

The Walrus Ivory Bell

All bell collectors know that a lady bell with its face made of ivory is very expensive. Ivory has been valued since ancient times. Elephant ivory used for producing luxury goods is particularly costly. But not all people are aware of the fact that horns of cattle, elk, and deer can also serve as material for carving. It is cheap though because it is porous.

I have a bell which as a whole, including decorative elements, is made of ivory. To be more precise, it is an ivory variety—a walrus tusk—the most prominent feature of the species.



Figure 1 The master is Ilya Lagay, St. Petersburg, Russia.

Tusks can reach a length of 1 m (3 ft, 3 in) and weigh up to 5.4 kg (6.6 lb). Walrus tusks are much smaller and more yellow than those of elephants, but their characteristics are very similar to them.

A recent discovery of researchers from the University of Cambridge and University of Oslo found out that walrus ivory trade between Viking colonies in Greenland and Europe had started between 900 AD. By the 1100s, Greenland had become the main supplier of walrus ivory to Western Europe. The scientists analyzed walrus samples discovered in several trading centers like Bergen, Oslo, Dublin, London, and others.

Green-landers themselves used walrus ivory to secure the right to their own bishopric from the King of Norway. Tusks were also used to pay tithes to the church. As for

medieval Europe during its Romanesque art period, walrus ivory was used for exquisitely carved items such as crucifixes and chess pieces.

Walrus ivory import stopped after 1400 AD because of different reasons and was eventually replaced by elephant ivory.

Being a solid and beautiful material, the tusk is especially valuable due to its natural milk tint color. That's why the tusk is not either whitened or painted before the process of carving. Enamel, the upper layer, is removed as it almost cannot be sanded and polished. The second layer of the tusk is of a yellowish tint, and it is polished quite well.

The walrus tusk can be used for artistic purposes provided it is very-very old. A tusk of a recently killed walrus won't work. A real valuable tusk is the one that is centuries old. That's why this material is so expensive as well as items made of it. The price of an item also depends on how complicated the carving is.



Figure 2. A walrus. Picture taken from the Internet.

Walrus carving is an ancient handicraft of indigenous peoples living in the Russian North. It's been known since prehistoric times. Now there are five carving art schools in Russia, two of which (Tobolsk and Kholmogory) date back to Middle Ages. In the Soviet times, carving workshops were founded in villages of Chukotka. The

village of Uelen is the best known among them. By the way, it is the easternmost settlement in Russia and the closest to the United States (Alaska).

There are some types of carving: smooth, relief, or multidimensional and straight-through.

My bell called Octopus is made in the technique of multidimensional carving.

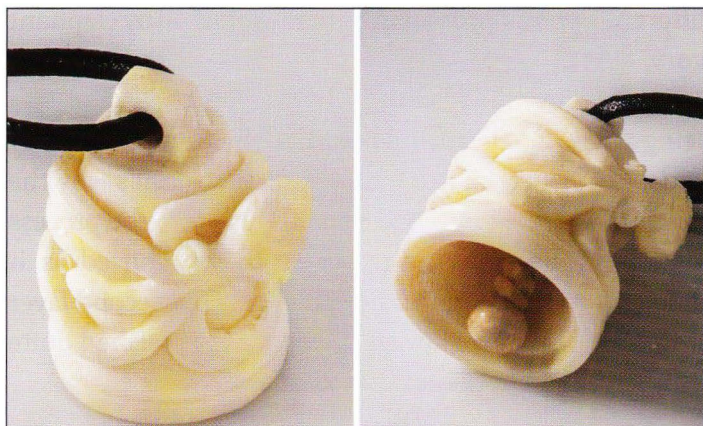


Figure 3. The height is 1.6 ", the diameter is 1".

I think the bell itself is just the example when it's more interesting what it is made of than what is shown on it. As soon as an octopus is a sea animal, the master added two decorative details to emphasize the marine theme.

He also said that the walrus tusk bell doesn't need any special care, and it doesn't like both water and a sharp drop in temperature.



Figure 4. An anchor and a steering wheel.

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