

Obituary

Barbara Blackmun (1928-2018)

Barbara Blackmun, noted Art history expert on the Benin carved tusks and ivories, died July 6, 2018, at age 90. Born in 1928 she had a varied career that included primary and secondary school teaching in California, and then as an instructor at Malawi Polytechnic College, Blantyre. She spent several years in Saudi Arabia where her late husband, Rupert, earned a substantial salary as an engineer. For most of her career she taught at Mesa College in San Diego until she became ill and was then cared for by her daughter Monica Visona, an Africanist art historian at the University of Kentucky.

Barbara belonged to the second group of professional scholars who focused mostly on the art and ritual of the Benin kingdom, that also included history, folklore, scientific dating analyses, and, in her case, the thorough study and analysis of the Benin kingdom's carved ivory tusks. Her extensive multivolume thesis at UCLA served as a landmark exploration of these artifacts.

The analysis of the tusks early on focused on what the designs and motifs meant – a form of hieroglyphics perhaps or some form of an undecipherable archaic writing system as initially thought -- but little was known until Blackmun published her research that set a standard for the interpretative analysis of the ivory tusks. The tusks formed part of the commemorative carvings with cast brass heads serving as bases and arranged amid other figures in various palace courtyards, often ancestral altars of kings. The Punitive Expedition of 1897 removed them as loot and they were dispersed in various European museums.

Barbara must have looked at almost every tusk and I recall her telling me that she found some in dim closet like spaces generally not available to the viewing public. That exhaustive and thorough methodology was typical of her research. The tusks had complex relief images of kings, priests, palace officials, warriors and animals as well as mythological emblems that gave way to careful interpretation. Although there was some overlap with the cast plaques, more often the carved motifs proved difficult to read because the cylindrical structure of the tusks allowed horizontal and vertical readings that was problematic, and subtly profound. It is to her credit that she capably deciphered their iconography and offered groupings placing them in an historical chronology and shrine location.

Colleagues and friends described her as graceful and kind, but most knew her as diligent and earnest. I would also add that she was persistent in deciphering every tusk motif and the relation of one image to another, teasing out meanings that for the most part made sense and her diligence has proved invaluable to our understanding these beautifully carved ivory tusks.

I see her contributions as the following. Barbara conducted fieldwork and by spending time in Benin City she saw how the *Igbesanmwan*, carvers of bone, wood, and ivory, operated organizationally and fulfilled its duties as a guild of the palace. She saw how carvers chose ivory, and she identified the motifs they felt necessary to signify important aspects of a king's reign. This was far different from curators and galleries where that first-hand exposure was not there, maybe not even considered as vital to understanding the carved tusks. For Barbara, fieldwork

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was essential so that she could draw inferences from the fieldwork to the tusks and from the ivories back to fieldwork.

One admires her persistence in searching out the locations of these tusks. There are about 130 tusks. But more importantly, when they were carved and what groupings they could be placed in. This served to identify which king's memorial shrine they adorned and how they were sources for the reconstruction of Benin kingdom history, with accompanying identifying objects. Because not all tusks came from royal altars, she found that other senior titleholders had the privilege of commissioning them as shrine embellishments.

This led her to some intriguing explorations of elephant, snake, and leopard motifs, the hierarchy of chiefs and warrior captains, queens and consorts, and especially, her "From Trader to Priest in Two Hundred Years: The Transformation of a Foreign Figure on Benin Ivories" in the *Art Journal* (47:2: 128-38) that investigated changing motifs on the tusks. Indeed, translating the motifs on the tusks, relating them to the brass cast work, and placing them in an historical context provided the impetus for much of her academic life journey and a stimulation for others to extend her signal contributions.

Joseph Nevadomsky, California State University, Fullerton.