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About the Society

The Society for Asian Art is an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that was incorporated in 1958. The Society was founded by a group of enlightened citizens dedicated to winning Avery Brundage's magnificent art collection for San Francisco. Since that time, we have been an independent nonprofit organization that provides programs on Asian art and culture and supports the Asian Art Museum.

For over sixty years, we have offered a wide range of innovative, high-quality educational and cultural programs, along with social and culinary events where participants share their knowledge and enthusiasm. SAA's popular Arts of Asia Lecture Series, open to all, has been the core of the museum's docent-training curriculum. We sponsor international and domestic travel, visits to private art dealers and collections, in-depth study groups, special lectures by leading scholars, literature courses and symposia. Much of our programming supports specific exhibitions. During restrictions imposed by COVID-19, the SAA's programs have continued through online streaming.

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To Wake a Sleeping Giant:

The Amazing Tale of Kumbhakarna

by Robert Goldman and Sally Sutherland Goldman

Legend, at least, has it that the Japanese admiral Isaroku Yamamoto, the architect of the attack on Pearl Harbor, either said or, alternately, wrote, in his diary after the event “I fear all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve.” If indeed Admiral Yamamoto, no doubt a student of military history, ever actually wrote or uttered these words, he might well have been channeling a quotation similarly questionably ascribed to Napoleon, “China is a sickly, sleeping giant. But when she awakes the world will tremble.”

It is, however, not very likely that these two military geniuses, in using the metaphor of a “sleeping giant” would have been aware that the idea it conveys can be traced back some 2,500 years to a literal as well as literary example of just such an event, recorded in an extraordinary, hyperbolic, and, finally rather broadly comical episode in the ancient Sanskrit epic the *Ramayana* of the legendary Indian sage-poet Valmiki. This episode, found in the poem’s *Yuddhakanda*, or Book of War, the sixth of the seven large Books of the monumental work, constitutes what we are calling, “The Amazing Tale of Kumbhakarna.”

In order to understand the episode and the characters it involves, a little background will perhaps be necessary. As aficionados of Asian arts and cultures, Readers of *Lotus Leaves* will, we expect, be at least basically familiar with the story of the *Ramayana*, one of the most popular, widely spread, and influential works of Asian literature



Figure 1-1 (and cover detail) The demon Kumbhakarna, perhaps 1920–1945. Indonesia; Java. Hide with pigments and gilding, wood, horn. Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, Gift of Marsha Vargas Handley, F2009.20.1. Photograph © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.



and one told in many languages throughout the many nations of South and Southeast Asia. Simply stated it is a grand quest narrative about a virtuous and valorous prince, Rama, widely revered by Hindus as an *avatara*, or incarnation, of the Supreme Lord Vishnu. Vishnu is born on earth to save it by removing, that is to say destroying, the monstrous Ravana, “the thorn in the side of the world” (*lokakantaka*). Ravana is the ten-headed king of the *rakshasas*, a race of supernaturally powerful demons who troubled the imagination of ancient Indians from as far back as the holy Vedas. In brief then, the tale is—on one very fundamental level—a parable of the eternal struggle between Good (*dharma*), as represented by Rama, and Evil (*adharma*) in the person of Ravana and his fearsome allies. The conflict reaches its climax in the poem’s long sixth Book, which describes at great length and in enormous detail Rama’s crossing the ocean with a vast army of monkeys, his siege of Ravana’s island fortress of Lanka, the numerous battles between the opposing forces, the tremendous final duel between the hero and the antihero, and, at last, Rama’s recovery of his wife, Sita, whose abduction and imprisonment at the hands of Ravana provides the immediate *casus belli* for the cosmic conflict of Good and Evil. The final struggle is so intense that, as the text—a treasure store of magnificent similes—says, it is comparable only to itself:

The sky is comparable only to the ocean,
the ocean only to the sky. The battle between
Rama and Ravana is comparable only to the
battle between Rama and Ravana itself.

But Ravana is not the only villain of the piece; he is surrounded by a cohort, a cabinet if you will, of relatives and ministers, who, with few exceptions, form a chorus of what we would today call “enablers.” Among these is his grandly drawn, monstrous, and gargantuan younger brother, a figure well known to the visual and performance arts of South and Southeast Asia, but little known in the West other than to students of Asian cultures and members of the South and Southeast Asian diaspora. This is Kumbhakarna the giant of our title and the delightfully horrible figure to whom we would like to introduce those of you who have

not previously had the pleasure. (See [Figure 1-1](#) and cover.) Like many of his *rakshasa* kinfolk, Kumbhakarna, literally, “Pot-ears,” has a name that reflects his extraordinary physiognomy. We see this in the names of such characters as his brother, Ravana, whose actual birth-name is Dashagriva, “Ten necks,” another brother, Trishiras, “Three-heads,” his sister Shurpanakha, “Winnowing fan-like nails,” and his brother-in-law, Vidyujihva, “Lightning-tongue.”

To introduce you to this delightful character it will be necessary to go back a little into *rakshasa* family history replete with its fateful Oedipal and gender related implications. We must start with one of the *rakshasa* patriarchs, a figure named Sumalin, who had a beautiful daughter named Kaikasi, who, although endowed with every virtue like the goddess of fortune Shri herself, had no suitor for her hand. Her father, fearing the scandal of having an unmarried daughter, sends her off to the pious and powerful vedic seer Vishhravas, grandson of the god Brahma himself, to ask him to accept her as his wife, promising her that she shall have by him sons equal in blazing energy to the sun. Dutifully, she approaches the sage while he is engaged in the awesome ritual of the *agnihotra* fire sacrifice.

Vishhravas, angered that the girl had approached him with such a request at such a critical moment, agrees to the marriage but addresses her as follows:

However, since you approached me at a
fearsome hour, now learn what kind of sons
you will bear. Fair-hipped woman, you shall
give birth to rakshasas of cruel deeds. They
shall be fearsome, ghastly in appearance,
and devoted to their fearsome kin.

Horrified by these words, amounting to a prenatal curse, Kaikasi protests that such sons would not be worthy of a descendant of the Creator. The sage partially relents announcing that her youngest son alone will be righteous and worthy of his noble lineage. True to his infallible prediction, Kaikasi in time gives birth to four children, the ghastly and terrifying ten-headed Ravana, the gargantuan and



voracious Kumbhakarna, a grotesque daughter, Shurpanakha, who will much later play a critical role in the epic drama, and, last, as promised, a pious and wholly righteous son, Vibhisana. The latter will ultimately abandon his evil brother and become an ally and exemplary devotee of Lord Rama.

Desirous of gaining great powers, Ravana and his two brothers retire to the holy site of Gokarna where they perform severe acts of asceticism for thousands of years. According to the familiar Indian trope, a divinity, in this case Lord Brahmā himself, is ultimately moved to reward their piety by granting them the boons they seek.

