

NETWORK

A Primer on Ivory

The remarks that follow are adapted from *Ivory in World History—Early Modern Trade in Context*, a treatise by Martha Chaiklin. (*History Compass* 8/6 [2010]: 530–542, 10.1111/j.1478-0542.2010.00680.x)

[Ivory is not a singular substance but is in fact many things, animal as well as vegetal.] The word “ivory” can refer to tusks or dentine (tooth) material of elephants, mammoths, walrus, wild boar, hippopotamus or sperm whale or narwhal horn. It can even refer to a plant material produced by the palm ivory (*phytelephas*) of South America. The endosperm of this tree, called the tagua or corozo nut, is also known as vegetable ivory because it can be carved like and looks similar to elephant ivory. In the late 19th and early 20th century, this nut was widely used for buttons and other inexpensive objects, which have now largely been replaced by plastic.

Elephant ivory is therefore sometimes called “true ivory”—the incisor of [an] elephant that continues to grow throughout the [animal’s] lifetime. So, tusk size loosely equates with the age of the elephant.

It may be difficult to understand the appeal of what is essentially a giant tooth. Certainly the implied power and prestige of the rare and exotic were a part of that appeal, but elephant ivory has some unique qualities. It is not covered with enamel, but rather an outer skin, almost like bark. Polished, the natural tusk can range in color from brilliant white, to yellowish to pinkish to greenish to brown. Ivory is also porous, which means that it can be dyed to brilliant colors. Smooth and cool with a pleasant heft; ivory is tactilely appealing. Most significant perhaps is that it is tough enough to withstand almost any treatment. It can be heated, soaked, finely sliced, sawed, cut, carved, etched, ground, or worked on a lathe.

Ivory is elastic enough to have been used for riding crops and is less likely to crack than bone. It is versatile, durable, flexible, and beautiful in a way that no other material is, natural or manmade.



These qualities are what have made ivory the material of choice for jewelry, sculpture, musical and scientific instruments, book covers, architectural elements; the list is virtually endless. This versatility combined with the beauty of polished ivory is the key to ivory’s importance as a world commodity from ancient times to the present.

Ivory. . . was a global commodity.... [and its trade] affected the ecology, economy, and material culture of most of the inhabited world. Ivory is an integral part of human history.

[As such], ivory formed part of the skeletal structure of trading networks throughout the world. It created economic ties between distant regions that spanned millennia. The mechanism of supply and demand was connected with the elephant, not just for the obvious reasons but because access to elephants created demand, and diminishing supplies acutely affected human actions in the pursuit of it or in seeking out substitutions for it.

Many substances can be and are substituted for ivory, but in the majority of cases, the substitutes are just not as good.

For an ecological take on the changing fortunes of *Elephas maximus* in the Far East, see *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* by Mark Elvin (Yale University Press, 2004)

