Elephant Ivory and the Temporalities of Consumer Ethics

Terrence H. Witkowski, Ph.D

Professor of Marketing & Director of International Business Program, California State University, Long Beach

Abstract

Consumer ethics have temporal dimensions. Practices once considered quite normal, even commendable have later become morally questionable. Consumption deemed ethical today might be judged defective in the future. This article investigates two temporalities: the historical contexts of past ethical norms and some of the factors driving ethical change over time. A brief account of elephant ivory consumption from the ancient world to the early twenty-first century serves as a case study for better understanding these ethical temporalities.

Keywords: consumer ethics, ethical consumption, elephant ivory

Introduction

From the point of view of the present, the morality of past consumption can appear quite dreadful. Take the treatment of other species. Many ethical consumers in the twenty-first century are repulsed by how humans for their own thrills and amusement or for the sake of fashionable adornment have wantonly slaughtered countless animals, and have tortured many millions more for dubious scientific experiments and product testing (Haynes, 1983; Singer, 2009). Yet, applying contemporary moral standards to past behavior should be done with caution (Edmonds, 2013; Newholm, Newholm & Shaw, 2015). People lived under different circumstances than we do now and their particular social worlds shaped and constrained their choices as consumers. Human lives were shorter and more precarious and wild animal resources far more plentiful than in the present-day. While the most egregious human behaviors, such as purchasing and owning other human beings as slaves, have crossed ethical lines and been condemned for centuries, the treatment of animals has been less of an ethical concern.

Historical analysis has much to contribute to our understanding of consumer ethics. Past consumption practices and meanings occurred within complex normative structures determined by prevailing material culture, religious beliefs, secular superstitions, advertising appeals, fashion dictates, and a variety of other factors. By revisiting these previous contexts or ‘synchronic temporalities’, historical research provides insight into the multiple causalities that may influence consumer ethics (Sewell, 2005). Historical analysis also has a diachronic face. It recognizes that normative structures, while often exhibiting significant continuities over time, do change and are often transformed dramatically. Religious influences, for example, may wax and wane compared to other determinant features in the ethical environment, such as accrued scientific knowledge,
levels of economic development, and the pervasiveness of unbridled marketing and consumer culture. Though some work in consumer ethics has taken an historical approach (see, e.g., Lang & Gabriel, 2005; Newholm, Newholm & Shaw, 2015), most has been concerned with the immediate here and now and may be ‘flawed by inadequate temporal assumptions’ (Sewell, 2005: p.14).

This article seeks to demonstrate the value of temporal perspectives on consumer ethics through a brief historical account of the consumption of elephant ivory. In the early twenty-first century, the killing of African elephants for their ivory threatens the survival of the species in the wild (Chase et al., 2016; Maisels et al., 2013). Governments, international bodies, global civil organizations, and many concerned individuals feel morally obligated to protect these iconic animals and have been working to restrict trade in ivory while deploying social marketing campaigns to discourage consumer demand (Nellemann et al., 2013). This ethical position is a relatively recent development that must contend with long-standing patterns of ivory consumption and accrued meaning often resistant to well-intentioned moral arguments. Without first establishing temporal contexts and a narrative chronology of ivory consumption, adequately identifying causal factors and successfully addressing the current crisis may be less likely.

Data sources and investigator position

The research draws from the substantial secondary literature on elephant ivory and from scrutiny of primary data sources including surviving artifacts, advertising ephemera, and period photographs. Art historians, museum curators, collectors, and dealers have been responsible for much of the writing on ivory objects made in the past. They have focused on describing items and their characteristics, how and where they were made, and who owned them. Very little primary historical evidence, such as diaries, letters, and other writing, has been found that directly reveals the state of mind of early ivory consumers. Visual inspection of ivory artifacts and their representations in advertising and photographs provide alternative methods for inferring past consumer motivations and ethical judgments. I have studied many images of ivory online and have visited museums, starting with the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum in January 2016, with a mission to survey their collections for ivory objects. Artifacts on display may not be representative of the universe of original ivory objects made in various source cultures. High quality, luxury goods tend to be preserved and thus survive into the future better than do everyday objects and this may bias our view of the past (Witkowski & Jones, 2006: pp.74-75). Ivory deteriorates when buried where moisture is present and so much ancient ivory undoubtedly has been lost. Our material knowledge of these objects is thus based upon the ones entombed in dry climates or preserved by churches, the wealthy, and collectors.