Ravana, famously, asks for the ultimate boon of absolute invulnerability and immortality; but this, as often in such tales, is refused. So Ravana scales back his demands a bit and asks to be invulnerable to all supernatural beings, omitting to mention such lowly creatures as humans and animals. It is this that compels Lord Vishnu to take on birth as a human being and ultimately ally himself with monkeys.

The virtuous Vibhishana, predictably, asks only that he be blessed to be always and entirely righteous. The wish is granted and, in addition, Brahmā confers upon him the gift of immortality that was denied his evil brother.

And now we come to the gigantic Kumbhakarna. But when we say “gigantic,” the term hardly does the monster justice. Although the *rakshasa* is of huge stature, the poet, in keeping with the over the top hyperbole he lavishes on this fantastic creature, observes later in the Book, when he finally goes forth to battle, that Kumbhakarna expands his already vast frame to unimaginable size. He deploys his magical powers to grow to the measure of three thousand six hundred feet in height and six hundred in width!

But, earlier on, just as the Creator is about to reward him for his penances, the gods intervene, denouncing him as a voracious cannibal who has devoured men, seers, and celestial nymphs,

terrorizing the three worlds. They beg Brahma to trick the monster so as to neutralize his menace, lest he literally devour the whole world. Brahma accordingly summons Sarasvati, the goddess of speech, and instructs her to enter Kumbhakarna’s mouth and, seizing control of his vocal apparatus, compel the befuddled *rakshasa* to ask only to sleep for many, many years. The story is a popular one as we see from the fact that it is narrated three times in different sections of the epic with each retelling giving a different calculation as to how long the giant will sleep, ranging from “many years,” through “thousands of years” to a version in which he alternates between sleeping and waking semiannually. The episode is also popular with *Ramayana* poets and performers throughout southern Asia.

In accordance with the immense *rakshasa*’s unintentionally self-inflicted curse (sometimes cast as a boon), his brother Ravana builds him a vast and sumptuous bedchamber where he falls into a profound, narcoleptic slumber. It is after this that the fantastic tale of Kumbhakarna reaches its grotesque and Rabelaisian climax.

After Rama—supported by his ever faithful brother Lakshmana and their simian allies, and aided by the virtuous defector *rakshasa* Vibhishana—has laid siege to the walled citadel of Lanka, there follows a lengthy series of fierce sorties on the part of Ravana and his forces during the course of which almost all of the demon king’s most powerful generals are slain in battle. Seeing that the war is going badly for him, the *rakshasa* king decides that he must deploy his most fearsome weapon. He commands his soldiers:

Kumbhakarna, who is overwhelmed by sleep, must be awakened! That *rakshasa* sleeps for six, seven, eight, even nine months at a time, waking only for a single day between his periods of slumber. Nonetheless, you must awaken mighty Kumbhakarna immediately.

So the question then arises. How does one awaken this sleeping giant? As no mere summary can do justice to the extraordinary scene, we will



let the poet's own words, in our translation, paint the grand picture. (See [Figure 1-2](#).) Here's how the poet describes the process:

Entering his vast bedchamber, which extended for a league on every side, the mighty *rakshasa* warriors were driven back by the force of his heavy breathing. They stared at the immensely powerful Kumbhakarna, that tiger among *rakshasas*, sons of chaos, as he lay there, his body hairs bristling, hissing like a great serpent, and terrifying them with his stertorous breathing. With his fearsome nostrils and his huge mouth as wide as the Hell called Patala, he was fearsome to behold. Then those mighty *rakshasas* placed before Kumbhakarna a supremely gratifying heap of meats as huge as Mount Meru. Those tigers among *rakshasas*, sons of chaos, set down massive quantities of deer, buffalo, and boar—an astonishing heap of food. Then those foes of the thirty gods placed before Kumbhakarna pots of blood and strong drink of various kinds. And they smeared that scorcher of his foes with costly sandalwood paste and covered him with heavenly garlands and fragrant perfumes. They released fragrant incense and sang the praises of that scorcher of his foes, roaring loudly in their thousands, like storm clouds. They sounded conches, whose luster was like that of the hare-marked moon, and they roared tumultuously all together in their impatience.

Those night-roaming *rakshasas* bellowed, clapped their upper arms, and shook him. Thus they made a huge commotion in order to awaken Kumbhakarna. Upon hearing that din—the sound of conches and drums, along with the clapping of the upper arms, the shouting and the lionlike roars—the birds, who were flying in all directions and soaring into the heavens, suddenly came crashing down to the ground. When the huge, sleeping Kumbhakarna was still not awakened by those cacophonous sounds, all the *rakshasa* troops took up bludgeons, cudgels, and maces. Then, with mountain peaks, cudgels, maces, trees, war hammers, and their palms and

fists, those huge *rakshasas* began to belabor Kumbhakarna as he slept there comfortably on the ground. However, because of the wind caused by the *rakshasa* Kumbhakarna's stertorous breathing, the *rakshasas*, although powerful, were unable to remain standing before him. Then those *rakshasas* of fearsome valor, ten thousand strong, all together loudly sounded their *mridanga*, *panava*, and *bheri* drums, along with many conches and jugs, right in front of him. Roaring and beating him, they tried to rouse him as he lay there, like a mass of collyrium. But he was oblivious to it all. When they were still unable to wake him, they resorted to more drastic and more violent efforts. With staves, whips, and goads, they drove horses, camels, donkeys, and elephants over him, and they sounded conches and *bheri* and *mrdanga* drums with all their might. They struck his limbs with great bundles of sticks, war hammers and cudgels, wielded with all their might. That tremendous din filled all of Lanka together with its surrounding woods and mountains. But still he did not awaken. Next, they incessantly and simultaneously beat a thousand *bheri* drums with drumsticks of refined gold, all around him. But when in that profound slumber brought about by the power of the curse he still did not awaken, the night-roaming *rakshasas* became furious. All those *rakshasas* of fearsome valor were in a towering rage. Some of them, in their effort to awaken the *rakshasa*, actually assaulted him. Some beat *bheri* drums, while others raised a tremendous racket. Some of them tore out his hair, while others bit his ears. Nonetheless, Kumbhakarna, plunged in his profound slumber, did not stir. Other powerful *rakshasas*, armed with mallets and war hammers, brought them down on his head, chest, and limbs. Even though that huge *rakshasa* was hammered all over with “hundred-slayer “weapons” tied to ropes and straps, he still did not awaken. But, finally, when they made a thousand elephants trample across his body, Kumbhakarna, aware of a slight sensation, at last awoke.



Figure 1-2 The Awakening of Kumbhakarna in the Golden City of Lanka, circa 1605, folio from a Ramayana, Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art via Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 1-3 Battle between Hanuman and Kumbhakarna, from the Ramayana, from Kangra in Punjab Hills, Mughal era, circa 1810-1820, Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art.

