Diplomatic Ivories

Sri Lankan Caskets and the Portuguese-Asian Exchange in the Sixteenth Century

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Ivories played a pivotal role in the making of Sri Lankan diplomatic exchanges with Portugal, an early high point in European-Asian diplomacy. In 1541, the Sinhalese monarch Bhuvanekabāhu VII (1521–51) sent an ivory casket of exceptional quality to King John III (1521–57) in Lisbon. This outstanding work of art, now in Munich and known as the “coronation casket,” inaugurates an important corpus of materials dispatched from various Sri Lankan courts to the Portuguese monarch John III, his wife Catherine of Habsburg (regent 1557–62), and their successor Sebastian (1562/68–78) (Figure 3.1). Like many ivories from Asia and Africa, these objects integrate motifs taken from Renaissance art into an iconography anchored in other regional traditions and executed, in this case, by South Asian artists. But what was it that drove the invention of such combinations in the local political context, what made it possible for images to travel between Sri Lanka, Goa, Lisbon and other places in Europe, and how did composite ivory

1 I wish to thank Sujatha Arundhati Meegama for sharing her thoughts on the ivory caskets at a time when much of her work was yet unpublished. This piece is best read alongside with Meegama, “The Local and the Global: The Multiple Visual Worlds of Sixteenth-Century Sri Lanka,” in Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History, ed. Alan Strathern and Zoltán Biedermann (London: UCL Press, 2017), 113–40. I also thank Annemarie Jordan Gschwend for her kind support, including an invitation to the opening of the exhibition on Sri Lankan ivories at the Museum Rietberg in Zurich in 2010. The catalogue to the exhibition now offers the finest overview of the subject. Annemarie Jordan Gschwend and Johannes Beltz, Elfenbeine aus Ceylon: Luxusgüter für Katharina von Habsburg (1507–1578) (Zurich: Museum Rietberg, 2010).

2 Nothing is known about such gifts during the regency of Cardinal Henry, 1562–68.
objects achieve their diplomatic goals at distant courts? Exploring such matters allows us to address the wider issue of how value(s) – political, commercial and aesthetic – could be understood across cultural boundaries and how the imperfections of cross-cultural readings in the sixteenth century were linked to the making of unequal power relations on the global stage.³

A SRI LANKAN EMBASSY TO LISBON, 1541–43

Carrying the “coronation casket” was a Tamil ambassador whose principal duty was to conduct talks about his Sinhalese patron’s vassalage to the Portuguese crown.⁴ In Sri Lanka, Bhuwanekabāhu VII ruled over a relatively small kingdom extending across the fertile hinterland of Colombo, organized around the capital city of Kōṭṭe. He also claimed overlordship over a number of other rulers in the island and, occasionally, laid claim to the much-coveted imperial title of cakravarti (“Turner of the Wheel”). In sixteenth-century Sri Lanka, this title designated not so much the ability to conquer the world as the ability to impose tribute over other rulers across the island. The overlordship of Kōṭṭe over other parts of Sri Lanka was an inherently diplomatic affair as relations of authority were almost permanently under renegotiation.⁵

It was one of the peculiarities of the Lankan political arrangement that imperial ambitions within the island could be combined with the payment of tribute outside. In the heyday of Chinese maritime expansion, the cakravarti of Kōṭṭe Parākramabāhu VI (c. 1411–67), while receiving tribute from rulers across Sri Lanka, also sent a series of tributary embassies to the Ming court in China. Although nothing is known about the material culture of those missions, the practice must have left an

imprint on the way gifts were put together in Sri Lanka to please distant courtly audiences. During the early sixteenth century, attention shifted to the emerging Indian Ocean empire of the Portuguese, the Estado da Índia. Bhuvanekabāhu VII saw himself as a key vassal of the Portuguese crown especially from the late 1520s onward, and while he had many things to complain about – for example, the Portuguese purchased Lankan cinnamon below market value – the agreement also carried advantages for him. By maintaining his status as the sole vassal of John III in Sri Lanka, the king of Kōṭṭe could hope to keep his Lankan rivals at bay. Tributary payments, generally in the form of cinnamon, elephants and precious stones, served to strengthen a military alliance that others in the island also longed for, but struggled to obtain. In this sense, certain commodities offered by Lankan rulers to the Portuguese served a function close to that of diplomatic gifts.

The embassy dispatched to Lisbon in 1541, however, responded to a specific moment in the political life of the kingdom of Kōṭṭe, for which a special kind of gift was required. In 1539, Bhuvanekabāhu VII had welcomed the birth of a grandson and declared his desire to see this child become the next king. The project went against the ambitions of Māyādūnnē, Bhuvanekabāhu’s younger brother ruling in nearby Sitāvaka (1521–78), himself intent on taking over Kōṭṭe and becoming the supreme overlord of Sri Lanka. As one would expect, the decision of promoting a younger candidate left many unhappy, and, confronted with the uproar, the monarch turned to his Portuguese allies to consolidate his position. He had some leverage on this front, since it was widely known that the royal treasury of John III owed him a sizeable sum of money, much needed to run Portuguese operations in Asia. The unofficial mid-sixteenth-century chronicler Gaspar Correia went so far as to suggest that the Portuguese monarch accepted to receive the Lankan embassy in the hope of seeing his debts pardoned. Much of what ensued was, then, of an ambiguous hierarchical order and traversed, from the Lankan point of view at least, by a strong sense of mutuality. The monarch of Kōṭṭe offered his personal vassalage, which in practice amounted to monetary

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7 Jorge Manuel Flores, Os Portugueses e o Mar de Ceilão, 1498–1543: Trato, Diplomacia e Guerra (Lisbon: Cosmos, 1998); Biedermann, “The Matrioshka Principle.”

and commercial support for the Estado, in exchange for further military assistance.\(^9\)

The “coronation casket” was reportedly used as a container for a gold statuette representing the chosen successor to the Lankan throne, Dharmapāla.\(^\text{10}\) Its diplomatic function, however, was to convey a political message through its complex iconographic program. The same story regarding the coronation of Dharmapāla and the ambitioned imperial authority of Bhuvanekabāhu VII in Sri Lanka needed to be told to two different audiences. First, it had to be exposed to the members of the court of Kōṭṭe, especially those who may have expressed doubts about the project. The fact that the mission was led by a man serving in Kōṭṭe as purōhița, an alter ego of the ruler and a figure guaranteeing that courtly acts were ritually appropriate, was key in this regard. Second, the notion of a coronation in Lisbon and how it related to Kōṭṭe’s supremacy in Lanka had to be expounded to the Portuguese court – especially since traditionally Portuguese kings were not crowned but anointed and acclaimed. It was important to achieve the perpetuation of Kōṭṭe’s alliance with Lisbon and to do so following certain formal precepts of Lankan political lore. It was also crucial that the Portuguese elite understood all that was expected.

