Ivories and Art of the Late Bronze Age

During the Late Bronze Age (LBA; 1600–1200 BC) — a period of unprecedented international contact throughout the ancient Middle East — elaborate royal gifts, such as objects of gold, lapis lazuli, raw and finished ivory, and other precious materials, were exchanged between the powers that ruled in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria, Anatolia, Cyprus, and the Aegean. This exchange led to the development of a new artistic style and craftsmanship that blurred elements and motifs from regions across the ancient Middle East and Mediterranean, resulting in a shared visual language among the elites and rulers. These carved ivories, excavated by OI archaeologists at the site of Megiddo (biblical Armageddon), were part of a hoard of 182 pieces that was buried below the floor of a palace; together they represent a comprehensive range of these unique LBA artistic traditions. Some of the ivories show ties to Egyptian, Assyrian, and Levantine artistic traditions, as example, yet at the same time display a hybridity that leads to ongoing discussions of their production and circulation. Read more about the LBA international artistic style here, and to browse the OI’s publication of the Megiddo Ivories, click here.

Late Bronze Age Aegean and ancient Middle Eastern features were melded into an international hybrid style that is particularly evident in the ivories made for the royal elite. The griffin was a mythological creature with the body of a lion and the head and wings of an eagle. The spiraling curls, overlapping wing feathers, and other details are also found on ivories from Delos, and similar griffins are depicted on wall paintings in Levantine and Egyptian palaces. This plaque (A22212, on display) may have originated in the Aegean, but it could also have been produced locally.

Local Levantine craftsmen drew upon international influences to produce new hybrid forms that would have been out of place in their land of origin. This openwork plaque with a robed female figure with inlaid glass eyes (A22258, on display) is likely from a chair or bed. Among the Amarna Letters, correspondence between Canaanite rulers and Egyptian pharaohs refers to lavish gifts and tribute that included ivory furniture.
**Ivory workers**

Although there is little evidence for ivory carvers and workshops, we can find one possible line of evidence from the Dynasty 18 tomb of Menkheperraseneb. Within this tomb, there appears to be representation of ivory workers working on a tusk that they saw into separate panels, presumably preparing the panels to be carved. The workers use tools that are also used in woodworking, not only saws, but also chisels and drills.

Local craftsmen produced ivories for Levantine elites in an Egyptianizing style that imitates Egyptian forms. Other Megiddo ivories bearing hieroglyphic inscriptions indicate a more direct connection with Egypt. The Canaanite letter tav, resembling the letter X, is inscribed at the bottom of this plaque (A22213, on display), suggesting local production. The female sphinx is also depicted differently from Egyptian sphinxes, which are usually male.