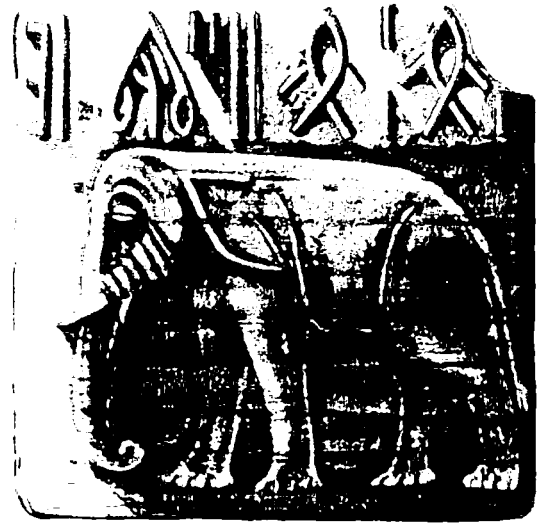


Steatite seal from Mohenjo-Daro (2500–2000 B.C.). Indus Valley



Steatite seal from Mohenjo-Daro (2500–2000 B.C.). Indus Valley

Rhino Horn and Elephant Ivory

NOEL F. SINGER

Photographs and drawings by the author unless otherwise indicated

ACCORDING TO A television documentary on Bangkok in 1990, unruly elements in the fast disappearing jungles along the border of Myanmar (Burma) and Thailand were killing the few remaining herds of wild elephants, not for their tusks, but to satisfy the local leather industry. It is depressing beyond belief that this splendid beast should end up as a handbag, suitcase or some accessory on the market stalls of Pahonyotin Street.

The habitat of the Asiatic variety of the elephant and the rhinoceros once stretched across India, China and Southeast Asia. Both were recorded by the people of the Indus civilisation (2500–2000 B.C.) as steatite seals bearing amazingly lifelike carvings have been found at the city of Mohenjo-Daro. The legendary properties of the rhinoceros horn were first noted in the fourth century B.C. when Ctesias, the Greek historian and doctor to the Persian King Artaxerxes II, wrote in his *Indica* about the medicinal benefits obtained by drinking from a cup carved from this material.

In China, Han period (206 B.C.–A.D. 220) chronicles claimed that the armies of the earlier dynasties of Shang and Chou (circa sixteenth–eighth century B.C.) used

the hides of the *hsi-chueh* (rhinoceros) and the *shui-niu* (buffalo) as armour. Diplomatic relations with the kingdoms of Southeast Asia appear to have been established by the second century A.D. for among the embassies which arrived at the court of the Han Emperor P'ing-ti (1 B.C.–A.D. 8) was one from Huang-chih, believed to be in the Malay peninsula, which brought with it a live rhinoceros. Imperial birthday celebrations of the T'ang (618–907) invariably included magnificent pageants with elephants, horses and rhinoceroses. According to tribute lists of the period, the habitat of the *hsi-chueh* ranged from Hunan, Yung-chang-fu in Yunnan, to the area west of the Huang-ho River valley. Chinese texts state that rhinoceros horn cups from the early dynasties were plain, and that craftsmen retained the natural shape. This claim has been substantiated by some of the earliest examples of eighth century Chinese origin, now in the Shoso-in Treasury of the Todai-ji Temple (dating from 738) at Nara in Japan.

The Mon and the Tircul (Pyu), two of the oldest civilisations in the country now called Myanmar, often portrayed the elephant in their works of art. Votive tablets datable to the seventh century depict the Buddha

flanked by these beasts, each holding aloft a miniature stupa. A contemporary Chinese account noted that some of the musical instruments used by these people were of horn and ivory.

At Juk-sok, Mon sculptors carved elephants, tigers and lions on a huge laterite wall a mile long. Ibn-Khurdadhbih of Basra, who visited the kingdom between 844 and 848, claimed that the ruler was the possessor of fifty thousand war elephants; the figure was probably a wild estimation of the herds roaming the jungles of the vast interior. Nevertheless, as late as 1827 John Crawfurd, the British envoy who was in the area, said that the creatures were particularly abundant in the forests of Pegu (Bago).