The front panel of the casket gives a vivid account of the key moment of the embassy.\(^11\) Prince Dharmapāla is presented in effigy to John III by Šrī Rāmarakṣa or possibly Bhuvanekabāhu himself, the child’s hand placed into that of the overlord. In another vignette, the Portuguese monarch places a crown on the head of the Lankan prince, anticipating his future coronation in Kōṭṭe. Dharmapāla would, so the agreement, continue the vassalage practiced by Bhuvanekabāhu VII, providing a stable ally in a troubled region. John III, in his turn, would support the house of Kōṭṭe, shielding it from common enemies such as the kings of


\(^\text{10}\) There remains some uncertainty about whether this exact casket is indeed identical with the mentioned container, or whether it may have been produced after the events to commemorate them. The former hypothesis is favored by Annemarie Jordan Gschwend and myself, the latter by Amin Jaffer and Melanie Anne Schwabe, “A Group of Sixteenth-Century Ivory Caskets from Ceylon,” *Apollo* 445 (1999): 3–14.

Sitāvaka, who maintained their own diplomatic and military network in South India, cooperating with the Hindu Nayaks of Tanjore and the Muslim Mappilas of the Malabar Coast.¹²

The “coronation casket” is a rather extraordinary piece of political artwork. It is a gift representing the very diplomatic act during which it was transacted. In this sense, it is the diplomatic gift par excellence. On the surface of it, the scenes mentioned may be read as either an unambiguous sign of Portuguese imperial superiority (John III as a “king of kings” capable of projecting his power into a distant, defenseless realm) or as an affirmation of a proud Lankan understanding of the deal of vassalage (Bhuvanekabāhu VII as a cakravarti reaching out to his very special foreign overlord on the global stage – a representation of the Buddhist monarch with a whole range of imperial attributes appears on the side panel in Figure 3.2).¹³ What makes the casket most interesting, however, is the dynamism of these two narratives taken together in a context going from local production (with borrowings from Western images for the representation of John III and two soldier figures), transcontinental displacement, display, and courtly reception and appropriation in Lisbon.

In contrast with the written grievances and requests presented to John III by the Lankan monarch, which may not have been made widely accessible, the casket is likely to have been on display for key members of the court, making an amply readable statement about the Luso-Lankan alliance. It probably moved on from Lisbon to the royal palace at Almeirim, where Śrī Rāmarakṣa spent time with the Portuguese royal family before returning to Asia in the spring of 1543. The purāhita did, by all means, an outstanding diplomatic job if we take into account the results of the embassy. He – and perhaps the casket itself – created lasting bonds with John III, Catherine of Habsburg (a figure much interested in ivories) and several other high-ranking personalities, to which he himself and Bhuvanekabāhu VII would come back time and again in their diplomatic correspondence over the following years.¹⁴ As Kōṭṭe entered a decade of troubles, the memory of the events in Lisbon kept the alliance alive. In Colombo, the Franciscans complained about Bhuvanekabāhu’s

¹² Flores, Os Portugueses e o Mar de Ceilão.
¹³ More on the parallels between the two imperial ideologies in Biedermann, “The Matrioshka Principle.”
¹⁴ On Catherine as a “collecting queen,” see Annemarie Jordan Gschwend, A rainha coleccionadora: Catarina de Áustria (Lisbon: Círculo de Leitores, 2012).
reluctance to convert. The king’s brother Māyādunne did all he could to invert the political hacking order in the island and become a vassal of John III himself. And other disgruntled princes and pretenders to Lankan thrones approached the Portuguese authorities with promises of conversion directed against Bhuvanekabahu’s symbolic paramountcy. Yet while the pressure mounted on John III to change the status quo, the ties consolidated in 1542 remained remarkably resilient.15

15 All this is abundantly documented in Georg Schurhammer and E. A. Voretzsch, Ceylon zur Zeit des Königs Bhuvaneka Bahu und Franz Xavers 1539–1552. Quellen zur
All this being said, it is important not to overidealize things on grounds of an isolated exegesis of the casket in its Sri Lankan context. As the casket was, during the main audience in 1542, carried through the great hall of the royal palace on the Lisbon waterfront, the Paço da Ribeira, it became surrounded by a visual apparatus set up by John III. The audience hall is likely to have been decorated at the time with a series of very large tapestries originally commissioned in Flanders by Manuel I (r. 1495–1521), representing scenes from the early years of Asian expansion. The “discoveries” depicted were an extremely ambiguous matter when it came to questions of hierarchy. In principle it is quite right to emphasize, in opposition to the older narratives of Eurocentric imperial history, that Portuguese diplomacy in Asia (and indeed in Africa) rested on a notionally level playing field. At the basis of all diplomatic interactions was an understanding that, on the other side of the divide, there were rulers sharing with the Portuguese monarchs the universal qualities of kingship. In other words, a king was a king, and an ambassador an ambassador. In fact, the Portuguese were often humbled during diplomatic encounters especially in the larger empires of mainland Asia. But to the participants in the 1542 reception, the overlord on whom things converged in that particular moment was the man sitting in the hall – notwithstanding his debts – rather than the one coming toward him. It was the former, after all, who had the power to dispatch troops to the realm of the latter, and not vice versa.

Naturally, the casket had been produced in Kōtte without knowledge of the precise context in which it would be used in Lisbon. It expressed a Lankan point of view, where mutuality was the key quality of the alliance with the Portuguese. In Lisbon, the royal palace reframed the visual narrative, putting it into perspective and in line with the Portuguese imperial imagination. Here the story became one of imperial expansion and the establishment of hierarchical diplomatic relations across the globe. The notion of Portuguese superiority found expression in a gesture


that modern historians, as their early modern precursors, have chosen to ignore. It is, to be more precise, an absence that strikes us as we go through the written record. After the casket was presented, John III does not seem to have offered anything of substantial material value in return. There is a possibility that the Portuguese monarch may have reciprocated a *cabaia* from Bhuvanekabāhu (a robe of the sort worn by him as shown on the casket) by offering a similar piece. But there are no further textual clues on this. The silence is in itself noteworthy.

