# Trade, Cultural Contact, Collections, and Exoticism: The Context of an Ivory Statuette of Columbia

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*Columbia*, Anonymous, 17th c., Ivory, Germany

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*Columbia* is a small ivory statuette that depicts a Native American woman. *Indian Maiden*, as it is also called, represents an allegorical representation of the Americas. The partially naked female figure measures about six-and-a-half inches tall. She is dressed in a toga-like garment, which wraps around her waist and drapes over her left shoulder, leaving her chest exposed. She is decorated with the carefully carved details of a headband, a beaded necklace and an armband on her right bicep. Her curls are pinned up in a bun and secured with her headband. Her feet rest on a small, plain platform in a classic *contrapposto* position and her body swivels as she looks over her right shoulder. *Columbia* originally held unknown objects in both of her hands, but they have long since broken off, as have a few fingers and part of her drapery. The ivory is carved with a great level of detail, from the striped pattern and fringed hem of her toga, to the delicate facial features and the curls of her hair. Very little is known about the provenance of the statuette, but it was made by a German artist working in Germany in the seventeenth century. By reconstructing the materials and iconography, we can better understand the historical context and the meanings this object had for its contemporary audience.

Beginning in the fifteenth century, Europe began to explore the world on a much greater scale than before. They began to travel to the Americas, Africa and Asia and established colonial empires. New trade networks allowed for much more exchange between Europe and these exotic lands. Plants, animals, foods and luxury goods that did not exist in Europe were shipped from the colonies. Explorers published accounts of their experiences, describing the people, flora and fauna of these exciting, new lands. The more efficient maritime trade routes exposed the

Europeans to a greater variety of new commodities than had been possible before. This increased access to information and goods from distant places lead to a rise in interest in the exotic.

Germany was much less active in the exploration of the world than other European countries, such as Portugal, Spain, and France. In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Germany was divided in over three hundred different states. In addition to not being a unified entity, the German states were more landlocked and farther from the open sea. However, Germany still benefitted from outside influences. The country was connected to the New World through trade routes within Europe and contact with their neighboring countries.[i] The exchange of goods, ideas and art between all of the European kingdoms and states means that, even thought the statuette of *Columbia* originated in Germany, it speaks to ideas present all over Europe.

The ivory trade benefitted greatly from the increasing globalization and as a result, ivory became much more readily available in Europe than it had been in earlier centuries. Between the tenth and the fourteenth centuries, ivory was shipped overland from Africa via Venetian trade routes. Elephant tusks are not small, however, and their weight severely limited the quantities that could be transported by caravan. In Europe, walrus ivory was often used as a more easily available substitute for true ivory, which comes from elephants. In the Middle Ages, the small amounts of available ivory were used primarily in religious art, but it became a sought-after commodity in the Age of Discovery.[ii] "Ivory importation as a raw material was a substantial business in itself"[iii] and once the material reached Europe, it was carved for everyday uses or as a luxury item. Excavations in Amsterdam have revealed that the "percentage of elephant ivory objects is even higher than the percentage of bone objects in the seventeenth and eighteenth

centuries."[iv] Thus, ivory was clearly a valuable and widely available commodity in seventeenth century Europe.

The ivory statuette of *Columbia* and other contemporary German pieces show that, although the German states lacked trade routes to Asia or Africa, ivory carving was popular there during the Baroque period.[v] Elephant ivory is durable and ideally suited for carving. The ivory used in *Columbia* would have traveled from either Africa or Asia to a European port. Next it would have made its way to Germany by way of overland routes, where it would then have been carved by a sculptor.[vi] Ivory was an especially popular medium in Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.[vii] Apart from ivory's practical advantages, the choice of material also speaks volumes about the artistic intentions of the time. The expense and effort required to obtain ivory indicates that people were not merely interested in statuette depicting a Native American woman, but that they were specifically interested in an ivory carving of a Native American woman. The use of ivory reveals the effects of globalization and the European interest in everything exotic.

