale was small, and the curator did not try to do too much; this show was as much for the connoisseur as for the general public. Copious written information was provided on panels. These panels clearly presented the main themes of the exhibition; there were also video images that showed details of an iconography often nearly invisible to the naked eye.

These works constitute the earliest products of what is now commonly known as cultural métissage. In this context one should mention the concurrent exhibition, “Planète Métisse,” a much more catchy and technologically showy production at the Quai Branly that incorporated video film clips and a grandiose presentation style that sometimes deflected attention from the material. No such problem with “Ivoires d’Afrique.”

I would take issue with the label of “Afro-Portuguese” that the curator applies to the ivories; some of the objects do incorporate European hunting themes, and some but not all were made for export to Europe; nevertheless, these carvings all clearly were made by West African artists, working—so far as we know—in Africa. The possibility that some Sapes carvers traveled to Lisbon and worked there, as was the case for some artists from the Portuguese Indian possession of Goa, has not yet been seriously considered by historians.

Bassani broadened the scope of these ivory carvings by including a magnificent horn, carved in geometric lattice-work and identified as Arabo-African from East Africa. This piece was illustrated in a catalogue of collections from Paris in 1692. The attendant scholarship shows the excellent historical spadework into European sources that enriches Bassani’s catalogue.

Elsewhere, I have taken Bassani to task for ignoring primary historical documents that provide important information about the African provenance of the Luso-African (or, as he prefers to call them, the Afro-Portuguese) ivories. I will return to this point later, but here, I want to be clear: the quality of Ezio Bassani’s research into the European pedigree of these ivories is beyond reproach. His work constitutes an important contribution both to our knowledge of this 300-year-old art form and to the history of European collecting of non-European objects.

For me, the most historically significant piece in the exhibition was a carved trumpet from Sierra Leone (which is likely the provenance of all of the known West African olifants); a horn that has the peculiarity of conjointing elements usually associated with olifants produced for export to Europe with elements associated with horns carved for a local African elite. The trumpet has a mouthpiece on the side rather than the end; side-blown trumpets are characteristic of instruments used on the Guinea Coast, whereas Sape hunting horns made for export generally followed the European model of end-blown instruments. This piece, now exhibited—except for this show—in the Pavillon des Sessions at the Louvre, is embellished with human figures and animals, iconographic elements consistent with its presumed creation for local African use. But the figures are carved in a style associated with Sape salt cells that were made for export to Europe. And the geometric decoration known as gadrooning—curvilinear patterns made of tiny carved balls, rhythmically flowing across the surface of the horn—is a distinctive element of Luso-African ivories, a decoration which Bassani with elements associated with horns produced for export to Europe with olifants produced for export to Europe and conjoined elements usually associated with horns produced for export to Europe. But the figures are carved in a style associated with Sape salt cells that were made for export to Europe. And the geometric decoration known as gadrooning—curvilinear patterns made of tiny carved balls, rhythmically flowing across the surface of the horn—is a distinctive element of Luso-African ivories, a decoration which Bassani with elements associated with horns produced for export to Europe with olifants produced for export to Europe and conjoined elements usually associated with horns produced for export to Europe. But the figures are carved in a style associated with Sape salt cells that were made for export to Europe. And the geometric decoration known as gadrooning—curvilinear patterns made of tiny carved balls, rhythmically flowing across the surface of the horn—is a distinctive element of Luso-African ivories, a decoration which Bassani with elements associated with horns produced for export to Europe with olifants produced for export to Europe and conjoined elements usually associated with horns produced for export to Europe. But the figures are carved in a style associated with Sape salt cells that were made for export to Europe. And the geometric decoration known as gadrooning—curvilinear patterns made of tiny carved balls, rhythmically flowing across the surface of the horn—is a distinctive element of Luso-African ivories, a decoration which Bassani with elements associated with horns produced for export to Europe with olifants produced for export to Europe and conjoined elements usually associated with horns produced for export to Europe. But the figures are carved in a style associated with Sape salt cells that were made for export to Europe. And the geometric decoration known as gadrooning—curvilinear patterns made of tiny carved balls, rhythmically flowing across the surface of the horn—is a distinctive element of Luso-African ivories, a decoration which Bassani with elements associated with horns produced for export to Europe with olifants produced for export to Europe and conjoined elements usually associated with horns produced for export to Europe. But the figures are carved in a style associated with Sape salt cells that were made for export to Europe. And the geometric decoration known as gadrooning—curvilinear patterns made of tiny carved balls, rhythmically flowing across the surface of the horn—is a distinctive element of Luso-African ivories, a decoration which Bassani with elements associated with horns produced for export to Europe with olifants produced for export to Europe and conjoined elements usually associated with horns produced for export to Europe. But the figures are carved in a style associated with Sape salt cells that were made for export to Europe. And the geometric decoration known as gadrooning—curvilinear patterns made of tiny carved balls, rhythmically flowing across the surface of the horn—is a distinctive element of Luso

These citations illustrate the one major shortcoming associated with this generally excellent exhibition and fascinating catalogue. Ezio Bassani is meticulous in his collection of European documentation, both visual and written, of the ivories after their arrival in Europe. His treatment of historical documentation of the ivories in West Africa (primarily Portuguese travel narratives) is far more selective and incomplete. Indeed, in the catalogue, his references to the histories of these objects before they arrived in Europe is based almost entirely on his own previous writings. His footnoting in the historical discussion of “Edo-Portuguese” ivories is practically hermetic. He cites Bassani but ignores Ryder and Eisenhofer, who contest his theory of Benin origins for the ivories. Similarly, there is no reference to the crucially important historical work of Adam Jones, regarding either sixteenth-century Sierra Leone, or the seventeenth-century collection of Christoph Weickmann. Nor is there reference to Father Alvares (see above), whose work proves that Sape society and art survived into the seventeenth century.

This is a crucial oversight. Together, the above-mentioned sources provide historical information that necessitates major revisions in the provenance and chronology of the Luso-African ivories. Recently, I have discussed these sources in an article in History in Africa (Mark 2007). To summarize briefly:

The Portuguese term “Sapes” included several coastal ethnic groups of present-day Guinea as well as Sierra Leone. “Sapes” society produced and exported ivory carvings from the late fifteenth century until well into the seventeenth century. Throughout this period the Portuguese and, later, the Dutch imported vast amounts of ivory, mostly uncured but also carved, from Guinée do Cabo Verde (Senegal to Sierra Leone). In all likelihood, the Portuguese did not trade for ivory from Benin until the last two decades of the sixteenth century.

Why emphasize this point in the context of the “Ivoires d’Afrique”? The question of Benin origins is admittedly peripheral to this exhibit. Indeed, the few objects here attributed (continued on page 4)
to Benin—spoons—may come from post-1580 Nigeria. But the underlying thesis of double origins—Sapes before 1530 or 1550; Benin thereafter—does not stand the test of historical documentation. This exhibit effectively combines historical sources and formal comparison of the objects themselves, to firmly establish the origins of French collecting of the Luso-African ivories. In so doing, it remains firmly rooted in European history. Africanist art historians need to apply the same critical historical method to their study of the African origins of these pieces. Only then will the ivories truly become part, not only of the history of European expansion, but also of the history of the West African cultures where they were created.

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**References cited**


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