The logic of receiving without giving reverberated through the following decades. It manifested itself in the sustained hesitation of the Portuguese authorities to send more troops to Bhuvanekabāhu VII, even when the latter kept producing material incentives including precious ivory objects to obtain such support. The politics of this increasingly asymmetrical exchange call to be spelled out. For Annemarie Jordan Gschwend, Catherine of Habsburg’s biographer, the queen not only received diplomatic gifts, she was also on a veritable shopping spree in the 1540s to obtain Lankan ivories that she then redistributed across her vast family. Recipients of Lankan ivory objects – for example, combs and large fans – included Maria of Parma, wife of Alessandro Farnese; Catherine’s niece and daughter-in-law Joanna of Austria; her daughter Dona Maria, wife of Philip II of Spain; Emperor Rudolf II; Ferdinand II of Tyrol; and Albrecht V of Bavaria. But what exactly was the nature of this trading, collecting and distributing? Can we ignore the ways in which the production of ivories in Sri Lanka was tied up with the new imperial order overseen by Portugal’s elite? It was on imperial power that the fulfillment of Catherine’s orders in Sri Lanka rested. The supply of ivories was discussed between Lisbon and Kōṭṭe at the highest political level.

18 Gschwend and Beltz, *Elfenbeine aus Ceylon*, 39. Gschwend has also suggested that the king may have sent some valuable weaponry in return, as he did to the Sultan of Cambay in 1537. Ibid., 43.


20 In 1551 the Portuguese viceroy mentioned, in a letter arguing for the launch of a military campaign in the island, that the royal couple should not worry about the supply of ivories so dear to the queen – a sign of how Bhuvanekabāhu VII had managed to tie the maintenance of the political status quo to the prospect of further ivory shipments. Catherine’s agent Diogo Vaz obtained, according to the same letter, over a thousand rubies, five hundred emeralds, a large rock crystal, and numerous objects made of gold. Sebastião Ferreira to Catherine, Cochin, January 24, 1551, published in Schurhammer and Voretzsch, *Ceylon*, 558.
It is important to distinguish here between at least two categories of objects handed over to Portuguese agents in the island. They may all have been part of the complex political and diplomatic operations of Bhuvanekabahu VII, but objects such as ivory fans, combs, small jewelry boxes and rock crystal figures do not seem to have carried the same political weight as caskets with their more elaborate iconographic programs. The potential for depoliticization and commodification was significantly lower with the latter than the former. While historians long believed the ivory caskets now in Munich to have been purchased in Lisbon by an agent of Markus Fugger on behalf of Duke Albert V, in 1566 – in other words, sold for money – recent research has shown that they were in fact sent to Bavaria by Catherine in 1573 as gifts, to help pave the way for a marriage between Princess Maximiliana, daughter of Albrecht V, and Sebastian of Portugal. In other words, they remained firmly within the remit of high diplomacy.

What is striking though is how a casket intended by Bhuvanekabahu VII to stand in Lisbon as a reminder of his and his successor’s vassalage was given away at a time when Dharmapala (1551–97), the king crowned on the front panel, was still on the throne and more reliant than ever on Portuguese support. What remained in Lisbon after 1573 were the papers containing Bhuvanekabahu’s demands from 1541 along with a series of royal decrees responding to them, issued in 1543. An important shift was under way. The papers, which had not received an exposure comparable to the casket during the actual diplomatic events, now became the principal testimony of the arrangement. They were retained in the state archive – where they remain today – while the casket was allowed to leave and perform new diplomatic functions. This bifurcation may be indicative of the progressive bureaucratization of the imperial

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21 A remarkable corpus of such objects has been gathered in Gschwend and Beltz, Elfenbeine aus Ceylon.
24 It has been suggested that the queen lost interest in Lankan art after the middle of the century, when she began to look for objects from China and Japan instead. Annemarie Jordan Gschwend, “O fascínio de Cipango: Artes decorativas e lacas da Ásia Oriental em Portugal, Espanha e Áustria (1511–1598),” in Os Construtores do Oriente Português (Lisbon: CNCDP, 1998), 195–227. This shift alone, however, may not suffice to explain the dispatching of the casket in 1573.
administration, and a relative loss of power of objects such as the “coronation casket.” The symbolic ascent of paperwork, now the key signifier of imperial reach, may have made other material remainders of diplomacy more dispensable at the Portuguese court than before.

KINGSHP, CASKETS AND CONVERSIONS: SOME OTHER DIPLOMATIC IVORIES

As is often the case with objects falling under the category of “decorative arts” in museums today, even high-profile diplomatic gifts are difficult to track down in historical inventories since their descriptions tend to be generic. The “coronation casket” is the only one that can be unambiguously linked to a specific diplomatic event. A number of other caskets made their way from Sri Lanka to Europe during the sixteenth century, but their history remains shrouded in uncertainty. Different narratives have evolved as historians of art have attempted to make sense of them.

The best-known summary of the caskets was produced nearly two decades ago by Melanie Schwabe in an article coauthored with Amin Jaffer.25 For Schwabe and Jaffer, there is a clear succession of caskets linked to the story of Luso-Lankan diplomacy. The first of these caskets, today in the Victoria and Albert Museum and known as the “Robinson casket,” was possibly the earliest to display Christian motifs (Figure 3.3). It only seems right to read it in connection with the conversion, in 1557, of King Dharmapāla (r. 1551–97) to Catholicism.26 While this event did not prompt a diplomatic episode comparable to that of 1542, it was closely connected with the earlier deal. On being baptized, Dharmapāla took the name of Dom João in honor of John III and pursued fundamentally the same objective as Bhuvanekabāhu VII had before: to offer tributary submission in exchange for Portuguese military support. By converting, Dharmapāla took things one significant step further, and that is precisely what the casket did, too. This time around, the carvers represented not just themes of kingship and overlordship, but also their religious conditions in the new Catholic imperial order. From the 1540s onward, Christianization had become a central and explicitly pursued objective of the Portuguese authorities. As an increasing number of Asian subjects opted for baptism,

questions were asked about the comparable value of being a Christian by birth (generatio) or by conversion (regeneratio).²⁷

