

Ivory In The 21st Century
Weekly Times Column
By Warren Joel

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How does one collect an illegal import in the 21st century?

As a collector's item ivory in its many different forms and origins has always been a prized collector's item. Ivory as a collectable comes in many different forms from the beautifully carved 18th and 19th century Japanese figures and carvings to the art deco figures of the 1920's and 30's. We also find ivory quite extensively used as an inlay in furniture even down to key plates in high end French and English furniture, or as simple as the white keys on a piano keyboard.

As a collector of art deco myself the moral dilemma of saving the elephant versus the collectability of figures has had me wondering.

My personal justification is quite simple – I am not interested in any form of modern ivory – be it jewellery, figures or other carvings. This is my way of looking after these magnificent creatures going forward for future generations. The distinction from my point of view is the age of the collector's item. We can't impact the extraction of ivory from years ago but we are in a position to do something about it today.

This principle is also recognised in both local and international laws. The 1986 CITES agreement bans the import and export of ivory but the same law also recognises that a piece may be over a hundred year's old (definition of antique) and as such is exempt from this law. Under CITES it is possible to import and export antique ivory providing antique attribution can be testified. I am quite often asked in my professional capacity as a valuer to verify the age of collectable ivory so collectors can meet their CITES obligations.

I have two personal favourites in the ivory collectable – my first favourite is the ivory or part ivory figures from the 1920's or 30's. Many of the sculptors of the day incorporated ivory with bronze into their figures. As an example you could have a female ballet dancer where the outstretched legs and arms held high are finely carved in ivory while the body is cast bronze. My second favourite are the beautifully and intricately carved Japanese ivories of the 18th and 19th century. The finesse and detail of the carvings are truly remarkable.

Next week: Netsuki – Japanese Kimono Toggles

Free Valuation for Weekly Times readers.

Byjoel will do a free valuation of your collectables via email. If you send a photo and description of your item to valuations@byjoel.com.au I will access the item and respond.

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Warren is a third generation auctioneer and valuer specialising in Art, Antiques and Collectables, accredited by the Commonwealth in 35 different areas of collectables.

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