

A GOBLET OF UNICORN HORN

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The lore of the unicorn, of which one phase is so magnificently illustrated in the tapestries at The Cloisters, is very wide in range and variety. It is a fascinating fact that objects exist that once were thought to have been made from the horn of this fabulous beast. These objects range from whole "horns" bought at enormous prices for the treasuries of secular and ecclesiastical princes, through rather large pieces made into scepters or croziers, to middle-size ones used for the bodies of beakers and goblets or for the handles of knives, to small pieces of the precious horn used to test the food of princes and noblemen or to be worn as amulets about the necks of noble ladies, and to still smaller fragments that were set in rings and other jewelry.

One naturally asks why these pieces were so greatly valued and accordingly priced higher than any other material including gold and precious stones. Why was the horn used for goblets, testing pieces, and amulets? The reason is that early stories of the beautiful wild white animal emphasized the horn's miraculous efficacy as a protection against poison and sickness. In the first half of the fourth century B.C. the Greek physician Ctesias wrote in his Indian stories that the unicorn horn, when put into a drink in powdered form, provided an antidote to deadly poisons. He also wrote that the Indians made goblets from the horn because it was believed to give the drink, water or wine, curative or preventative properties against cramps, epilepsy, and poisoning. Aelian, a Roman author of about 200 A.D., added that only the Indian noblemen could afford to own such precious goblets, which they made still more costly by elaborate mountings of gold. In the late Middle Ages and in the renaissance and baroque periods in Europe unicorn goblets were still be-

lieved to have magic powers and were also given luxurious mounts. The value of the goblet was increased by the belief that its owner could detect by specific reactions, such as sweating or steaming, when it contained poisonous drink. It is no exaggeration to say that from antiquity to the eighteenth century among the things sought by man to protect life and prevent death none was more highly regarded than the horn of the unicorn. In early Christian times, the unicorn was made a symbol of Christ and the beast's horn a symbol of the cross of Christ, thus adding to the practical importance of the object an equally high spiritual value.

Many different substances, real or imagined horns, were believed to be unicorn horn, especially when, like fossilized bones or mammoth tusks, they were found under unusual circumstances, or, like walrus tusks and the horns of rare mountain goats, they came from mysterious, far-off places. But the two most important were the horn of the one-horned Indian rhinoceros and the tusk of the narwhal. The former played an important part in the growth of unicorn lore. Its single "horn" is not really a horn growing between the eyes on the forehead, as the unicorn's is pictured, but a horny prolongation of the nose. Yet the resemblance to the fabled unicorn horn was sufficient for miraculous antidotal qualities to be attributed to it. This identification of the rhinoceros horn with that of the unicorn was first made not in India but in China as early as the fourth century A.D. Although none have survived it is known that goblets were made of this material at such an early period. Indeed, the earlier references of classical authors may have been to just such goblets, although the exact nature of the material is not specified. In the Middle Ages the rhinoceros horn was accepted as unicorn horn both in the Islamic countries and in Europe.

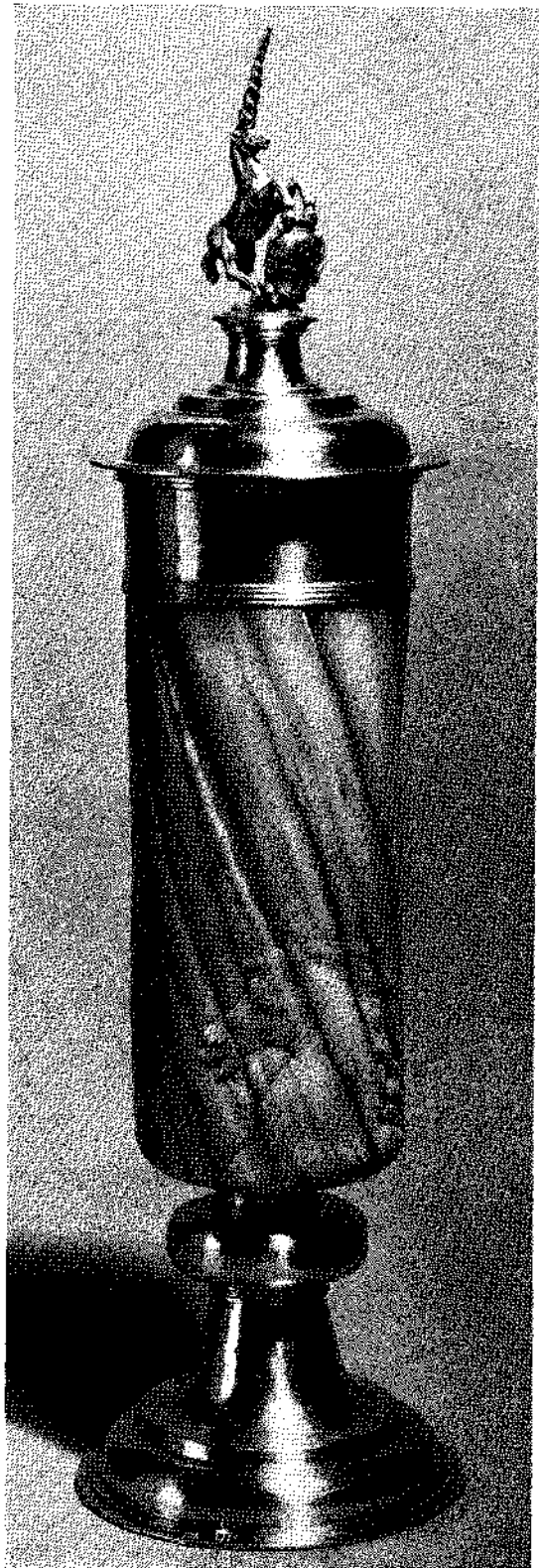
In Europe the narwhal was a much more important source of unicorn horn. The narwhal is a species of whale, smaller than the sperm

