

An Ivory Cabinet in the Archaeological Museum, University of Ceylon

IN the Leslie de Saram Collection of antiquities now exhibited in the recently established Archaeological Museum of the University of Ceylon, there is a rich assemblage of ivory objects such as cabinets, pill boxes, caskets, fan handles and Buddha images. Among these there is an ivory cabinet which is of special interest for a study of the ivory carver's art in the orient. Its special interest lies in that the central theme of the panels forms the story of Adam and Eve. Unfortunately, at present we are unable to know the provenance from which it came into the Leslie de Saram Collection.

In a paper published by Joseph Pearson under the caption "Note on an ivory panel in the Colombo Museum," (See J.R.A.S. Ceylon Br. Vol. XXIX, No. 75, Parts 1—IV, 1922, pp. 2—5, Pls. 1—IV) mention is made of the existence of four such ivory carvings. Of these the Colombo Museum exhibit is only a carved panel which probably formed one of the doors of a cabinet. That it was used for such a purpose is indicated by the presence of two perforations on the upper and lower halves of the left side of the panel for fixing two hinges. The other three specimens are complete cabinets belonging to foreign museums, viz, two cabinets in the Louvre Museum (one belonged to the Sauvageot Collection and the other to the Révoil Collection) and the third in the Victoria and Albert Museum. We are now fortunate in adding to this list another complete cabinet. As the Colombo Museum carving is only a single panel, the University of Ceylon specimen becomes unique by its being the only complete cabinet so far known to be found in Ceylon (Pls. I, II).

The Ceylon University specimen measures 14.6 in. × 10.5 in. × 12 in. The box is made of thin wood to which ivory panels have been fitted on the outside faces so that the whole box appears as one completely made of ivory. The two doors and the drawers are treated in the same manner. The panels are fitted on to the wood by driving in ivory nails and at the corners are ornamental metal mountings which have been fixed as a strengthening measure. The doors are fixed with metal hinges, three on each side, as in

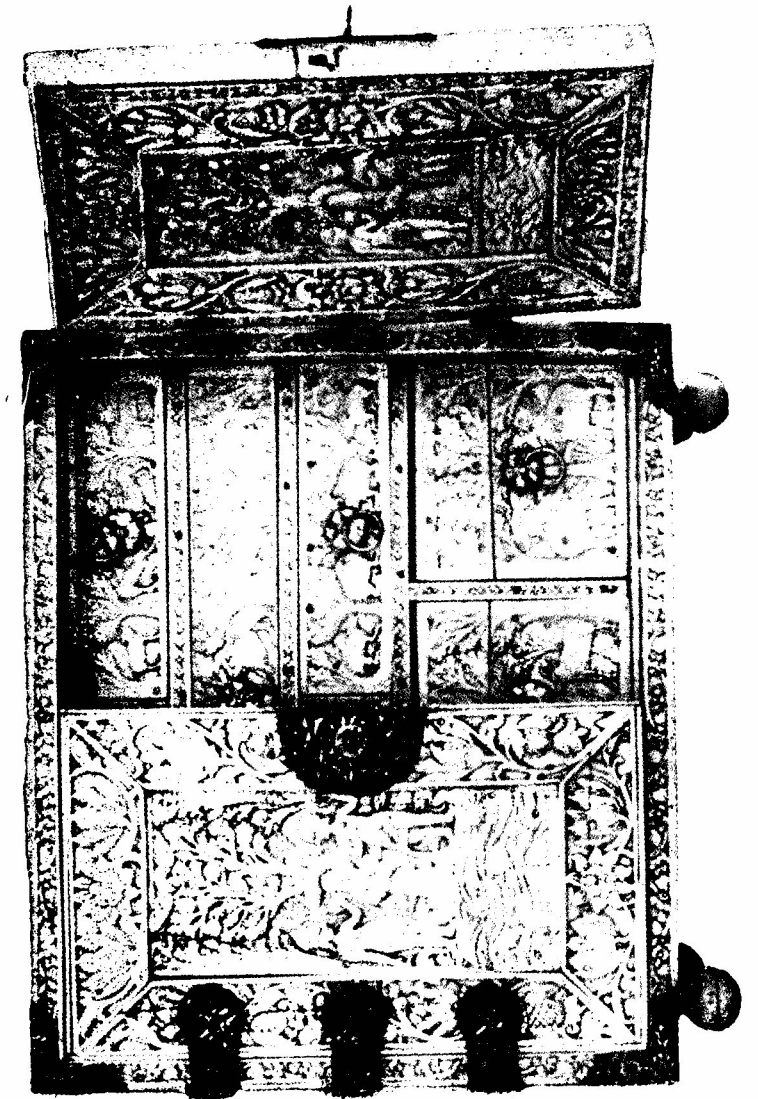


Plate I

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the case of the Victoria and Albert Museum specimen. The two doors which are of equal size are to be locked together at the centre. The ornamental key-plate is fixed in two equal halves so that when the two doors are closed together they appear as a single plate.