Birth and rebirth are indeed the central themes addressed by the “Robinson casket” with the help of Western and South Asian motifs.²⁸ Among the biblical references on the various panels of the caskets, the Betrothall of the Virgin, the Rest on the Flight to Egypt and a magnificent Tree of Jesse on one of the lateral panels stand out (see Figure 3.6; more on this below). A female head with a royal sunflower appears depicted on the lid, once in Sinhalese and once in European dress, suggesting the transformation of a Lankan queen – possibly Dharmapāla’s first wife – into a Catholic figure. All this is accompanied by Lankan motifs revolving around the same topics, namely, a pair of kinnaras, half-human mythical being, the tails of which become beaded ropes known as “cords of life” encircling every creature in the world. On the lid, an unusual combination of regal lion bodies with symbolic makara heads further explores the link between kingship and creation/re-creation.²⁹ Such themes are best seen in connection with the conversion of a Lankan monarch and his need to affirm himself as a Catholic by regeneratio in the new imperial order.

Another casket, today in Berlin, has been dated by Schwabe to 1578–80. The first date refers to the disappearance and likely death of King Sebastian in Morocco, the second to the signing of the donation of Kōṭṭe by Dom João Dharmapāla, naming the Portuguese monarch as his successor to the Lankan throne. Here the majority of the iconographic program is Christian.³⁰ There are references to the Life of Christ and the Martyrdom of Sebastian as well as the attempted martyrdom of John the Evangelist – a barely veiled allusion to the continued attacks that Dom João Dharmapāla suffered throughout his reign, namely, from his Sītāvakan rival Rājasimha I (1578–93), the successor of Māyādunnē. A full reading of the twenty-two scenes on this casket has yet to be produced, but there is, again, a very plausible association between the

²⁹ Ibid., 9–10. Also see Meegama, “The Local and the Global.”
object and a key event – the signing of the testamentary donation of Kötte in 1580 and the expressed hope that the vanished Sebastian may reappear. The casket could well have accompanied a copy of the testament as it was dispatched to Lisbon. It was on grounds of this donation that, after Dharmapāla’s death in 1597, Phillip II of Spain became, as king of Portugal, the new king of Kötte.31

Both the 1557 and the 1580 caskets seem to have been ordered by Dom João Dharmapāla to express his commitment to Portuguese overlords and, thus, pursue his own agenda to obtain increased military support. At a time when sending full-blown embassies to Lisbon posed practical problems – such missions were costly for all parties involved, and indeed not encouraged by the Portuguese crown – the caskets themselves served as visual reminders, certainly accompanied by explanatory letters, of the importance of maintaining the old alliance between Lisbon and Kötte. There is scope to consider them not only as diplomatic gifts, but also as objects that travelled with a certain autonomy on diplomatic missions.

A sharp critique of the narrative proposed by Schwabe and Jaffer has been formulated recently by Annemarie Jordan Gschwend.32 To Gschwend, the considerations summarized above call to be reexamined in the light of a closer reading of European royal inventories. In Gschwend’s view, at least four or five of the high-quality caskets now extant in Europe must have been collected by Catherine of Habsburg during the 1540s. The merit of Gschwend’s proposal is, as we shall see, that it reopens the debate for new considerations of chronology. The main problem is that a rich iconographic reading of the caskets themselves is challenged by means of references to usually very plain textual evidence extant in inventories, where no details other than the type of object (“a casket”) and their materials are given. This is then an unresolved methodological issue, and, for the time being, the assumption that some of the high-end ivory caskets from Sri Lanka make most sense in conjunction with diplomatic developments over several decades remains as valid as the more recent thesis about the concentrated protagonism of Queen Catherine as a collector. Gschwend’s suggestions are most valuable in that they encourage us to revisit the corpus and ask new questions of it.

31 On this transition, see Biedermann, *The Portuguese in Sri Lanka and South India*, 87–102.
32 Repeatedly in *Elfenbeine aus Ceylon*. 
GIFTED COMMODITIES: CASKETS AND DIPLOMATIC COMPETITION

That nothing is set in stone is best illustrated by a rereading of two ivory caskets not mentioned so far, one preserved in Munich and the other in Vienna. The so-called second Munich casket has been placed by Schwabe, who here argues on grounds of the earlier work of the Portuguese scholars Luís Keil and Xavier Coutinho, in the context of a diplomatic mission launched by Māyādunnē, king of Sitāvaka, to lobby the Portuguese viceroy Dom João de Castro in the late 1540s (Figure 3.4). Only the association with Castro is tenable, however, and even this has been drawn into question by Gschwend. Some motifs have been linked to a later cycle of tapestries commissioned by Castro to commemorate his victory over the Turks at Diu in 1548, today at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, though the similarities are weak. The bearded man sitting at a table may represent the viceroy himself, and the lady his wife Dona Leonor Coutinho – though other readings are possible identifying the latter figure as Bhuvanekabāhu VII, Māyādunnē, Śrī Rāmarsha or Proytila Rala, another diplomat from Kōṭṭe. In principle, the two figures could also be the Portuguese royal couple, John III and Catherine.

