

# JOURNEY TO THE WEST

西游记

The British  
Museum



*Opens 7th April 2022*

The Edith Murphy  
Foundation



Charles Wallace  
India Trust

Pears  
Foundation



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## Raw Materials

Ivory is by no means exclusively obtained from elephants; any animal tooth or tusk used as a material for carving may be termed "ivory", though the species is usually added, and a great number of different species with tusks or large teeth have been used. Elephant ivory, as well as coming in the largest pieces, is relatively soft and even, and an ideal material for carving and were believed to have come from Africa and India.



## Traders' Journey

The ivory industry in China needs to be understood within the context of the economic transformation in East Asia in terms of traders, craftsmen and vendors of ivory. Processing ivory was vibrant and China was the largest ivory manufacturing and exporting country in the world. This attracted international manufacturers from Malaysia and Indonesia. The transnational trade in carved and ornamented ivory objects was mainly between Fujian and Guangzhou.



## Travel Stories

The lid shows the episode from Xiyouji (Journey to the West) with an angel in each corner. The central cartouche for an owner's monogram or coat of arms remains blank.

The interior of the lid is painted with a view of the Bocca Tigris forts on the Pearl River. This echoes the power and importance of cooperation and collaboration that the global network.

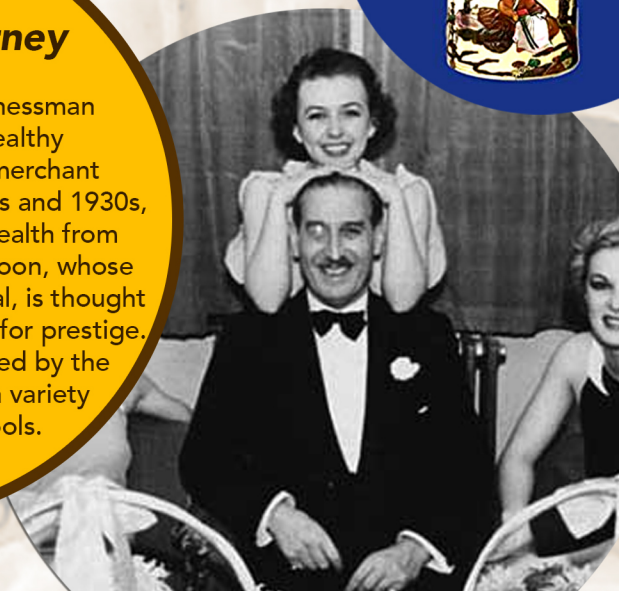


CHINESE  
IVORY  
CARVINGS  
THE  
SIR VICTOR SASSOON  
COLLECTION



## Collector's Journey

Victor Sassoon was a businessman and hotelier from the wealthy Baghdadi Jewish Sassoon merchant and banking family. In the 1920s and 1930s, he transferred much of his wealth from India to Shanghai, China. Sassoon, whose fondness for art is controversial, is thought to have collected ivory objects for prestige. When the casket was acquired by the Sasson Trust it contained a variety of ivory needlework tools.



**Object In Focus: CASKET**, Museum number 2018,3005.475

Group : Emrah Kahraman, Siddhant Shah and William Nsuiban Gmayi

Mentor : Jessica Harrison-Hall, Head - China Section, Curator of Chinese Ceramics and Chinese Decorative Arts

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## CASKET

Museum number : 2018,3005.475

Donated by:  
The Sir Victor Sassoon Chinese Ivories Trust,  
2018

The casket, produced in Guangzhou in the 19th century, is densely decorated with carved Chinese scenes such a hunt and a lion dance or procession for the lantern festival around Chinese New Year. The interior of the lid is painted with a view of the Bocca Tigris forts on the Pearl River. The box was bought by Sir Victor Sassoon, a businessman who was active in collecting carved ivory.



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Chinese carvers produced snuff bottles, stands for porcelains, perfume boxes, accessories for opium smokers, as well as Majiang (Mahjong) sets and seals.

The carved ivory casket came to the British Museum in 2018 through a donation from The Sir Victor Sassoon Chinese Ivories Trust and after this display is soon to go on loan to the Jewish Museum in New York in an exhibition about the Sassoon family and their collections.

Visitors to the exhibition at the British Museum will see some of the details of the five journeys directly relating to the object – the journey of raw materials from India and Africa; the migration of ivory workers from SE Asia; the journeys from legend and popular culture carved on the casket; the transport of the casket from China to Europe and finally the voyage of the casket from the Sassoon collection to the British Museum. There will also be the opportunity to share their journeys on a mood board. All visitors will see the episode from *Xiyouji* (Journey to the West) which is carved on the lid of the casket. Its inclusion in the exhibition helps to tell the story of different journeys of the shared beliefs and cultures that inspired ancient communities to build many other journeys including trading.

**Claire Messenger, Manager of the International Training Programme, said:** *"The Object in focus exhibition proposal project always proves to be a highlight of the International Training Programme. It clearly demonstrates our fellows hard work, research skills, creativity and imagination. It allows voices to be heard, ideas to be exchanged and provides an excellent opportunity for the fellows to develop strong working relationships and enhance the ITP global network."*

*"The story of the Journey to the West, echoes the power and importance of cooperation and collaboration that the global network of culture and heritage professionals hope to bring to museum sectors around the world"*

Jessica Harrison-Hall – As Laozi the Daoist Philosopher has said a journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step. The three curators of this exhibition have collectively travelled a thousand miles to be here and unlocked the secrets of this beautiful casket.

The exhibition has been organised with the National Museums of Ghana, India and Turkey.

A full public programme of events will accompany the exhibition. More information will be available on [britishmuseum.org](http://britishmuseum.org)

Opening on Tuesday April 7 – Tuesday April 14 2022 @10.00–17.00, each day. Last entry 90 mins before closing.

Details on Tickets below:  
[www.britishmuseum.org/journeytothewest](http://www.britishmuseum.org/journeytothewest)



The British Museum unveils its special exhibition *The Journey to the West* (7 April – 14 April 2022). This is the UK's first ever special exhibition on the story of the ancient Chinese tradition of ivory carving. **Five journeys are brought together from across the world** in a once-in-a-lifetime spectacle on the history – and mystery – of the ancient Chinese tradition of ivory carving.

Visitors will see the key object, which is a rare, carved ivory casket made for export from China in the early 1800s. The entire surface is densely decorated with figural scenes and fitted with gilt-bronze hinges, side handles and a lock. The front panel is carved with figures returning from a day trip hunting while the reverse has a night scene of a lion dance illuminated by figures holding lanterns. The lid shows the episode from *Xiyouji* (Journey to the West) with an angel in each corner. The central cartouche for an owner's monogram or coat of arms remains blank. The interior of the lid is painted with a view of the Bocca Tigris forts on the Pearl River near Guangzhou.

Ivory carvers, making such treasures as ivory goblets inlaid with turquoise, have been active in China since before the era of the Shang dynasty (18th-12th century BCE). At that time elephants roamed the forests around the Yellow River so artists had easy access to a regular supply of tusks. During the Han Dynasty (206-220 CE) ivory tablets became a regular feature of formal dress, and even grew in size during the Tang (618-907). Elephants became extinct in China in the Song (960-1279) dynasty. Imported ivory was used during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), to create small statuettes of popular gods and other figures. During the era of the Qing dynasty (1644-1912), when Beijing and Guangzhou established themselves as the leading centres of Chinese ivory carving, the craft became more intricate and widespread. Objects carved included decorative handles, brush-holders, table screens, cylindrical brush boxes, as well as a wide range of delicately carved figurines, often coloured with stains and lacquers. Later,