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WILDLIFE WATCH

Antique Dealers Come Face-to-Face With Ivory Ban

In the face of increasing legal restrictions on ivory sales, antique sellers' options are limited.



New U.S. ivory regulations make it illegal to sell antique ivory, such as this pendant at an antique mall in Washington State, across state lines unless it can be proven that it's more than a hundred years old.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID HYDER, THE NEW YORK TIMES, REUTER



By **Kristin Hugo**

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To reduce poaching of African elephants—some 33,000 of them are lost every year—the United States put into effect an almost complete ban on selling and trading ivory across state lines beginning July 6. That has many antique dealers struggling to figure out what to do with the items remaining on their shelves and in their storerooms. From walking sticks and small carvings to chess sets and jewelry, antique dealers are left with few options for selling or disposing of ivory items they invested in.

International commercial trading in ivory has been illegal since 1989—except for “antique,” pre-ban ivory. Research and investigations, including a 2002 report from the Humane Society of the United States, show that large amounts of ivory, labeled as antique, continued to enter the U.S. At least some of that ivory was from post-ban times—and likely from poached elephants.

So in 2014 the U.S. made it illegal to import ivory antiques for commercial purposes. Still, it remained legal to sell lawfully imported ivory within the country, which conservationists argue has given cover to those trading in poached ivory because it's essentially impossible for law enforcement to tell the difference without expensive testing.

Now that allowance is being tightened. The new ban restricts interstate sales of ivory items to two narrow categories: antique ivory that's proven to be more than a century old and items that contain only a little ivory, such as a violin bow with an ivory tip.

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The value of antique ivory held in the U.S. is unclear. One survey of ivory dealers and collectors placed it at nearly \$12 billion, but the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which regulates the U.S. ivory trade, says it's less than one percent of that—about \$100 million.

Antique dealers are in a tough spot. Registration for newly acquired ivory has never been a requirement in the U.S., so most antiques typically don't have proof-of-age paperwork. Dating tests cost hundreds of dollars.

How Are Antique Dealers Reacting?

The new ban isn't so surprising or restrictive that dealers are trying to dump their goods immediately, said Bob Weisblut, head of the International Ivory Society, a club of ivory collectors, artists, dealers, and others. “With over 200 people in my club, I haven't heard anyone say they're trying to liquidate.”

Instead, increasing stigma against ivory ownership and tighter regulations at the state and federal levels have been encouraging dealers to gradually get out of the business.

Tom Lang, of Alexander Westerhoff Antiques, in Essex, Massachusetts, stopped buying and selling ivory 15 years ago and now supports an ivory trade ban in his state because he believes the antique industry drives demand and gives cover to illegal ivory.

“We had a moral awakening,” Lang said. “Once you realize what it is that you're selling, and that you're contributing to the slaughter of these animals, even when it's antiques—we're creating a market, you can't deny that.”



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One antique dealer in San Francisco's Chinatown mentioned that with demand dropping during the past several years, he gave up on ivory. Another dealer cited fear of being arrested or raided by the Fish and Wildlife Service for not being able to prove the ages of his pieces. And some dealers have been under the false impression that ivory was illegal, even to possess.

“I think most of them will quit,” Weisblut said, adding that many people have already done so.

In June 2014, the popular PBS program *Antiques Roadshow* stopped appraising ivory tusks on air. Auction houses have started distancing themselves from ivory too, according to Weisblut. “Most dealers don't want to take ivory. They're afraid they're going to get raided,” he said. “There's no market—and it isn't fair to people who paid a lot of money.”

Lang agrees that ivory is getting more difficult to sell, pointing out that a large and exclusive international antique-selling website called First Dibs has put strong restrictions on ivory, so sellers around the world can't trade it as easily. “Once there is some moral action on an issue, it will affect the market,” Lang said. He also notes that in the antiques world prices fluctuate as items go in and out of style, and it won't really hurt dealers if any one type of item becomes unpopular and difficult to sell.

Leslie Hindman Auctioneers, an auction house with branches across the U.S., stopped accepting ivory in March 2014 because management considered the regulations too unclear. “Leslie Hindman Auctioneers actively chose not to sell any form of ivory until the Endangered Species Act was more clearly defined,” Molly Gron, the company's director of business development, wrote in an email. With the new regulations, the company intends to sell ivory again. “We will resume ivory sales at our auction house in strict accordance with all guidelines,” Gron wrote.

It remains legal to sell antique ivory within states, other than in California, New York, New Jersey, or Hawaii, which have passed state bans on the ivory trade. Other states have legislation pending. That means a market still exists for some ivory sellers. Take, for example, [ElephantIvoryTusks.com](#), a Florida-based online company that buys and sells ivory, whose website states that 60 percent of the business is within the state.

Ivory owners who want to get rid of legally acquired ivory can donate it to the Fish and Wildlife Service's national wildlife repository, in Colorado, if they're willing to pay the shipping costs. Or they can simply keep it in their own private collections, which Lang said is a popular option for antique dealers wanting to remove ivory from their stores.

Owners may also offer to donate their ivory to a museum. Art, culture, and science museums in particular might be interested in legally acquired, historically significant ivory, according to Sheila Hoffman, the chair of the American Alliance of Museums' ethics subcommittee.

“We consider all contemporary ivory pieces abhorrent,” Hoffman said, emphasizing that no museum will have anything to do with recent, possibly poached, ivory. However, she added, seeing relics of a different time can help us better understand our own history, even if we find it distasteful. “Really, it's our responsibility to create this dialogue rather than sweep it under the rug.”

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