After an a correspondingly hyperbolic and massively hearty breakfast, Kumbhakarna reports to Ravana. When he learns from him about the abduction of Sita and the siege of Lanka, all of which transpired while he was sleeping, this paragon of unbridled violence and lawlessness, surprisingly, remonstrates with Ravana for his recklessness in abducting the princess and lectures him on the rules and practices of proper kingship and governance. But, as a dutiful younger brother, he obeys and sets forth to battle, wreaking murderous havoc among Rama's monkey troops—crushing and devouring them and—in his mad rage—even his own allies by the thousand until, in a scene reminiscent of Monty Python's portrayal of King Arthur's comic battle with the Black Knight, Rama cuts off his limbs, one by one until, finally, decapitating him with the arrow of the king of the gods, Indra. See [Figure 1-3](#) and [Figure 1-4](#).)

But even as the poet narrates the death of Kumbhakarna, he cannot relinquish the pleasure of his over the top portrait of this amazing figure. Here is how he describes the monster's fall:

With Indra's arrow, Rama severed the *rakshasa* lord's head—huge as a mountain peak, its fangs bared, its gorgeous earrings swinging wildly—just as, long ago, the god Indra himself, smasher of citadels, severed the head of the demon Vrtra. Struck off by Rama's arrow, the *rakshasa's* head, which

resembled a mountain, fell. It smashed the gates of the buildings on the main thoroughfares and knocked down the lofty rampart. Finally, the enormous *rakshasa*, who looked like a mountain in the Himalayas, fell into the sea, the abode of waters. There, he crushed crocodiles, shoals of huge fish, and serpents before entering the earth.

And such was the end of one of India's and world literature's most extraordinary creations, yet one of which most western readers—although fully familiar with such comparatively puny figures as Rabelais' Gargantua, Homer's Polyphemus, and, of course, the folkloric nemesis of the bean-stalk-climbing Jack, would be utterly unfamiliar. This, of course, is a product of our still rather Euro-centric educational system in which some of the most widely read texts of literary history that affect the lives, arts, politics, religions and cultures of billions of people worldwide are ignored or backgrounded to a narrow set of "western" works—the so-called "western canon"—many of which—like the Greek and Latin epics—are products of extinct civilizations.

In any case, we hope that our little portrait of the great and terrible Kumbhakarna will prove both interesting and informative to you lovers of Asian art and culture. If he were alive today, We are sure that even Admiral Yamamoto would be impressed.

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Figure 1-4 Demon Kumbhakarna is Defeated by Rama and Lakshmana, circa 1670, folio from a Ramayana from Malwa, Madhya Pradesh, Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Roman Catholic Ivories from Asia

by Robert J. Del Bontà

Roman Catholic art from Asia and more specifically Portuguese India has received very little scholarly attention. Considered provincial by many, these works have largely been ignored. Few articles have been published, although a few exhibitions have been held, mostly at museums dedicated to the arts of the Iberian colonial empires. The scholarship that does exist largely focuses on ivories, such as a catalogue published by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon, Portugal,¹ and an exhibition held at the Museu de Arte Sacra de São Paulo, Brazil.² Other exhibitions have included some related material, as may be seen at those held at the Art Gallery of South Australia in Adelaide in 2015, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2013.³ A recent exhibition at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS, formerly the Prince of Wales Museum) in Mumbai displayed Indo-Portuguese material from their collection for the first time.⁴ The Museum of Christian Art at Velha Goa (Old Goa) holds a great deal of material, but does not have an on-line presence.⁵

Recently we mounted an exhibition from the Dr. Siddharth K. Bhansali Collection entitled *Arte Sacra: Roman Catholic Art from Portuguese India* consisting of sculptures of various iconographies and sizes and materials at the New Orleans Museum of Art.⁶ Besides impressive wooden sculpture the true glories of the exhibition are the small ivories made mostly for export to Europe — Portugal, Spain, and Italy as well as to Latin America — and for the domestic market.

These were most likely used for home worship, a practice that continues today amongst the faithful in Catholic countries. Examples of these exquisite carvings are in many museums and private collections. The ivories from India are usually called Indo-Portuguese. A distinct group from Sri Lanka is called Cingalo-Portuguese and a few from the Philippines are called Hispano-Philippine. Comparisons between these groups display quite distinct aesthetics with the artists from the three regions drawing on quite different traditions. This article focuses on Indian ivories from the Bhansali Collection, along with several from other collections and from other centers in Asia.

A Brief History of Christianity in India

The group referred to first as Syrian Christians and later as Saint Thomas Christians has a long history on the sub-continent. According to tradition, Saint Thomas the Apostle traveled to the sub-continent and spread the new faith there during the first century of the Common Era. Although no textual or archaeological evidence survives of the Apostle's journey, it is believed that Thomas arrived in Cranganore (Kodungallur) in Kerala in 52 AD and was martyred in 72 AD. Today, there are still Saint Thomas Christian communities along the west coast of India (the Malabar Coast); their churches tend to have no statues, since early

