

Fossil Ivory Carving - by Natasha Popova

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(by Natasha) Hello everyone!! I'm Natasha Popova, living in Moldova. It is the small country which situated between The Ukraine and Romania, not far from the Black Sea.

I use different raws for my carvings, box-wood, mammoth and walrus tusk, cachalot tooth. My carvings are the fine sculptures, okimono and netsuke.



The new work is the ryusa style netsuke, called "Dragon and Lily", 2 inches across! I so wonder about your opinion!



I have done only this ryusa netsuke, it was my first attempt! I have photos of the reverse side and some of sides.

I carved the loop for the cord which was opposite himotoshi. There was so much undercutting work, I thought I would be cried! Janel knows this “funny” story!

(by Janel) The inside carving of the ryusa netsuke was a remarkable accomplishment, in mammoth tusk! That is HARD material to carve. Then, try to imagine making the tools carve half an inch away or more, sideways, from the hole in which the tool is inserted. Arrrgggghh! Not for the timid carver or faint of heart.

I think that Natasha meant that this ryusa is the first and only one that she has carved. You will find many remarkable carvings by this talented woman on her web site.

Question: (by Natasha) I have a question: is there a contemporary carver who has carved such ryusa netsuke with a lot of open-work? When I began to carve it, I found not many such netsuke, they all were antique. I even visited the site of Sotheby and saw some of them. My collector, who ordered this ryusa style netsuke sent to some images, too. But I couldn't find a contemporary netsuke!

Answer: (by Doug Sanders) It's just my opinion of course, but I think regarding contemporary ryusa manju netsuke it's a question of what the market wants.

From what I've seen in auction catalogs, kagamibuta and manju netsuke fetch much lower prices than katabori (carving in the round) figures and animals.

It's a shame, because the ryusa especially take quite a bit of skill and time, not to mention different tools. With kagamibuta, I like how one can create a 2-dimensional scene-almost paint a picture-and have a fuller story than is sometimes possible with a compact 3-D carving.

Tom and Janel- you've created a number of kagamibuta style ones...any thoughts about interest in them from contemporary collectors.

I too can't think of a contemporary ryusa netsuke...

Dick mentioned a while back that kagamibuta netsuke could be considered medals by collectors of that specialty. Could ryusa manju also be defined under the medal category?

(by Jim Kelso) Sadly, ryusa and the other similar forms of netsuke, manju and kagamibuta are held somewhat in contempt by certain factions of the collecting world. Katabori (fully 3 dimensional) netsuke are thought by these folks to be somehow inherently superior. This attitude has exerted its influence on the contemporary work being made so that these forms are not often made.

I commend you Natasha for ignoring this attitude to make such a superior ryusa!

(by Tom Sterling) To Doug's question: "Tom and Janel - you've created a number of kagamibuta style ones...any thoughts about interest in them from contemporary collectors".

I've created a number of kagamibuta netsuke over the years, and only sold a few. There is a definite reluctance on the part of netsuke collectors to obtain manju types (manju, kagamibuta and ryusa styles). Collecting them often seems to be limited to beginning collectors since the prices are generally lower, with a few notable exceptions when a famous name comes available. I suspect the reasons behind these (at least kagamibuta netsuke) being less desirable is the perception that they were produced most often by out-of-work sword furniture makers once samurai swords became outlawed, and that a mechanical means (lathe) was obviously used in part of their manufacture. I found this perception even more pronounced among contemporary collectors, since they are a much smaller subset of the general collector market. Janel may have had better luck, since many of her clients aren't netsuke collectors, who would simply look at her work as desirable based on its' own merit and not through the colored glasses of a particular prejudice.

(by Natasha) Doug, I think You are right! The market dictates everything. This ryusa netsuke was the order, my collector asked me about a carver who is carving the same netsuke. He ordered one

more such netsuke. Probably the market needs such things now!

I agree with You, Kagamibuta is very astonished! I don't think that Kagamibuta can be defined as the medal category. It is more relief, I mean the separated aspect of Art, which cannot be copied many times like the medals!

How did I do hollowing the ryusa? I began with the drill, made many holes, but the drill made very rough view, then I use tools, which were bought in the shop for the dentists. To do such thing, the first time, was very difficult, no special tools, I never saw such netsuke before, no images! So, I carved it intuitively!

(by Natasha) Two days ago I finished my sculpture, the size is 8.7 cm, mammoth tusk.







Especially I would like thank Janel and Peter Welsh for helping with photos of the bat wings! It was really very difficult work, the beginning was with power-tools, then everything was done with hand-tools, I used all tools which were done for the Ryusa style netsuke, such places as places under the wings and between threads of cocoon were very awful for me, but I so adapted at Ryusa, so I could carved it at last!

I began to carve with the power-tool, but almost all work was done by hand-tools, there were so many small details which were not for power-tool. I'm glad that this difficult adventure was finished! I used all tools which were made for the Ryusa style netsuke, such places, as the places under wings and between threads of the cocoon were very difficult! So my experiment with netsuke helped me with the sculpture! So the next work will be one more Ryusa style netsuke!



Question: (by ekrem) It sure is a stunning work of art Natasha! It's beautiful! What did you use to polish all those tiny grooves? The piece looks so smooth all the way round.