Diligent investigators have documented the recent history of elephant ivory consumption through market surveys enumerating ivory items for sale in different countries and, when possible, recording the attitudes of vendors (Martin, 2000; Martin & Stiles, 2008; Martin & Vigne, 2015). Conducting primary consumer research with living ivory consumers is trying since informants may be unwilling to discuss their buying motives and activities openly and, even when they do, may not be entirely forthcoming. It can also be dangerous. On February 4, 2018, noted researcher Esmond Martin was stabbed to death in Kenya, possibly in retaliation for his clandestine penetration of ivory and rhino horn markets (Dixon, 2018). Additional evidence of the beliefs and motives of contemporary ivory consumers can be found in public written documents, such as
legal actions and editorials and letters to the editor in collectors’ publications, and videos related to ivory trafficking available online (Grammaticas, 2014). The arguments of authors, whether committed activists dedicated to saving elephants or collectors and dealers defending the antiques market, need to be weighed carefully.

For the sake of ethical transparency, readers should know that I am a collector who owns, among a lot of other stuff, two revolvers made circa 1860 to 1875 and several older knives and swords, all of which have grips probably made from elephant or marine ivory (rather than bone). I did not purchase these objects for their ivory per se, but rather as antiques that happened to have ivory components. Researching elephant and other ivories, now and in the past, has instilled a more skeptical appreciation of museum pieces while imparting a negative valence to the substance as something I would want to own. As Greenwood (2010) so eloquently puts it, learning about the social and ecological consequences of one’s consumption is a personal journey.

## Early ivory consumption

Ivory is a beautiful, warm and creamy substance, sensuous to feel. It is flexible, but relatively durable and fairly easy to work with tools. Ivory comes from the teeth and tusks of large mammals, especially African and Indian elephants, but also from extinct mammoths and mastodons whose tusks have been preserved in arctic permafrost, and from walruses, narwhals, sperm whales, and hippopotamuses. Ivory has been obtained from hunting living animals, but also from scavenging the remains of dead ones. According to signage at the British Museum, researchers have determined that some of the walrus ivory used in the famous medieval Lewis Chessmen had been harvested from animals that already had died. The late nineteenth century book, *Billiards Simplified; or, How to Make Breaks*, claimed that in sourcing from Africa ‘The natives discover great quantities in what are known as the elephant’s burial-grounds’ (Burroughes & Watts, 1889a: p.8). This assertion may have been wishful thinking and a moral rationalization rather than actual fact.

Until about the middle of the nineteenth century, ivory was a relatively rare and valuable material used mostly in luxury goods for domestic consumption by the wealthy and for public display by the powerful. Worked ivory has been found in prehistoric archaeological sites and the ancient Assyrians, Egyptians, Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans all carved it. Triumphant monuments show captives bringing tusks as tribute and archaeologists found ivory artifacts in Tutankhamen’s tomb. Roman demand was insatiable:

‘Ivory was used to decorate temples and palaces; carried in triumphal processions; and made into a vast range of luxury goods: thrones, chests, statues, chairs, beds, book-covers, tablets, boxes, birdcages, combs and brooches. Caesar rode in an ivory chariot; Seneca possessed 500 tripod tables with ivory legs; Caligula gave his horse an ivory stable. Consuls and magistrates adopted ivory for their insignia of office, their scepters and curule chairs and they sent inscriptions of their appointments to dignitaries and friends on ivory diptychs’ (Meredith, 2001: p.26).