This habitat was shared by the rhinoceros, which caught the attention of Sulayman al-Tajir, a merchant of Siraf on the Persian Gulf. He stated it was an animal with a single horn within which was a human figure, and added that it existed in large numbers and that he had eaten its flesh. Although aware it was found in neighbouring countries, he said the horn from the indigenous species was "more beautiful, often containing the image of a man, peacock, fish or anything else". Sulay-

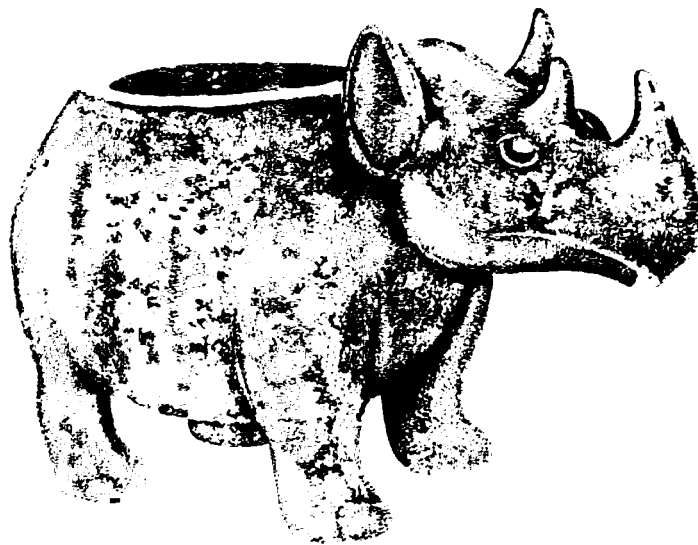
man's naive statement, made in 851, would indicate that this was his first contact with horn carvings. It is possible the figures represented Buddhist imagery, and were the work of either Mon craftsmen or foreigners settled in the country. Astute Chinese middlemen acquired the pieces at source with cowrie shells. Presumably the carved and plain horns were then shipped to China, where the latter were made into belts and other objects and sold for "three or four thousand dinar and even more, according to the figure's beauty".

Under the T'ang, Canton, with its colonies of craftsmen renowned for their superb works of art, also imported the horn from India, Srivijaya, Java and Kambuja. Sulayman noted the fashion of the period required Chinese ladies to wear as many as twenty ivory combs and hair ornaments; some of these are known to have been of rhinoceros horn. Another account said that aristocrats and officials wore a belt of carved plaques, the colours of which ranged from amber to yellow veined with black. The sword handles of high ranking army personnel, which were decorated with silver and gold, were also of this material.

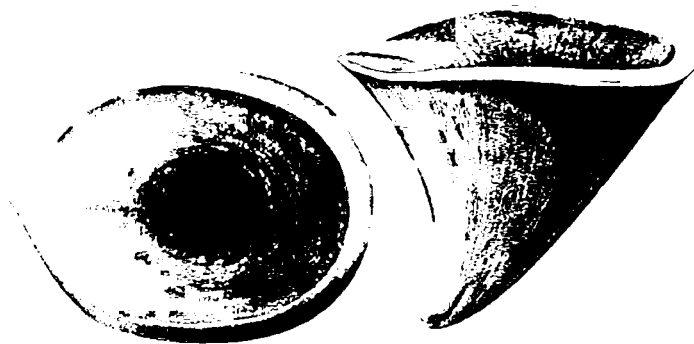
A report by Ibn-al-Faqih in the year 902 shows that Mon ports were popular with the merchants of the Orient. He said the kingdom was ruled by a queen, and despite a catastrophic outbreak of plague which was gripping the country, traders flocked there "by reason of the great profits to be made". Exports from Mat-tma (Martaban), which was known to the Chinese as Mo-ti-po, included ivory, spices, scented woods, gold, silver, ceramic jars and a cloth "so fine that it could be passed through a signet ring".

Men who hunted the hsi-chuch in western China, long before the Mon considered its horn a saleable commodity, claimed that the animal was more ferocious than the tiger. This ferocity later came to be associated with bravery, the symbolism of which was conferred on one of the two groups of officials who attended the emperor: the wheels of their chariots were decorated with an incised figure of a crouching rhinoceros.