The centre of each side panel is provided with a large ring-handle. Four round knobs of ivory (three are replaced by wooden ones) have been used as props or legs of the cabinet.

The box contains eight drawers in four stages : (from top to bottom), (1) Two narrow drawers of equal size, (2) single narrow drawer running to its entire length, (3) two narrow drawers of equal size and (4) three drawers of equal size. Each drawer is fitted with a small ring-handle of metal at the centre. The faces of the drawers are panelled with ivory carvings. It will be of interest to note that these carvings portray animals (lions, leopards, boar, deer, buffaloes, elephants, etc.) in pairs with trees intervening—a feature not found in other specimens of this class. (Pl. III).

Large panels depicting the story of Adam and Eve are carved on the sides of the box and the two doors. Each central panel showing 'Adam and Eve' is set within a frame-work of scroll bands, the broad frame itself being placed between two narrow bands of scrollwork. The panel at the back is reduced in size by being set within a framework of four such decorated bands.

There is a general similarity in the central scene of all these panels. An apple tree occupies the centre with Adam and Eve on either side facing each other amidst a group of animals. A serpent coils round the trunk of the tree and its head is stretched out towards the fruit held in Eve's hand. The figures are usually depicted in the same postures. But they change their sides in different scenes. Thus in six panels (top, back and two side panels, right door outer panel and left door inner panel) Eve is shown on the right and Adam on the left. Eve holds the fruit in her outstretched right hand, while her left hand is stretched away from the body. Adam places his left hand on his chest and the right hand is stretched upwards and bent at the elbow with the index finger pointing upwards. The rest of the panels portray Eve on the left and Adam on the right. In such panels the right hand takes the position of the left in other scenes and the left hand that of the right. Though nude both Adam and Eve have their loins covered in a characteristic manner. Eve covers her loins by her long wavy locks of

hair which, falling over the shoulders flow across the back and appear at the thigh covering the region of the groin. Adam has his loins covered by a shrub that grows nearby. In the garden amidst trees and shrubs are shown various animals like elephants, horses, deer and wild boar. The central tree is shown laden with fruits and some birds are shown hovering above and approaching the fruits, while others peck at the fruits. In spite of the hard material in which the artist had to work, he has been successful in depicting the animals in their natural movements.

In each panel, below the garden scene, there is a river scene. Amidst the surging waves which are shown in a conventional manner, there are fishes floating about, while the presence of the crocodiles is indicated by their heads peeping above the water. This feature—the river scene—is very well shown in the Ceylon University specimen. In the other specimens the proximity of the garden to the waters is merely suggested by the presence of aquatic animals like pelicans, swans, tortoises and crocodiles.

A casual glance at the above-mentioned cabinets would show a general similarity of form and design, central theme and ornamentation, style and technique. Probably they were issued from the same atelier. However, a close examination of the different cabinets would reveal certain well-marked variations.

The inner compartments or drawers of the Ceylon University cabinet differ from those of the other cabinets in number as well as in design. The Louvre Museum specimen and the Victoria and Albert Museum cabinets possess only four drawers each while the Ceylon University Cabinet contains eight drawers. The facing of the drawers in all other ivory cabinets are decorated with scroll patterns while in the Ceylon University cabinet, as it has already been noted, the facing panels of the drawers contain friezes of various animals, always in pairs placed on either side of a tree. Herein the artist appears to have made a bold attempt to deviate from the usual design, and in keeping with the central theme he decorated these panels too with garden or jungle scenes in a stylised manner.

