

A M I R M O H T A S H E M I



Casket

Probably Kholmogory, Russia, Early 18th century

Walrus Ivory openwork on mica, with brass mounts

16cm high, 20cm wide, 16cm deep

This casket, covered in pierced openwork bone, and carved with symmetrically displayed foliage over a wooden core, closely follows a 17th-century Sri Lankan (Ceylonese) prototype that originally would have been made for export to Europe.[1] Its decoration, albeit coarser in appearance when compared to the Sri Lankan models, minutely carved in elephant ivory, fully echoes its original counterpart, standing as testimony to the far-reaching artistic consequences of global trade in the early modern period in the hands of the Dutch. Following in the footsteps of the Portuguese, who commissioned hybrid ivory-carved objects combining European shapes (and uses) with exotic local materials and high-quality craftsmanship, such caskets and other small luxury pieces of furniture were made for export and found their way onto Dutch ships bound for the White Sea on the northwest coast of Russia. Starting from the late 16th century the Dutch established important trading relationships with Russian merchants who supplied export goods from central Russia.[2]

The present casket was most likely made in Kholmogory (Холмогоры), which is in northern Russia at the mouth of the Northern Dvina River, and approximately fifty miles up the river from Arkhangelsk (Архангельск, known in English as Archangel). It was the chief seaport of medieval and early modern Russia, established near the exit of the river into the White Sea. Kholmogory had a thriving ivory and bone carving industry, which used the by-products of the hunting and whaling (seal bone and walrus ivory) trade from Arkhangelsk. A high level of craftsmanship was reached in the late 17th century in the workshops of the Kremlin Armoury, where, under the direct patronage of the Tsar, Yevdokim and Semyon Sheshenin, who had been brought from Kholmogory, produced bone carvings for the court and the Patriarchy. Similarly, the Kholmogory bone carvers Osip Dudin and Nikolai Vereshchagin, who worked for the imperial court in the 18th century, made objects that served as diplomatic gifts. Highly influenced by the designs and decorative repertoire of objects brought by Dutch, English and German merchants, the bone carvings made at Kholmogory, albeit unique, remain poorly known and studied.

Literature:

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[1] Chaiklin; Veenendaal; Crespo, pp. 212-218, cat. 19

[2] Kotilaine, pp. 17-27