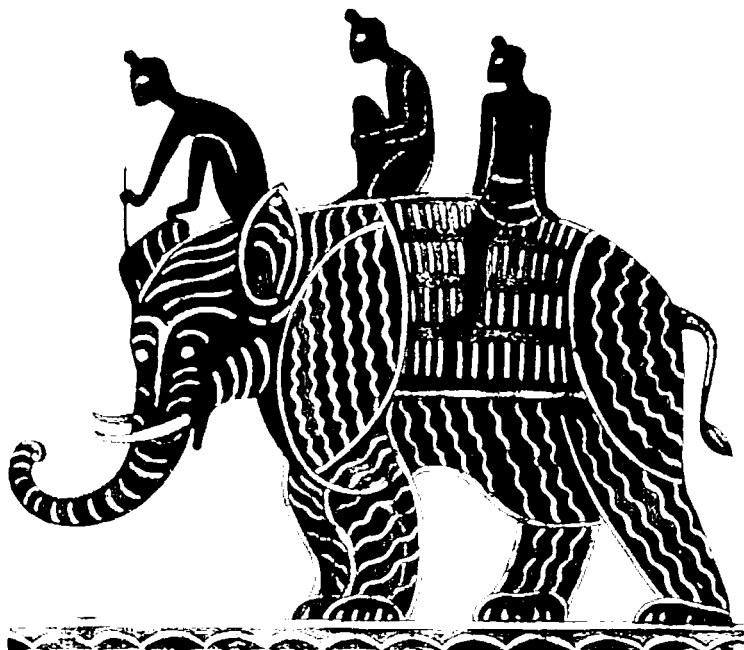
All manner of medicinal and exotic qualities were attributed to the horn. A T'ang emperor was said to have been presented with one which glowed in the dark (the result of judicious application of a naturally occurring bioluminescent substance perhaps?). Pearl divers held a piece in their mouth; this was said to create an air pocket around them. Maybe they believed that it helped them to hold their breath longer. The material was either "cold" (*pi-han-si*) or "warm" (*pi-shu-si*) and was affected by the seasons. A girdle made from the former type and worn by a man prone to bad temper was said to calm him. Prior to the invention of "jade cases" (burial suits believed to prevent the decay of mortal remains) in the Han dynasty, some of the inner coffins of emperors were of rhinoceros and buffalo



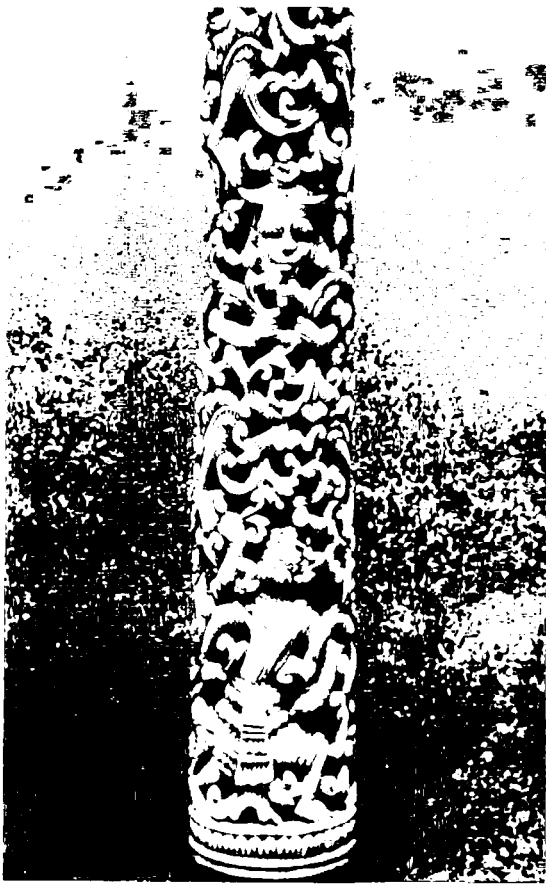
Rare bronze in the shape of an extremely realistic rhinoceros. Shang-Yin to early Chou dynasty, 12th-11th century B.C. Found at Shou-chang in Shantung. Avery Brundage Museum, Chicago



One of the earliest rhino horn cups, part of the personal effects of the Japanese Emperor Shomu, bequeathed by his widow in 752 and now in the Shoson Treasury at the Todai-ji Temple, Nara