Searches for ‘Roman ivory’ on Google Images, Wikimedia Commons, Pinterest, and different museum websites reveal carvings of gladiators, satyrs, the goddess Aphrodite, and many other real and mythical characters. Roman and other ancient ivory artifacts carried religious, social status, and political meanings. Ivory also appeared figuratively. In the Hebrew Bible, the Song of Solomon conveyed images of ivory, and in Homer’s Odyssey Penelope dreams of ivory gates. As early as the
twelfth century the ‘ivory tower’ trope became associated with the Virgin Mary, but in the nineteenth century its meaning shifted to secular aesthetics and then, in mid-twentieth century America, to academia as a frequently belittled site for disengagement from the cares of the real world (Osborne & Boström, 2001; Shapin, 2012).

Ivory was very popular in Byzantine and Medieval Christian devotional art, such as relief panels (diptychs and triptychs) illustrating Biblical stories and covers for illuminated manuscripts (Figure 1). Domestic uses in the Middle Ages and early modern period were limited to a few luxury goods for the upper classes including pins, combs, mirror cases, writing tablets, knife handles, sundials, dice, draughts, and chess pieces (British Museum 2018). According to online and onsite descriptions, museums have not always established whether this ivory came from elephants or some other large mammals. Northern Europeans possessed little knowledge about elephants, but in 1255 Henry III of England received one as a gift from Louis IX of France and kept it in the Tower of London where it attracted much curious attention (Osborne & Boström, 2001). In the eighteenth century watercolor on ivory tusks or whalebone became a standard medium for portrait miniatures in England and America and remained popular into the nineteenth century until superseded by faster and less expensive photography in the 1840s. These personal images, painted on very thin discs, provided a connection with absent or deceased loved ones (Frank, 2000). Mason (2014) estimates that only the top two to four percent of Americans could afford these mementos.

Figure 1. Ivory diptych (14x7.9cm) carved with scenes from the life of Christ, probably France ca. 1350-1375.
Source: Victoria and Albert Museum A.18&A.1940.
In addition to its uses in the West, ivory sourced from both African and Indian elephants lent itself to the intricate geometrical patterns and Arabic inscriptions found in Islamic Art. India and Sri Lanka also have had long traditions of ivory carving with Murshidabad in West Bengal a primary region for carving and with other centers in Mysore and Tamil Nadu in South India, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan in the north, and Kandy in Sri Lanka. Ivory was not a prestigious material in ancient China, but did lend itself to domestic utensils, such as combs, and to decorative art. Until the seventeenth century, the Japanese rarely used it, but then began to apply it to netsukes (fasteners used with obi sashes) and other miniature sculptures (Lane, 2015). Around 1600, workshops in the Philippines and China started mass-producing religious sculptures and portable art made from imported African Elephant ivory. Spanish and Portuguese traders purchased these objects for re-export to Mexico, Peru, and Europe (Lane, 2015).

Well before the current crisis, and even before the longer-term decline that got under way in the 1800s, humans had driven populations of elephants and, even entire elephant species, into extinction. Prehistoric hunters contributed to the disappearance of mammoths and mastodons in North America, Europe, and Asia some 10,000 years ago. By 500 BCE the Asian elephant herds in Syria had been eliminated (Brown, 2008). The Romans killed so many elephants for sport in the morning animal hunts (Venationes) of the Roman games that they drove North African populations to near extinction (Meredith, 2001; Minowa & Witkowski, 2012). In 77 CE Pliny (the Elder) wrote, ‘An ample supply of ivory is now rarely obtained except from India, the demands of luxury having exhausted all of them in our part of the world’ (cited in Meredith 2001: p.27). The rare Chinese elephant, known only from art and archaeological research, was probably a subspecies of the mammoth, but possibly a unique species. It went extinct by 100 BCE.

Many of the world’s cultures have shown respect for elephants in their literatures, visual arts, and sculptural objects. Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists worship the elephant headed god, Ganesha. Nevertheless, no evidence from this very long period has been located to indicate our ancestors entertained the notion that they should take the interest of living elephants. Like antlers and skins from deer and bison, or horn and leather from cattle and sheep, ivory apparently was just another material, albeit a more precious one.