whale, that attains a length of from twelve to twenty feet. Its habitat is in the far north. It is seldom seen south of Greenland and therefore was almost completely unknown in medieval times. The male is distinguished by a single tusk that grows from the left upper jaw, sometimes to a length of more than nine feet. These tusks are about two or three inches thick at the root and taper to a sharp point. They are straight and have a marked spiral twist that differentiates them from other tusks—elephant, hippopotamus, walrus. An example is displayed at The Cloisters.

Narwhal tusks are, like all tusks, ivory, not horn. However, when they were introduced into Central Europe from Eastern Asia by way of Islamic countries or directly from the north in the eleventh or twelfth century, their identity was lost in transit. Their strange appearance suggested a mysterious origin and miraculous properties. By the twelfth century, in any case, at a time when the unicorn story was gaining widespread attention through the physiologi and the bestiaries, narwhal tusks were considered unicorn horns in Europe. We know this from written sources and occasional surviving specimens as well as from contemporary pictorial representations. From then on the unicorn was shown with increasing frequency as having a very long, straight, pointed, spirally twisted horn that was a perfect image of the narwhal's tusk. So it is in *The Cloisters* tapestries.

Goblets made of narwhal tusk are among the rarest objects preserved in today's collections. Aside from the original rarity of the material quite a few of the goblets were actually eaten up in the course of time, that is, taken in powdered form as a prophylactic or a remedy by their fortunate owners. Probably not more than two or three dozen examples still exist, none so far as I know from the Middle Ages. But they are men-

Goblet of carved narwhal tusk, with silver-gilt mountings, German (Frankfort), 1654-1666. The carving is probably the work of Justus Klessger (1610-1678). The mountings bear the mark of Nicolaus Kempf (1623-1678). Lent by Mr. and Mrs. A. B. Martin for The Cloisters, 1951

