

# THE ANCIENT CHINESE ART OF IVORY CARVING

## How to Sort Out the New from the Old

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Qing Dynasty ivory carving sold  
in 2000 in China for 605,000 CNY  
(about US\$76,000)

**T**o the Chinese, carving is a very important art form and has been for thousands of years. This art divides into three main categories based on the material used: woodcarving, bamboo carving and ivory carving. This last category, the intricate and delicate carving on ivory, which is the milk white material from the tusks of elephants, walrus and narwhals, is perhaps the most refined and best known.

The beauty of the material, along with its smooth feel and the lovely sheen and color that comes with aging, makes carved ivory a favorite for collectors around the world.

Although the ivory carving in China dates back at least 5000 years, ivory came into China from Africa in quantities along the “Silk Road” some 2000 years ago. Some of the ivory pieces existing today are extremely old. The antique pieces, which demonstrate an extremely high level of precision of carving, exquisite workmanship and incomparable detail, are very valuable.



Ming Dynasty Buddha

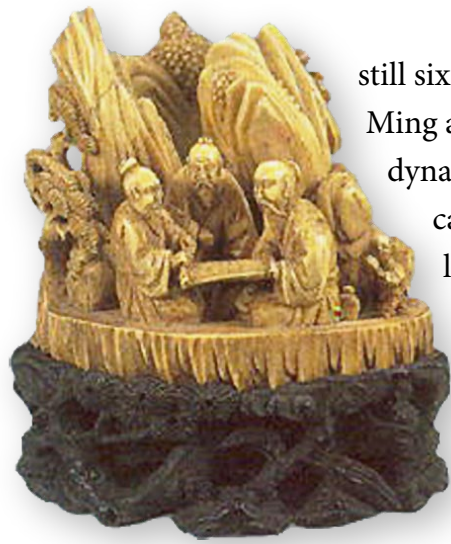
Unfortunately, in part due to the many millennia of production and to the fact that ivory for carving became very scarce towards the end of the last century, the craft is also riddled with abuses, forgery and criminal practices.

The use of false ivory, animal bones and other materials and pretending it is ivory, aging new ivory to make it look old and forgery of masters’ signatures among other fraudulent activities have increased since China agreed to support the UN ban on ivory imports and in 1991 outlawed ivory coming into the country.

A collector must know all the tricks of the criminal elements to make sure that the ivory pieces one is buying, particularly the antique ivory, is the real thing.

### Chinese Ivory Through the Ages

Carved ivory pieces have been found from the Humudu culture, which goes back 7000 years, and the Dawenkou culture, which dates from 4000 to 2000 years ago. Coming up towards the present although



People and Hill by Shen Junyu, Ming Dynasty

still six centuries ago, the Ming and Qing (Ch'ing) dynasties carried the ivory carving to whole new levels.

During the time of the Ming and Qing dynasties, ivory carving became more sophisticated, benefiting from improved carving methods. The craftsmen learned how to carve the

ivory very delicately and finely. The beauty of the modeling achieved unprecedented levels. This was a high point for the craft and prosperous times for those involved in it.

Typical of the the Ming Dynasty ivory carving are figures of female court attendants, studies of Chinese characters and ordinary people, the Goddess of Mercy, images of Buddha, card and letter holders, plates, fan handles and so on, all beautifully carved in incredibly

fine detail. No coloring was used in the Ming Dynasty work. It's all natural ivory color. The work is noted for the gentle modeling, perfectly round pieces and the decorative design of the utensils and other carved items.



Qing Dynasty female court attendant



Ming Dynasty card holder



Ming Dynasty letter holder

During the Qing Dynasty the themes included traditional characters, images of Buddha, card holders and also dragon boats, pagodas, lanterns, baskets of flowers, table screens and other items. The range



Eight Immortal Figures, Qing Dynasty

was expanded. The work is just as fine, but during this period painted inlays are introduced. In the later part of the Qing dynasty, a combination of intricate carvings along with calligraphy and painting became the new artistic trend.

The ancient ivory carving usually consisted of small decorations and the cup—a tube-like drinking vessel, all of it actually functional. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties the ivory carvings were on a larger scale and were mostly ornaments and artistic carvings done for their aesthetic rather than functional value.

An interesting note on ivory is that in the past the Lingnan people, especially those from Guangzhou and the Zhujiang Delta considered ivory to have special qualities such as the power to exorcise evil spirits and to eliminate filth.

