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The elephant and its ivory in the sculpture of Western Europe

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The elephant and its ivory

The elephant is today – and often has been – a favourite animal world-wide, as has been demonstrated by the other international papers about Far Eastern reactions, even if Islamic attitudes vary and were cooler. I had been going to begin my talk “tactfully” by showing a British example of heraldry with crossed swords and elephant-supporters. (Fig. 1)¹

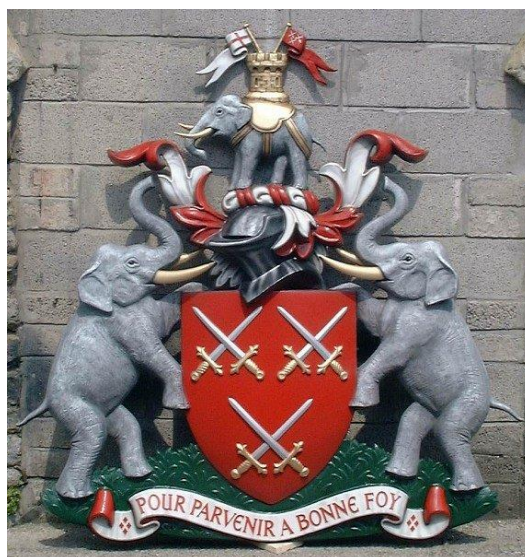


Figure 1: The coat-of-arms of the Worshipful Company of Cutlers of London: the coat-of-arms was first granted in 1476, and the crest of an elephant and castle was added in 1622. The choice of an elephant presumably alludes to the costly ivory employed in making hafts for swords, knives and other weapons.

Then I was given sight of Ed. Emery’s paper about “The Elephant in England” from the first of the SOAS conferences on the Elephant of 2016, which he started with an illustration of the arms of SOAS, invented around a century earlier, in 1916, at the height of the British Empire. Matched with an Arabian camel, your supporter is an Asian elephant, a very smart, particularly anthropomorphic, creature that resembles a plump Edwardian clubman, trotting along Pall Mall, so the happy pairing represents two auspicious beginnings on this vast subject.

The elephant has always been considered a royal beast, on account of its sheer size, ponderous might and aggressive tusks, which in French are suggestively called “*défenses*”. The British – more prosaically, though accurately – used to call tusks “elephants’ teeth”, probably following the Latin expression, “*eburnei dentes*” (Livy). Owing to the distance from Europe of the native habitats of the elephant in Africa and India, ivory was always extremely rare and accordingly was highly prized. Little was known about the animal itself, save for its enormous size and phenomenal memory and what ancient lore – often quite inaccurate – was passed to posterity in the writings of Aristotle: this sufficed for the compilers of Mediaeval Bestiaries to provide caricature illuminations and garbled accounts to their readers.

Live elephants with their trainers (*mahouts*) can of course be walked overland, but their feet are quite sensitive (having evolved to aid their hearing through vibrations in the ground and thus also direction-finding on their thousand-mile annual treks), and so they find it hard to traverse hard, rocky terrain, unlike the savannah, with its softer grassland and mud, or jungle floor with leaf-mould, to which they are accustomed. When a few reached Spain, Italy and the Alps, to ease their feet they were sometimes made protective leather boots by local cobblers along the way. But they could most easily be transported by water (by river or along the seacoast), when they were as young as possible, in order to minimize their weight on board ship, as well as the amount of fodder that needed to be taken on board at every port of call.

Sourcing the product

By 3000 BC the Egyptians had evolved hieroglyphs for both wild and tame elephants, though they later died out in that country. They feature as royal mounts for pharaohs and left their name on Elephantine Island in the River Nile at Aswan. The Egyptians employed ivory for all sorts of luxury domestic artefacts and trivia – Tutankhamun, for instance, had a smooth headrest of ivory that accompanied him to the grave, as well as a model boomerang, which betrays the natural curve of the tusk from which it was painstakingly carved.² Tusks piled up neatly besides ring-shaped ingots of gold on boats coming down the River Nile as tribute from the Land of Punt (Nubia) appear frequently in Egyptian reliefs, while ivory was used to mount furniture both there and in Nimrud, Ur and Jerusalem (King Solomon's Throne). The Greeks invented a technique – since lost – for making ivory pliable so that they could use it alongside gold for cladding colossal statues of their gods, Zeus at Olympia and Athena in the Parthenon in Athens.

