



Fragment of an oliphant

On display**Title/Description:** Fragment of an oliphant**Born:** 1700 - 1799**Object Type:** Figure**Materials:** Elephant ivory**Measurements:** h. 130 x w. 54 x d. 58 mm**Accession Number:** 271**Historic Period:** 18th century**Production Place:** Africa, Sierra Leone**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This fragment, a head wearing a skull-cap and carved out of reddish-tinted ivory, is damaged at the back and at the lower end, apparently by fire. There is little difficulty in recognising this fine old ivory as the finial of a trumpet or oliphant, since the damaged torso retains about one third of what is plainly the embouchure or mouth-piece on the side near the point where the nerve cavity ends.

Its provenance, however, is less clear. It has generally been attributed to the Congo Basin, but it is more likely to have its origin near the source of the Niger, where there has been a well-established although little-known tradition of ivory caning, especially of the making of oliphants, since before the arrival of the Portuguese in the fifteenth century. However, parallels for this piece should probably be sought from about the eighteenth century among the royal trumpets used by chiefs to arrest the attention of the populace, for example among the Sherbro, Temne and Mende tribes.

A tusk as massive as this should indeed have been a chief's property, the more so as wanton slaughter of elephant herds had caused a shortage of ivory by the 17th century (Kup, 1961: 17). The nerve cavity, reaching to the crown of the head, has been plugged with an ivory peg, while the missing portion would have been at least eighteen inches in length, with a girth commensurate with the thickness of the surviving fragment. There is a row of small circular holes on the back of the head. A light-coloured circular patch above the V of the opening is probably the end of a suspension loop which has broken away.

Margaret Carey, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) p. 103.

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1971.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