**Ivory consumption 1800 to 2000**

By the middle of the nineteenth century Egyptian and Arab traders were exploiting elephant populations in East Africa (Beachey, 1967), while southern Africa was becoming increasingly accessible to sport and market hunters who now wielded large bore percussion rifles soon to be superseded by even more powerful repeating breech-loaders using high-power cartridges (Meredith, 2001). In the years from 1780 to 1830, the price of ivory had increased tenfold and fortunes could be made. The supply of ivory began to increase reaching 1000 tons a year (65,000 elephants) by the late nineteenth century (Burroughes & Watts, 1889a; Meredith, 2001). Great quantities of ivory were shipped to Europe, India, China, and Japan for manufacturing to serve both domestic and export markets. Factories in Aberdeen in Scotland, and London and Sheffield in England made ivory combs, handles for cutlery, and billiard balls. Burroughes & Watts (1889a: pp.7-8) reported that in 1888 Britain alone imported 60,000 tusk. Ivory no longer was reserved for elite luxury goods. It became another raw material for the industrialized production of goods targeting middle-class markets. Prices for ivory billiard ball sets ranged
from £2.5s to £3.10s (Burroughes & Watts, 1889b) or £274.86 to £427.56 in 2017 currency (Bank of England, 2018).

In the United States the Connecticut towns of Deep River and Ivoryton became the center of the industry. In the early 1800s new machinery had lowered the cost of combs made from ivory and by the 1840s the growing popularity of sheet music and pianos meant burgeoning demand for ivory keys. One 75-pound adult tusk could produce enough thin veneers to cover the keys of 45 pianos. The largest firms were Pratt, Read & Company and Comstock, Cheney & Company. Just one company, Comstock, Cheney & Company, milled an estimated 100,000 tusks before 1929 (Malcarne & Milkošky, 2015). The colloquial expression for piano playing – ‘tickle the ivories’ – seems to have originated in early twentieth century America. Meanwhile, the Brunswick-Balke-Collender Company, formed in 1884, manufactured billiard tables and sold sets of ivory billiard balls like the ones in Figure 2.

![Ivory billiard balls](image)

**Figure 2.** Ivory billiard balls manufactured by the Brunswick-Balke-Collender Company. The set sold for $800 in May 2013 by Rich Penn Auctions, Waterloo, Iowa. Source: Photo courtesy of live auctioneers.

Americans were as bloody minded as other people in their exploitation of animal resources. They sent the passenger pigeon and Carolina parakeet to extinction and greatly endangered wolves, grizzly bears, and the bison (not to mention American Indians). By the end of the 1800s, big game hunting on African safaris had become an acceptable, even somewhat romantic endeavor epitomized by the character Allan Quatermain in the popular 1885 novel, *King Solomon's Mines*, by H. Rider Haggard. U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt was an archetypical ‘great white hunter’. After leaving office, he organized the 1909-1910 Smithsonian-Roosevelt African Expedition where he and his son Kermit killed over 500 animals including eleven elephants (see Figure 3) (Meredith, 2001). This enterprise had scientific overtones rather than commercial objectives. The animal skins were eventually mounted and displayed at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington and the American Museum of Natural History in New York, with duplicates distributed to other museums across the U.S. to build their collections of animal specimens.
Indicative of shifting public opinion, newspaper writers and cartoonists jeered Roosevelt's pretensions (Coutu, 2015; Shaw, 1910). In response to questions about the large number of animals slaughtered, Roosevelt said: 'I can be condemned only if the existence of the National Museum, the American Museum of Natural History, and all similar zoological institutions are to be condemned' (O'Toole, 2005: p.494). True enough, museums all over the world eagerly purchased animal specimens for their collections (Coutu, 2015). Despite his bloody mindedness, Roosevelt was also an ardent and forward thinking conservationist who established the U.S. Forest Service and numerous national parks, monuments, forests, and bird and game reserves.