Much of the early trade with Europe was conducted by the Arabs and north through the Red Sea. Thence via Egypt's north coast ports, vessels could take them and their tusks along with rings of gold and – alas – slaves, often via Crete (e.g. Knossos, Mycenae) and Cyprus, to the Aegean sea and its many islands, as well as to Athens or Constantinople [Istanbul]; or, later on, up the Adriatic Sea to the maritime republics of Bari or Venice; or via Sicily and through the straits of Messina to Rome and Genoa.

However, once the Portuguese had pioneered the route to the Far East round the Cape of Good Hope, c.1492, and shortly afterwards secured from the Pope the exclusive rights to this “new” Eastern hemisphere (leaving the Western one to Spain), it became the established trading route for northern Europe, avoiding conflict with Arab and other rivals in the Middle East and Red Sea.

An elephant–diplomat of 1514

The Portuguese embassy to the newly-elected Pope, Leo X de' Medici, son of Lorenzo the Magnificent de' Medici, in 1514 was led by no less an ambassador than the intrepid explorer Tristão da Cunha, accompanied by a four-year old white – and therefore rare and sacred – elephant called Hanno.³ It was quickly taken to the heart of Leo (who was, in his Latin persona, another exotic beast, the lion) and even got a look in on a serious engraved portrait of Da Cunha (*Fig. 2*). As indicated, they probably stood about the same height, “eyeball to eyeball”. The baby elephant was transported from Cochin on a stout trading vessel similar to one depicted in the frontispiece for Thomas More's *Utopia*. (*Fig. 3*)

The “triangular trade” from northern Europe to West Africa and the Caribbean

The route from London, Antwerp and Rotterdam past the Iberian Peninsula and the Straits of Gibraltar, down to the Ivory Coast provided a new source of African tusks, which tended to be much bigger than the Asian ones. This became one side of the “triangular trade” to West Africa and then across the Atlantic to the British sugar plantations on the Caribbean islands. There they off-loaded a valuable cargo of hapless human beings to work as slaves in the infernally hot process of refining cane and filled their holds with conical cakes of sugar. For the third leg of the trade the ships rode the seasonal westerly trade-winds back home, to Liverpool, Bristol or London, where they



Figure 2: *Tristão da Cunha* (c. 1460 – c. 1540) and the elephant Hanno (c.1510 – 8 June 1516), woodcut, c. 1575, from Paolo Giovio (1483-1552), *Elogia veris clarorum virorum imaginibus...*, Venice 1546 (Wikimedia Commons, under “Tristão da Cunha”). The engraver has struggled to fit Hanno in behind the bust of the explorer – maybe as an afterthought – but its beady eye and domed skull are visible on the right.

could sell the elephant ivory, a few remaining slaves and sugar, all at a goodly profit. This was pioneered by piratical English ship-owners and masters, having initially been backed by none other than “Good Queen Bess” (Elizabeth I), who had no scruples in providing John Hawkins with a ship to conduct his profitable ‘privateering’ slave-trading expeditions in the teeth of Spain, her particular enemy, and other Roman Catholic countries.

The main source and the process of acquiring the ivory and slaves is graphically depicted in a drawing of c. 1690, showing some German merchants, within sight of Fort Grossfriedrichsburg (Ivory Coast), exchanging with some Africans ingots of iron, against large tusks and heavy rings of gold (in the basket).⁴ This proves that it was not only the British, but all the major nations of Europe, as well as Arabs and fellow-Africans, who were vying for a “slice of the action” down the coast of Africa: all were guilty of what are considered today heinous “slave-trading” and “ivory-poaching”, but which in those days were regarded as legitimate business, no more culpable than harvesting natural products.

The tusk and its limitations

Tusks are simply twin out-growing incisors that are built up organically, year by year, like our own teeth, or the trunk of a tree, out of layer upon layer of dentine.⁵ They provide the carver with a dense, even-grained, creamy-coloured material that may be polished to a high gloss and is particularly effective when meant to render human skin. Conversely, the Roman writers Ovid and Horace in their love poetry likened parts of the female body – the arms, the neck, the back – to ivory. The tusk is conical and curving and has a hollow conical centre to accommodate the nerve and pulp, though its tip is solid. It is therefore basically an awkward shape, other than when it was quite simply adapted by hollowing out and drilling into a huge hunting or battle-horn. These “horns” were called during the Middle Ages an oliphant, from a corruption of the animal’s name.⁶ An impressive, early example – whose damages serve to reveal the structure of a tusk – was purchased by the British Museum in 1979. (Fig. 4)



Figure 3: Ambrosius Holbein, *Utopiae insulae tabula*, woodcut map, 13 x 8 cm., from the 2nd edition of Thomas More, *Utopia*, London, 1518. To help the stability of the ship (tiny by today's standards!) Hanno would probably have been tethered on the open deck by a chain round the mainmast.