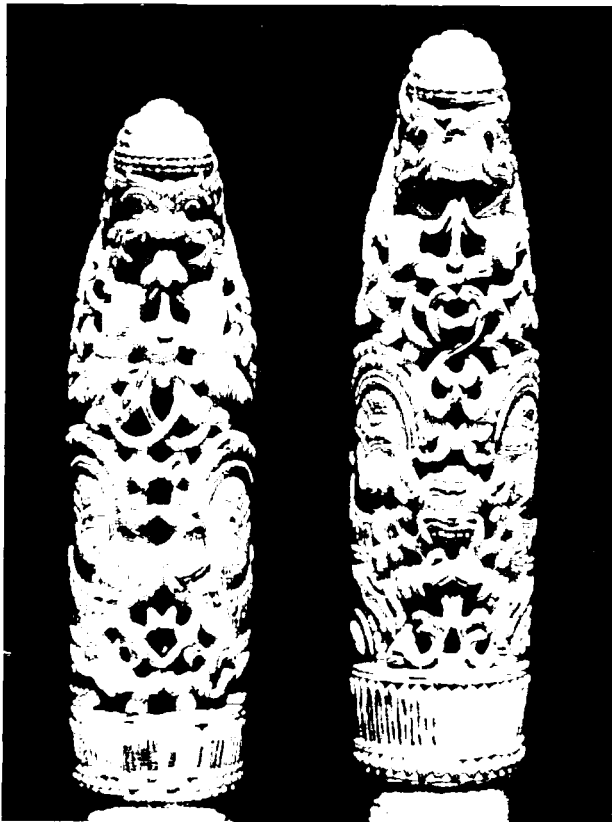
Elephant with riders, part of the decorations in silver and gold wire on a bronze tube discovered in 1965 at Ting-t'ien in Hopei. Western Han dynasty, 1st century B.C.



Sword handle carved with figures from the Ramayana enclosed within thick vegetation. 1st-10th century.



Two sword handles from the Ramayana. The left handle is from the 1st-10th century and the right handle is from the 10th-12th century.



The Bali and Sugriva sword handles from the Ramayana are shown. The Bali handle is carved with figures and floral patterns and the Sugriva handle is carved with figures and floral patterns. 1st-10th century.



Two sword handles from the Ramayana. The left handle is carved with figures and floral patterns and the right handle is carved with figures and floral patterns. 1st-10th century.



Stall handle for ceremonial mask carved with a human figure wearing a demon mask and clasping two magic dragons. Buffalo horn. Probably Mon. Late 19th century.



War elephant with riders. The two figures were originally armed with spears, now lost. Shan States. Late 19th century.



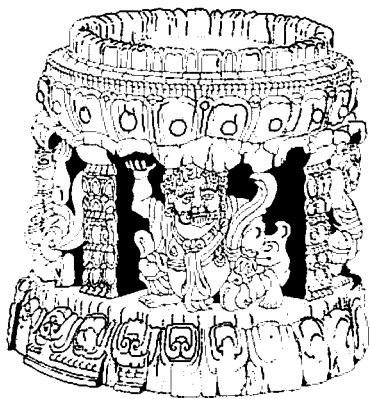
Chessmen. Late 19th century.



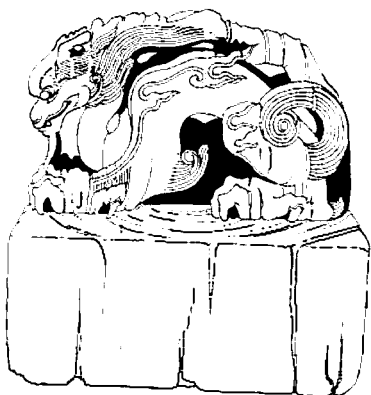
Shan man with tattoos. The delicately carved figure is typical of the type of Shan work made for tourists in the late 19th century.



Galon (guardian) and Behu (demon). Late 19th century.



Ivory base for an image carved with the four guardians of the cardinal points holding aloft a lotus throne. Believed to be of 7th century provenance. Cleveland Museum of Art



Rhino horn seal decorated with a dragon. Early Ming dynasty. Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, Stockholm



Samantabhadra shown seated on an unusual elephant. 14th-16th century. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

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The *hsi-chueh* was said to be an indiscriminate eater of toxic and non-poisonous thorny vegetation. As a result, the concoctions within its system imbued the horn with the power of neutralising poison. Its metabolism was such that it was capable of miraculously extracting only the beneficial elements from medicinal herbs, which were then stored in its blood. This was believed to lengthen its life and, in time, it became associated with *Shou-lao*, the god of longevity. It is possible the *ch'i-lin* or unicorn, which appears so prominently in Chinese mythology, was based on this creature.

