

Elephants on board the Manila Galleons: from exotic gifts to Hispanic–Philippine ivory sculptures

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Abstract: Between 1565 and 1815 the Manila Galleons sea route brought about the beginning of a series of exchanges between the Philippines and Spain. In this paper we propose a comprehensive study of the relevance of the elephant in the Manila Galleons. Not only the animals themselves, but also the elephant tusks and the tusks carved as religious sculptures: the well-known Hispanic-Philippine ivory sculptures that are present in collections all around the world.

By way of background to this exchange of elephants in the Philippines, one of the first documentary references we find is the embassy sent by Francisco Tello de Guzman, governor of the Philippine Islands, to Japan. Despite the diversity of the gifts contained in this embassy, headed by Luis Navarrete Fajardo in 1597, the big attraction was the elephant "Don Pedro" that the governor of Manila had received from Cambodia. We would expect gifts such as to feature on *namban* folding screens of the kind kept in the Museo de Arte Antiga in Lisbon.

It was usual for elephants from Cambodia to be sent as gifts to the governors of the Philippine Islands, as also happened with another one, that was sent to Don Alonso Fajardo, governor of the Philippines in the first half of the seventeenth century. This animal was subsequently donated to the Company of Jesus and helped with hauling the construction materials for the building of their church.

As regards transportation aboard the Manila Galleons, subsequent to the eighteenth-century foundation of the Royal Company of the Philippines that established the direct route from Manila to Cadiz we have evidence of the first elephants arriving in Spain from the Philippines.

In the 1770s, two Asian elephants, one male (which landed in Cadiz in 1773 and which was dissected after its death in late 1777) and another female, coincided in Aranjuez, the location of the Court of King Charles III. The female died in the royal palace in early September 1780.

On 24 July 1773, the Royal Navy frigate *Venus*, from Manila, landed on the island of Leon (currently San Fernando), Cádiz, an Asian male elephant five and a half years old, that the governor of the Philippines Don Simon de Anda had sent as a gift of the Nawab of the Carnatic Indian to His Majesty. The galleon was additionally carrying the animal's keeper, along with scarlet and gold trappings for the elephant, made in Cadiz during the period of acclimatisation, and to be used in the presentation of the elephant to King Charles III. They finally arrived at Aranjuez on 27 October of that year.

On 17 November 1777, Pedro Franco Dávila, director of the Cabinet of Natural History in Madrid, received the news of the death of the elephant. He asked the king's permission to dissect the animal and bring it to Madrid to be put in the Royal Cabinet. And so he did. They reassembled the skeleton of the animal, and also created a wooden frame on which the elephant's skin was subsequently displayed. This specimen is currently on show at the National Museum of Natural Sciences in Madrid.

On 27 July 1778, the *Fragata Astrea* arrived at from the Philippines with a female elephant, the second pachyderm to be given by the Nawab of the Carnatic Indian to His Majesty through the Governor of the Philippines, Simon de Anda, along with other animals, both living and stuffed.

The king, grateful for both gifts, gave Simon de Anda the right to put an elephant on his coat of arms, which we can see at his birthplace in Subijana de Alava.

The arrival of these exotic animals in the eighteenth century seized the imagination of the Madrid Court. They featured as protagonists of poems, plays and artistic performances, such as the elephant that appears in a work of Lorenzo Tiepolo, which depicts an elephant on a lady's fan.

Besides the exchange of elephants in these galleons, there are also references to the tusks of the animals, such as those given as a gift of the King of Siam, Don Fernando Manuel de Bustillo Bustamante y Rueda, governor of the Philippine Islands to Her Majesty in 1719.

There were also the tusks carved as sculptures, such as the ones that were carried on the galleon *San Jose* in 1665.

Hispanic–Philippine ivory sculptures

These Hispanic–Philippines ivories, as they are known, were the main objects of cultural exchange linked to the creation of the trans-Pacific route of the Manila Galleon, which, from 1565 until 1815, transported delicate pieces from Asia to the new-Hispanic and Spanish ports, and vice versa.

I would now like to say more about these Hispanic–Philippines ivories that arrived from the Philippines to Spain via this trans-Pacific route, and which are currently to be found in public and private collections around the world.

The Manila Galleon was a fine means for advancing the evangelisation of the territory. Different religious orders sponsored the building of churches that required appropriate liturgical furniture for their ceremonies. Chinese artists were in charge of providing these goods to the religious communities.

Soon the Manila colony was formed with people known as the *sangleys*, who started the production of these characteristic Philippines pieces. The governor Gonzalo Ronquillo Peñalosa ordered the construction of the first *parian* in 1581, to provide a base for the *sangleys*. But this was not the only one; up to four of these were rebuilt as a result of fire damage.