Similar 'horns' from the early Middle Ages and later periods, some carved in Europe and others in their native Africa, abound – perhaps because being in a rare material, physically weighty and visually impressive – they were always regarded as regal and quasi-magical.

Otherwise, the tusk can be cut across and along its length to provide (working from the tip) a solid cone-like piece of ivory suited to a statuette of a human, such as the noble standing robed figures, for example graceful and regal, but motherly, images of the Virgin and Child, Saints or Angels beloved of Christian art. (Fig.5)

In the Gothic period the natural curve of the tusk imposed a swaying of the forms of draped humans in ivory that became generally fashionable and so was transferred to other media, notably stone, where there is no such imperative upon a carver.

To economise, these cones could also be sawn vertically, providing two matching pieces of semi-circular cross-section and with a flat back appropriate for carving figures in deep relief to be set against a flat, neutral – though often painted – background)



Figure 4. Middle Byzantine, 11th century, probably Salerno, *The Clephane Oliphant*, 57.5cm long. British Museum (1979,0701.1) According to tradition this horn had been since the Middle Ages in Carslogie Castle, a seat of the Clephane family, near Cupar, Fife. It is amazing to think how far it travelled, probably in the hands of victorious warrior-princes, from Salerno, its place of manufacture at the southernmost ‘toe’ of Italy, to a remote stronghold in Scotland.

Below the tip a number of “sleeves” with relatively thick walls may be sawn off, so as to lend themselves to being carved in relief on the outside. Their wide, hollow cylindrical shape lent itself from early days to making with relative ease a container such as the *Basilewski Situla*, (Fig. 7) by simply putting a further plate of ivory across its bottom and then water-proofing the vessel.

During the Baroque period bigger tusks from Africa – the “Ivory Coast” – became available and so the thick walls of some of the cross-cut rings of ivory could be further hollowed out to accommodate a silver-gilt container for drink within a tankard. This would usually have a silver-gilt handle and mount attached below and above, as well as a hinged lid. They were particularly popular in beer-drinking southern Germany. A fine example, signed and dated Augsburg 1651, is the earliest known work of Bernhard Strauss (Figs. 5, 8).⁷



Figure 5: See caption for Fig. 8 below



Figure 6: France, Paris, c. 1310-20, The Virgin and Child, ivory, 35.5cm. Victoria & Albert Museum, London, inv. no. 4685&:2-1858. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. In order to accommodate the strong curve of the tip of this tusk, the carver has had to make the figure sway markedly and to compensate by making the pedestal wedge-shaped.



Figure 7: *The Basilewski Situla*, ivory. Victoria & Albert Museum, London, inv. no. A.18-1933. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. This rare bucket for ceremonial use was lovingly carved with a dozen scenes from Christ's Passion, like a strip-cartoon. It was inscribed round its lower edge to the Holy Roman Emperor Otto II on his visit to Milan in 980 AD, where another such bucket still survives in Sant' Ambrogio.



Figures 8: German, Bernhard Strauss (active 1651-1681), *Tankard*, ivory with silver-gilt mounts, 1651. Victoria & Albert Museum, London, inv. no. 4529-1858. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. The inscription hidden under the lid (Fig. 5) reads: *In the year 1651, Bernhard Strauss, goldsmith's apprentice of Marckdorf on the Bodensee [Lake], made this at Augusta Vindelicorum [Augsburg]:* even so, he was evidently well advanced in the skills of an ivory-carver and by the time he carved the sleeve, according to another signature this time visible on Neptune's chariot – had become a qualified goldsmith.

From nearer to the socket in the elephant's jaw a number of thinner and less sharply curved plaques can be cut and then planed more or less flat and squared off. In the

Roman world such plaques were frequently used for tablets to contain writing impressed with a stylus (possibly a sliver of ivory too) into a bed of wax that they enclosed. Their backs / outsides were elaborately carved and then tied together in pairs with thongs and sealed for “posting” (the most splendid and ornate being the series of Consular Diptychs, of which a particularly fine and complete one is in the V&A. (Fig. 10)⁸



Figure 9: Roman, 530 AD, *Diptych of Rufus Gennadius Probus Orestes*, ivory, 34cm high. Victoria & Albert Museum, London, inv. no. 139-1866. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. One of the earliest purchases made for the museum in 1866, this diptych shows the new Consul enthroned on a curule seat, holding in one hand the *mappa circensis* with which he gave the signal for the games to begin, and in the other a sceptre. The flanking helmeted ladies represent the two capital cities, Rome and Constantinople. Above are portraits of the Emperor and Empress, while below squat figures are busily emptying sacks of money for the prizes.