The casket displays numerous references to warfare, chivalry and kingship, but not a single Christian motif. If it was produced in Kōṭṭe, then it makes sense to assume that it must have been made before the death of the unbaptized Bhuvanekabāhu VII in 1551, or at the very latest during the early years of the reign of Dharmapāla, before he converted in 1557. The thesis of a royal patronage with a Buddhist background is reinforced by magnificent representations of Lankan kingship (the monarch sitting on a war elephant and on the imperial throne) on the two lateral panels of the casket. Both are remarkably similar to those of the “coronation casket” and may well have been produced by the same workshop. The main argument in favor of a provenance from Kōṭṭe rather than Sitāvaka emerges once we place the “second Munich casket” in connection with another casket, held today

33 On the front panel, a footman seems to carry a shield with the six arruelas, the symbol of the Castro family; cf. Luís Keil, “Influência artística portuguesa no Oriente. Três cofres de marfim indiano do século XVI,” Boletim da Academia Nacional de Belas-Artes 2 (1938): 39–43.
35 The elephant scene is similar – albeit with some differences – to the one that can be seen from an angle in Figure 3.1.
Second Munich casket (frontal view), probably Kötté, Sri Lanka, late 1540s. Munich, Bayerische Verwaltung der staatlichen Schlösser, Gärten und Seen, Residenz München, Schatzkammer, Inv.-Nr. 1242.
in Vienna (Figure 3.5). The latter, known as the “Rāmāyaṇa casket,” has been recently redated by Annemarie Jordan Gschwend, who believes that it may be precisely a gift produced by Māyādunnē in the late 1540s. It could have been forwarded from Goa to Catherine, as other exotic were, and be identical with a casket appearing in the queen’s 1550–55 inventory for the first time.\(^{36}\)

We are here best advised, it seems, to read the objects in the context of a wider struggle involving competing diplomatic gifts. Dom João de Castro’s term as viceroy between 1545 and 1548 fell into a period of intense diplomatic rivalry between Bhuvanekabāhu VII and Māyādunnē. While the former remained the sole formally recognized vassal of John III in Sri Lanka, his younger brother relentlessly pursued the objective of becoming a Portuguese vassal himself and then launching a reinvigorated attack on Kōṭe. An ambassador of Māyādunnē made it to Goa in November 1547,\(^{37}\) and Bhuvanekabāhu was forced to send his own ambassador, a nephew of his, about a month or two later in order to counter the potentially damaging effects.\(^{38}\) The “second Munich casket” makes most sense in this context as an object combining references to Bhuvanekabāhu VII as the supreme Lankan overlord, to Castro (or indeed John III) as the head of the Portuguese Empire in Asia and to motifs of chivalry, but also what seem to be more leisurely hunting scenes on the back of the casket. These vignettes, all of impeccable artistic quality, exude a firm command of the most distinguished iconographic traditions pertaining to kingship and nobility in Lanka and in Portugal. The hunting scenes in particular suggest familiarity and the possibility of mutual understandings grounded in common values and in a protracted relationship between the two dynasties.\(^{39}\)

The “Rāmāyaṇa casket,” in contrast, makes no references at all to the European visual idiom. If this is indeed a gift from Sītāvaka, then there is in this absence a striking honesty. Between Māyādunnē and the Portuguese, the

\(^{36}\) Gschwend and Beltz, *Elfenbeine aus Ceylon*, 70–71.


\(^{38}\) Schurhammer and Voretzsch, *Ceylon*, 500. Which is not to say, evidently, that the casket was produced spontaneously at short notice – it must have been under preparation for a considerable amount of time, and indeed Māyādunnē may well have known about it.

\(^{39}\) Another line of inquiry would concern the numerous dancing scenes in this and other caskets (see for example the lid in Figure 3.1). On the perceived universality of dancing and the gesturing it involved during the medieval period, see Paul Zumthor, *La mesure du monde. Représentation de l’espace au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Seuil, 1993), 38–39.
relationship had been strained for decades. Sītāvaka maintained its above-mentioned alliances with Hindu and Muslim enemies of the Estado in India. If a new alliance was to be built, there would have to be a fresh start. Much of the iconography on this casket is grounded in the Rāmāyaṇa and would have required verbal explanations by the king’s ambassador when the gift was delivered in Goa. The tone is confidently bellicose with a slightly strident emphasis on legitimacy and unrightful dispossession. Māyādunnē was, after all, in principle the heir of Bhuvanekabāhu VII until the latter chose Dharmapāla to succeed him and John III decided to crown the child’s effigy in 1542. The most remarkable aspect is perhaps how Māyādunnē, while having himself represented on a war elephant as Bhuvanekabāhu was on one

Figure 3.5 “Rāmāyaṇa casket” (lateral panel), probably Sītāvaka, Sri Lanka, c. 1547. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Kunstkammer, Inv.-Nr. KK 4743.
lateral panel of the casket, did not include an image of himself on the imperial throne on the other. Perhaps an act of visual usurpation involving the throne would have been deemed excessive and counterproductive in the context of Lankan notions of kingship and ritual purity.\textsuperscript{40}

On the lateral panel where the Munich caskets show Bhuvanekabahu in full imperial glory, Māyādunnē opted for a very different motif. What we see here is not a monarch sitting on the lion throne, but Sīta, the principal female figure of the Rāmāyaṇa – after whom the city of Sītāvaka was named. This feminine reference may seem disconcerting, but the values associated with the spouse of Rāma may well have been what Māyādunnē wished to emphasize: dedication, self-sacrifice, purity, legitimacy and courage. Sīta accompanies Rāma into exile and undergoes, in the great epic, terrible trials before being made a queen – only to be sent away again in the end, unjustly accused of having been unfaithful. She is, in other words, a legitimate royal figure who has her moments of glory but is also forced into limbo by circumstances for which she bears no responsibility.\textsuperscript{41}

The figure of Sīta calls for a complex reading. On the one hand, the Rāmāyaṇa’s key female protagonist carries necessarily the message of her undeserved fall from grace. Through Sīta, Māyādunnē could allude to things as they were rather than as he wished them to be, skillfully striking a realistic tone at a time when the \textit{Estado} discussed more pragmatically than before the possibilities of switching vassals in Ceylon. Presenting himself as the chief victim of decades of misunderstandings grounded in the perfidious diplomacy of Bhuvanekabahu VII, Māyādunnē could attempt to make himself heard as the pure-at-heart, reliable ally that the Portuguese were looking for. He was the very man who, in the Lisbon agreement of 1542, had been unduly barred from succeeding on the Lankan imperial throne. It may well have been hoped in Sītāvaka that the dramatic tone of all this would relativize the fact that Māyādunnē, like Bhuvanekabahu, still refused to convert.\textsuperscript{42} Complementing such a reading, on the other hand, is the fact that the iconography of the casket,

\textsuperscript{40} A detailed identification of the various Rāmāyaṇa scenes can be found in Gschwend and Beltz, \textit{Elfenbeine aus Ceylon}, 70–71.

\textsuperscript{41} See Jorrit Britschgi and Eberhard Fischer, \textit{Rama und Sita: Das Ramayana in der Malerei Indiens} (Zurich: Museum Rietberg, 2008).