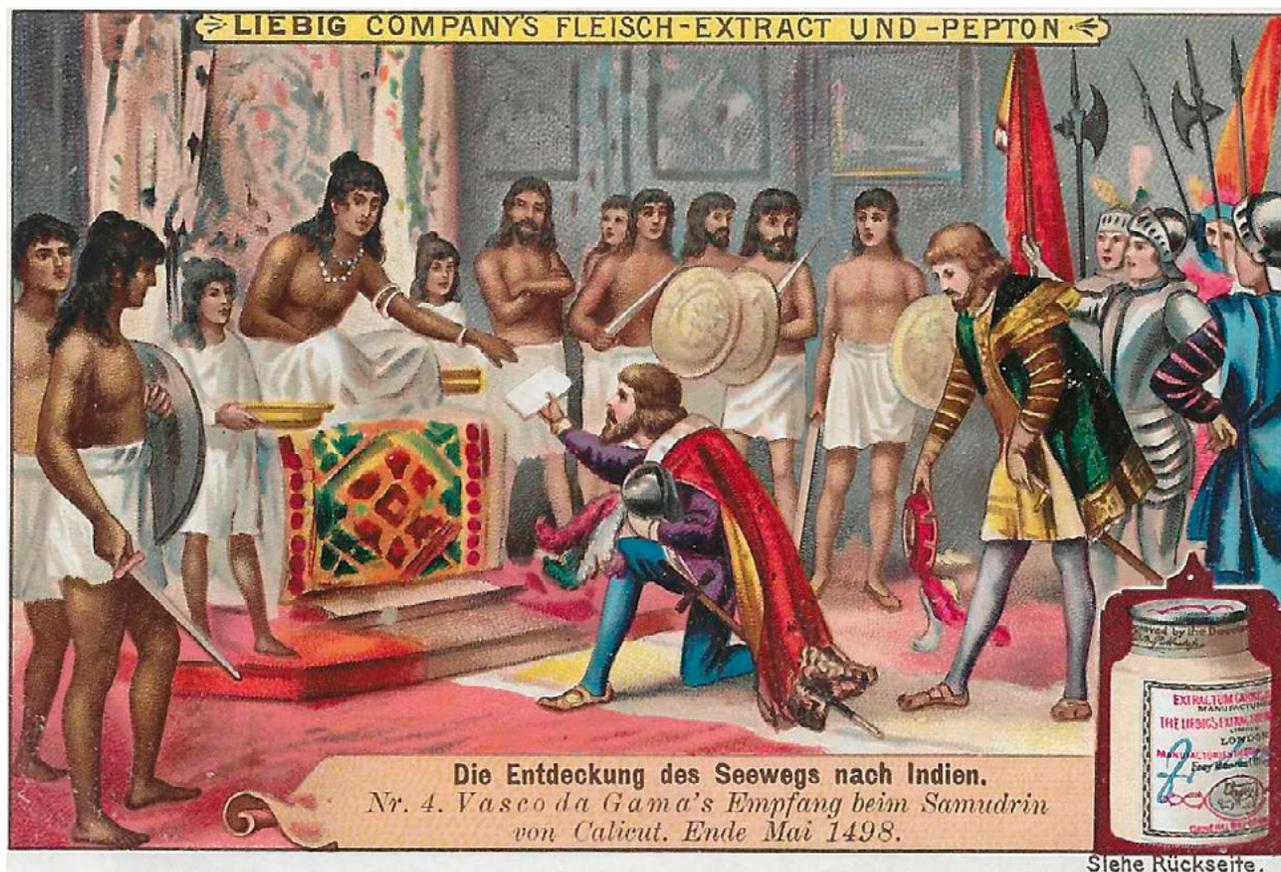


Figure 2-1 Vasco da Gama meets the Zamorin, Liebig trade card, 1897. Private collection, San Francisco.

Christians adhered to the aniconic traditions of Judaism. The arrival of European missionaries in the 16th century and the establishment of Goa as the administrative and religious center for the Portuguese colonial empire, brought a different kind of Christianity, one informed by the Counter-Reformation. Once the Roman Catholic missionaries arrived, images of the Saint Thomas the Apostle became quite popular, as the newly arrived Europeans sought to establish links to Christianity's early history in India.

Vasco da Gama and the Portuguese

The Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama (1460-1524) arrived by ship to Calicut (Kozhikode) in Kerala in 1498 and changed the course of Indian history. Da Gama's stated goal was to discover Christians and spices. At the time, Muslim traders

controlled much of the spice trade. Da Gama's fleet left Lisbon and rounded the tip of Africa hugging that continent's east coast, until they reached Malindi in what is now Kenya. After obtaining a pilot, likely a Hindu merchant, from the sultan of that city, he arrived in Kerala on the Malabar Coast ten months after leaving Portugal. Many paintings and engravings have been made of da Gama's meeting with the Zamorin (the ruler) of Calicut ([Figure 2-1](#)).

Based on stories that had circulated in Europe, including the Venetian Marco Polo's report of St. Thomas' tomb on the eastern Coromandel Coast, da Gama expected to find Christian communities in India. During da Gama's visit in Kerala he was shown a Hindu temple that he believed to be a Christian church and evidence of a Christian population.⁷ Later Portuguese missionaries discovered his error, and Mylapore near Chennai (formerly Madras) was identified



Figure 2-2 Map of Goa, Jan Huygen von Linschoten, *Itinerario. Voyage ofte schipvaert...*, Amsterdam: Cornelia Claesz, 1596. Private collection, San Francisco.

as the site of Thomas’ burial; Portuguese missionaries first built a church there in 1547.

Shortly after da Gama’s voyage, Francisco de Almeida (1450–1510) was appointed the first Portuguese viceroy of the State of India (*Estado da India*) and he created a series of fortresses along the entire edge of the Indian Ocean making it easier to establish significant trade. The major outcome was the end of Arabian dominance in bringing spices to Europe. The extension of Portuguese holdings in the East eventually led to the establishment of commercial ports farther east such as Macau (Macao, established in 1557) situated at the eastern side of the entrance to the Pearl River opposite Hong Kong (only ceded to the British in 1842) on its western side.

Even more important for the history of the Portuguese colonial empire was Afonso (also

called Alfonso) de Albuquerque (1453–1515). He made his first expedition to Kerala in 1503 where he helped establish the king of Cochin (Kochi) securely on his throne; the king in turn let Albuquerque build a fort there. After a number of voyages and exploits in the Indian Ocean he replaced Almeida as Governor of the Portuguese holdings in India. In 1510 he tried to take Calicut but quickly turned his attention to Goa, where the fleet of the Egyptian Mamluk Sultanate had taken refuge after a defeat at the hands of the Portuguese at Diu situated at the bottom of the Bay of Khambhat (formerly Cambay), about 500 miles by sea up the coast from Goa and perhaps 1000 miles north of Cochin.

The city which became Goa was then ruled by the Muslim Bijapur Sultanate and had been a port for earlier Hindu dynasties. Albuquerque established the city as a permanent base for

sheltering troops, merchants, and missionaries. By the end of the century, Goa ([Figure 2-2](#)) became the main seat of the Catholic Church directing activities that stretched Eastward as far as Japan, and the Portuguese ruled their eastern colonial empire from Goa up until the modern period. The city itself was not a healthy environment and after being ravaged by malaria and cholera the capital was first moved to Mormugão (now Marmagao) and then in 1759 to Panaji, formerly Panjim, closer to the coast. Between 1695 and 1775 the population of the old city of Goa dwindled from 20,000 to 1,600; essentially only priests, monks and nuns remained. The old city, now known as Velha Goa (Old Goa), consists almost solely of religious buildings. Goa did not become part of modern India, which was created in 1947, until India invaded the territory in 1961. Along with the Portuguese dominions of Daman and Diu up the coast it formed a Union Territory, but separately became India's 25th state in 1987.

Missionary Expansion

During the sixteenth century, virtually all the Roman Catholic religious orders who evangelized Asia established their headquarters in Velha Goa. Arriving in 1542 the Portuguese Saint Francis Xavier (1506–52), called the “Apostle of the Indies,” was by far the most important figure in the missionary work in Asia. A founding member of a new order, the Society of Jesus (also called Jesuits), Francis and other Jesuits quickly moved to spread Christianity throughout Asia via the Portuguese holdings and trade networks that stretched from Africa eastwards. Francis made Velha Goa his permanent base, and later the Jesuits also established themselves in Tamilnadu, farther south, at Madurai. Leaving the growing Jesuit community, Francis traveled eastwards to spread the faith. He was the first Christian missionary to visit Japan. While intending to evangelize in China, Saint Francis Xavier died of fever off its coast in 1552. Shortly thereafter his body was taken back to Goa. He was beatified and canonized quite quickly, becoming a saint in



Figure 2-3 Saint Francis Xavier, wood, Goa, 17th century. Dr. Siddharth K. Bhansali Collection, New Orleans.



Figure 2-4 Head of Saint Francis Xavier, ivory, the Philippines, Manila?, ca. 1630. British Museum, London, 2017,8027.1.