Some maintain it was the horn of the male which contained the special properties, as it was suffused with the *yang* or male principle. Such horns were said to have been recognisable by markings, including a "red line, which was a result of his habit of gazing at the moon"; the spots in the keratin were said to be the constellations.

Some Western writers hold that, as the material in its natural state is grey, dyes had to be used to enhance it. The surface of a cut and polished specimen examined at the Natural History Museum in London did have sections of grey, but there were also pale yellow, white and darker pigmentations streaked throughout. At first glance, the glass-like texture seemed incapable of absorbing dyes of any kind, but the writer has been assured that this is not the case with keratin.

Chinese sources claim that horns with a dark opaque coloration were bought by apothecaries and pharmacists, who used the ground powder in medicinal preparations and as an antidote to poisons. Those with a pale yellow, amber or red translucent ground, sometimes streaked with black, were reserved for ornaments, drinking vessels and *objets d'art*. One wonders whether sometimes during their long history horns were dyed secretly by the dealers before coming onto the market.

Despite the awe in which it was held, the *hsi-chueh* does not appear to have been a favourite subject either for the painter or the craftsman, as examples are rarely seen.

Fan Ch'o, secretary to the governor of Tonkin (now part of northern Vietnam), gave a detailed account of the Man kingdom of Nan-chao (Yunnan) in his *Man Shu* (Book of the Southern Barbarians) which he published at some time between 860 and 873. He stated that the rhinoceros was found in the Yueh-t'an and Kao-li areas, and also on the borders of Hsun-ch'uan and K'o-lung-ch'uan, and that local hunters trapped them by digging pits. He also described the head-dress of the male population, and said they wore a "head-bag" shaped like a rhinoceros horn, made either of silk, taffeta or felt, according to

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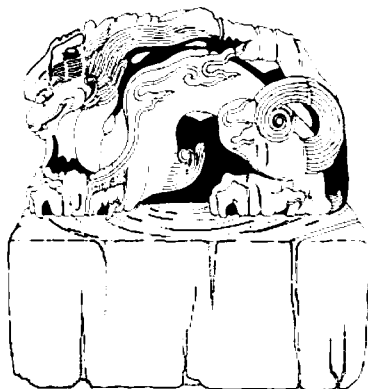
The thick rhino hide was used for horse furnishings, sword belts and scabbards, the latter painted red for the junior officers. Shields and armour were also made from it, large pieces being worn by cavalymen on their backs. The hilt of a sword was either covered in hide or, for those of the higher ranks, carved from the horn and decorated with gold and jade. Such excessive demands by the military authorities over the centuries could only result in the decimation of the creature in its traditional habitat. It is therefore not surprising that from the tenth century onwards China had to depend on foreign imports, the price fluctuating according to availability. This resulted in cleverly forged pieces of buffalo horn appearing on the scene. Although Arab traders were responsible for the introduction of the African variety, a steady flow could not have been fully achieved until the sixteenth century, when the influx of Dutch and Portuguese merchant ships began to dominate the eastern seas.

By the end of the tenth century the elephant, which had provided ivory for generations of carvers, had almost disappeared from K'ai-nan, Pa-nan and the Huang-ho River valley. The animal, which was believed to be a symbol of fertility, was often depicted in Shang dynasty bronzes. A scholar, who was aware of the greed inherent in man, predicted its extinction from as early as the Chou dynasty. Another, several hundred years later, protested at the indiscriminate use of ivory by courtesans and the *nouveaux riches*. Evidence that this creature was used for transport can be seen in a bronze ornament from the first century B.C. found at Ting-hsien in northern China. There are also accounts of ninth century Yunnanese buying trained elephants to plough their fields. Succeeding dynasties maintained a stable for ceremonial purposes, but as access was restricted, depictions of this noble beast by Chinese artists became a grotesque caricature. With urbanisation, the few surviving rhinoceroses and herds of elephants had no choice but to withdraw deeper into the jungles of northern Vietnam, Laos and present-day Myanmar.