\textsuperscript{42} This is in contrast with some disgruntled princes and the more peripheral king of Kandy, who began to promise baptism in exchange for support during the early 1540s. On ivory production in Kandy, see Martha Chaiklin, “Ivory in Early Modern Ceylon: A Case Study in What Documents Don’t Reveal,” \textit{International Journal of Asian Studies} 6, no. 1 (2009): 37–63.
namely, the posture given to Śīta on the lateral panel, points to her triumph rather than her trials. Śīta did, after all, become the spouse of Rāma. In this vein, one could add to the previous considerations that Māyādunnē was striking an increasingly defiant, self-aggrandizing and forward-projecting tone. This was very much in line with his proactive diplomatic stance at a time when the Goan authorities manifested openness to a change in their regime of alliances. It also reflected the real accrual of Śītāvakan military power during this period.

The “Rāmāyaṇa casket” would have required explanations in a diplomatic context where the Goan elite had a limited grasp only of the stories of the great epic. It is not clear to what extent even Dom João de Castro, otherwise known for his appreciation of the South Asian art, would have fully understood the references on the casket without an interpreter. Observers in Goa less versed in Hindu mythology might simply have read the female figure as, say, an exotic personification of Iustitia or an opaque piece of Asian luxuriousness tout court. What seems certain, however, is that studying these objects as Habsburg collectibles at one end of the exchange does not entitle us to neglect the complex political contexts that generated them at the other.

**DID DÜRER MEET THE RĀMĀYĀṇA? THE PROBLEM OF VALUE AND VALUES**

As a picture emerges of how the study of diplomacy may add something to our understanding of early modern material culture and art, we must also ask ourselves how, inversely, insights from the history of material culture and art may enrich the way we study European-Asian diplomacy. Ivory caskets void of European imagery, Jaffer and Schwabe argued, could be assumed to be the oldest because, naturally, they originated before the European artistic influence reached them. Yet the underlying notion of linear historical change is as problematic from

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43 I thank Barbara Karl for this suggestion.
44 Jaffer and Schwabe, “A Group of Sixteenth-Century Caskets.” A similar proposal is in Keil, “Influência artística portuguesa,” 42. To be fair, the authors themselves admitted that this notion was a weak point in their theory. It can also be added that ultimately the political reading of the “coronation casket” itself does not change radically even if we assume, with Jaffer and Schwabe, that it may have been made after the embassy rather than before it.
an art historical point of view as from that of diplomatic history. It may seem straightforward to imagine how, at an early moment of the exchange, a Lankan king decided to present a “purely” South Asian casket to the Portuguese (for example, with scenes from the Rāmāyana), and how then, over the years, new iconographic elements were introduced on other caskets (for example, a bagpiper taken from a Dürer print on the front panel of the “Robinson casket”). This is, after all, a story that seems to resonate with processes of exposure, adaptation and “hybridization” – a problematic but far from useless concept – in the arts and politics of Africa, America and Asia. In West Africa, spectacular “hybrid” ivories were produced in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries combining regional craftsmanship and materials with imagery of European origins. At the same time, African rulers and princes interacted diplomatically with the Portuguese. But while it is logical to assume that no innovations of this kind could have existed before the arrival of Western travelers and motifs, the reverse argument is not tenable. Even after having produced an object including some Western elements, or after having exchanged ambassadors with a Western monarch, a workshop could perfectly go back to producing other objects without them, and a ruler could return to his old alliances. These were matters of choice.

Agency is a contentious topic across early colonial history. The agency of African and Asian craftspeople (and by extension their diplomatically engaged patrons) has been persistently minimized by art historians who have here, perhaps more than in any other subfield, clung to an outdated vocabulary built around a hierarchical notion of “influence.” For the Portuguese art historian Nuno Vassallo e Silva, for example, there can be


no doubt that the same commissioners sitting in Lisbon determined the making of ivories in West Africa and in Sri Lanka, and that this is, in essence, the story to be told.\textsuperscript{48} Once this sort of chronologically anterior, hierarchically superior Portuguese agency is established in our imagination, the complex reception and adaptation of Western imagery by Asian carvers is easily reduced to a unidirectional process by which Asian artists and patrons were made to churn out passive and uncritical imitations of European inventions. In fact, it is only a small step from here to affirming that Asians did not understand what they were doing, combining European motifs “in an apparently random manner, without a coherent repertoire.”\textsuperscript{49}

Only very recently has this argumentation been challenged for the Sri Lankan case by the art historian Sujatha Meegama. To avoid perpetuating traditional interpretative schemes, Meegama argues, we should start by replacing the word “influence” by “appropriation.”\textsuperscript{50} Rather than stating that Lankan artists “followed faithfully” a model from a European “source” or proceeded to a “direct reproduction,”\textsuperscript{51} we need to acknowledge that the inspiration derived from a foreign model stood in a wider context of artistic and political selection and (re)creation. Of course, motifs were copied, as they were throughout history in many parts of the world including Europe, but by whom, how, why and what for? If insisting on the push factors subjacent to diffusionist theories of empire and of art is problematic, should we not explore more vigorously the pull factors that made the appropriation of certain motifs by people in Africa, Asia and the Americas possible? What exactly would the perceived difference be, in Sri Lanka (and also in Portugal), between a “purely” South Asian object and one that made use of some European imagery?


\textsuperscript{49} Silva on the “Robinson casket” in “Ingenuity and Excellence,” 93.


\textsuperscript{51} Silva, “Ingenuity and Excellence,” 93.
How long after being included in a Lankan object would an imported motif cease to be European and become Asian? What can these caskets tell us about the translatability of values and the connectability — or even the universality — of visual idioms, the key conditions for the successful conduction of diplomacy?

To tackle such questions, a seemingly minor, but in fact key art historical concept requires to be discussed as well. Along with the placement of European above Asian agency, art historians have operated with a simplistic notion of ornamentality. Western motifs thus appear to have been “curiously adapted within the Singhalese style of ivory, with the rich texture of clothes, and the filling of backgrounds with other human figures, as well as animals.”

The contrast is not just between the “figurative” and the “ornamental,” but between an art that carries meaning opposed to one that, even in depicting the human body, is incapable of autonomous thought. The suggestion is that there were elements of a higher tradition (for example, an image originally created by Dürer) rendered in an idiom of a lower tradition that excelled, essentially, at the technical level, and could handle Western inputs only through dexterous, but ultimately passive imitation.

