

Press release

IVORIES FROM CEYLON – LUXURY GOODS FROM THE RENAISSANCE

28 November 2010 – 13 March 2011

In 1506 the Portuguese landed in Ceylon, today's Sri Lanka. Thanks to the discovery of a direct sea route, there was no longer any need for the lengthy overland journey and the services of middlemen. The Portuguese established close trade relations with the kingdom of Kotte in the south of Ceylon: exclusive goods including elephants, precious woods, gemstones and spices such as cinnamon now reached Europe.

One particularly fascinating example of this trade, precious ivories from the collection of the Portuguese queen, Catherine of Habsburg (1507–1578), are the focus of this exhibition: ivory caskets embellished with gold and precious stones, or large-fans with blades made of wafer-thin ivory. The extraordinary beauty and mysterious iconography of these former prestige and luxury objects will enchant viewers today.

Historical background

By 1518 Ceylon had become an important staging-post on the Portuguese trade route to East Asia. The ivories exhibited here were diplomatic gifts for the court in Lisbon, especially for Catherine of Habsburg, queen of Portugal. The ivories do not only reveal the artistic skills of the ivory carvers who worked in Kotte at this time, they also testify to the unusual political and cultural links between Portugal and Ceylon. On the one hand, they represent the grandeur and ambition of the Portuguese court and of Portugal as a maritime power with its centre in Goa; and on the other they remind us of the first Asian country to have an embassy in Europe. In 1542 the first ambassador, Sri Radaraska Pandita, a Brahmin priest from Kotte, arrived in Lisbon.

During this time, more and more precious ivories came to Europe as luxury goods. A notable feature of the ivories is that as well as local motifs, they also show details from contemporary European painting and graphic art. By taking some of their models from Europe, the ivories display a unique relationship between East and West, between Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu imagery.

The ivories are among the greatest treasures that were ever collected by the Portuguese court. Because of the material, the elaborate decoration (worked gold inlaid with precious stones), and the wonderful carvings, Ceylonese ivories were seen as the most exclusive exotica that anyone could possess in Renaissance Europe. European royal families, above all the Habsburgs, competed for the best objects.

Their acquisitions of paintings, portraits, Flemish tapestries, and unusual jewels formed the heart of the royal *Kunstkammern* and *Wunderkammern*, predecessors of today's museums.

In the mid-sixteenth century, the Habsburg collectors were recognised as connoisseurs of exotica, curiosities, and luxury goods from all over the world, from Africa, Asia, the Far East and America. They obtained them in the markets of Lisbon, Seville, Goa, Malacca, Macao, and in Mexico. When it came to acquiring such rare objects, the enthusiasm of the Habsburgs knew no financial bounds. Their collections were symbols for them of their rule over the world. This is best exemplified in the Prague *Kunstammer* of Rudolf II, great-nephew of Catherine.

The exhibition reveals Catherine's exquisite taste and her connections to the Habsburg courts of Vienna, Innsbruck, Prague, Brussels, Madrid and Munich. It includes family portraits by the famous court painters Anthonis Mor and Alonso Sánchez Coello, some of which have never been shown before.

Highlights of the exhibition

In the centre of the exhibition are precious ivories from the collection of the Portuguese queen Catherine of Habsburg (1507–1578). But other important objects from her *Kunstammer*, such as weapons and jewellery, are also on display. Other notable exhibits are the portraits of the Portuguese kings, the Habsburg nephews, and the children of Catherine. The highlight among these is the portrait of the young Prince Sebastian which until recently was unknown, having been exhibited for centuries under a wrong title in Schloss Schönbrunn in Vienna. The loans, many of which are being shown to the public for the first time, come from leading European museums and private collectors in London, Vienna, Paris, Madrid, Lisbon and Berlin.

Of special interest: menageries and exotic animals

One notable theme of this exhibition is the establishment of menageries in Renaissance Europe. The collecting of unknown, bizarre animals was an essential component of court display. Botanic gardens and menageries became adjuncts to the *Kunstkammern*, sources of diversion, entertainment and astonishment for the royal courts, as well as being symbols of power and prestige.

The most spectacular gift to come to the Portuguese court was living elephants which had been bred in captivity in Kotte. These pachyderms complemented the gifts of ivories. After the discovery of the sea route to India by Vasco da Gama in 1498, King Manuel I set a new trend in Renaissance Europe. He imitated Indian princes and collected state elephants – as living trophies, they proclaimed his power and grandeur. João III and Catherine of Habsburg continued this trend. The latter was to play a key role in the acquisition of rare animals to give as gifts to her Habsburg family in Spain, central Europe, and the Netherlands. Between 1552 and 1563, Catherine gave two young Ceylonese bull elephants to her nephew Emperor Maximilian II. One of them bore the nickname Suleiman and was the first elephant ever seen in Austria. The late José Saramago, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, created a monument to this elephant with his last book, *The Elephant's Journey*.

Context and communication

The exhibition is accompanied by a trilingual short guide and a German catalogue. Both texts are the result of years of research using original sources by Annemarie Jordan, the guest curator.

The exhibition aims to give lively and authentic glimpses into a fascinating moment in history. The artworks are there to be admired for their extraordinary beauty but above all are brought to life in their historical context. Astounding stories tell of long journeys, delicate marriage negotiations, diplomatic

bargaining, power and luxury. A complex theme such as this needs a special exhibition strategy. An interactive map will guide visitors through the many dimensions of the show. Visitors can go on a journey of discovery with Vasco da Gama or walk on a beam of time through the sixteenth century, meeting the most important Habsburg regents on the way and discovering the great global trade networks and transfers of goods.

