

BOOKS

Ivory's Ghosts: The White Gold of History and the Fate of Elephants

by John Frederick Walker, ed., New York: Grove Press, 2009. 312 pages. Paperback: \$15.00.

REVIEWED BY BARBARA STAUFFER

Elaborately carved Renaissance triptychs ... intricate Chinese puzzle spheres ... rounded Paleolithic Venus figures ... mounds of Victorian-era billiard balls ... richly decorated horns from Benin. These are the images that excite my imagination at the outset of reading *Ivory's Ghosts: The White Gold of History and the Fate of Elephants* by John Frederick Walker. Walker does such a thorough and evocative job of describing the allure of ivory through the ages – its unique physical properties, its exotic origins, and its incredible beauty – that the exhibition developer in me can't resist imagining them displayed to full effect. In my mind's eye I can just see this array of treasures resting on fabric-covered pedestals, artfully lit in their vitrines.

But that's just the first third of the book. Continue reading, and the incredible environmental, social and political costs of our millennia-long global obsession with ivory become abundantly clear. And that's when the exhibition developer in me fully understands that this book could serve as the basis for a major exhibition, one of those comprehensive exhibitions that takes a single topic and spins it out to tell an important and even larger cultural and environmental story. Museums have mounted exhibitions inspired by books: think of the Los Angeles County Natural History Museum's

2004 exhibition, *COLLAPSE?*, inspired by Jared Diamond's book of the same name and the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History's 1991 *Seeds of Change* exhibition, inspired by a book by Henry Hobhouse. With *Ivory's Ghosts*, Walker has created the ideal background paper for a case study of how a commodity can be a source of artistic inspiration, the focus of a brutal global trade, a symbol of power, an impetus for industrialization, and an important lesson in the importance of wildlife conservation.

There would be many challenges to putting together such an exhibition, and I can just imagine a few of the interesting and important conversations that an exhibition team would have.

You'd have to show some ivory artifacts, as they are part of the troubled history of the commodity and, frankly, part of the public allure of the topic. And all of the items on display could very well be borrowed from the collections of the Smithsonian's nineteen museums and research centers, as well as notable collections like those of the Walters Art Museum, the Victoria & Albert Museum, Rosenborg Castle in Copenhagen, the Alaska State Museums, and many others. As Walker describes in the first third of his book, ivory's tactile qualities, its increasing rarity, the difficulty of obtaining it, and the symbolic value assigned to it made it a valuable global commodity for societies dating

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from the Neolithic to the present. The sheer range of geographic areas, styles and time periods of ivory artifacts would underscore the cultural importance of ivory through the ages.

But then someone would ask: is it wise to put together such a beautiful display when the actual message you're trying to communicate is quite different? Isn't there the risk of increasing the demand for ivory by displaying it? How do you communicate the cultural importance and value of ivory objects when you want people to leave the exhibition understanding the toll the trade takes on elephants, people, and landscapes? And how do you feature and justify the ivory in your own collections while telling visitors they are bad, irresponsible, and even potential felons if they covet or consider purchasing ivory in the future? We all know that lecturing to or berating visitors isn't very effective.

Ideas for approaches would abound: Walker describes ancient and historic sources predicting the extinction of elephants, starting with Pliny the Elder in the year 77 C.E. and including a German ivory dealer in 1876. Perhaps the display of ivory artifacts could be combined with some of those predictions to remind people of the devastating loss of elephant life behind the acquisition of ivory. Another possible strategy for communicating this loss might be to add in text labels in a large and dramatic typeface that communicate the number of elephants that were killed in the year a given ivory object was made.

This data might be hard to assemble, and some museums – art museums perhaps – might not be comfortable with this approach. But the team could certainly consider it. Harder would be helping visitors understand the difference between historic artifacts acquired legally (or at least before the ivory bans) and conserved responsibly and those modern-day trinkets that are part of a violent and illegal global market.

This is where a detective game that takes visitors through the process of determining whether or not a certain piece of ivory is legal might be both entertaining and effective.

Another challenge would be to communicate the complex socio-economic, political, and global history of the ivory trade. Without an appreciation of that, it is difficult to understand what happens when local markets become global and when the actions of a few roll up into a devastating industrial-scale process undertaken by many. A first, very pragmatic, decision would be to limit the story to Africa, which Walker has effectively done in his book. Admittedly, Asian elephants are even more endangered than their African counterparts. But their story is more complex, with threats from human-elephant conflict and habitat loss playing the largest roles and ivory trade emerging as a growing menace. And no exhibition can cover everything. So, recognizing that a focused story will have more impact, an African story would likely get exhibit design team support and allow you to hone in on the story of how an estimated 26 million African elephants in 1800 were reduced to just over 1 million in the early 1970s.