In the Middle Ages such plaques were often carved with minuscule figures into Christian devotional scenes within Gothic architectural surrounds and picked out with brightly contrasting paint and gilding. The backs were left plain and could be hinged together with

little loops of wire, this time with the carved sides facing inwards, for the sake of preservation and on account of the sanctity of the imagery, to form diptychs or triptychs, secured by a little metal hook.

Odd-shaped off-cuts from in between these prime segments of ivory were carefully preserved to make into handles for cutlery, trinkets or to further cut down into simple geometric shapes for inlaying into wood, for instance to make chess boards and frames.

The tapering and curved shape of the tip also lent itself, when inverted, to creating images of the naked human body, notably the crucified Christ, to which the extended arms – fashioned from thinner, separate pieces of ivory – would be dowelled. Later on, following the new stylistic trends of Rubens and precepts of the Counter-Reformation Baroque movement – the forms of His body still sway in accordance with the natural curve of the tusk, as is clearly shown in a typical 17th century group of *The Crucifixion* from France. (Fig. 11)⁹ A generation later, around 1700 and on the secular front, David Le Marchand, a skilful Huguenot immigrant from Dieppe to Edinburgh – and then around 1700 to London – used a nice, fat, tip of a tusk in which to whittle, to its outermost extremities, a spectacular group of *Time revealing Truth*, which is only 23.7cm – or 9 5/16 in. high. (Fig. 14)¹⁰

Manufacturing and marketing ivory and its huge variety of products

Until the Industrial Revolution (and generally-speaking thereafter too), the process of putting ivory to human use and delight has remained a matter of laborious and skilled craftsmanship, as one can judge by comparing depictions of working ivory that are in Venice. The earlier is in two panoramic illuminations enlivening one page of a Byzantine Greek manuscript of c. 1200 devoted to hunting: representations of an elephant in the wild and of a carver seated and hard at work out of doors on a tusk held in a wooden vice, with one of his products, a bow – for shooting arrows – lying on the ground below. (Fig. 10)¹¹



Figure 10: Byzantine Greek, 11th century, *An Indian elephant* and *An ivory-carver*, from an illuminated manuscript known as the *Cynegetica*. Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice (cod. Gr. Z.479, fol. 36r). By concession of the Ministero dei Beni e delle Attivita Culturali e del Turismo.



Figure 11. P. S. Jaillot (1631-1681), *Crucifix*, dated 1664. Victoria & Albert Museum, London, inv. no. A.1-1984. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Based in Paris from 1657, Jaillot

was a specialist in *Crucifixes*, occasionally enscenced in a group with other holy figures depicting the scene on Calvary, such as this one is. The shape of the tusk remains palpable



Figure 12: English, David Le Marchand (1674-1726), *Time and Opportunity with Penitence*, initialled "D.L.M. Sc.", 23.7 cm high. Victoria & Albert Museum, London, inv. no. A.1-1935. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. The uniquely ambitious composition was derived from a monumental marble statue by Thomas Regnaudin completed in 1687 for the *Parterre d'Eau*

of Versailles. It is a miracle of craftsmanship, in which Le Marchand must have employed a drill to undercut his lithe figures.

In this remarkable double-image (not previously reproduced in colour), the elephant is quite life-like, except for its projecting feet, and may be from some direct knowledge from the Middle East or North Africa. The carver is shown out of doors – perhaps for the sake of good light and air – and seated on a mound using a small axe or adze to peel off the outer husk from the ivory, while an antler lies on the ground ahead of him, as though it was to be his next job.

The other scene of daily activity, from half a millennium later, is an “official image” – an ensign – of the Venetian Guild of Comb-makers painted in 1725, showing a typical, traditional, ivory workshop, with a stylish front-counter patronised by a couple of young grandees. (Figs. 14-15)

On the right of the painting, the smart proprietor is offering a range of routine and deluxe ivory articles hanging on the wall behind him – including many a comb, some brush handles and syringes, as well as what may be snuff boxes and or portrait roundels to some gentry – perhaps a young couple fondly gazing on carved pictures of each other.



