



### *Afro-Portuguese Saltcellar, c. 1490-1530*

Foliage Master, Floral Workshop (Sierra Leone)

Ivory | Height: 13 1/8 in. (33.3 cm)

- The meaning behind the confrontation between the dogs and snakes is not known. How might these animals fit into the theme of the work? Who might the figures at the top represent?

#### VISUAL ANALYSIS

The work is a chalice-shaped vessel with a salt cup capped with an ornately decorated lid. The vessel has a conical base decorated with *spiral gadrooning* twisting along indentations made in the ivory. Above, the base is adorned with alternating human and dog figures, five of each positioned equidistantly around the cone. Surrounding these figures are intricate details of floral decorations, particularly patterned leaves and

stems. The humans are all positioned with their hands behind their backs, looking outwards, while the dogs all face upward. The facial expressions of these people are very similar, and all appear to be wearing head coverings and trousers. The figures are not proportionate: their heads are about one third of their body, and their faces are elongated. The dogs are looking up at snakes that have descended from an upper *knop*: the snakes are fanged and opened mouthed, while the dogs have flattened their ears and bared their teeth.

Above this, a cylinder connects the base to the cup of the “chalice,” capped with another knop. The cup is also decorated with the spiral gadrooning. At the top are the figures of a mother and child. The mother holds her child so that it faces away from her and out toward the viewer, or possibly the ground. She has her arms wrapped around the baby’s torso and ankles, while sitting on her haunches, knees on the ground, balancing the child’s feet on one of her thighs.

The overall effect of the work’s composition is to draw the viewer’s eye upward towards the figures, and this is principally achieved through the use of the gadrooning and figures along the base. Notably, the strongest horizontal element is the seam between the top and bottom of the salt cup.

#### FUNCTION/Form & Style

The intended function of the work is to serve as a container for table salt, but as evidenced by the ornate design, these objects were utilized more for decoration than practical use. As exports, the African symbolism inherent in the ivories was lost after the works were shipped to Europe. Europeans purchasing the ivory objects also viewed traditional African stylization and motifs as pagan, and began commissioning ivories with European motifs, including traditional heraldic, Christian, or

- What are some visual ways that the saltcellar represents the mixture of two different cultures?
- How might it be helpful to have men who understood both African and European cultures to mediate trade between the two countries? How might the presence of such men influence or change the ivory exportation?

western mythological imageries. These ivories, then, became “visual and conceptual hybrids” of the African and European traditions.

With the onset of established trade, the many cultures of Africa and Europe invariably mixed. The Portuguese had an established and growing trade empire, and as such had a considerable amount of contact with the native tribes. Three different groups of Portuguese lived in Africa during this time: the metropolitan Portuguese who stayed in the major cities, those who settled on Cape Verde (an archipelago off the western coast of Africa), and the *lançados*—Portuguese who were integrated and initiated into *Bullom* and *Temne* societies. As such, they became middlemen traders and ambassadors. The *lançados* underwent all of the initiation practices of the Temne and Bullom people, including scarification rites. The saltcellar depicts these *lançados* as the figures around its base.

Traditional ivory carvers made no difference visually between the facial features of Africans or Portuguese, but the long hair of these figures indicates that they are, indeed, Europeans. Their bare feet, trousers, and the scarification seen on some of their torsos further indicate their *lançado* status. The combination of the imagery

of Africanized Portuguese with African motifs, such as animal imagery, suggests a proverbial or metaphorical reference of local significance. In other works, the ivory carvers would place Portuguese figures in situations that metaphorically indicated their power, such as carving them astride an elephant, or amidst captives.

### CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE

The Temne and Bullom people were among several indigenous tribes encountered by the Portuguese in 1462, when contact with western Africa was made and a system of trade established. Little about this area was culturally homogenous. The people did not have an organized all-encompassing government; instead, the area was composed of village clusters, each with their own set of leaders. There also was no unifying language—men’s and women’s groups bridged the culturally diverse areas by inviting people from all over the region to join their social organizations.

This saltcellar and other ivory works from the region created during the 15th to 16th century were among the first pieces of African art created especially for export. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to sail Sub-Saharan Africa and open up trade routes. This area was filled with skilled ivory

### VOCABULARY

**Knop:** A small decorative knob.

**Lançados:** Portuguese who integrated into the African society as middlemen merchants.

**Spiral gadrooning:** Spiral beading carved on indentations.

**Temne; Bullom:** African tribes located in the area now known as Sierra Leone.

## OHIO ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

Study of this work and its related classroom activities meets some or all of the following K-12 benchmarks:

- **Language Arts:**  
Acquisition of Vocabulary; Communications: Oral and Visual; Concept of Print, Comprehension Strategies and Self-Monitoring Strategies; Information, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Literary Text; Research; Writing Process
- **Mathematics:**  
Mathematical Processes Measurement; Geometry and Spatial Sense
- **Sciences:** Life Sciences; Science and Technology
- **Social Studies:**  
Economics; Geography; History; People in Societies; Skills and Methods
- **Visual Arts:** Analyzing and Responding; Connections, Relationships, and Applications; Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection

craftsmen, and their work, particularly forks, spoons, jewelry boxes, and saltcellars, was commissioned by Portuguese nobility and wealthy patrons

from Austria and Germany as decorative art. During the Renaissance, their work was collected for curiosity cabinets as examples of the 'rare' and 'exotic.'

### CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

**LANGUAGE ARTS:** Since the significance of the animal imagery has been lost over time, research some other stories from African tribal culture that have animals as their main characters. Use what you have learned to come up with your own interpretation of the saltcellar's imagery. (*Elementary and Middle School*)

**MATHEMATICS:** How many of each kind of animal is depicted, including humans? How many resemble each other exactly, and how many are different from the rest of their similar figures? (*Elementary School*)

**SCIENCE:** Ivory comes from elephants and other tusked creatures, such as the hippopotamus and walrus. Is it possible for humans to have ivory in our teeth? What are some of the structural differences between tusks and teeth? What happens when those tusks are removed from an animal? (*All Ages*)

**SOCIAL STUDIES:** What parts of the world does ivory come from? Investigate ivory trade in the world today. Why is the trade of ivory illegal and what steps are being taken to prevent this illegal trade? What problems are associated with ivory trade laws and what are some possible solutions? (*Middle and High School*)