1622. His body rests and is displayed in the grand Basilica of Bom Jesus in Velha Goa. It is clear that the populace did not wait to venerate the dead missionary until his sainthood as images of him date from long before his canonization. One finds many statues of the saint throughout Portuguese India.

A wooden sculpture in the Bhansali collection depicts Saint Francis as a commanding figure (Figure 2-3).⁸ Dressed in liturgical garments he stands in a pose of great authority as he points to a Tamil translation of a verse from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 16, verse 26 (also Mark 8:36):

What does it profit a man who acquires the whole world, but loses his soul? What price would he pay to redeem his soul?

His chasuble is elaborately decorated and the artist has taken great care to delineate maniple ends hanging against the alb above his feet.

The British Museum has a striking head identified as Xavier. He appears almost Christ-like, but with a priest's tonsure (Figure 2-4). The rendering of the face and beard illustrates the masterful qualities displayed by many of these ivories.

The various orders who established missions in India had their own saints to revere. A simple ivory of the Italian Saint Francis of Assisi (1181 or 1182-1226, canonized 1228) is in the Bhansali collection (Figure 2-5). The Franciscans were the first order to arrive at Velha Goa, in 1517, and Saint Francis is typically shown wearing monk's robes. In this small ivory, he wears a rope as a cincture around his waist of his hooded habit displaying a large rosary and holds a book from which to preach to the faithful.

Alongside the Jesuits and Franciscans, the Dominicans and Augustinians established bases in Velha Goa, and all built elaborate churches, monasteries and convents vying to outdo each other. Initially some of the missionaries were artists and they also brought statues and paintings with them from Europe. But as few European artists wished to make the arduous journey to India, Indian craftsmen began creating art for their new patrons in acceptably European styles. It is clear that they first based their work on imported models. Quick learners, these unnamed Indian artists were soon able to rival the realism of the Baroque Iberian style of Spain and Portugal. Talented Indian artists also began to create works for the European market. This was especially true of small-scale works made for domestic worship, often made of valued ivory.

It is curious that most of the ivory carved in India actually came from the Portuguese colonies

in Africa. African ivory was much preferred by the Indian craftsmen since it was less brittle and could be carved with more detail.⁹ Thousands of tusks were imported annually by the end of the sixteenth century.¹⁰ The trade with Europe included decorative objects and furniture as well as religious statues. Small caskets were often either made entirely of ivory or included ivory decoration.¹¹

Christian iconography

Where the older Christian denominations in India avoided icons, the Portuguese found in the primarily Hindu populace fertile ground for introducing elaborate Roman Catholic iconography. The new converts were used to images of their gods in domestic shrines, so the new Catholic icons easily took their place in the homes of converted Indians. Sculpted images were created and were in many cases dressed elaborately, a practice known in the Hindu tradition as well as in the Iberian Catholic environment.

The Portuguese Franciscan Saint Anthony of Padua (1195–1231) is usually depicted holding the Christ Child along with a book (Figure 2-6). The book represents the book of psalms that he used when preaching. Tradition tells us that it was taken by a student and later returned to Anthony so he is considered the patron saint of lost items. Here Christ sits on the book and raises his hand in benediction. The saint's right hand, carved from a separate piece of ivory, is now missing.

Another popular saint is Saint Sebastian, here depicted at his martyrdom wearing a loin cloth, his body pierced with arrows (Figure 2-7). Originally part of a triptych, it probably would have flanked an image of the Virgin. Asian triptych shrines made for the European market were quite common and an example in the Victoria & Albert Museum represents the Assumption of the Virgin with God the Father welcoming her from above (Figure 2-8). The side wings depict Saints John the Baptist above Francis of Assisi to the left and Saints



Figure 2-5 Saint Francis of Assisi, ivory with some paint, Goa, 17th century. Dr. Siddharth K. Bhansali Collection, New Orleans.



Figure 2-6 Saint Anthony of Padua, ivory, Goa, 17th-18th century. Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2019.10.7. Gift of Shelly Errington from the collection of her brother, Trois E. Johnson, M.D., and given in his memory.

John the Evangelist and Anthony of Padua to the right.¹² Its place of origin is debated, but the museum notes that the top outline of the three panels displays significant Chinese influence.

Images of Mary Magdalene were also popular and one among the large collection in Minneapolis depicts her in a stiff upright manner similar to some of those of the Virgin to be discussed below (Figure 2-9). She is dressed in European fashion, but the handling of the cloak gives the impression of a sari as well, very commonly seen in ivories of female saints from India. The base with the acanthus leaves and the decoration of the hem of the cloak with dots in little circles are both earmarks of the work of Goanese carvers. Mary Magdalene is also represented in carvings of Christ as the Good Shepherd (Figure 2-20).

The Holy Family

The largest group of ivories produced throughout Asia represent the Holy Family: Christ, the Virgin Mary, and Saint Joseph. The Virgin was particularly popular. Mary either stands alone or holds the Christ Child. Playing into the idea of India being fertile ground for the introduction of the Church's expansive iconography, one must recall that imagery that we put under the umbrella of "Hinduism" includes many goddesses. Hindu goddesses are of a variety of types: some are nurturing, but others have to be propitiated so that they don't bring disease and other calamities. The concept of the nurturing Mother Goddess is very ancient in India. Mother Goddess worship also is found in Buddhism with common images of Hariti and in Jainism with the popularity of Ambika. When the Virgin Mary holds the Christ Child she can clearly be associated with traditional worship of Mother Goddesses. Popular depictions of a child in the arms of its mother appear from early times in India.¹³

An exquisitely carved ivory Virgin holding the Christ Child is one of the highlights of the Bhansali collection (Figure 2-10).¹⁴ Its artist quite



Figure 2-7 Saint Sebastian, ivory, Goa, 17th century, Private collection, San Francisco.



Figure 2-8 The Assumption of the Virgin with Saint John the Baptist, Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint John the Evangelist, and Saint Anthony of Padua, ivory, China, the Philippines, Macau, or Japan, ca. 1600–20.²³ Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 99 to B-1864. Purchased from Don Jose Calcerrada, Madrid, in 1863, for 50 francs, by John Charles Robinson.



Figure 2-9 Mary Magdalene, ivory, Goa, 17th-19th century. Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2019.10.5a-b. Gift of Shelly Errington from the collection of her brother, Trois E. Johnson, M.D., and given in his memory.



Figure 2-10 Madonna and Child, ivory, Goa, 17th–18th century. Dr. Siddharth K. Bhansali Collection, New Orleans.



