

From Tusks To Treasures: Ivory Carving on Display

In spring of 2013 the Kirkpatrick Foundation gifted 220 carved ivory objects to the Mabee-Gerrer Museum of Art in Shawnee, Oklahoma. The donation also included a \$50,000 grant to aid in the preservation of the collection.¹ This collection, known officially as The Kirkpatrick-Keesee Ivory collection, was an original gift to John Kirkpatrick from J.W. Boardman Milligan in 1968. Milligan, who was one time comptroller of Cortex Oil Company, assembled his collection in the early 20th century from Northern Nigeria (1910) and the French Congo (1912-14), long before any type of sanction or prohibition on ivory trading was implemented. Pieces of the collection boast famous previous owners such as Rudolph Valentino, Enrico Caruso, and Robert Ripley. The provenance of the collection prior to the Mabee-Gerrer reveals an intricate web of international business endeavors and personal relationships within a public-minded family that grew to be one of Oklahoma's leading philanthropic organizations.²

Large, and more famous, pieces of this collection went on display shortly after acquisition. The ivory eagle which, taken with its driftwood perch, stands close to five feet tall and was part of the main exhibit space at least a year before the smaller exhibit opened. The collection was donated with the specific purpose to

¹ <http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Mabee-Gerrer-Museum-of-Art-in-Shawnee--Oklahoma--Receives-Gift-of-Rare-Ivory-Artwork.html?soid=1102200742132&aid=0p3RPru4Xoo> Accessed Feb 12, 2016

² For more on the Kirkpatrick family and philanthropy see <http://kirkpatrickphilanthropy.com/founders.php> and <http://kirkpatrickfamilyarchive.com>

“draw attention to the growing problem of ivory poaching and the resulting impact on elephant populations.”³

The temporary exhibit was only open for six weeks and occupied gallery space intended for traveling or other temporary exhibits at the Mabee-Gerrer. The welcome desk and gift shop separate this space from the permanent exhibits. In this manner the museum itself is easy to navigate between a patron’s favorite pieces, and their interest in any new and highly advertised temporary exhibits, in this case the “From Tusks to Treasures” exhibition.

The exhibit layout itself was the conservative art museum fair, dark rectangular bases with clear vitrine covers housing many pieces of carved ivory which range in size from tiny elephants the size of coat buttons to larger full and half tusk carvings which depict landscapes or mythological tales. The space only has one point of entrance and egress and a visitor can see the entire exhibit standing in this entryway. On the far wall there was an enormous wall graphic depicting an elephant in silhouette, one of the many reminders of where these works originated before becoming art.

The purpose of the exhibit is broadly two-fold. The objects themselves are on display as pieces of art, to be appreciated and enjoyed. They are used to raise awareness of the plight of elephants that are being hunted to extinction in order to harvest the raw materials to make this art. The accompanying text panels and supplemental teaching materials work hard to distinguish between this original collection and the modern practice. The educational materials open with a

³ <http://www.mgmoa.org/exhibitions/ivory/>

disclaimer that the material presented may be difficult to engage and suggest parents and teachers review the material before the class or family visits.⁴

Beyond the display as an exhibition of a private collection, the display was framed by Louisa McCune-Elmore, the director of the Kirkpatrick Foundation, as a representation of “our belief in the power to think globally and act locally.”⁵ This framework provides a broad foundation for the museum educators and curators to present the artifacts in a way that highlights their beauty as an art object, while at the same time convincing patrons to support measures that would end further creation of such objects. The craftsmen are not considered, the general location and acquisition of the objects themselves are not obvious or disclosed. They are point in time that is used to highlight the raw material (elephants) and the finished product (art).

The bulk of the collection displayed features Asian carvings. These carvings range from simple animals like a chick or an owl to more elaborate boats and temples with intricate detail and varying degrees of difficulty. There are at least 4 pieces that depict African portraits, and as many more full tusk carvings that are African ivory. This is striking as the media attention to elephant poaching centers on the plight of African elephants and not Asian elephants. The large elephant graphic on the exhibit’s back wall depicts an African and not an Asian elephant. Perhaps this

⁴http://www.mgmoa.org/sites/mg/uploads/images/Exhibitions/Ivory/Ivory_EDU_Guide.pdf

⁵ <http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Mabee-Gerrer-Museum-of-Art-in-Shawnee--Oklahoma--Receives-Gift-of-Rare-Ivory-Artwork.html?soid=1102200742132&aid=0p3RPru4Xoo>

was done to not regionalize the problem of elephant poaching but to reinforce the thinking globally perspective.⁶

The Mabee-Gerrer is a teaching collection at its heart. The “Tusks to Treasures” exhibit highlights and reinforces that position that with the larger than usual amounts (compared to what I have seen in the past) of supplementary teaching materials that are available to utilize in conjunction with a visit. The exhibit was marketed through its mailing system to its members and the public at large. Local news reports following the donation of the objects through to the installation of the exhibit helped provide exposure to the exhibit and the museum beyond Shawnee. At a crossroads between building visibility and promoting attendance and reinforcing the message that this exhibit would serve to bring attention to the elephant poaching crisis in the wild, Laura Bottaro, the Elephant handler and animal curator at the Oklahoma City Zoo delivered the keynote during the mid October reception at the museum.

The text within the exhibit itself is sparse and reveals a disconnect between the print and advertising rhetoric and the actual display of the objects. The captions describe the object and indicate the date and location of the piece. There are no accompanying text panels within the exhibit that describe the current conditions of elephant conservation, wildlife poaching, or anything similar. There is just the lone elephant silhouette at the back of the exhibit. All of the text that supports the intended mission of the exhibit and the donation of the collection to the museum is contained within the supplemental materials that are available if you know where to

⁶ I suspect that this is not the case. The most likely explanation is the graphics chosen were either the easiest to obtain or the easiest to identify in silhouette.

look and/or who to ask. The teaching supplement even offers suggestions for you to follow “If you feel moved to help save the elephants.”⁷ If visitors just happen in to the exhibit or visit without any of the context that is supplied outside the physical space, there are no such suggestions or even mention that this exhibit can help save the elephants. Inside the exhibit the text only goes as far as mentioning that this collection was created before the current ivory trade laws were established.

⁷http://www.mgmoa.org/sites/mg/uploads/images/Exhibitions/Ivory/Ivory_EDU_Guide.pdf