Apart from recognizing the evident shortcomings of such notions, the truly disquieting challenge is to further explore the matter of “ornament,” not on grounds of an ill-informed, anachronistic aesthetics of the Lankan ivories, but by engaging with the artistic and diplomatic discourses that surrounded the m in the sixteenth century. On the Lankan side, visual elements that have been misunderstood by Western art historians as mere decoration can tell stories of great subtlety and complexity. As Sujatha Meegama has argued, the Tree of Jesse on the “Robinson casket” (itself an interesting adaptation of a famous print first produced in Paris in 1499, not a copy) is best read in connection with the equally impressive, but generally ignored panel on the opposite end of the casket (Figures 3.6 and 3.7). The latter, structurally similar

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52 Silva, “Ingenuity and Excellence,” 93.
53 See for example Silva, “Ingenuity and Excellence,” 98. Note that a more complex view was given already in 1938 by Luís Keil, who described the Munich caskets as the product of carvers who “insisted on a symbolist Hindu decoration, with exuberance and meticulousness” and used “European themes” as “details” signaling certain historical events (“Influencia artística portuguesa,” 42).
54 On the problems caused by the assumption that aesthetics are a prerogative of Western art, see Valerie Gonzalez, Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001).
and conceptually equivalent to the Tree of Jesse motif, has a pair of vines coming out of the mouths of two makara-headed lions at the bottom of the scene. This, Meegama shows, is as powerful a reference to the founder of the Lankan royal lineage, Vijaya (born from the union of a woman and a lion) as the Tree of Jesse is to the founder of the royal lineage leading through David to Jesus. The animals, placed on the vines as kings are in the Tree of Jesse, all carry specific auspicious associations. What we are looking at is then a very sophisticated piece of diplomatic artwork creating a profoundly meaningful dialogue with its Judeo-Christian counterpart at the very moment of Dom João Dharmapala’s conversion to Catholicism. Overall, its message is one of symmetry and...
mutual intertwinment rather than rupture or the imposition of a new hierarchical order. We are, again, in the presence of a diplomatic dialogue carved in ivory.

One cannot, of course, be certain that Portuguese observers in the sixteenth century did not regard the Lankan vines and animals with similar disinterest as twentieth-century art historians have done. But we need to consider at least the possibility that this was not the case. Renaissance observers were inclined to acknowledge that they stood face to face

55 Meegama, “The Local and the Global.”
in South Asia with an artistic tradition of the highest possible sophistication. A number of Portuguese travelers and decision-makers regarded Indian sculpture in particular with great admiration. To be sure, their descriptions could easily be misread as reflecting an appreciation of craftsmanship in the reductive sense observed above. Take for example one of the most remarkable descriptions of South Indian art in the account written by the traveler Domingos Pais after a visit to Vijayanagara, around 1520–22. Pais was in awe as he walked into “a room . . . all of ivory, as well the chamber as the walls, from top to bottom, and the pillars of the cross-timbers at the top had roses and flowers of lotuses all of ivory, and all well executed, so that there could not be better, – it is so rich and beautiful that you would hardly find anywhere another such.”

But this appreciation needs to be placed in conjunction, from the 1530s, with another development that carried wider cultural implications.

During the reign of John III, a strong classicist current shaped the visual culture of the Portuguese courtly elite and their perception of Asian arts. It has been pointed out that the viceroy Dom João de Castro observed Indian architecture through the lens of Vitruvius, and that with him others may have sensed strong commonalities between classical ideals and the round-bossed forms of Indian sculpture. Castro’s description of the caves at Elephanta Island are a spectacular example of early cross-cultural admiration.

While no similar comments survive in the written record regarding Sri Lanka, it is very likely that the caskets brought to Goa and Lisbon in the 1540s elicited a strong appreciation precisely on these two grounds: the exceptionally high technical standard of their execution, along with an ability to represent the human body in proximity to Renaissance ideals – and hence with commensurate artistic

58 Paulo Varela Gomes, “Perspectives of World Art Research: Form, Recognition and Empathy,” paper presented at the 2012 Opler Conference, Worcester College, Oxford. I wish to thank the author, now deceased, for sharing this material. Also see Zoltán Biedermann, “Imagining Asia from the Margins: Early Portuguese Mappings of the Continent’s Architecture and Space,” in Architecturalized Asia: Mapping the Continent through Architecture and Geography, ed. V. Rujivacharakul, H. H. Hahn, K. T. Oshima and P. Christensen (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 35–51.
standards as sculpture in the West. The volume and depth of the figures, the highly accomplished play with light and shadow, the combination of fair proportions and energetic yet controlled movement, along with a sustained (and indeed unrivalled) attention to detail, all combined into an art that could not but gain appreciation.

These considerations bear relevance for our understanding of the value of the Lankan ivory caskets. The overall value of a diplomatic gift such as the “coronation casket” or the “second Munich casket” resulted from a combination of a multiplicity of factors ranging from the quantifiable to the unmeasurable. At the most fundamental level, it seems very reasonable to assume that labor and matter constituted parts of the value of any object. It does not take a Marxist conviction to see that, especially at a time when patronage involved a tight control of labor but, concurrently, highly skilled labor was hard to come by, an object made in a royal workshop over thousands of hours was in itself almost inevitably very valuable. The fact that this work was done in ivory, a material of a recognized inherent value across cultures in Europe, Africa and Asia, only consolidated the value created by labor. To this, one has to add mutual aesthetic appreciation, in connection with the wider commonalities of European and Asian court societies. It was, as Sanjay Subrahmaniam has pointed out, an encounter not between “peoples” of the two continents in which such objects changed hands, but between courtly elites sharing a number of social and cultural values. However exotic the pose of Bhuvanekabahu VII on the lion throne may have been to Portuguese eyes, the royal status of the ruler depicted was evident, the quality of the artwork impeccable and the links between this figure and the coronation scenes on the front panel forceful. However exotic the animals populating the friezes above and below the hunting scene in the “second Munich casket” may have seemed, the act of hunting as such was a shared interest of European and Asian nobilities and closely connected with the military ethos.

