



PHOTOS BY LUCY VIGNE

JAPANESE IVORY TRADE STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE

BY LUCY VIGNE AND ESMOND MARTIN

The Japanese have used ivory for over 1,200 years, importing items from China perhaps as early as the sixth century. Considered a valuable substance, a law in the eighth century demanded that all of high rank carry an ivory emblem as a symbol of authority. The importance of ivory has continued in Japanese culture ever since.

But where is the Japanese ivory market and trade in the environmentally conscious world? We set out to see how it was faring, and found it struggling. In 756 AD after the death of Emperor

Shomu, his wife donated to the Todaiji temple thousands of Japanese works of art that were then stored in the Shosoin Repository in the city of Nara. There they have remained, but in more recent years, some have been brought out to exhibit twice a year at the Nara museum. In November 2009, we were fortunate enough to be in Nara at the time of the exhibition, and we joined the long queue of Japanese, who travel by coach from all over the country to enter the crowded rooms and gaze in awe at many exquisite and carefully preserved items that the

Japanese so admire. Emperor Shomu's blue-stained ivory penknife with a design of delicately incised flowers, birds and butterflies was one of the favourite exhibits; another penknife had a rhino horn sheath with a similar ivory hilt.

Japanese arts and crafts evolved over the centuries to incorporate influences mostly from China and Korea. During periods of contact, there was rapid assimilation and during times of isolation, native ideas grew with a cultivated sense of beauty and a quiet restraint. Incorporating great technical skill, ivory objects used in daily life were crafted with grace and elegance as works of art. The Japanese are proud of their history and their culture and continue to uphold their artistic traditions in ivory.

Western culture and influence have been growing in the last few decades – as seen in the city centres of Tokyo and Osaka where Western fashion dominates. But in the quieter parts of town, or out in the suburbs, ivory craftsmen continue their work, providing a variety of items

**Top Left:**

A customer looks at a variety of ivory items for sale in a souvenir shop in Tokyo.

Top:

These Japanese figurines in an Osaka shop were carved before 1990, but still have not been sold due to a decline in demand for ivory items in Japan.

Below:

Large plectrums called *bachi* are used to play the Japanese musical instrument, the *shamisen*. Tusks of 20 kg and above are required to make them.



for sale to the Japanese in department stores, gift shops, ivory specialty shops and outlets for hanko or, more formally, inkan. These are signature seals with which the Japanese stamp their names on documents and receipts. All adult Japanese own at least one, if not several, of these, for different purposes. Made usually of boxwood, plastic, rubber, various stones, domestic water buffalo horn and ivory, 80% of Africa's tusks being imported into Japan today are used to make hanko, which are so engrained in Japanese culture.

After the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) banned the commercial import and export of ivory (except antiques and hunting trophies) amongst all member states in 1990, only Japan has been allowed twice by CITES signatories to buy ivory from certain African countries. This is because they were satisfied that certain southern African countries met the criteria needed for controlled trade, and that Japan had improved its legislation assessing the records of registered ivory manufacturers and traders, along with developing new reporting forms

and databases, and using an identifying sticker to be displayed with the ivory items by all registered vendors.

At southern Africa's CITES-permitted one-off ivory auctions in 1999 and 2008, Japanese traders bought 5,446 tusks weighing nearly 50 tonnes the first time and 3,700 tusks weighing nearly 40 tonnes in 2008. The Japanese like the best quality tusks. In 2009 the main traders in Tokyo were selling a little of their southern African ivory to colleagues in Japan for the equivalent of \$333 a kg for an average 10 kg tusk. This 2009 price in yen was the same as eight years earlier, but was up by 38% in dollar terms due to the depreciation of the dollar. The traders will not pay more for ivory due to the Japanese recession.

The Japanese refer to ivory from the savanna elephants of southern Africa as soft ivory, compared to hard ivory from the forest elephants of central Africa. Soft ivory is creamier in colour and easier to carve. In 2009, the ratio of soft ivory versus hard used to make items was 90% for hanko, 50% for netsukes (the traditional kimono toggle carved with great skill, now ornamental, and popular



Top: Three pairs of ivory chopsticks can be seen on the top shelf in this Tokyo department store where an artisan engraves chopsticks with people's names.