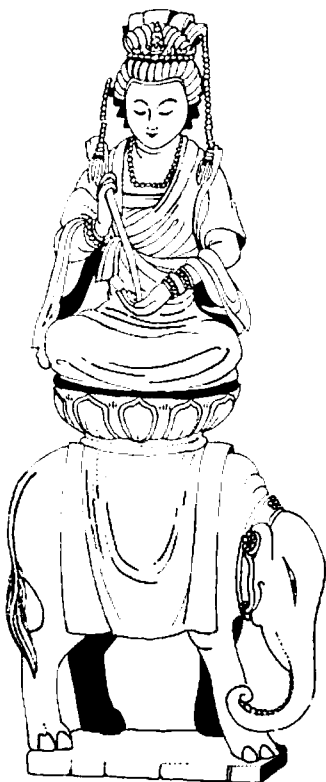
In the land once dominated by the Mon and Tircul, by the twelfth century much of the commerce in the interior was in the hands of the Myanmar, another ethnic group whose migratory route from the northwest of China had taken them through the Man kingdom of Nan-chao, and down to the central part of the country. The influence of the Man on these people can be seen in the murals of the Pathothamyā Temple at Pagan; Myanmar aristocrats are depicted with the horned head-dress of their former overlords. As late as 1178, a Sung dynasty (960-1279) chronicler noted that "the king and officials of P'u-kan kingdom all wear on their heads caps shaped like the rhinoceros horn".



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Mule caravans to Yunnan carried this valuable merchandise, together with the horns of buffalo, deer and quantities of ivory. Nicolo di Conti, on his visit in about 1435, said the Myanmar were aware of rhino horn's special qualities. Its supposed magical properties had by now become well known among the ruling élite of the Orient, where intrigue and violence were a way of life. Some took extra precautionary measures and used rhino horn cups for drinking. Rods made from the material were also employed in testing food and liquids; the presence of poison was said to have been indicated by the exudation of a white substance.

A Myanmar rhino hunter knew that the entire carcass was saleable, not only for its meat but also for other purposes. Its blood, which was dried on a slow fire before use, came to be valued more than its horn and was sought by the *say saya* (master of medicine) for restoring vigour and in the curing of a variety of ailments: from heart disease, psychological illness, blood disorders, to sleeplessness and epilepsy. Most horns were earmarked for the China trade, nevertheless some were bought by local "wizards" for making amulets. Pieces were also rubbed on a stone with "charmed" water and the paste taken internally. Some men still indulge in potions for sexual potency, but unlike with the Chinese, there is no traditional belief in the efficacy of the rhino horn as an aphrodisiac.

According to a list published in the 1920s, three species of this animal were known to exist in Myanmar. They were the single horned *kyant-sin* (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*); the hairy *kyant* (*Rhinoceros lasiotis*) with two horns; and the double horned *kyant-shaw* (*Rhinoceros sumatrensis*) with its thick black skin covered in bristles. This latter type was said to be the smallest, but was reputed to grow the largest horn of the three.

Country folk further divided the creature into two groups: the *su-sar kyant* (thorn eater), so named because of its partiality to thorny shrubs, and the *mee-sar kyant* (fire eater), presumably because of its ferocity. Although Myanmar artists, like their Chinese counterparts, delighted in painting animals and birds, the rhinoceros is rarely depicted, neither does it appear in local folk beliefs. Possibly the earliest representation is to be found in one of the terracotta plaques in the West Phetleik Pagoda at Pagan, attributable to Aniruddhadeva (1044-1077).

The forests of the Chindwin are the home of the *cin* or elephant (*Elephas indicus*), reputed to be the biggest in the country, while those of the lowlands are said to be small. Some are also found in the May-yu Hills of Rakhaing (Arakan), where a pair of black tusks were discovered and later exhibited at the Natural History Museum in the Myanmar capital Yangon. In the days of the monarchy, elephants were an integral part of court life. Given titles and splendidly

caparisoned, they took part in impressive pageantry. Not only were the creatures symbols of rank, but they were indispensable for long-distance travel and relied upon by the military.