The provenance of the ivory used for the caskets is unclear, though there is a strong possibility that for several of them African material was used. The whiter color of the Vienna casket may indicate a Lankan workshop with limited access to foreign ivory (Gschwend and Beltz, Elfenbeine aus Ceylon, 71).


If elements taken from the Western tradition were used to depict the chivalrous confrontation of two horsemen (as in Figure 3.4), then this would be necessarily appreciated by Portuguese observers not as a random imitative ornament, but as a conscious and suitable nod, a bridge between two societies facing each other in diplomacy, war, trade and other forms of exchange. Shared social values contributed to the creation and recognition of sharable notions of artistic and diplomatic value. In close connection with the latter, though at a slightly more abstract level, the value of specific gifts also depended on their handling in politically charged contexts, mainly in moments of high diplomacy involving rulers with commensurable imperial ambitions. In those moments, the said and the unsaid were necessarily intertwined. Political ideas are likely to have been uttered in the guise of explanations regarding the iconography, while majesty as such – like the high material and artistic value of these caskets – required no comments.

Crucially in these objects, all indicators of value seem to have been relevant both at the point of origin and at the port of destination. It becomes inevitable to ask whether the notion of distinct “regimes of value” is not of limited bearing in comparison to that of “mechanisms of commensuration” mediating between them. While one might think that the aura of a regime of high diplomacy was easily effaced again once the object was de- and recontextualized as, for example, a simple curiosity in a Renaissance Wunderkammer, the history of the “coronation casket” suggests otherwise. It rather looks as if the value of this particular object never increased nor decreased very steeply as it was transported from Kōtte to Goa, Lisbon and finally Munich. The combined impact of a high-end artistic production closely linked with royalty, a series of images pertaining to matters of state, along with a highly dramatized reception at a royal court made sure that the original aura (and not just the aura of the original) never quite vanished. Perhaps it was precisely the fact that


\[64\] Note that one instance at least of monetary valuation is documented in an inventory of the collections of Phillip II, the price of an ivory casket from South Asia here being given as 150 ducats. In the same inventory, a painting by Hieronymus Bosch was valued at 6 ducats, but a portrait of the monarch and his son Charles, painted by Titian, at 200 ducats (Silva, “Ingenuity and Excellence,” p. 101). It is far from clear what we can conclude from these figures, but at present they seem to confirm the very high value of caskets and Annemarie Jordan Gschwend’s intuition that royal courts remained the natural habitat of such artifacts throughout the sixteenth century.
value was here consolidated through a very specific, politically loaded exchange, a zone of highly charged communication, that mattered. This would then be a case of an overarching, transcultural regime of value itself being “built through the intercultural and international exchange.”

Before we conclude, a caveat is due though regarding the limits of early modern connectivity. Even within such a reduced corpus of highly “political” caskets as those preserved in Munich and in Vienna, there may be a gradation with complex implications. It could be that the continuum of value as we observe it in the two Munich caskets depended precisely on the controlled inclusion of some pictorial elements that would be immediately readable for sixteenth-century Europeans as not just commensurate to Western traditions, but taken directly from the Western visual repertoire. It may well have been these specific elements that drove the reception of certain caskets, easing the way for European eyes into a world of less familiar stories. Without such anchors, the observers might not only have felt lost, they could also have refrained from engaging with the iconography altogether. However stunning its imagery may be, the “Rāmāyaṇa casket” now attributed to the royal workshop at Śītāvaka has not come near, to this day, to achieving the symbolic status of its “hybrid” or “composite” counterparts in Munich. Whether this is down to it having come from a king not recognized as a vassal in Lisbon, or to being entirely void of graspable Western visual elements, we cannot know for sure. Nor is it clear when exactly it became just another piece of South Asian craft in a European Kunstkammer and the later Kunsthistorisches Museum, since the history of the perceptions of such objects in sixteenth- to nineteenth-century Europe is barely known. The only certainty is that, as an original diplomatic gift, the casket calls to be reconnected now curatorially with its distant, politically loaded past.

CONCLUSION

The inclusion of motifs that still tend to be seen as “European” on objects made in Asia for the global diplomatic marketplace can be understood in two different ways. At one level, such innovations can be read as a sign

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not of the fragility of their commissioners and makers, but of high diplomatic capabilities, of deliberate choices and of a remarkable sense of empathy and strategy as objects were dispatched to perform diplomatic missions on the other side of the globe. It may have been precisely through the controlled incorporation of the foreign that Lankan (and particularly Kotte-based) diplomatic and artistic agency came into full bloom. In fact, one is compelled to note that it was the European elite that often stood by passively, watching casket after casket reaching its courts without being able to control their making or even fully read the stories they told. On the other hand, we are again well advised not to overstretch this argument. The appearance of pictorial elements and themes taken from Western art does signal quite clearly the beginnings of a global power imbalance, at least in this specific case. It was the rulers of Sri Lanka who courted the Portuguese monarchs with exquisite diplomatic gifts after all, and not the other way around.

Sadly enough, Dürer did not quite meet the Rāmāyaṇa in the end. The famous bagpiper appears on the “Robinson casket,” which makes no reference to the epic, and also on another casket predominantly displaying motifs taken from Western models, now in a private collection in Paris. This being said, we are still awaiting a systematic survey of Lankan ivory caskets. A thorough comparison of these objects with other manifestations of sixteenth-century Lankan and South Indian sculptural practice is still outstanding. Stories of great significance may be hiding in the numerous vignettes covering the caskets – and indeed, perhaps, on other objects such as fans and combs – most of which await a full and thorough investigation. New connections will inevitably surface. For the time being, this incursion into the history of a handful of caskets may suffice to whet our appetites. It exemplifies how examining art objects as diplomatic gifts may help us understand their iconographies, and vice versa. The new readings are worthwhile if through

66 This said, we know nothing about the ways in which for example churches in sixteenth-century Sri Lanka may have gone through similar processes of visual blending and adaptation.
67 The Paris casket is analyzed in Gschwend and Beltz, Elfenbeine aus Ceylon, 60–69.
them we gain access to a hitherto overlooked universe of cross-cultural encounters and exchanges that all contributed – by connecting the courts of Europe and Asia as, in the words of Norbert Elias, the “communicating organs” of a larger body – to the making of the early modern world.69