The interest in exoticism is perhaps most evident in the rise of collections that began in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In Germany especially, collectors started to assemble vast collections that included artwork, rare and exotic items and natural history specimens. These *Wunderkammern*, or cabinets of wonders, took the form of a series of rooms filled with anything from antiquities, foreign art, scientific equipment and exotic, stuffed creatures. Before the Renaissance, churches and the homes of the nobility were the only real repositories of art. Eventually, these collections outgrew their treasuries and were shifted to semi-public spaces.[viii] These *Wunderkammern* collections served as early museums and laboratories and gave rise to many fields of scientific inquiry. Items from and information about the New World were very

popular items in these collections, as was anything exotic and marvelous. These collections included curiosities from the New World such as maps, indigenous artifacts, dried plants and preserved animal specimens,[ix] including a stuffed crocodile in one notable example.[x]

People in Europe were fascinated with the Americas and the strange people that inhabited the mysterious continent. The collections were a way to make sense of the world and as Paula Findlen surmised, "an attempt to manage the empirical explosion of materials that…increased travel, voyages of discovery, and more systematic forms of communication had produced."[xi] Something like *Columbia* would certainly have been a welcome addition to any *Wunderkammern*, as it is a representation of a distant land, carved out of a prized, exotic material.

The statuette of Columbia is interesting, because it is a European conception of what an Indian maiden might look like and it was used to symbolize the entire continent of the Americas. While this concept may seem strange, it was actually common practice to depict allegorical representations of the four continents as illustrations on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century maps. Columbia is depicted in an interesting way. While the positioning of the figure is classical, her exotic garb marks her as very foreign. No European woman would wander around topless and clad only in drapery in real life. The European vision of the otherness of the new World people and the fascination with the exotic necessitated this somewhat scandalous depiction.

*Columbia* embodies the effects of globalization and the newfound interest in exoticism in Europe. It is a statuette representing the Americas, carved by a German artist out of elephant ivory that perhaps traveled all the way from India. This potential scenario of the statuette's context says a lot about globalization in the seventeenth century. In earlier years, certainly before

Columbus' discovery of the New World, such a complicated feat would have been impossible. The statuette conjures up the image of a Europe that had become closely connected to foreign cultures in the New World, Asia and Africa. *Columbia* makes you think of a Europe that was so fascinated by otherness and exoticism that they had to combine exotic themes and mediums in their art.

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[i] Jenkinson, David, et al. "Germany." Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online. Oxford University Press, accessed February 20, 2014, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T031531.

[ii] Chaiklin, Martha. "Ivory in World History: Early Modern Trade in Context." History Compass. no.6 (2010): 535-536.

[iii] Meadow, Mark A. "Merchants and Marvels: Hans Jacob Fugger and the Origins of the Wunderkammer." In *Merchants and Marvels: Commerce, Science and Art in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Pamela H. Smith and Paula Findlen, 182-95. (London: Routledge, 2002), 183.

[iv] Rijkelijkhuizen, Marloes. "Whales, Walruses, and Elephants: Artisans in Ivory, Baleen, and Other Skeletal Materials in Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century Amsterdam." International Journal of Historical Archaeology. no. 4 (2009): 420.

[v] Schmidt, Eike D. *Fruits of Desire: A Seventeenth-Century Carved Ivory Cup*. (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2009), 41.

[vi] Chaiklin, Martha, "Ivory in World History," 535-536.

[vii] Frank Minney. "Ivory." *Grove Art Online*. *Oxford Art Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed April 15, 2014, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T042956.

[viii] Jenkinson. "Germany."

[ix] Elisabeth Scheicher. "Kunstkammer." *Grove Art Online*. *Oxford Art Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed April 15, 2014, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T048290.

[x] Findlen, Paula. *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 39.

[xi] Findlen, Paula. "*Possessing Nature*," 3.