Figure 2-11 Madonna and Child, ivory, Goa, 18th century. Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2019.10.2. Gift of Shelly Errington from the collection of her brother, Trois E. Johnson, M.D., and given in his memory.



successfully articulated the folds of the dress and cloak that billows around her right arm, and the beading at the edge of the cloak is delicately detailed. Angels' faces peer out from a billowing cloud at the base. They are bodiless, only subtle swirls fill the space between their wings. These are frequently found in ivories carved in Goa. The small Christ Child perches convincingly in her left hand. The pose is also seen in [Figure 2-6](#), but here he also holds a globe. [Figure 2-11](#) is a rarer pose for the Madonna and Child, clearly not following a European model. The artist depicts the Christ truly as a babe in arms, rather than as a prescient being raising his hand in benediction. Again the face of a cherub looks out at the viewer and a crescent moon is added to the statue, a feature to be discussed below. [Figure 2-12](#) offers an even rarer ivory of the Virgin and Child, one carved in the Philippines. The elements are the same as in [Figure 2-10](#), even with the cherub's face below, but the whole feel and decoration of [Figure 2-12](#) displays strong Chinese influence including the distinct Chinese features to the Virgin's face.¹⁵ The heavy application of pigment is quite common in Roman Catholic ivories made in the Philippines.

Images of the Virgin can be interpreted to represent a variety of concepts. A popular title is of Mary in the guise of the Immaculate Conception. This is her title because Catholics believe that she was conceived and then born free of Original Sin. The Portuguese king João IV (1604-56) declared this form of Our Lady as the patroness of Portugal in 1646.¹⁶ The specific iconography followed to this day was developed by the Portuguese artist Francesco Pacheco (1564–1654) three years after the king's declaration. She is depicted with her hands in prayer standing on a crescent moon. This iconography has conceptual connections to the New Eve, the Virgin of the Assumption standing on a cloud, and more specifically to the Woman of the Apocalypse or Woman Clothed in the Sun from the Book of Revelation (Chapter 12).

The Immaculate Conception ([Figure 2-13](#)) stands in an unbending pose and sports a lovely

face. Highly detailed, her hair falls in elegant curls on the elaborately patterned collar of the dress. Again the small dotted circles along the edge of her garments and acanthus leaves are typical of many other Goanese carvings. [Figure 2-14](#) follows this usual iconography but the artist has rested the moon on a fantastic dragon-like creature, a feature found in some European examples as well, sometimes replaced with a snake referring to the New Eve. The compact silhouette of this figure suggests that it was actually carved in Sri Lanka by comparison with another Immaculate Conception in the Walters in Baltimore ([Figure 2-15](#)). Her hands appear to be carved from separate pieces of ivory. Unlike figures from Goa the Virgin is crowned as Queen of Heaven adding another layer to the subtle iconography of these images. The quality of the carving is quite different from the examples from Goa, lacking the panache of the billowing fabric especially seen in [Figure 2-10](#). The strict rigidity of these figures from Sri Lanka can be compared to the standard form of standing Buddha figures which in turn are derived from the art of Amaravati with clean lines and parallel vertical folds of the drapery.¹⁷

Another image of the Virgin from the Philippines illustrates an aesthetic different from the Indian and Sri Lankan examples. See [Figure 2-16](#). Similar to [Figure 2-12](#), the image displays a number of Chinese features. She is similarly dressed and the gentle sway follows the curve of the elephant tusk found in many ivories from China and the Philippines. In this case, the artist took realism to a new level. By carving the hair and back of the head from a second piece of ivory, he was able to insert glass eyes behind Mary's lids. A silver radiating crown is also added. The handling of the drapery combines approaches from the other two centers, Goa and Sri Lanka: the silhouette is contained, but the fabric billows.

The Christ

The wood representation of Christ as a sleeping child compares to many Hindu depictions of the



Figure 2-12 Madonna and Child, ivory gilded and painted, the Philippines. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, 71.322. No data.



Figure 2-13 Immaculate Conception, ivory with painted lips, Goa, 17th century. Dr. Siddharth K. Bhansali Collection, New Orleans.



Figure 2-14 Immaculate Conception, ivory, Sri Lanka, ca. 1650.²³ Victoria & Albert Museum, London, A60-1949. Given by Dr. W.L. Hildburgh FSA 1949.



Figure 2-15 Immaculate Conception, ivory, gilding, and pigment, Sri Lanka, 17th century. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, 71.341. No data.



Figure 2-16 Immaculate Conception, ivory with paint and gilding, glass eyes and silver crown, the Philippines, 18th century.²⁴ The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 64.164.243a-b. Gift of Loretta Hines Howard, 1964.



Figure 2-17 Sleeping Christ Child, wood, Goa, 17th century. Dr. Siddharth K. Bhansali Collection, New Orleans.



Figure 2-18 The Christ Child, ivory, Goa, 1600-1700. British Museum, London, 1957,1008.1. No data.



Figure 2-19 Christ as the Mariner on the Ship of Salvation, ivory, Goa, 17th century. British Museum, London, 1959,0721.1. Brooke Sewell Permanent Fund.

god Krishna as a child (Figure 2-17). A devotee of Krishna often establishes a personal, loving relation with the god. In the South parental love is a major focus in the worship of Krishna and devotees often view Krishna as one's child. The devotion to the child is quite similar in Christianity and southern Krishna devotion. This sleeping Christ was probably carved to lie in a manger in an elaborate crèche at Christmas time. The pose appears so natural and the fleshy body has a great deal of appeal. Who could not smile looking at this sleeping baby?

Two ivories in the British Museum present very different takes on the Christ Child. Figure 2-18 depicts the nude babe standing in a commanding pose blessing the viewer.¹⁸ A second ivory presents the Christ child as the Mariner on the Ship of Salvation (Figure 2-19). The British Museum website claims that this composition is based on an Italian print, but does not identify the source.¹⁹ The iconography will be discussed below.

Many ivory carvings depict the young Christ as the Good Shepherd and display a complicated composition. One in the Asian Art Museum offers this elaborate iconography (Figure 2-20). He sits with his hand to his head in meditative thought or dozing atop a pillar-like mountain. Sheep are everywhere: on his shoulder, in his lap, at his feet, and below the fountain. At his feet, two birds drink from the fountain of life. The figure that lies at the bottom reading a book has been interpreted as Mary Magdalene.²⁰ Note that she is depicted with a book in Figure 2-9 above. An image of a young man with animals would resonate with Hindu tradition since Krishna is often depicted as a child surrounded by calves. A rarer depiction of the single figure is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Figure 2-21). It is highly detailed and clearly depicts the sleeping Christ with a lamb on his lap with another perched on his shoulder. The artist has taken great care with the details; even the sandals are carefully carved.

The entire Passion leading to the Crucifixion is central to the Faith and a rare form of Christ

as a young man wearing liturgical robes displays Symbols of the Passion of Christ (Figure 2-22). These symbols, also called *Arma Christi* (Weapons of Christ), consist of a wide variety of objects. Reading from the top of his chasuble we see the crown of thorns, the veil of Veronica, the cross draped by the shroud with the hammers to its side and spears below it. The symbols in a similar ivory in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (Figure 2-23) include the purple robe of Christ above the three nail heads with the pincers to remove them below, the money bag containing the thirty pieces of silver, and the column — flanked by whips and surmounted by the rooster that crowed after Saint Peter's third denial of Jesus — at which Christ was flagellated. The arms are missing on Figure 2-20, but his right arm may have been raised in benediction like the London example. Without the arms the strict rigidity of the figure conveys a lot of presence. The youthful face and soft curls on his head are delicately rendered. The fact that Jesus is depicted as an adolescent makes the symbols of the Passion prophetic in nature rather than illustrating the pain and suffering of the Passion in actual terms.

