I ABSTRACT I

In the 15th century, Portuguese traders went down the coast of West Africa in search of spices, arriving in Sierra Leone in 1460. There, local artists began carving ivory objects for the Portuguese, who sent them home to Europe as luxury gifts and religious objects. One such artwork depicts the Tree of Jesse, a genealogical representation of Christ's ancestors. The same ivory image was also produced in Goa, India and in Sri Lanka after the Portuguese arrived in South Asia. How and why was the same image appropriated by artists from West Africa to South India to Sri Lanka?

Standard art historical narratives frame these objects of encounter as reproductions, especially when, as is often the case, they depict scenes from European prints. My research, however, focuses on the act of appropriation in diverse geographical locations and suggests that these visual responses give access to the voices of anonymous artists in some of the earliest colonial encounters in Asia and elsewhere. Each time the Tree of Jesse is appropriated, it is reborn in a new context with a new visual form and new meaning, pointing to the connected art histories of early modern art worlds.

I ABOUT THE SPEAKER I

Sujatha Arundathi Meegama is an Assistant Professor in Asian art history at the School of Art, Design, and Media at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. Sujatha holds a BA from Temple University (Japan Campus), an MA in East Asian Studies from Stanford University, and a PhD in art history from the University of California, Berkeley. Prior to joining NTU, she was a lecturer at UC Berkeley and a Museum Educator at The Art Institute of Chicago.

Sujatha specializes in the art and architecture of South Asia. Her methodological interests range from artwork that questions established boundaries to the transmission of artistic knowledge. Her dissertation research on Sri Lankan temple architecture was published in the journal Artibus Asiae (Vol. LXX, No. 1). She is currently at work on a series of articles about 16th-century Sri Lankan ivory caskets. Last year she curated an exhibition on visual responses by Sri Lankan artists to the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka. She is also researching roadside shrines to Ganesha built by Sri Lankan security forces.

I DATE I Wednesday, 04 March 2015
I TIME I 3.00pm to 4.30pm
I VENUE I Malay Studies Seminar Room, AS7 #04-13, Kent Ridge Campus, NUS