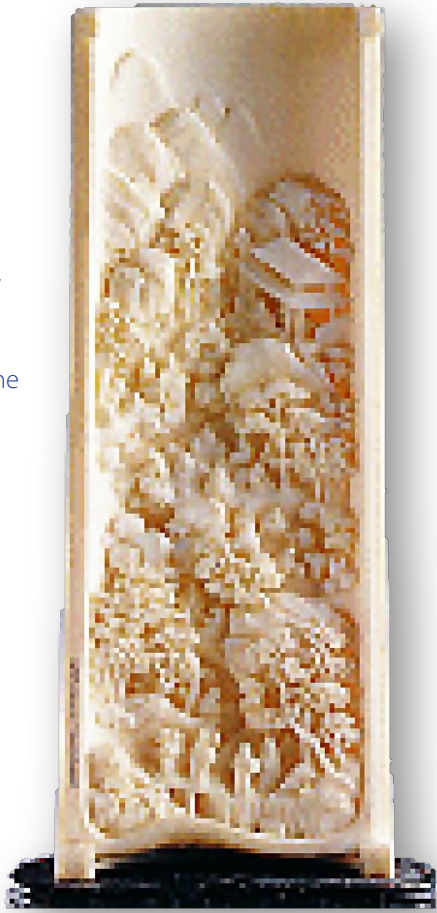


Ming Dynasty "air freshener"



Hand basket, Ming Dynasty

Huang Chen-hsiao (early 18th century). Small screen in the form of a wrist rest with a scene of the Gathering at the Orchard Pavillion. Qing Dynasty. Dated to fourth year of Ch'ien-lung reign (1739). Carved ivory. Height 3 5/8" (9.2 cm) Width 1 5/8" (4 cm.)



Guangzhou or southern ivory carving

The 20th century was a flourishing time for the Chinese ivory carving trade. Towards the beginning of the century, Zheng Yike, a master and teacher was quite influential. Wood carvers and jade carvers changed over to ivory as their medium. There were in the region of 200 well known, skilled ivory artists.



Guangzhou is famous for its ivory ball carvings

### Recent Developments

The major ivory carving centers are Beijing, Guangzhou and Shanghai. Beijing is mainly famed for ivory carvings of figures of ladies, as well as flowers and birds. Guangzhou is well known for its exquisitely carved ivory balls. Shanghai is famous for its deli-



Shanghai ivory carving

cate ivory figures. The ivory carvings are exquisitely executed and lifelike. However, the technique of ivory carving is gradually declining for lack of material and consequently lack of opportunity for young people.

Some of the most

famous were Yang Shihui (founder of the Yang School), Yang Shizhong, Cui Huaxuan, Hu Fengshan, Li Hongyi. In 1933 Yang Shihui and Yang Shizhong opened their school and recruited many apprentices. They had a very high level of production.



Yang Shihui is a famous Beijing ivory carver. Two of his pieces: Poet Li Bai (left) and God of the Luoshui River (right).



In the latter part of the century the Beijing Ivory Carving Factory was one of the most prosperous ivory companies in China with a staff of over 800 people and an annual consumption of 4 tons of ivory.

Another major school in Beijing is the Hang School, founded by the great ivory master Sun Sen, now 70 years old. Sun Sen was born in 1936 in Beijing. When he was 13 he began to study ivory carving under Chen Xiu, a master ivory craftsman. He went on to found the Hang School where he and his wife



Sun Sen, founder of the Hang School in Beijing.

and two sons worked together with many apprentices.

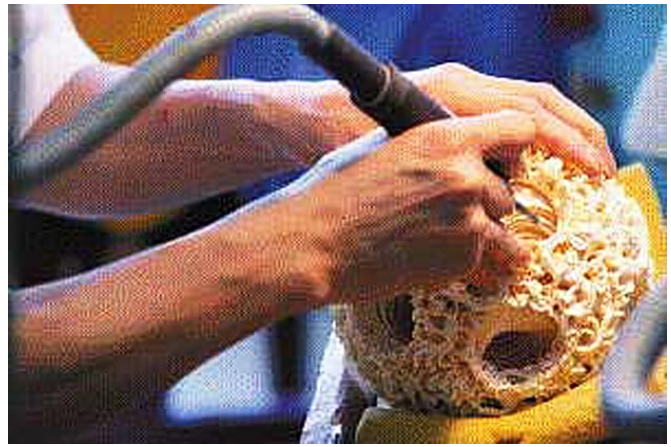
In 1985 the Guangzhou Daxin Ivory Craft Factory was established producing carved ivory products known the world over. Many foreign merchants would arrive in Guang-

zhou to purchase the products for the foreign market. Staff at Daxin numbered over 1000.