Jeyasura Cansu I (1113-1160), on tour in his barge, saw what he took to be a huge nest made of tusks, and was told by his *hu-yar-phyu* (Brahmin astrologers) that it belonged to a giant scorpion which preyed upon elephants. Intrigued by the structure (which was probably the tangled remains of a group caught in a flash flood), he had artists record it before loading it on board. The *cin-swair-pan-shet* (interlaced ivory flower) designs which are said to have evolved from the sketches are still in use today.

Ivory does not appear to have been popular with the Myanmar of the Pagan dynasty (1044-1287) as it is rarely included in their lists of precious articles. Nonetheless, it was used as barter, export and in the exchange of royal gifts. The Mon, with their long tradition of carving in horn and ivory, continued to employ it in the manufacture of religious and secular objects. A passage in the Kalyani inscriptions (1476-1479) states that a large number of priests were made to become laymen as they had practiced "unbecoming professions", among which were the "manufacture of *cin-dran* (ivory) articles" and the carving of bone and horn "handles of knives and cleavers". During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the city of Sri Hamsawati (Bago), with its thriving port open to the commerce of Southeast Asia, competed with the Myanmar kingdom further inland for the ivory trade. Giovanni da Empoli, visiting Matma in 1514, declared that the people were "first rate merchants" and was surprised to find they kept their accounts "in books, like us".

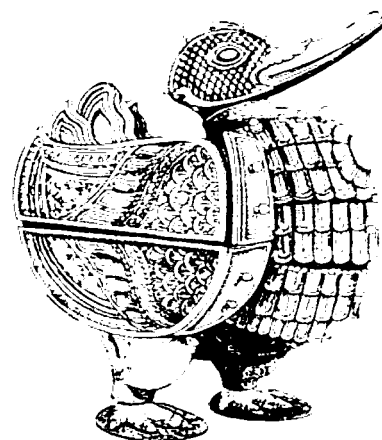
Although the *srit* (rhinoceros) still flourished, cups made from its horn do not appear to have been used by Mon royalty. One has only to read the chronicles to see that death was usually caused by poison, the most common being a camphor plant, *pon-ma-thein* (*Blumea balsamifera*), administered with lime.

The *pren* or buffalo (*Bubalus bubalus*) features prominently in Mon mythology. Tradition has it that a female buffalo *bau* (spirit) called E-nin-ga-laung, which raised the abandoned princeling Asah Kumma who was later to become the national hero and king (854-861) of Sri Hamsawati, still guards the old city. For centuries, the outcome of an encounter between Asah Kumma and a mysterious woman who claimed to be the goddess of the tidal bore on the Saton (Sittang) River made it obligatory for the head of this beast to be offered before any marriage ceremony: an excellent custom as the horns could be sold and the guests provided with meat for the wedding feast.

Amulets made from buffalo horn are known, but its main use was in providing



Circular ivory disk with writhing dragons, possibly part of the decorations from an imperial carriage. 14th-15th century. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Container in the form of a hamsa, believed to be of ivory. Late 18th century. National Museum, Yangon



Myanmar lord with offerings, after a painting from the 11th century. Pathothamya Temple, Pagan

ornamental handles for swords, two popular figures being a demon or the monkey god Hanuman. Myanmar males favoured the latter, and adorned the ivory or bone handle of their sword with this minor divinity. Sangermano, who was in the country between 1783 and 1806, said that in so doing they believed they were capable of "cutting through every obstacle and of warding off the blows of any hostile weapon". (The illustrated examples were carved so that the only way to grasp them comfortably is with the face of the creature pressing into one's palm; this ensured that the "power" emanating from it passed into the holder's body.)