We are particularly pleased to have commissioned the two actresses Miriam Fiordeponi and Rachel Braunschweig to enact scenes from the Portuguese court. The play was written by Michael Hasenfuss in collaboration with Annemarie Jordan. Theatre in the museum – a completely new way of experiencing the exhibition!

The extensive programme of events includes concerts of Renaissance music, and a short trip to Innsbruck for our members to visit Schloss Ambras. (see enclosed flyer).

PARTNERS

What may seem unusual about the exhibition are the partnerships with the Museen Aargau, the Botanic Garden or the Zurich Zoo. But what links us to these institutions are common themes such as the Habsburgs, the family castle of this royal dynasty in the canton of Aargau, the spice cinnamon or the elephants – endangered by the ivory trade – in the menageries, predecessors of zoos. The theme of the exhibition touches on our life today and invites visitors to continue their journey of discovery in other places.

SPONSORS

The exhibition is supported by the Parrotia-Stiftung and the Instituto Camões, Portugal.

LENDERS

The loans came from leading European museums and from private collectors: the Victoria & Albert Museum, British Museum, and Society of Antiquaries in London; the Kunsthistorische Museum in Vienna, the Louvre in Paris, the Museo del Prado in Madrid, the Museo Nacional de Arte Antiga in Lisbon, the Staatliche Museum für Völkerkunde Munich and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin.

PUBLICATIONS

The catalogue is the result of many years of archival research and presents the latest scholarship on the Renaissance to the general public.

Ivories from Ceylon: Luxury Goods of the Renaissance

Annemarie Jordan Gschwend and Johannes Beltz (eds.)

168 pages, numerous colour plates, 30.5 x 23 cm, with map, bibliography, paperback with flaps, sewn binding

Subscription price until 13 March 2011: CHF 56, EUR 40;

thereafter CHF 75, EUR (D) 54

Publication date: end of November 2010

The exhibition is also accompanied by a small-format illustrated guide (German/French/English) CHF 4

PROGRAMME OF EVENTS

Thursdays 12.15 | Sundays 15.00

“Between you and me!” – Secrets from the House of Habsburg – Violante de Távora, first lady-in-waiting of Catherine of Habsburg, queen of Portugal, shares the gossip from behind the scenes of the Habsburg Dynasty (in German).

Sunday 28 November 2010, 11.00

War and Peace in the Garden of Eden – Talk about the complex diplomatic and cultural relations between Ceylon and Portugal in the sixteenth century (in German).

Friday 7 January 2011, 20.00

klangkunst: The Zürcher Kammerorchester in the Museum Rietberg

Advance tickets: Museum Rietberg or ZKO Billettkasse 0848 84 88 44, (Mon–Thurs 11.00–17.00), billettkasse@zko.ch, www.zko.ch

Friday 14 January 2011, 20.00

O Cavalo Branco – Birthday concert for Catherine of Habsburg (14 January 1507) with Portuguese music from the sixteenth century.

Saturday 5 February 2011, 17.00

Raja’s Journey – a film by Karl Saurer, 2008; followed by Q&A with the director

Saturday 12 February 2011, 20.00

The Music of the Discoverers – The Ensemble Turicum sing Portuguese Renaissance songs on the anniversary of the death of Catherine of Habsburg (12 February 1578).

GUIDED TOURS AND WORKSHOPS

Offers for adults:

- **Public guided tours** (in German).Sundays 11.00, Wednesdays 18.00
“Between you and me!” Thursdays 12.15, Sundays 15.00
- **Private tours** (in German/ English / French) Tel. +41 44 206 31 11 / 31
- **Artworks in dialogue** – Interactive tour for adults.
Globalisation in the Renaissance: Discoveries, trade and diplomacy (in German).
Saturday 11 December 2010, 10.00

Offers for children and adults (in German):

- **Childrens’ workshop** – Suleiman – or how an elephant travelled through Europe in the sixteenth century
Sunday 12 December 2010, 10.00 – 12.30 | Sunday 6 March 2011, 10.00 – 12.30
- **Workshop for grandparents and grandchildren** – Of cloves, nutmegs and elephants – visiting the exhibition and baking cookies. Wednesday 15 December 2010, 14.00 – 16.30
- **Family workshop** – baking delicious cinnamon stars – how exotic spices came to Europe.
Sunday 19 December 2010, 14.00 – 16.30
- **Workshop for grandparents and grandchildren** – Carving “genuine” ivory jewellery from the tagua nut. Wednesday 12 January, 14.00 – 16.30
- **Family workshop** – Suleiman on his way to Vienna – how an elephant is carved.
Sunday 6 December, 14.00 –16.30

INFORMATION AND CONTACT

Further information and download of photographs on www.rietberg.ch

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www.rietberg.ch

Opening hours:

Tues – Sun 10 am – 5 pm | Wed and Thu 10 am – 8 pm

Holidays:

25 December, 1 January; 10 am – 5 pm

24 December, 31 December; closed

Admission:

adults CHF 16 | reduced CHF 12 | up to the age of 16 free

Access:

Tram 7 (direction Wollishofen) to the «Museum Rietberg» stop (4 stops from «Paradeplatz»). No parking; disabled parking available.

RailAway offer

By train to Museum Rietberg: www.railaway.ch

20% reduction for train tickets, transfer and admission.