There is a wealth of archival and more contemporary images that you could draw from to illuminate the increasingly sophisticated network of indigenous elephant hunters, cross-border slave traders, and international merchants involved in the long and violent history of the ivory trade. But there would be concern that you're not doing enough to bring to life the violence and the horror of elephant hunting. So you might select objects that provide evidence of the ferocious evolution of elephant hunting, including weapons ranging from nineteenth-century elephant guns to assault rifles and a poacher's jeep. Brutal, yes, but exhibitions have the power to appeal to the emotions, and the team would want to do that here. In addition,

life-sized modeled installations of a 6-foot-high mound of elephant entrails in the bush – with the smell if possible! – and a car-sized scale stacked high with elephant tusks in a warehouse in late nineteenth-century Zanzibar would appeal both to visitors' appreciation of scale and help elicit a more personal – and literally visceral – response.

And it would be hard to resist displaying an example of what Walker considers the ultimate – and tragically ironic – example of the global nature of the ivory trade: a trinket carved in China from African elephant ivory and then shipped back to Africa to be sold as a local souvenir.

Finally, it would be essential to bring the story up to the present day and to communicate the ongoing international struggle to regulate the ivory trade and conserve elephants. *Ivory's Ghosts* was published in 2009, so the conservation information contained in it is nearly a decade out of date, particularly in light of the 2014 decision to ban the commercial import of ivory in the United States, a 2015 ivory crush in Times Square, Kenya's controversial decision to burn a stockpile of ivory in 2016, and China's decision to ban ivory sales by the end of 2017. But the basic issues at play have not changed since the book was published, and it wouldn't take much to find current information from sources such as the World Wildlife Fund, the African Wildlife Foundation, the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, National Geographic Society, and an impressive host of organizations that play a role in protecting elephants through education and conservation efforts. Finding someone who is as skillful as Walker in weaving the complex data and information into a compelling narrative is another challenge completely.

Add to that the fact that contemporary and contentious issues cannot be as neatly packaged

and presented as historical topics, particularly in exhibitions where information is interpreted as "fact," and you're presented with some challenges. To begin with, the effect on elephants by population growth, settlement, habitat loss, and arbitrary political boundaries makes the story the exhibit is charged with telling about more than just hunting or poaching. And, what about the effects on people when their traditional practices become illegal? Thus there are a variety of perspectives – including international conservation groups, national and local governments, wildlife preserves, local communities, poachers, art historians – that must be included in the exhibition. And any proposed solution generates much disagreement and many additional questions that are raised in Walker's book and still relevant today. How large can an elephant herd be before it begins to destroy its habitat? Should herd sizes be managed through selective culling? How can you dispose of legal ivory (i.e., from elephants that die of natural causes) without adding to the global demand for ivory? Why can't a wildlife preserve sell its legally obtained tusks to pay for the costs of managing the land? And, very important in the effort to conserve elephants, how do you protect elephants while preserving the livelihoods of the people who live near and among them?

An exhibit team would spend quite a bit of time discussing these complex issues, how best to include them, and what partner organization and/or consultant would provide the expertise needed for this portion of the exhibition. This is where media and public programming could come into play to expand upon themes and questions raised by Walker's book. For example, you could imagine an interactive experience where visitors to the exhibition have the opportunity to take on a role, perhaps as the manager of a wildlife preserve, perhaps as a resident living adjacent to the preserve, perhaps as a researcher

who tracks elephants to study their social habits, perhaps as an art historian who curates a collection that includes ivory. Such role playing could also take place in debates and discussions and other public programs designed to engage groups in solving knotty elephant conservation problems. In any case, while taking on these roles, visitors would learn more about the problems that these respective people need to solve, be exposed to a variety of perspectives, and – ideally – realize that, while there are no easy answers, smart people – like those who Walker features in the section of his book on conservation and wildlife management – are coming up with and trying out a variety of solutions.

After all this, if you've done things right, you've employed a variety of strategies that encourage your visitors to leave with a greater understanding of the historic role of ivory in world culture, an appreciation of why they should care about elephants and ivory, and a new sense of purpose in what they can do in support of elephant conservation and ivory trade regulation. And that leads me to conclude with one final possible exhibition idea: imagine life-sized images of piles of tusks at each entrance to the exhibition: rows of tusks for sale in a nineteenth-century ivory warehouse at one end and stacks of tusks legally collected on a wildlife preserve at the other. These would represent the possibility that ivory is now elephants' salvation rather than its curse, a message that Walker hopes is true.

Having now explored Walker's book through the lens of an exhibition developer, I find myself even more excited by the possibilities of an exhibition and associated programming. And I hope that others might be inspired as well. At the very least, it would be worthwhile to read *Ivory's Ghosts* and then follow up with some of the more recent literature on ivory and elephant conservation. Having done that, how

would you present this topic in your institution? Does it inspire you to think about your own institution's collections and how they could be used to stimulate these same conversations (both internal and with your visitors)? What other exhibition and outreach ideas do the conversations generate? And, how can the conversation continue? I certainly hope it does! **END**