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ABSTRACT: “Agents in Ivory: Critical Hybridity in Loango Tusk Sculptures”

A crocodile attack, “Westernized” Africans, European merchants, enslaved Africans, and Roman deities – each scene just two inches tall – spiral around elephant tusks in sculptural relief. Ivory tusks, elaborately carved with scenes such as these and a multitude of others, document the cosmopolitan and dramatically changing social and economic character of the Loango Coast during the mid- nineteenth to early twentieth century. Kongo-Vili artists carved each unique sculpture as souvenirs for Westerners who were engaged in trade in the region. Held in museum and private collections throughout the United States and Europe, these sculptural documents are rarely publicly exhibited and have received scant scholarly attention. With their naturalistic style and narrative subject matter, Loango tusk sculptures challenge notions that typically value African art as “authentic” for its aesthetic otherness and ritual use. Inspired by Homi Bhabha’s notion of the “colonial hybrid,” Henry Louis Gates’ treatise on “signifying” or coded criticism in black culture, and Alfred Gell’s analyses on how art objects themselves may be agents, this paper argues that beyond the sculptures’ reference to indigenous, Kongophone traditional art forms and local proverbs, their hybridity is the source of their agency. This paper is also based upon research conducted in United States and European museum and private collections and archives (2005-2006), and fieldwork conducted on the Loango Coast in and around Pointe Noire, Republic of Congo (2007). Representational rather than abstract, creole rather than “pure,” and documentary rather than “timeless,” Loango ivories demonstrate multiple visual literacies by appropriating and incorporating ostensibly Western idioms with Kongophone ones while simultaneously critiquing Westerners. Frequent representations on the sculptures of violence such as forced labor, captivity, and abuse, scenes illustrating intimate relations between European men and African women, or depictions of Europeans at leisure drinking and playing – as well as the materiality and form of the tusk itself -- confronted and critiqued the very patrons of the sculptures. Loango tusk sculptures “signify” in indeterminate, multivalent, and dynamic ways.