Answer: I have spent on this "Breath" 227 hours..... among them about 100 hours for polishing! I begin to polish with sand-paper for cars, from number 600 to 2000. As a rule this process I do 4 times. The first time I polish with number 600 very easy, try to delete all needless deep places or add, if it needs. Then I wash a sculpture with solution of alcohol and water (50/50) trying to delete all dust after sanding. Then I take sand-paper number 800, again wash. The third time I use the sand-paper number 1000 or 1500, it makes the surface of mammoth almost smooth, again wash. The last time I do polishing with sand-paper number 2000, after this time the surface is brilliant! Then I carve all hairs, because dust of sand-papers is heavy deleted!!!! The last time I wash the sculpture with alcohol and water and put it aside for the next day for drying. I cover my work (netsuke and sculptures) with the solution of paraffin, for it I take a clear desolvent and some white paraffin, I prefer very saturated solution and put much paraffin. The next day I cover the sculpture by such solution with a small brush. In two or three hours I take a white cotton cloths and do last polishing. The solution of paraffin penetrates into mammoth very deep, 1-2 mm, that's why all different works with sculpture must be done before covering. The paraffin protects the surface of mammoth or bone against wetness and other small troubles, it doesn't become yellow in some time as organic oil, doesn't make the covered surface sticky or oily. The mammoth, after covering with paraffin, becomes a little bit darker, warmer color. So, you can compare these photos:



The first photo is the covered netsuke, the second was not covered yet.

Question: (by Janel) What do you use as a “clear disolvent” when making a solution of the paraffin? And, is the paraffin you use a solid, white wax (commonly used by people who make sweet fruit jams and preserves, to seal in the jam by melting and pouring onto the hot fruit mixture). I ask because I have heard the word paraffin used to describe what I call kerosene.

Answer: Hi, my dear Janel! It is so strange our languages!!!! The kerosine can be used as a de-solvent, the paraffin is often used for producing candles. I take a white candle, cut it many many times and put in kerosine! So, there is no tasty things! About my tools, it is not a secret, I forgot to do photos, the nearest days I’ll do it!

Question: (by Janel) I find myself wondering how you orient the piece to be carved, to the grain or length of the tusk. Is there a preferable way to place a carving, uh, I do not know how to say it, sorry. I know that there is a pattern when looking at a cross section cut. This might enter into the decision, to show it or to not show it, but are there other reasons to orient the carving into the length or crosswise cut?

Answer: Hi Janel! Sorry, my English is not so good. I didn't understand what did You mean? I have a big piece of mammoth tusk, it was about 23 kg, now it is less! The grain of mammoth doesn't change within all length, I cut a piece and look at it thinking about cracks, size. Recently I've written about how a mammoth tusk must be dried: the tusks are found in the Permafrost, the temperature of it is very low, about -10 or -15 within summer, as soon as the tusk is found, it must be put in the low temperature for 2-3 years, the refrigerator can be a solution, during this time some needless wetness goes away very slowly! Then the tusk put in a place where the temperature is a little bit higher, about zero, then it put in another place with the temperature is about +5 - +10, in year the temperature can be +15 or +20. Only after such drying procedure the mammoth tusk can be used by carvers. After sawing, the pieces are covered with a wax or dye, or paper with glue, or something else which will keep these pieces from cracks. The temperature and the wetness must be constant, the temperature is about +20 degrees, the wetness is about 60 % (+/- 10%), keep them away from any wind in your home. I don't cover my pieces with tradition glue or wax, I use Super Glue (Ciacrine), it keeps my pieces very good, I can always control the surface, the Super Glue is deleted very well! If I see a crack I cover it with this glue, it stops the crack and fills all empty space in the crack.

So if You decide to buy a piece of mammoth tusk You should buy that piece which was dried about 5-7 years. Only such pieces won't give You a bad surprise as a crack after carving. Never buy 1-2 years dried!!!! It is big problem! As a rule, the sawed surface covered with white glue and paper, that's why You cannot see any cracks, the second problem, You must dry it for 2-3 years before carving. So, the piece of mammoth tusk must be dried very well! Better to buy those pieces which have diameter minimum 4 inches and has no more than 1 crack (which looks like a diameter).

Question: (by Janel) About the mammoth tusk question. The tusk is basically a cylindrical shape. You cut the piece and have a disk that is round with two flat faces. These faces have end grain (as with wood), and you can see the arc patterns around the outer portion that are characteristic of tusk/ivory. Elephant ivory has a different degree/angle than mammoth, the basic way to determine which is which.

When you cut the disk in half or other sized portion, the cut parallel to the outside of the tusk, the newly cut face is side-grain or with the grain (again as with wood).

My question is in regards to how and why you orient the carving across or with the grain of the

tusk. Do you give any consideration to which way it fits into the tusk? Thoughts about where you might want to see the arc pattern, or not see it, in certain areas of the carving?

Thank you so much for the detailed information about the nurturing of mammoth tusk. The piece I use was found in sand and gravel, and has a lovely uncracked portion. The broken end is cracked and very weathered, so I take material from the end towards the tip (though the tip was not included with it) The diameter is nearly four inches, and was described as from a female mammoth.