According to the description of the Sauvageot Collection cabinet, given by Albert Jacquemart in "History of Furniture" and quoted by Pearson in his paper mentioned above, the Adam and Eve scene is carved on the inner side of the door panel. In the ivory cabinet belonging to the Révoil Collection this scene appears on the outer side of the door panel. Though

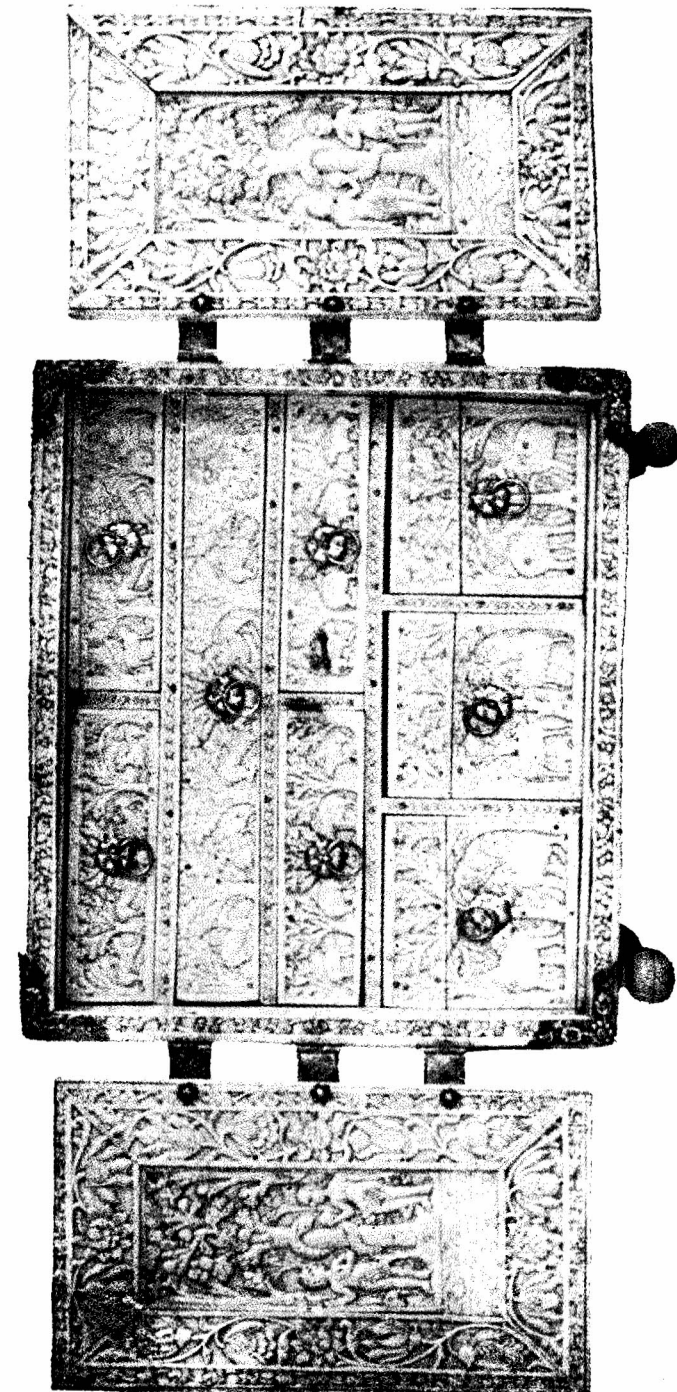


Plate II

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there are two doors closing at the centre in this specimen the whole front face is treated as a single panel in depicting the story. The inner sides of the doors are treated as separate panels, but here the decoration consists of scroll designs of the same type as the decoration of the drawer fronts. In the case of the Victoria and Albert Museum specimen, the outer face of the doors depicts the story of Adam and Eve as in Révoil specimen. But the inner sides of the doors, too, contain two complete scenes of the Garden of Eden, one in each panel. In the case of the Ceylon University cabinet the outer face as well as the inner face of the doors is treated as a separate panel, and all contain Adam and Eve scenes ; it thus has four scenes altogether on the two doors alone.

In the carvings of the boxes belonging to the other museums we notice that the faces of Adam and Eve are usually treated in three-quarter view. In the Ceylon University specimen all faces are shown in profile.

The wildness of the vegetation is strongly suggested in the Colombo Museum panel and in the Révoil Collection cabinet, while in the Ceylon University cabinet scenes are comparatively clear with few trees and select animals.

The creeper patterns decorating the outer bands of the carvings of the Louvre Museum specimen and those of the Victoria and Albert Museum cabinet are elaborate and rhythmical, the intervening circles containing figures of birds in various postures. This feature is altogether absent in the Ceylon University specimen.

When we consider the style and technique of the different carvings it becomes clear that the Colombo Museum panel is the best of all. The figures of Adam and Eve, animals and also the rich vegetation are summarily treated but there is a gliding rhythm that pervades through the whole scene. Figures are of high relief, their bodies are graceful and well-proportioned. Compared with this the carvings of the Ceylon University cabinet appear flat. Even the breasts of Eve could hardly be seen, and figures on the whole give a stunted appearance. However, taking the Ceylon University specimen by itself one could notice that the top panel is better treated than the rest. Figures in this panel are well modelled and details are shown better. Generally, the heavy scenes contrast with the lightly treated scroll bands. Thus the whole panel presents a pleasing design.