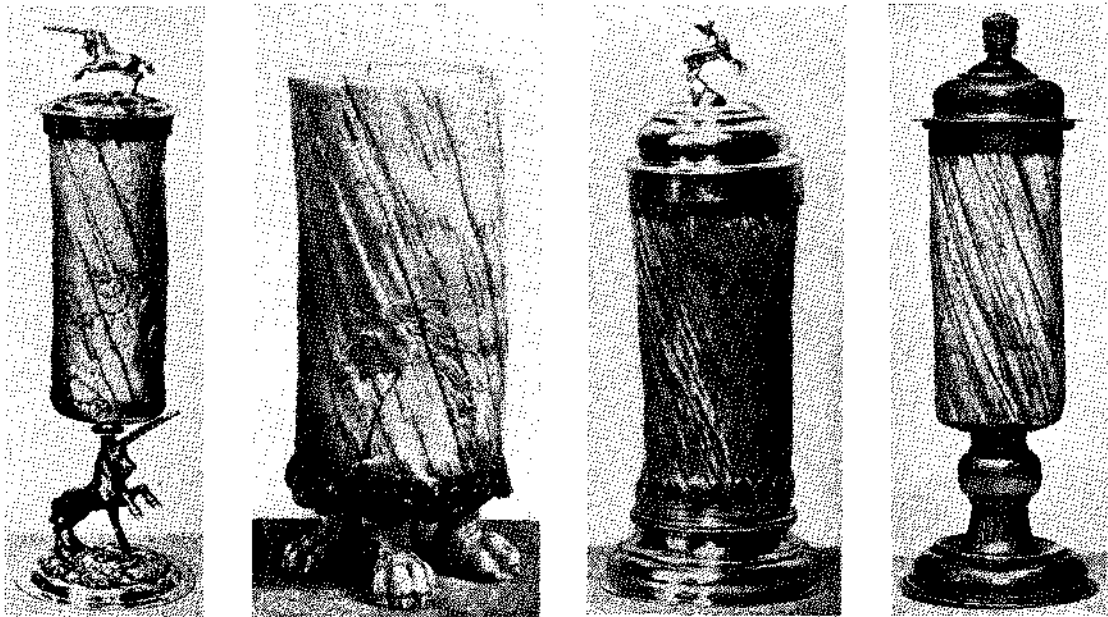


tioned in the inventories of late medieval princes. One was made for Philip the Good of Burgundy about 1450-1460. Perhaps it is the one shown in Lucena's *Histoire d'Alexandre*, illustrated about 1470 by Loyset Liedet (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Mss. Fr. 22547), made for Charles the Bold, Philip's son. In a courtly scene pictured on the dedication page a cup-board is shown behind the duke and on it, in a prominent position, is a cylindrical goblet with precious mounts, supported by animal figures (unicorns?). The body of the vessel shows the characteristic twist of the narwhal tusk. It may be the same goblet that is mentioned in the inventory, made in Bruges in 1487, of Charles's son-in-law, the young king Maximilian, when Maximilian married Charles's daughter. The oldest surviving goblet known to me is in the treasury of the Cathedral of Toledo. It is said to have belonged to Philip the Handsome, the son of the Emperor Maximilian, and dates from

the middle of the sixteenth century. The second oldest I know of is the tankard made by Hans Reimer in 1572 for the Bavarian treasury at Munich.

Probably no unicorn goblet was to be seen in the United States until a beautiful example, dating about 1615, arrived with the Vienna collections and was shown here last year. Now, however, at least one fine example has come permanently to this country. Formerly in the collection of Max von Goldschmidt-Rothschild of Frankfort on the Main, it is now owned by Mr. and Mrs. A. B. Martin, who have lent it to The Cloisters where it may be seen in the room with the unicorn tapestries.

With the cover on, this rare piece stands twelve inches high. The body of the goblet is narwhal tusk, plainly but handsomely mounted in silver-gilt. Hallmark and master's mark on each part of the mounting tell that the metal-work was fashioned in Frankfort on the Main



Unicorn goblets, German (Frankfort), middle of the xvii century. The two goblets on the left belong to the group probably carved by Justus Klessger. The first, mounted by Nicholas Birkenholz, is in the collection of the Grand Duke of Hesse at Darmstadt; the second, without mounting, is in the Ducal Museum at Gotha. Of the plain goblets on the right, the one surmounted by a unicorn is also at Darmstadt, the other, dated 1666, in the Historical Museum at Frankfort. Comparisons of style lead us to believe the Martin goblet was made before the dated piece. The mounts of the plain goblets, though not marked, suggest Kempf's work.

by Master Nicolaus Kempf (1623-1678). The decorations of the goblet illustrate the unicorn theme. A cast rampant unicorn on the top of the cover supports an oval shield bearing a coat of arms within a scrollwork frame. The arms, silver, a pale silver bordered by engraved lines, over all a red twig sprouting two green leaves, have not yet been identified. The unicorn theme is repeated on the body of the piece where the head of the beast appears carved in flat relief. The spiral fabric of the tusk has been skilfully used to depict the twisted horn of the unicorn.

The carved decoration places the present goblet in a very interesting group of five, all made in Frankfort in the middle of the seventeenth century. Not all of these were mounted by the same goldsmith. At least one other master, Nicolaus Birkenholz, did this kind of work. He mounted the well-known unicorn goblet in the *Silberkammer* of the Grand Duke of Hesse at Darmstadt. On this example the relief shows one of the forefeet as well as the neck and head of the unicorn. A third goblet that has lost its silver mounting is in the Ducal Museum in Gotha; whether it came from the Birkenholz or the Kempf workshop cannot be ascertained. Kempf surely made the metal mountings of two examples that are, or were, in the Esterhazy collection at the castle of Fraknó. One has a high foot and a loose cover like the Martin goblet; the other, in much the same style and also with a high foot, has a hinged cover and a handle. The first of these two has the Frankfort hall-mark and Kempf's mark. Their decoration is very rich, foot and cover bearing gilded and enamel ornaments, including white unicorns stepping through floral motifs, against a silver ground. The floral motifs are bordered by bands of garnets that appear also on the lip of the

piece. Each of the Esterhazy goblets is surmounted by a rampant unicorn, and the half figure of a unicorn is carved in the body of nar-whal tusk. Interesting as this rich jeweled mounting is in representing the goldsmith's work of Frankfort of the period, it should be observed that the simpler mounting of the Martin goblet provides greater emphasis for the principal feature, the carved body of unicorn horn.