Historically, some killing of elephants by Africans had been for food or the result of competition over habitat (Meredith, 2001). Before 1800, the ivory market was small and elephant hunting perilous. The rise in hunting and ivory trading in the nineteenth century did convey benefits. Certainly consumers should have been pleased to own ivory goods if they could afford them. And the trade supported hunters, artisans, and various middlemen. As cruel as was, the treatment of elephants had not been any worse than that inflicted upon other wild animal species with market value, such as whales for their oil, beavers and bison for their pelts, and exotic birds for their plumage. Captive elephants in zoos, circuses, and work camps were handled reasonably well at times, but perhaps more often subjected to cruel exploitation and mistreatment.

On the other hand, many consumers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries may have been exposed to an incipient animal rights discourse. For centuries numerous philosophers including John Locke (1632-1704), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860),
and Charles Darwin (1809-1882) had all argued, albeit from different perspectives, for the humane treatment of animals. Animal protection legislation was enacted in Britain, France, and the U.S. in the 1800s, while Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals were launched in England (1824), Ulster (1836), Scotland (1839), Dublin (1840), the U.S. (1866), and New Zealand (1882). British bird lovers railed against using feathers in millinery for over fifty years before the passage of the Plumage Act in 1921 (Haynes, 1983).

A glimpse into what some people in the Victorian era may have thought about the ivory trade is illustrated in Figure 4, which depicts a cover circa 1865 for the Julius Pratt & Co. catalogue. Four separate panels show, starting in the upper left, an Indian elephant saddled up with an elaborate Howdah, a very large and impressive horned bull with a human minder, a buff African man in skivvies holding a spear in his right hand and cradling an elephant tusk with his left, and an upper middle class American woman, wearing a full white dress and peacefully knitting in her parlor across from an impressive, ivory-keyed, square grand piano. The tranquility of these scenes belied the reality in Africa at a time when tribal people were being conscripted into forced labor to move tusks long distances from the interior uplands to the Indian Ocean coast and Zanzibar where both the ivory and slaves were sold (Meredith, 2001).

![Figure 4. Cover for Julius Pratt & Co. catalogue, ca. 1865. Source: Ivoryton Library Association and the Treasures of Connecticut Libraries.](image-url)
‘Missionaries from Europe, in Africa to spread Christianity, left vivid accounts of the suffering of ivory’s human porters. Though precise figures are not available, David Livingstone, the famous Scottish physician and clergyman who spent decades in Africa, violently opposed the use of enslaved workers and is said to have estimated that five Africans died for every tusk moved to the coast for export. The American Civil War created some pressure to end slavery in Africa, but it continued there through 1897’ (Malcarne & Milkofsky, 2015).

Thus, although they may not have known it, or cared even if they had, ivory consumers, dealers, and manufacturers in the late nineteenth century were complicit in the brutal enslavement and decimation of African people (Figure 5).

**Figure 5.** (Top) African slaves in chains, ca. 1890s. (Middle) Ivory caravan fording stream near border of Belgian Congo, ca. 1908. (Bottom) Zanzibar natives and two American buyers sitting on approximately 50 recently harvested ivory tusks, ca. 1890-1910. Source: Ivoryton Library Association and the Treasures of Connecticut Libraries.
Ironically, Procter & Gamble registered the ‘Ivory’ trademark in 1879 to signify the purity of its new soap product. Harley Procter, the founder’s son, created the name, allegedly inspired by Psalms 45:8 in the King James Bible: ‘All thy garments smell of myrrh, and aloes, and cassia, out of the ivory palaces whereby they have made thee glad’ (P&G, 2018).

By the early twentieth century, a conservation ethos was emerging and attitudes toward animals began to shift (Coutu, 2015). Ivory trading had been at the center of Joseph Conrad’s powerful 1899 novel, The Heart of Darkness, which exposed the horrors of colonialism (Hochschild, 1999). In 1900, colonial powers drew up the Convention for the Preservation of Wild Animals, Birds, and Fish in Africa, and, in 1933, the Agreement for the Protection of the Fauna and Flora of Africa. These measures, along with the establishment of national parks and game preserves, restricted hunting to only those who could afford licenses (i.e. white Europeans), which provided ample revenues, but also marginalized indigenous hunters (Coutu, 2015). Still, a change in ethical norms regarding animal stewardship was taking place.