According to Pearson the four specimens mentioned earlier must have been made in the same workshop and probably the Sauvageot Collection box and the Colombo Museum specimen were made by one artist while the cabinets belonging to the Révoil Collection and the Victoria and Albert Museum were worked by another. As regards the age and origins of these ivory carvings Pearson adds: "I have not been able to obtain any precise information on this question but the consensus of opinion appears to favour their having been made by Italian monks in the 17th century either in India or Ceylon." However, Sir Cecil H. Smith, the then Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, opined that 'the box in the Victoria and Albert Museum belonged to a period of Dutch colonisation in Ceylon rather than to the earlier Portuguese occupation period.' Very probably these ivory cabinets were produced locally by a group of European artists, either Portuguese or Dutch.

The Ceylon University specimen is definitely a product of the same atelier. However, its style and workmanship indicates that this cabinet must have been produced by a different artist from the others. On comparison, the ivory cabinet exhibited in the Archaeological Museum of the Ceylon University comes closer to the Victoria and Albert Museum specimen than to the others.

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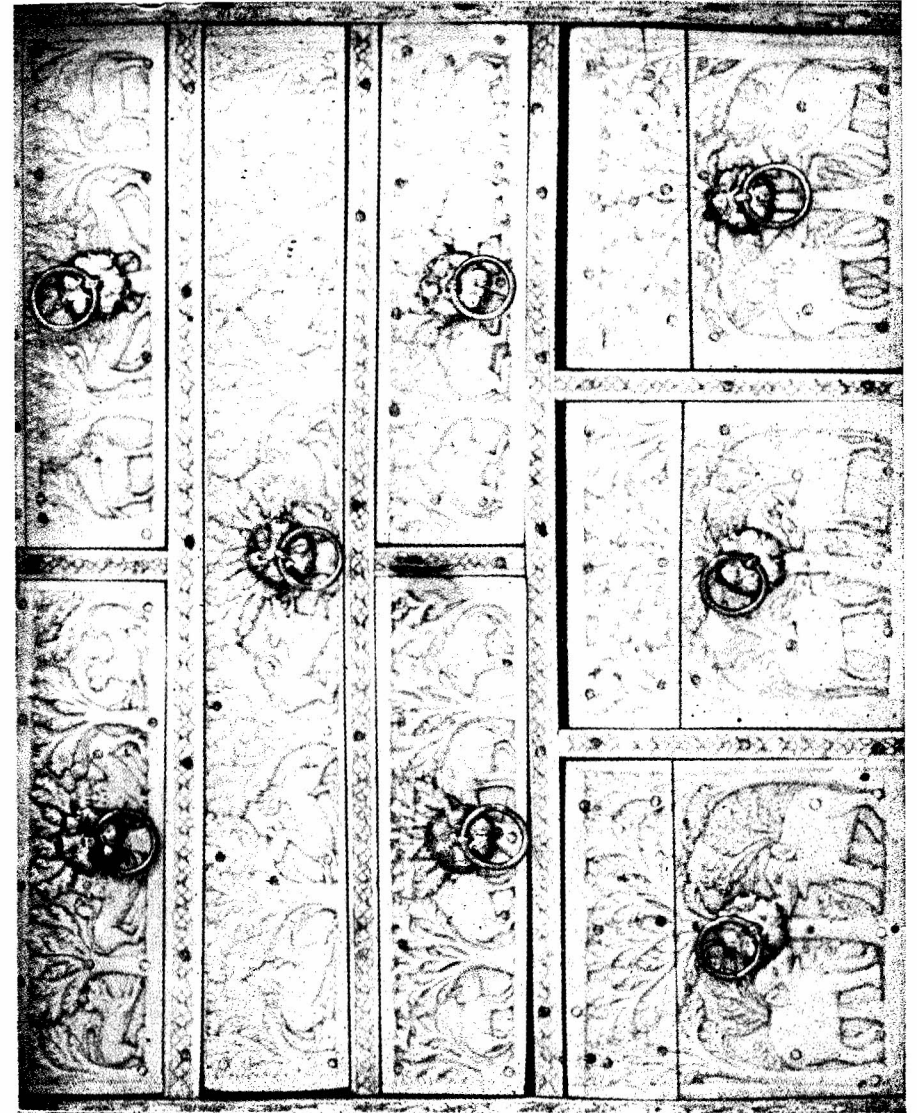


Plate III