Figure 13: French 16th century, *Comb*, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, A.7-1947. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. While the design – with a row of fine teeth and another of stronger ones – had been standard from the Gothic period, the ornament on this example has changed to a free interpretation of classical ornament: grotesque masks, Grecian *anthemia* and a joyful scene of naked baby boys with a barking puppy in a garden, capering round a fountain.

Figures 14-15 [Following pages]: Unknown Venetian painter, 1725, Ensign of the Venetian Guild of Comb-makers (*Pettineri*), oil on wood, Museo Correr, Venice. This picture sets out clearly the whole process of production (“From weaver to wearer”): starting from a heap of tusks in the raw; to a sawhorse with the master and an apprentice removing the solid tip of a tusk; and another man sawing out the teeth of their leading product, a comb (with nine finished products lying on the floor at his side – perhaps a day’s work?). In the left foreground a woman is sawing an ox-horn against a template. Thus, a range of raw materials and each stage of manufacture are recorded for posterity. while two enlarged combs hang symbolically in the air

above as shop-signs. These combs are essentially similar to a design used since the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, if rather simpler and more utilitarian. (Fig. 13)



Figure 14: See caption on preceding page



Figure 15: See preceding caption

The English diarist John Evelyn, visiting Dieppe on Easter Monday 1644, noted that the town was full of craftsman who worked in ivory and every sort of shell, as well as shops of rarities from the Indies. Indeed, the French coined a noun, “ivoirier”, for those who worked this material, as well as “*tabletier*” – presumably after writing tablets – for those who fashioned and sold small decorative artefacts and trinkets. So popular was this trade in the seventeenth century that it merited inclusion in a series of humorous engravings depicting representatives of various trades with their bodies and apparel composed out of their own products, à la Arcimboldo. (Fig. 16)

The *tabletier* holds with his right hand a complete tusk, labelled “*Dant d’éléphant*”, resting its weight across his shoulders like the club of Hercules. His hat, called a *Trou Madame* (‘Lady’s burrow’?), may be a caddy for cosmetics, while in his extended hand, instead of a walking-stick, he holds a bundle of measuring rods (?). His other products are recognisable, but the palette and paintbrushes hiding his lower leg are so small that it must have been intended to signify the fact that ivory was used as a ground for the most delicate miniature paintings.

Objects of amazement: the European *Kunstkabinett* or *Wunderkammer*

A whole sub-section of European interest in ivory during the later Renaissance and Baroque periods – notably, but not exclusively, in Germany – was devoted to the “gentlemanly” pursuit of turning it on an eccentric lathe into exotic shapes. These were classed among the *Artificialia*, as distinct from the *Naturalia*, which had been the nucleus of every serious collection since the late Middle Ages and the growth of interest in the natural sciences that were an integral aspect of the Renaissance.