In addition to the large companies there were many smaller shops and individual artists all producing their own brand of Chinese ivory carving.

The ivory carving business was thriving in China all through the last century until the late 1980s which were one of the more prosperous periods.

The skills of carving were passed down from generation to generation with many family run carving companies in Beijing, Guangzhou and Shanghai and some other major cities.



Modern ivory carving methods include using a dentist's drill. The ivory ball carving is typical of Guanzhou ivory work

Two factors have resulted in a serious decline of the industry in the last 15 years or so.

The first was the prohibition imposed by the Chinese government, under pressure from the UN, on the import of ivory. This measure was in line with wild-life preservation.



Contemporary ivory carving

The other factor concerns apprenticeship and passing on from generation to generation the skills of carving ivory.

When the ban on ivory imports hit in 1991, the many companies who were making carved ivory products were forced to fall back on existing stocks with no

hope of replenishing them (despite the fact that in 2002 alone over 16 tons of illegal African elephant ivory were intercepted by customs, mainly in Asia). These companies are all reputable and would not get involved in illegal activities, smuggling ivory and so on.

The price of ivory has soared. In the 1980s you could buy a kilogram (2.2 lbs.) of raw ivory for \$200. The price has multiplied many times since then.

Some of them, like the Beijing Ivory Factory—since renamed Kupeng Ivory Carvings LLC—with a history of more than 40 years of high quality ivory carving, turned to using bone and other materials. This also broadened the market as the products were less expensive than the actual ivory carvings. They dropped from 800 staff to only a few dozen craftspeople.

The Guangzhou Daxin Ivory Craft Factory dropped from over a thousand staff to only a few dozen.

These two companies are among the only major ones left. Even if they can find young people to apprentice, the dwindling ivory stocks make it impossible for them to offer any kind of security for the future.

Yang Shihui is down to 12 apprentices. The skill that has been passed down through the generations is facing a serious threat.

Many smaller companies were simply forced into bankruptcy. Some of the larger companies had to cut back. What amounted to thousands of ivory carvers have been reduced to dozens. There was a steady decline for over 10 years.

Beijing master ivory carving artist Li Chun Ke explains that since 1990, their ivory carving factory has only been able to use raw material which was already in stock for production and the output has obviously dropped. The factory has 600-700 kilograms in stock

which is being saved to make only the highest quality goods. In several years these ivory supplies will be used up and if things don't change they will be forced to stop production entirely.

He explains the other problem which is the dwindling supply of skilled craftspeople. "Today's young people are not willing to study the craft of ivory carving because it takes too long to learn and wages are not that high. Many are not willing to face the

fact that it takes eight to ten years to become expert. Those who do learn the trade are the ones who have a strong desire to master the art and who realize that it is a craft which requires a lifetime of endeavor."

On the brighter side, at least for the Chinese ivory carving industry, it does appear that there may be some relaxing of the ban on ivory and there are signs of an upturn in the fortunes of the craft. There are some signs of revival for the ivory carving business.



### Collecting

Prices for genuine Chinese carved ivory products are climbing, as always happens when there is great scarcity.

Collecting these items, if you like them, is also a great investment.

Here's some information on the subject.

Note: As a rule, ivory and ivory articles are forbidden to be taken out of China. In China, taking out

ivory articles or ivory carving is strictly controlled. Permission issued by the relevant governmental department is required.

A quick Google search for Chinese ivory carving gives you mostly pages and pages of ...eBay! Of course that is not the only place to buy Chinese carved ivory. You will need to search your local area. There are several pitfalls. One of them is that there are many laws surrounding sale, import and export of ivory. The others concern the widespread fraud surrounding carved ivory.

All the more reason to know what you are buying.

For the legality of the trade, check this link:

[http://www.hsus.org/web-files/PDF/Ivory\\_Trade\\_Report.pdf#search=%22San%20Francisco%20Chinese%20Ivory%20carving%22](http://www.hsus.org/web-files/PDF/Ivory_Trade_Report.pdf#search=%22San%20Francisco%20Chinese%20Ivory%20carving%22)

## Fakery and Forgery



Genuinely old carved ivory

get higher profits for their work, these people try to discolor the carved objects to make them look old. There are various ways of doing this, none of which

Since the prohibition of ivory imports in the 1990s, there has been a great deal of fakery and forgery in the world of ivory carving in China.