The sophisticated, multi-layered iconography of this period is exemplified by the Christ Child as the Mariner on the Ship of Salvation (Figure 2-19). It displays some of the Passion symbols on the shields above the oars of the ship and the cross itself is draped with the shroud behind the nimbate figure of Christ. The ladder used for the deposition and sponge are to his right and the lance to his left with the *Titulus Cruces* inscribed INRI at the top. The Christogram HIS appears at the stern of the ship as well.

Christ's pain and suffering were depicted often. A common depiction presents Christ after he was scourged and presented to the people by Pontius Pilate who exclaimed "Ecce Homo," (Latin for "behold the man") and turned Christ over to the hostile crowd before the Crucifixion. Ivory carvings of the body of Christ on a crucifix are found in collections all over the world. It represents the Redemption: Christ dying



Figure 2-20 Christ as the Good Shepherd, approx. 1650–1700. India; Goa. Ivory. Asian Art Museum, Acquisition made possible by Paul and Kathleen Bissinger, 2011.4.a-.b. Photograph © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco



Figure 2-21 Good Shepherd, ivory, Goa or Diu, 18th century. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011.576.7. Gift of Cynthia Hazen Polsky, 2011.



Figure 2-22 Symbols of the Passion, ivory, Goa or Sri Lanka, 17th century. Dr. Siddharth K. Bhansali Collection, New Orleans .



Figure 2-23 Symbols of the Passion, ivory with some paint and gilding, Sri Lanka, ca. 1650. Victoria & Albert Museum, London, A.62-1927. Given by Dr. W.L. Hildburgh FSA in 1927.



Figure 2-24 Crucifix, ivory with some paint, Goa, 17th century. Dr. Siddharth K. Bhansali Collection, New Orleans.

for the sins of Mankind. Due to its modest size, [Figure 2-24](#) probably was made for a Catholic home, although small examples are also found in churches, monasteries, and convents. The artist has taken special care with the loin cloth draped at the figure's waist; the handling of the twisting rope holding the garment and the folds of the cloth are truly a *tour de force*. Following an Iberian tradition, the body is heavily scarred. The ivory carver has effectively portrayed the horrors of crucifixion; the length and angle of Christ's arms emphasize the weight of his body, his legs appear lifeless, and the pronounced tilt of the head instills pathos to the image.²¹ A broken ivory figure of Christ from the Yale University Art Gallery that was once mounted on a crucifix offers an even more tortured figure²² ([Figure 2-25](#)). The modeling of the body is mannered in appearance; the rib cage is raised unnaturally and one senses the weight of his body stretching the figure as it dangles from the cross.

An even more moving pathetic scene is that of the Virgin Mary with the body of Christ draped across her knees — the Pietà. The New Orleans exhibition of the Bhansali Collection included a large rendition of the Pietà with the Madonna lifting her face to heaven. The collection also includes a very small ivory Pietà ([Figure 2-26](#)). The pathos of the Virgin appears internalized; the Virgin Mary is focused on the body of Christ whose lifeless pose with its sharp angles is placed upon the lap of his grief-stricken mother.

This small group of Roman Catholic ivories from Asia represents a wide variety of iconographies and styles. Considered collectively, they encompass the core of the Faith in telling ways. From the Incarnation itself depicted by the Christ Child in his mother's arms ([Figure 2-10](#), [Figure 2-11](#) and [Figure 2-12](#)) and sleeping in the crèche ([Figure 2-17](#)) to depictions of him at stages of his life from his guise as the Good Shepherd ([Figures 2-20 – 2-21](#)) through his Passion and death on the Cross ([Figure 2-22](#), [Figure 2-23](#) and [Figure 2-24](#)), and ending with the figure of his dead body in his mother's arms, the Pietà ([Figure 2-26](#)), the whole history

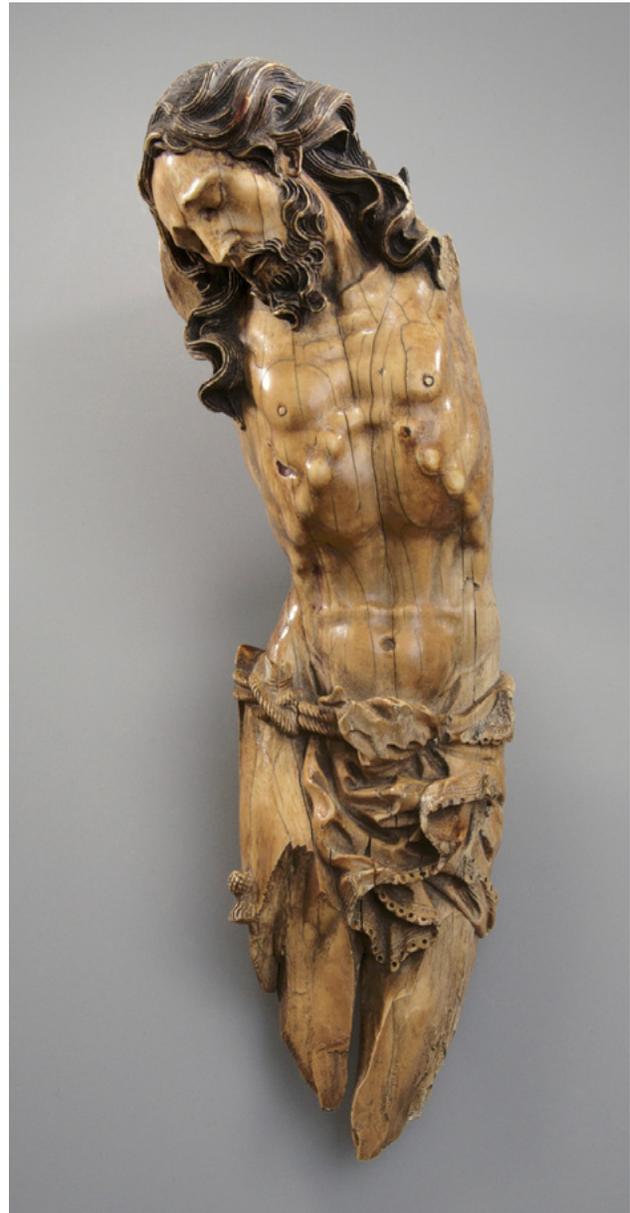


Figure 2-25 Corpus of Christ, ivory, Goa, 17th century. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, 1967.52.1. Director's Purchase Fund.



of the Redemption is spelled out. One can return again to [Figure 2-19](#) where virtually all these aspects appear with Christ presenting Salvation to Mankind.