Equally important, new materials and new consumption patterns challenged ivory in different applications. Bakelite, an early plastic invented in 1907, started replacing ivory in billiard balls within just a few years and in the 1920s became very popular in jewelry. Piano production in the U.S. peaked in 1910. Subsequently, consumers turned to gramophones and radio and, increasingly, left home to go out to the movies or drive their automobiles. During the Great Depression the demand for pianos plummeted and cheaper plastics began to supplant ivory piano keys. The last shipment of ivory to Ivoryton was in 1954 (Malcarne & Milkoasky, 2015). However, the production of ivory souvenirs continued in Asia after World War II and American tourists and military brought home many of these objects (Mason, 2014; Meredith, 2001).

**Ivory consumption in the twenty-first century**

Since 2000, overall consumption of raw or newly worked ivory appears to have declined in the traditional markets of Europe, North America, and Japan, but has burgeoned in China (Martin & Vigne, 2015; Nellemann et al., 2013). Accordingly, this section first investigates China and Hong Kong, and then turns to recent consumption trends in Japan and the United States.

China has had an 1800-year history with ivory, but until recently consumption has been rather limited and the material was not accorded the status of jade. Today, however, because of economic growth and an expanding middle class, many more Chinese can afford to buy ivory goods that are being targeted toward them by producers and retailers. Chinese consumers have come to think ivory is a good luck charm, a status symbol, a good investment, and a suitable gift or bribe to win favor or a business contract (Grammaticus, 2014; Martin & Vigne, 2015). The purchasing of ivory by some Chinese does not necessarily imply widespread consumer demand, but if only a small segment within a very large and growing middle class Chinese market is buying, total consumption can still be significant. The Chinese government has imposed laws against trafficking and selling ivory, but enforcement is difficult (or compromised by corruption) and the trade has been carried out online.
Hong Kong is a leading processor of raw ivory, 90% of which is now sold to visitors from Mainland China. Martin & Vigne (2015) conducted surveys of the Hong Kong ivory business in 2002, 2010/11, and 2014. It consisted of two parallel markets: one for Russian mammoth ivory, which in Hong Kong was legal to import, work and export, and one for new ivory that cannot be imported and should be made only from supplies acquired before 1990. The latter group consists mostly of small items, such as jewelry or name seals (chops), that can easily be smuggled to the mainland. Figure 6 illustrates small carvings with Buddhist and Catholic influences. They are said to be from mammoth tusks, but may be from recently killed African elephants. Martin & Vigne (2015) found that prices had risen and, in their last survey, ranged from $5 for trinkets to $2.5 million for one elaborate carving. On January 31, 2018 Hong Kong lawmakers approved a measure to phase out the legal retail market by 2021 (Actman, 2018).