Quite often one finds, in the ivory carving market, that criminals are carving new ivory and selling it as old or antique or even using other materials such as bones or man-made ivory and selling that off as real ivory. In order to

can escape careful scrutiny. But the unwary can be deceived.



Genuinely old ivory

to replicate the slight cracking that occurs sometimes with old ivory is to place it alternately in a furnace and a freezer so that the alternate heating and freezing causes the surface to crack.

4. Another approach is to expose the ivory to smoke which causes it to discolor and resemble antique ivory. Sometimes tar is used which deposits an even layer of color on the new ivory. This is fairly easy to detect because a cloth with organic solvent or soap and warm water will remove the color and bring out the luster of the new ivory.

One way to detect any of these methods of “aging” the ivory is to examine the exterior surface and com-

1. One method is to heat up the ivory in strong tea or soak it in coffee for extended periods, even weeks of months.

2. Another is to soak the ivory in turpentine and then expose it to strong sunlight for three or four days.

3. A method used



The unmistakable look of new ivory



New ivory

pare it to the inner carvings. If the ivory has aged naturally. The outer layer discolors differently from the inner parts where the ivory has been carved. In other words it does not discolor uniformly. However, the false aging affects all parts of the piece the same so the “aging” appears uniform throughout. This is a sign of false aging.

### Telling the Real from the Fake

There are two ways to tell real antique ivory carving from forgeries.

- 1)The material itself
- 2)The craftsmanship of the carving

Here are the main rules to follow:

1. Ivory ages and you can look at it carefully and tell whether it is really old or not, even when someone has tried to make new ivory look antique. The outer layer tends to change color. First it goes yellow, then it goes a deeper yellow until eventually it starts to go brown. Also as it ages the surface changes and can appear to have a shallow grain, almost like short

hair. Small cracks are not uncommon.

2. You can also tell from the carving and the artistic style. In pieces from the beginning of the Qing Dynasty such as the Goddess of Mercy or a Buddha, the line of the clothes is very sharp and clear.

3. There is also a problem with modern carving of genuinely old ivory (material) in an attempt to forge the antique pieces. This is old-material–new-carving. Someone finds some old ivory and tries to make a piece and represent it as Ming or Qing or even earlier.

4. One needs to be aware of signatures and styles. The famous, ancient ivory carvers–the really good ones–were allowed to sign their pieces. Some of the later forgers would also try to duplicate the signature of the old master to forge the piece so that it could achieve a much higher price. So one needs to be vigilant for fakes and have them checked and verified by experts if there is any question. It would

be very hard to really replicate the style and the forge the signature of a real master.

The two points to look at in estimating the age of a piece are the material and the quality and style of the



carving itself.

In the end it is these two factors that are used to tell the real antique from the modern fake.

### Taking Care of Ivory Objects

Ivory is a fine, durable material. However, if not taken care of properly it, with age, starts to develop small cracks on the surface. It also discolors, as discussed above. The enemies



of ivory are excessive dryness and extremes of temperature.

1. The ivory product should be kept in a soft lined box and kept in an environment where the temperature is relatively steady.

2. Ivory artifacts are especially sensitive to changes in humidity. Ideally the humidity should be around 55-60%. The easiest way to accomplish this is just to put a glass or cup of water near the ivory and make sure that the environment is not too draughty.

3. Ivory is easy to clean. If it's just dust or loose dirt, use a soft brush to clean it. However, if it is stained or greasy, then it needs to be washed in a mild soap solution, rinsed and then dried right away to prevent warping or splitting.

### The Future of Chinese Ivory Carving

For a number of reasons, many of them already touched on, the value of genuine Chinese carved ivory is expected to increase. To summarize the reasons for this:

1. In the 1980s China joined with the rest of the world in the effort to protect wild animals particularly endan-

gered ones such as elephants. This led to the ban on imported ivory. This in turn led to many large and medium-sized ivory carving factories closing down. Many families who had been involved in the ivory carving business for generations were forced to look for other jobs. The supply of fine quality carved ivory products has declined considerably.

2. Antique carved ivory artifacts are becoming more and more scarce as they go into collections and are not available on the market. This is particularly true of the high quality pieces from the Ming and Qing Dynasty periods. The prices are inevitably higher and will continue to rise due to the scarcity. Even within China the prices are escalating. The government has imposed a ban on all ivory in and out of the country, including Chinese who go abroad and buy Chinese antique

ivory carvings to "bring home." They are not allowed even to bring antiques back into China.

For all of these reasons, the beautiful ivory carvings are not only fascinating to collect but also a smart move from an investment point of view.



Contemporary ivory carving