Below: These large and elaborate ivory chrysanthemums were carved 40 years ago and were offered for sale in Tokyo for 10 million yen or \$110,000.

Bottom Right: This sailing boat made in Japan was selling for 4,500,000 yen or \$50,000.

with collectors), and 90% for jewellery and small accessories that are crafted from left-over ivory pieces. There are old stocks of hard ivory in Japan that are used to make small parts for traditional musical instruments and chopsticks that cannot be made well with soft ivory because it can bend. Of all the ivory crafted in Japan in 2009, traders told us that 80% was used for hanko, 12% for traditional musical instrument parts, 4% for netsukes and figurines, 2% for jewellery and 2% for other items.

There are two ivory associations in Tokyo and Osaka set up by and for ivory traders and manufacturers and two others for carvers and sculptors. They work together to the betterment of their profession, their reputation and Japan's ivory industry. According to the ivory associations' figures, there has been

a downward trend in the production of ivory items this decade. According to vendors, sales have also declined. Compared with data that Esmond Martin collected in 2002, we found some ivory specialty shops have closed down or have diversified into jewellery made of coral and semi-precious stones, while department stores now display fewer ivory items and less variety.

Unlike in 2002, no department store in Osaka was seen displaying for sale ivory bachi (plectrums that are used to play the traditional stringed musical instrument called the *shamisen*), *shamisen* bridges, human figurines, picks for the traditional musical instrument called koto, nor purse latches. In Tokyo no department store had ivory ear picks, good luck charms, human figurines, paint brushes or string tie clasps, as seen



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eight years earlier. Ivory trinkets are less commonly made, unless on request, due to the high cost of labour in Japan.

Of 13 department stores that we visited in 2009, the number of ivory hanko on display had fallen to 207 compared with 269 eight years earlier in the same stores. As well as the display items there are more hanko kept in drawers. Vendors say they have been hounded by animal welfare groups to stop selling ivory, but the hanko industry is very important to the Japanese. Still seen in some department stores are ivory chopsticks (usually just two or three pairs on display) and traditional tea

ceremony ivory lids with the much sought after tea containers, as well as long teaspoons often of ivory or part-ivory used in the tea ceremony. Like hanko, these are important in Japanese culture.

We were invited in one department store to join a tea ceremony. It demonstrated to us the strong ties the Japanese have with their past that they wish to maintain – it was a unique experience of calm discipline, away from the hurried modern world, as we sat cross-legged in a circle on mats in a small enclosed room, watching the tea being made with the greatest care, then slowly sipping the tea while listening to the

polite praise given by fellow guests to our hostess about her valuable implements.

But those who work with ivory in Japan lament growing threats to their livelihoods and their art. Their main concerns are: the uncertain legal supply of ivory from Africa – they would like to buy 50 tonnes every five years to be viable; Japan's depressed economy, which has steadily reduced demand for luxury items; Western fashion trends that especially affect the younger generation; strict trade regulations involving time-consuming and complicated paperwork; and the export ban (that stops foreign visitors from being allowed to take home recently-made netsukes and figurines). For these reasons, some Japanese ivory traders and carvers are giving up. This is in contrast to China, where the economy and demand for ivory is greatly expanding. ●

ESMOND MARTIN is a geographer who specialises in studying the illegal trade in wildlife products, especially rhino horn and elephant ivory. He began this research in the mid-1960s, examining the smuggling of ivory, mangrove poles, liquor, and people in the Indian Ocean using traditional dhows for transport. He first studied the Japanese ivory trade in 1980. In 1985 WWF published his book, "*The Japanese Ivory Industry*" in English and Japanese. Since then he has visited Japan several times, monitoring the decline in this industry.

LUCY VIGNE was born in Cape Town and brought up in London. She has a degree in Zoology from Oxford University. She has lived in Kenya all her adult life, working as the first Executive Officer for IUCN's African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group in the 1980s when elephant and rhino poaching were rife. She has also been researching the ivory trade in Asia and investigating ivory demand world-wide, including in Japan.