Ivory consumption in China has features in common with the growth in demand for shark fin soup. Once a traditional delicacy only a few Chinese could afford, rising affluence has enabled more Chinese to partake with the expected consequence being rapidly declining shark populations. Fabinyi (2012) discusses the cultural and social context of this demand. Traditional Chinese medicine links seafood to bu foods, which purportedly imbue strength and health and promote virility. Wild foods have more bu than domesticated foods and studies have shown that Chinese men more than women prefer to consume wildlife (Wasser & Jiao, 2010; Zhang, Hua & Sun, 2008). Ancient Confucian notions of man subjugating nature shape modern Chinese attitudes toward wildlife. In addition, shark fin soup is featured in important social functions, such as weddings and banquets, where the cultivation of guanxi (connections) and social display are important (Fabinyi, 2012). Chinese probably do not spend money on ivory trinkets and figurines for sexual potency, but like shark fins these objects made from wild animals can become a vehicle for conspicuous consumption. Many of the ivory statuettes depicted in the photos accompanying Martin and Vigne's (2015) monograph are carvings of dragons, Laughing Buddhas, and other traditional characters from Chinese folklore, further reinforcing cultural meaning.
Japan is the only nation in the world with noticeable demand for ‘hard’ or forest elephant ivory (a species of African elephant), where it has been used for making hanko (personal name stamps) and bachi (a plectrum or pick for playing the traditional shamisen). Ivory hanko became highly fashionable in the 1970s and by the mid-1980s about 25% of all worked ivory in the world went into their production (Meredith, 2001). Musicians use wooden bachi for practice and save their ivory ones for performances (Figure 7). Ivory bachi need to be replaced occasionally, sometimes as often as once a year. In 2010, Nishihara (2012) and his associates, posing as clients, surveyed 86 hanko and 29 shamisen shopkeepers in Tokyo. Knowledge levels appeared low: more than 70% of hanko vendors could not distinguish between hard and soft ivory, about two-thirds did not know the origin of the ivory they sold, and several believed that elephant tusks could regenerate after removal. The shamisen sellers knew more about different types of ivory (bachi require hard ivory) than the hanko dealers, but were equally clueless regarding the geographical origins of their ivory. Perhaps these informants knew more than they shared with the researchers, but in any event they did not appear to be helping educate customers to make informed ethical decisions about purchasing ivory. Ivory items have been sold on Rakuten, Japan’s largest e-commerce site (Mead, 2014), and an undercover investigation in 2015 (McCurry, 2015) found widespread fraud in tusk registration in Japan due to lax enforcement of existing laws.

After China and Hong Kong, the United States may have had the world’s next largest retail ivory market according to a census of items seen for sale conducted in 2006 and 2007 at 657 outlets in 16 cities (Martin & Stiles, 2008). Out of 24,101 items counted, about 7400 appeared to have been crafted after the 1989 ban on importation and were presumably illicit. The authors estimated that the U.S. consumes less than one ton of raw ivory annually, down from seven to eight tons a year in the
late 1980s. This may indicate falling consumer demand, but the decrease may also result from smugglers successfully evading law enforcement.

Subsequent to the Martin and Stiles research, authorities arrested Philadelphia-based dealer in African art, Victor Gordon, in July 2011 for possession of nearly one ton of elephant ivory objects probably worked in Cameroon and Gabon and valued at $800,000. This was one of the largest U.S. seizures of illegally imported ivory (Figure 8). Gordon later pled

![Figure 8. Some of the items seized from Philadelphia ivory smuggler Victor Gordon, 2011. Source: Photo by Bill Butcher U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service via AP.](image)

![Figure 9. Ivory confiscated in New York City in 2017. Source: Ferré-Sadurní (2017)](image)
guilty and was sentenced to 30 months in prison (Christy, 2014). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service destroyed this ivory in the middle of New York’s Times Square on 19 June 2015. Two years later, on 26 July 2017 a pair of New York antique dealers pled guilty to illegally offering and selling $4.5 million in elephant Ivory (Figure 9). Fined $2000, they were also ordered to contribute $200,000 to wildlife conservation groups. This batch of contraband, most of which appeared to be in a Chinese taste, was crushed in Central Park on August 3, 2017 as part of World Elephant Day (Ferré-Sadurní, 2017).

In March 2015, researchers collected data on ivory sales via Craigslist in 14 primary and 14 secondary cities (LaFontaine, 2015). They located hundreds of items for sale, worth over one million dollars, that were suspected of being made from new ivory. Only rarely did the online ads provide information on the legal status of the product, knowledge crucial for making ethical consumer decisions. Because Craigslist is a classified advertising site, and not an ecommerce or online auction site, information about actual transactions was unavailable.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The consumption of elephant ivory has shown continuities and change, both temporally and spatially. The making of devotional objects from ivory has existed for several millennia across different cultures (see Figures 1 and 6), but this tradition appears to be waning in the twenty-first century. For household purposes, different peoples have been fashioning ivory into portable luxury goods since ancient times and by the second half of the nineteenth century the range of applications appears to have increased. After World War II, however, much ivory carving has been redirected toward making what are essentially assortments of souvenir kitsch (see Figures 6 and 8). In the public arena, ivory lost its meaning as a symbol of secular political power long ago. Technological change has affected patterns of ivory consumption. The invention of photography in the nineteenth century curtailed the art of painting portrait miniatures on ivory and plastics replaced ivory in piano keys, billiard balls, and other objects by the mid twentieth century. At this writing, ivory markets have been shut down in many countries though exceptions have been made for antiques. Illicit commerce in newly worked ivory undoubtedly continues.