At the same time, this short discussion of Roman Catholic ivories from a few centers in Asia illustrates different artistic traditions. Where the artists in Goa and other Indian centers clearly copied Iberian examples quite closely, those in Sri Lanka continued to follow local styles. At the other end of the missionary expansion into Asia, the Spanish colonization of the Philippines, there is a strong Chinese influence and the artists tended to decorate their works by adding pigment to a much greater degree.

Robert J. Del Bontà (Ph.D. The University of Michigan, 1978) has been loosely affiliated with the Asian Art Museum since 1978 where he taught courses and curated many shows. He has curated major exhibitions for the Berkeley Art Museum; The University of Michigan Museum of Art; The Portland Art Museum; and was a major contributor to one at the Rubin Museum of Art and two at the Art Gallery of South Australia. He has two current exhibitions at the New Orleans Museum of Art. He has lectured and published articles on a wide range of subjects: Hindu and Jaina sculpture and architecture; calendar art; Indian composite painting; Jaina, Sikh, and Mughal painting; 19th century photography; and more recently European prints pertaining to Europe's outlook on India and Indo-Portuguese art.



Figure 2-26 The Pietà, ivory, Goa, 19th-20th century. Dr. Siddharth K. Bhansali Collection, New Orleans.

Notes

1. Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, *A Expansão Portuguesa e a Arte do Marfim*, (exposition), Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisboa, 25 de Junho a 15 de Setembro de 1991. A catalogue was published in both Portuguese and English: Francisco Faria Paulino and Susan Lowndes Marques, *Portuguese expansion overseas and the art of ivory* (Lisbon: Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimentos Portugueses, 1991). There was also an exhibition at the Sackler Gallery in Washington concerned with the Portuguese overseas empire: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/when-portugal-ruled-the-seas-161560859/>
2. See a website for an exposition of ivories in 2018 entitled *Sagrado Marfim: O Averso do Averso* (*Sacred Ivories: Inside and Out*): <https://portalradar.com.br/museu-de-arte-sacra-de-sao-paulo-exibe-raridades-em-marfim/>
3. James Bennett and Russell Kelty, eds., *Treasure Ships: Art in the Age of Spices* (Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 2015), and *Journeys to New Worlds: Spanish and Portuguese Colonial Art* from the Roberta and Richard Huber Collection, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art February 16, 2013 – May 19, 2013: <https://www.philamuseum.org/exhibitions/777.html>



4. *Icons of Faith: Indo-Portuguese Art from the CMSVS Collection*, December 10, 2019 through March 29 2020. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (formerly the Prince of Wales Museum), Mumbai.
5. The museum is housed in the old convent of Saint Monica: <https://goa-tourism.com/christian>
6. *Sacra: Roman Catholic Art from Portuguese India*, New Orleans Museum of Art, mounted March 13, 2020 and running at least through the Spring of 2021. A catalogue is still in preparation.
7. For a discussion of his error, see: Alexander Henn, *Hindu-Catholic Encounters in Goa: Religion, Colonialism, and Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), Chapter 1: "Vasco da Gama's Error: Conquest and Plurality," pp. 19-39.
8. Published in *Living Wood: Sculptural Traditions of Southern India* (George Michel, ed., Bombay: Marg Publications, 1992).
9. The differences between African and Asian ivory is discussed at: <http://www.ivoryeducationinstitute.org/the-difference-between-african-and-asian-ivory/>
10. Most of the tusks came from Mozambique. Eventually 22,000 tusks were imported annually as cited by Celsa Pinto, *Trade and finance in Portuguese India: a study of the Portuguese country trade, 1770-1840* (New Delhi: Concept Publ. Co., 1994).
11. Some of this material was included in Bennett, *op. cit.* The exhibition contained European art based on Asian material as well as Asian material that copied the art of the West. It highlighted similar sculpture to pieces in the Bhansali collection, but also featured furniture and decorative objects such as inlaid boxes made in India for the European market and the rest of Asia.
12. The museum labeled the figure of the Virgin as the Immaculate Conception, but also discusses it as a depiction of the Assumption. They make a case for an early date, one that predates the development of the iconography for the Immaculate Conception discussed below. The mixed message is probably due to the crescent moon at her feet.
13. An early 6th century example is in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, M.82.42.2.
14. For a discussion of similar ivories, see: Marsha G. Olson, "Mary on the Moon: Ivory statuettes of the Virgin Mary from Goa and Sri Lanka," *Rethinking Place in South Asian and Islamic Art, 1500-Present*, Deborah S. Hutton and Rebecca Brown, eds (New York: Routledge, 2016, pp. 97-115).
15. A Chinese ivory from about 1600 makes a strong case for being a copy of a seated Madonna and Child. The figures are clearly depicted as Chinese. The Hermitage titles it "Kuanyin with a boy" (acq. no. JIH-939), see the following where one can click on the image: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/when-portugal-ruled-the-seas-161560859/>
16. This doctrine of her conception had been debated since the Middle Ages, but in actuality Pope Pius IX ultimately declared this as dogma only in 1854.
17. A headless example from probably from 3rd century Nagarjunakunda is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, 2016.700. Even the way that the fabric drapes over the figures left shoulder is very similar when one compares Figure 15 to the New York example and others. Later Buddhas sculpted in Sri Lanka continue draping the garment in a similar manner, for instance a 10th century piece in the Met's collection, 1993.387.8.
18. Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 66, cat. no. 195 depicts a Goanese standing naked Christ Child.
19. It was also copied around 1600 for a border of a folio from the Mughal Gulshan Album at the Freer-Sackler Galleries in Washington (F1956.12). The marginal painting is inscribed *Rome 1580* giving a date for the model apparently. Some Hispano-Philippine examples labeled Niño Divino Piloto that copy an identical engraving are on-line at: <https://colonialart.org/archives/locations/mexico/unidentified-state/unidentified-city/unidentified-collection#c3496a-3496b>
20. The extended iconography was quite popular and examples are found in many museums. For instance: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 17.190.297; The Victoria and Albert Museum in London A.38-1921 and an even elaborate one A.58-1949; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, M86.187; the Walters Gallery in Baltimore, 71.324; and elsewhere.
21. Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 72, cat. no. 202, 1700-50, illustrates a Indian crucifix where Christ has a raised head suggesting his final words to God the Father.
22. Published in McCully, Marilyn, "The Indo-Portuguese Ivory Crucifix in the Yale University Art Gallery," *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Nov., 1972), pp. 4-9.
23. The Victoria & Albert Museum has its origin on-line as: Goa (probably; Indo-Portuguese (Goa) or perhaps Cingalo-Portuguese (Sri Lanka), but it is clearly a product of a Sri Lankan artist.
24. The Metropolitan Museum of Art notes that the crescent moon is missing, but labels this as the Immaculate Conception anyway. I would suggest that it should simply be called the Virgin.



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