Fray Domingo de Salazar refers to this *parian* and to their goods in a list sent in a letter. Because of this letter, we know of the production of sculptures made of ivory by the *sangleys*, and it confirms that the Spanish in the archipelago brought their own models and European goods.

I would like to explore the aesthetic evolution of these sculptures, examined in terms of their chronology.

Starting with the oriental look. This normally appears in the seventeenth century ivories. Highlighting their slanted eyes, flat nose, lined necks and long lobes. We can see this in crucified Christs, specially in dying Christs. And in some Inmaculada Concepciones. This is also common in some saints, like the figures of Saint Michael and John the Baptist from Badajoz. Also in the Virgin and Saint Joseph from México.

Next, as regards the European influences, which featured frequently in the mid-seventeenth and eighteenth century. For instance, the impact of the arrival of sculptures from Flanders in the sixteenth century, recreated by the Malinas workshops, such as the Santo Niño de Cebu. These gave the characteristic elements of Hispanic–Philippines ivories, such as small size, clear forehead and small eyes.

Christian iconography was exported from Spain with the missionaries and with European engravings, and was duly absorbed. But we also have to bear in mind the relevance of the Andalusian sculptural school in the Hispanic–Philippines ivories, mainly focused on Juan Martinez Montañes. We can find images of the “Baby Jesus blessing” similar to the

reference image of him that is conserved in Seville Cathedral. The quantity of sculptures of this type is maybe because one copy comes back to Ternate, in the Philippines, from Acapulco in the seventeenth century.



Figure. 1: Anonymous Filipino artist, *Madonna with Child*, 1600s. Ivory and silver. Seville Cathedral, Spain

So now, turning to the saints. Saint Michael is one of the most frequently represented, since he is the symbol of the triumph of the Catholic Church against heresy. Alongside Saint Michael there is also Saint Sebastian, John the Baptist, and the saints related to different religious orders, like Saint Francis of Assisi, and some female representations such as Santa Rosa de Lima or the Virgen de Guadalupe.

Next, let us look at some of the legacies from the Philippines during the eighteenth century.

First, we can outline the figure of Manuel Silvestre Pérez del Camino, originally from the Riojan village of Castañares de Rioja, who had an extensive career as a state employee in the Viceroyalty of New Spain.¹

He made a donation to build a chapel in his home village in the eighteenth century, to

consolidate his family prestige. This chapel has a small altarpiece, presided over by a painting of the Virgen de Guadalupe, signed by Miguel Cabrera. However, the most interesting ornaments in this chapel for our study are ivory sculptures.

Of all of them, the Virgin of the Rosary, Saint Michael and Sant Joseph and the Virgin of the Holy Family set, were sold by the parish priest. So, now in the Diocesan Museum in Calahorra, they have the sculptures of John the Baptist, San Fernando and the Baby Jesus of the Holy Family. All of them have oriental features even though they are from the eighteenth century. We do not know if they came from the Philippines or were made by *sangleys* in Mexico.

Another interesting part of the legacy is Francisco de Samaniego y Tuesta.²

There is not much information about him, but we know that he was born in 1568, in Caicedo de Yuso, Álava, and died in 1670 in Manila. So, there was a delay in the repatriation of properties from the Philippines to Spain, given that the reference date for this was 1783.

The content of this decree not only allows us to analyse the pieces that Francisco de Samaniego donated to his native village, ivory crucifix, a silver sacred receptacle and a silver cross that is currently missing.

With respect to the crucifix, the decree mentioned its measurements and description, and that its location was in a chapel near to the church of Nuestra Señora de la Asuncion that is now in ruins.

Its features have a European influence that can be particularly appreciated in the eyes and nose. But the most interesting part of this sculpture is the inscription is preserved on the right foot, which is unusual in the Hispano-Philippines ivories, since these models are normally anonymous. The set is completed with a filigree sacred receptacle.

Finally, I want to show my most recent research. I am working on analysing the composition of ivory and polychrome in some of these sculptures, like this Immaculate Conception. It was documented in the eighteenth century and was donated by D. Juan de Osorio Crespo, from Mexico to Íllora in Granada, where he was born. Unfortunately it was damaged in the Spanish Civil War, but this has given us opportunities for chemical analysis.³

We are currently working on a book about Hispanic-Philippine ivory sculptures in Spain and comparison with others from around the world, where we want to deal with the uncertainties that now exist around them, the origin of the material, the process of preparation, as well as studying workshops and artisans.

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NOTES

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