Norms pertaining to killing living elephants for their ivory have evolved over time in much of the world, but certainly not everywhere. Although a paucity of written data sources means we may never discover their inner thoughts, ivory consumers in the early period seem to have had few ethical reservations about their possessions were produced. Not until the 1800s did conservation and animal rights philosophies start taking hold and activists begin organizing in Britain, America, and elsewhere. Concern about elephants grew further in the late twentieth century and up to the present day. Economic development may be an important causal factor behind this normative change. Though there are many exceptions, in general people living under subsistence conditions may have less regard for animals than do people with the ‘moral luck’ to live in affluent societies where caring for the other is more of an option (Edmonds, 2013). The development of information technology, whether newspapers, magazines, and novels in the late nineteenth century or the Internet and social media in the twenty-first, has enabled the transmission of vivid reports and visual images stimulating new ideas about animals and how they should be treated. The drastic dwindling of elephant populations in recent years has undoubtedly been an alarming wake up call and spur to action. Moral progress is not a certainty, however, and we should be wary of teleological explanations.
that view historical processes of change as an inexorable march toward some better future state (Sewell, 2005). The arc of history does not necessarily bend toward higher standards of ethical justice in consumption. Most animals raised on modern industrialized farms, for example, live under inferior conditions compared to husbandry a century ago.

Returning to the question raised in the introduction, how should we judge the ethics of past ivory consumption? Moral relativists would argue that we should not compare present day standards with those of prior times. For most of human history (and pre-history), ivory workers and consumers lived in a world with little regard for the rights of animals and, unless exceptionally prescient, could not have known any different (Edmonds, 2013). By the late nineteenth century, however, the situation had changed. Philosophers had been commenting upon animal rights for some time and a conservation ethos had been developing. Yet, ethical consumer decision-making requires knowledge of product provenance (origin), as well as understanding of the consequences that flow from the act of purchasing. The history of elephant ivory illustrates barriers to acquiring this information. Past ivory sellers were not entirely forthcoming about the origins of their products. In the late nineteenth century, slave labor and European brutality were ignored (see Figure 4) until activists such as George Washington Williams and Edmund Morel and the novelist Joseph Conrad alerted the public about these horrific practices (Hochschild, 1999).

The cause of animal rights had a mixed reception during the twentieth century – the proliferation of industrialized agriculture and animal testing being major steps backward – and did not get serious traction until the publication of the first edition of Animal Liberation in 1975 (Singer, 2009). Since then animal rights movements have achieved legislative success in a number of countries. Yet, the late Esmond Martin and his colleagues have documented numerous examples of willful ignorance and stonewalling among ivory dealers in various countries. To make matters worse, other parties have undermined ethical decision-making by casting doubts upon 1) the threat to wild elephant populations and 2) the relationship between ivory consumption and poaching and trafficking (see, e.g., Ivory Education Institute, 2018). Ethical consumers must critically examine these assertions and studiously ask questions about producer markets and supply chains (Greenwood, 2010). Ethical consumers need factual data for assessing product origins and the consequences of their consumption.

They also need to know the history of ivory in their culture. Ivory goods in the twenty-first century may not be as authentic or traditional as they may think. In China, for example, ivory is now used in myriad crafts and accessories never before made of ivory. Interpreting long-standing designs and characters from Chinese art and folklore, these tchotchkes convey a sense of cultural continuity, but are not historically accurate in terms of their material composition. In Japan, the making of hanko from ivory started after World War II. Previously stones and crystals were used. Crafting bachi from ivory began earlier, in the Meiji era (1868-1912), but still relatively late in Japanese history (Nishihara, 2012). Elephant advocates hope that highly informed ivory consumers today will switch to other materials.
References


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