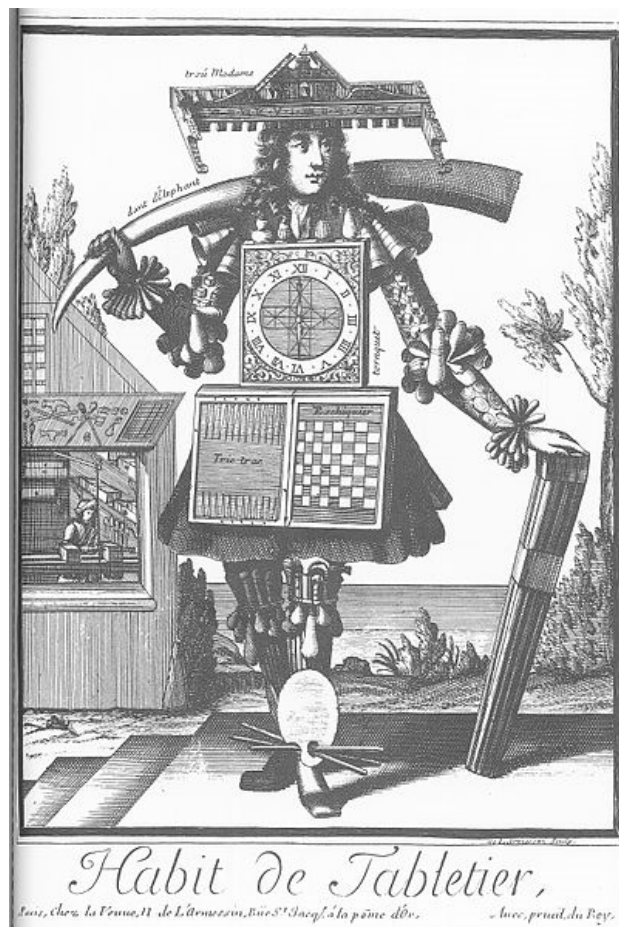


Figure 16. Nicolas de Larmessin II (c. 1645-1725), *Habit de Tabletier*, from the series *Costumes Grotesques et les Metiers*, etching and engraving on paper, France 1700-25 (C. Avery Archive).



Figure 17: Gran Principe Ferdinando de' Medici of Tuscany (1663-1713), *Cup and cover*, 33.8 cm high, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 75-1865. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Though signed inside simply – and grandly – “*Princeps*” [Prince] and dated 1681, this brilliantly composed, ‘weird and wonderful’ *objet d’art* was made on an eccentric lathe by the heir to the Grand-ducal throne under the watchful eye – and possibly still with the guiding hand – of his German tutor, Filippo Sengher (1675-1704).

Ivory-turning as a hobby for grandees

Many grandees enjoyed turning ornaments on the lathe as a hobby, while specialists could make a name for themselves with ever more intricate and complex three-dimensional geometrical patterns worked with an eccentric lathe – this was regarded as a “polite” activity, for it required an intellectual, mathematical and therefore “scientific”, approach to the design. (Fig. 17)

The appreciation and suspicion of ivory today

This brief survey of the material and its aesthetic and intellectual appeal over the centuries in a large and significant part of the world is intended to provide a useful armature for the appreciation and study of a rich field of human artistic endeavour. It is to be hoped that it may act as an antidote to the panicky over-reaction and tendency towards the instant gratification of iconoclastic destruction of ancient artefacts lovingly fashioned in ivory that is being aired by some (including international journalists seeking headlines and even government lawmakers) who wish today’s elephants well – as all right-thinking people of good will do – in the face of modern mass-poaching.

Let us not forget that if guilt by association is to be apportioned, it would have to include every – otherwise innocent – middle class Victorian lady and her successors who were keen to show off their new-found prosperity and aspiration to “culture” by owning a piano and “tinkling the ivories”, and every worthy, if self-made, gentleman who longed to show off by playing billiards with solid ivory balls (still, I am told, ‘the best’) in his own desirable suburban home. Thousands of people in Europe and the United States of America would in all logic have to be found guilty “beyond reasonable doubt”, for, to gratify their seemingly harmless whims, until quite recently, hundreds of thousands of elephants have had to be slaughtered over the last couple of centuries.

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NOTES

1. I am indebted to the Worshipful Company of Cutlers of London for this image of their arms.
2. See *Treasures of Tutankhamun*, exh. cat., British Museum, London, 1992, no. 37.
3. Presumably after a Carthaginian general so-named, in honour of Hannibal’s heroic crossing of the Alps from Spain with some war-elephants.
4. Rutger van Langeveldt, *German Merchants trading iron for gold and ivory*, pen, pencil and wash. Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin (Inv. no. KdZ13128): too expensive to reproduce here, but see, C. Avery, *David Le Marchand (1674-1726), “An Ingenious Man for Carving in Ivory”*, London, 1996, p. 24.
5. See M. Trusted, *The making of sculpture: the materials and techniques of European sculpture*, London, 2007, p. 116, fig. 207.
6. “Sir Olifaunt” was a vicious giant in Chaucer’s “Tale of Sir Thopas” in *The Canterbury Tales*, while Oliphant still exists as a Highland Scottish clan and peerage title, as well as a surname.
7. M. Trusted, *Baroque and Later Ivories*, London 2013, pp.49-52, no. 32.
8. M. Trusted, *The Making of Sculpture: the materials and techniques of European sculpture*, London, 2007, p.116, fig. 207
9. M. Trusted, *Baroque and Later Ivories*, London 2013, pp. 240-44, no. 222.
10. See C. Avery, *David Le Marchand (1674-1726), “An Ingenious Man for Carving in Ivory”*, London, Lund Humphries, 1996, pp. 52-53, plate 9; M. Trusted, *Baroque and Later Ivories*, London 2013, pp. 172-73, no. 146.
11. Anthony Cutler, *The Craft of Ivory*, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C., 1985, p. 38, fig. 37.