Goblet with hinged cover. Mounted by Kempf. Esterhazy collection

Besides the five goblets already mentioned two others with no carving on the body belong to this Frankfort group, one also in the *Silberkammer* at Darmstadt, the other in the Historical Museum at Frankfort. While neither bears a maker's mark the mounts suggest the work of Nicolaus Kempf. The second of the two, dated 1666, is stylistically later, more baroque, than the Martin goblet. The Martin goblet, therefore, may be assumed to have been made before this date.

The carving of the five goblets with unicorn heads in relief is, in spite of slight differences, so similar that we can assume that one artist was responsible for the work on all. We know of one sculptor living in Frankfort about 1650 who was famous not only for large-size sculpture but also for ivory carvings. This was Justus Klessger, born in 1610 in Hameln, who became a citizen of Frankfort in 1654. The few works we know by him are large pieces such as the figures of the high altar of the Cathedral of Bamberg. But we know also that after his death in 1678 many ivory sculptures and ivory goblets were found listed in the inventory of his estate. In 1675 Joachim von Sandrart wrote that Klessger executed many pieces in ivory that were held in high esteem by collectors and art lovers. It is a fair guess that Klessger was the man who carved the goblets we have described. At the time work

of this nature was so highly regarded that a goldsmith would have tried to get the best man possible for the job. And in Frankfort that man would surely have been Klessger. If we accept him as the artist responsible for the carving, the goblet at The Cloisters must have been made after 1654, the year Klessger became a citizen of Frankfort. Its date is then fairly well fixed between 1654 and 1666.

The belief that narwhal tusks were true unicorn horns had decreased by the middle of the seventeenth century. The growing importance and the extension of whale hunting brought more narwhal tusks to Central European markets. The tusk or tusks used for the Frankfort goblets may well have been bought at one of the city's own famous international fairs.

The increased supply of narwhal tusk and knowledge of its real identity brought the cost of *unicornu verum* down to one eighth its former price. Yet the centuries-old belief in its worth was not easily eliminated. The history of the goblet in the Frankfort museum affords interesting proof of the persistence of the traditional faith in its properties. It was given as a most appropriate present by one of the best-known druggists of Frankfort, Matthias Bansa, to the city's department of sanitation in 1666 and was kept there in custody until the beginning of the nineteenth century. Marks scratched on the outside indicate it had been used for medicinal purposes.

The decoration of the goblet at The Cloisters shows that belief in the unicorn was still very much alive when it was made, that the body of the piece was thought to be unicorn horn and the goblet itself endowed with the miraculous attributes of that substance. That the spiritual

significance was still important is shown by a narwhal-unicorn goblet made about 1660 for the Art Gallery of Rosenborg Castle near Copenhagen. Engraved on the interior of its silver cover is a representation of the woman of Samaria at the fountain, an illustration of the text of Saint John where Jesus said, "But whosoever drinketh of the water I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life." The Martin goblet and the other Frankfort goblets are more secular in iconography. Yet the spiritual importance is implicit, just as it is in the tapestry in front of which the goblet now stands. The tapestry's scene shows the unicorn purifying the water of the fountain from the poison of the serpent, the fountain which is at once a fountain in the woods and the fountain of paradise.

For more comprehensive accounts of the unicorn see Odell Shepherd, The Lore of the Unicorn (Boston and New York, 1930); Richard Ettinghausen, "Studies in Muslim Iconography, I: The Unicorn," in the Occasional Papers of the Freer Gallery of Art, vol. 1, no. 3 (Washington, D. C., 1950); and Guido Schoenberger, "Narwal-Einhorn: Studien über einen seltenen Werkstoff," in Staedeljahrbuch, vol. 9 (Frankfurt am Main, 1935-1936).

For the Frankfort hallmark which appears on the Martin goblet see Marc Rosenberg, Der Goldschmiede Merkzeichen, third edition (Frankfurt, 1923) vol. II, no. 2001. For the master's mark, NK with a little star in a shield, see W. K. Zuelch, Frankfurter Künstler (Frankfurt, 1935), p. 549 (Kempff became master in 1647).

Photograph p. 287 courtesy Dr. C. Pastory.