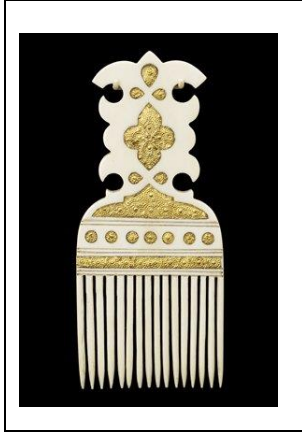

Title of Object

Hair comb

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Unknown

Country: Tanzania

Date of Object: About 1800

File Created: 9/1/2016

Accession Number: 2012.67

Author of File: Pat Gale

Material/Medium: Ivory and gold

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

Department: Arts of Africa

Last Updated/Reviewed: 2/1/2017

Culture: Swahili

Tour Topics

Group 1, Highlight 1600-1850, Trendsetting, symbolism, fashion/style, power/status, women, beauty

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

Take some time to take a close look at this ivory hair comb. What do you notice?

What does this comb tell you about the owner? What might be comparable in our culture?

What objects do you wear to indicate your status?

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

Description: This is an extremely rare ivory comb and an excellent example of Zanzibar craftsmanship. It was carved from a single piece of ivory from an African elephant. It has 16 prongs that are long, tapered and well-spaced. It is inlaid on both sides with chased gold plaques. The design on the handle is

symmetrical with scrolling edges. The cutouts are tear shaped, circular, and include a center quatrefoil and a bar. It is inlaid on both sides with chased gold plaques. The gold inlay is stamped with repeat circular patterns in a sunburst motif that can be seen in both the stripe and the individual designs.

It is believed this comb was a wedding gift and would have definitely shown off the bride's status as one of the wealthy elite and someone who had married wisely. It was most likely used to comb long wet hair and to help with the drying process in addition to being a decoration. In Africa many rites of passage (coming of age, getting married or giving birth) are accompanied by works of art that convey one's new social standing.

In African culture a person's clothes, jewels, hair and combs gave information about the owner. What a person wore could convey their cultural group, their village, their religious affiliation and social status. Combs were "mini sculptures." What are you wearing today that tells us something about you? What else in our lives are symbols of our status?

This comb was made from the ivory of an African elephant. According to experts, the best ivory (the most durable, easiest to carve and the most lustrous) is the soft ivory from the African elephant (actually from the front two incisors of the *Loxodonta Africana*, the African elephant). Asian ivory is considered inferior because the higher density made it harder to polish. Also the ivory was more brittle and more prone to yellow with age. African elephants and their tusks grown on both male and female are much larger than Asian elephants. Their tusk can be as large as 225 pounds and as large as 10 feet tall. The qualities of ivory can vary as well as the color. Surfaces can range from white to yellow to brown.

Because the African ivory was soft and easy to carve into combs, piano keys and billiard balls, by the early 1800's European and American traders were desperate for ivory. (The American demand for ivory in the 1830's was so great that a town was established in Connecticut named Ivoryton with a factory making piano keys and billiard balls from ivory from Zanzibar. It is estimated that in the 1830's at least a dozen elephants a week were dying just for the Connecticut factories. This lasted for about 50 years.)

Note: Billiard balls were always made from the tusks of African female elephants because their tusks were straighter and a nerve that ran down the center of the tusk caused the ball (when properly carved) to roll true. An average female tusk yielded five billiard balls. Old sales records from Ivoryton, CT refer to ivory of female elephants as "billiard." (See article from Hartford Courant paper.)

This comb displays many Islamic influences: the scalloped edges on the comb handle and the repetitive circular gold inlay patterns in the individual designs.

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

This comb is from Zanzibar, which is an archipelago in the Indian Ocean - off the east coast of Africa. Because of its location on the Indian Ocean and the strong trade winds, it was easy for traders and explores to access. Arab, Persian and Indian merchants established trading centers long before the Portuguese arrived in 1498. It is believed that Islam was established in Zanzibar as early as the 11th century.

These explorers blended with the local people to form a distinct culture. Called Swahili from the Arab word for "people of the coast" it refers to the 1800 mile coast line from present day Somalia to Mozambique. (Khan Academy) The Swahili coast has a very distinct culture from other African countries due partly to the assimilation of Islam and Persian cultures and the links to India. (The Swahili language

is still the most widely-spoken language in East Africa. Thanks to Walt Disney's "Lion King" lots of people know a bit of Swahili. "Hakuna Matata" means "no troubles" or "no worries".)

The trend in hair combs continues and got a new twist about 40 years ago when a new style emerged with a new symbolism. In the early 1970s, in an effort to reconnect with their cultural identity, Africans stopped straightening their hair. This necessitated a new style of hair comb that had longer and wider teeth. This new comb helped care for the hair and decorate but with the Black Power movement, it also became a political emblem. The Black Fist comb became recognized as a symbol of saying no to oppression. In 2013 Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge raised an exhibit entitled: Origins of the Afro Comb. Fans of Jimmy Fallon will notice QuestLove (drummer) wears an Afro comb every night.

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

Whoever gave this comb to his wife more than 200 years ago must have loved her dearly. Carefully carved and made of precious materials (elephant ivory and gold foil), it's something the owner would have shown off, perhaps wearing it in her hair. It would signal that she was among the wealthy elite of Zanzibar and had married well.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Ipad Images:

Enlargement of comb showing gold inlay

Enlargement of Beard comb (in same case as comb) for comparison to craftsmanship

Map of Africa with Trade routes

Black Fist Comb

Black Fist Comb on display next to Ancient Egypt hair comb (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge- 2013 Exhibit)

Online sources:

PBS, The Swahili People: http://www.pbs.org/wonders/Episodes/Epi2/2_wondr2.htm

(Info on use of ivory in US) Ann Farrow, Hartford Courant newspaper, Sept. 29. 2002, *Chapter 7: The Last Slaves*: <http://www.courant.com/news/special-reports/>

The Difference Between African and Asian Ivory, by Godfrey Harris:
<http://www.ivoryeducationinstitute.org/the-difference-between-african-and-asian-ivory/>

MIA website: <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/114833/hair-comb-swahili> (ArtStories also)

Khan Academy: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-africa/aksum/v/kilwa-kisiwani-tanzania>

Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/kong/hd_kong.htm

Fitzwilliams Museum- Origins of the Afro Comb: 6,000 years of culture, politics and identity:

<http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/calendar/whatson/origins-afro-comb-6000-years-culture-politics-and-identity>