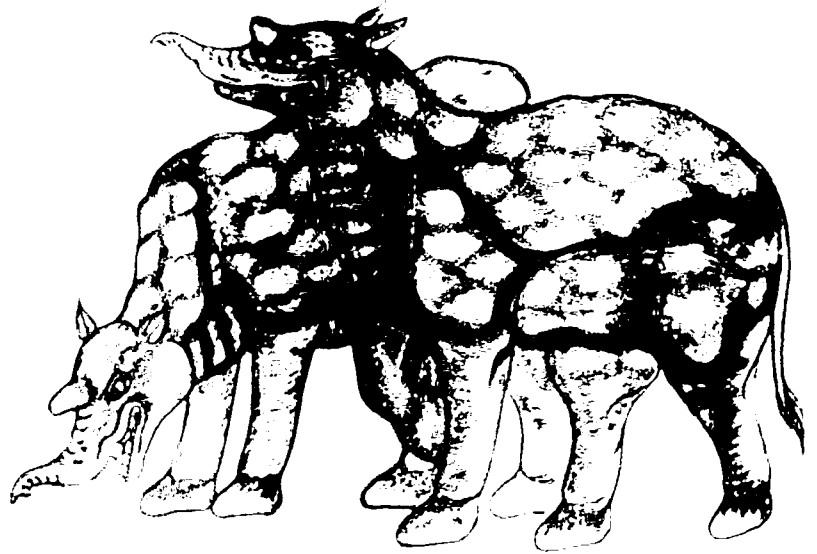
Elephant tusks grow in a variety of ways, with eight types having been recorded. Some formations were considered unlucky and were believed to bring death to the owner. There were also rules on storage: tusks were never kept with the tips pointing into a room, neither were they kept in a basement standing up, as this was said to bring misfortune. Having no doubt seen what the beast was capable of perpetrating, the superstitious rightly felt threatened.

Revenue was often paid in the form of ivory. When a beast died, one tusk was kept by the owner and the other handed over to the Crown. Because of the large stocks held at the capital, the court atelier was able to make use of this material in different ways for regalia, ornaments, sword handles, images, boxes, state letters and religious manuscripts. Among the presents sent by Badon Min (1782-1819) in 1792 to the Manchu emperor Ch'ien Lung (1736-1795) were helmets of ivory decorated with gold and rubies. At the investiture of a *saopha* or ruler of one of the Shan States by his Myanmar overlord (whose symbol was the sun—male—with a figure of a peacock within), he was presented with an ivory seal shaped like a stupa and embellished with a carving of the moon—female—with a hare in it; around this was engraved his title.

By the 1880s the popularity of this material had begun to wane, with only six ivory carvers employed by the palace, their total salary being a mere two hundred kyats per month.

Tusks from a male elephant contain a larger amount of solid material. The ivories from the female are not only short, but the surface is usually covered in tiny grooves; being brittle, they have to be cut carefully, limiting their use to counters for games of chance, amulets and small images. Once a suitable piece is selected it is boiled in a preparation to soften it. An outline is then drawn and the carving commenced. On completion it is rubbed with pounded bamboo fibres and various grades of imported sandpaper. Oil, opium or yellow orpiment (arsenic trisulphide) is also used to give the surface a mellow appearance.

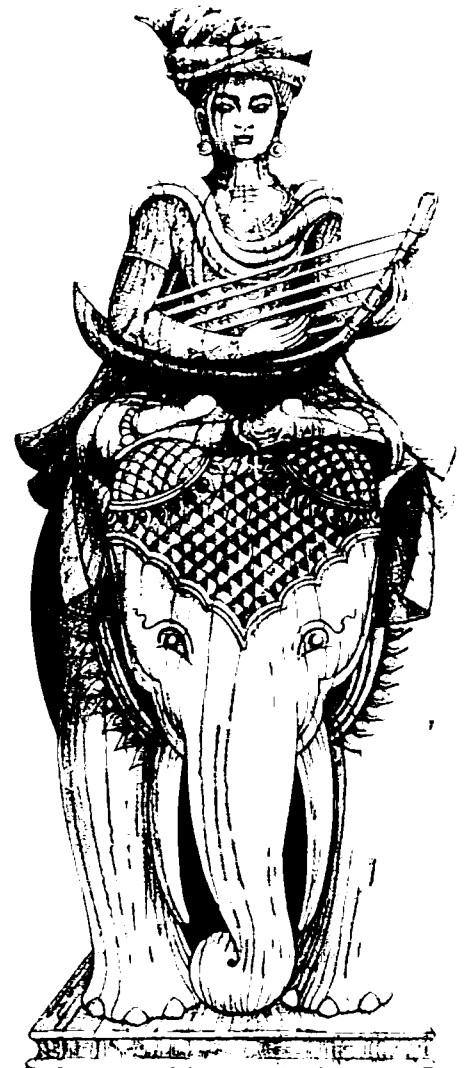
Among the Myanmar, gilded amulets in the shape of an elephant carved from *thingan* wood (*Florea odorata*) are sometimes worn as



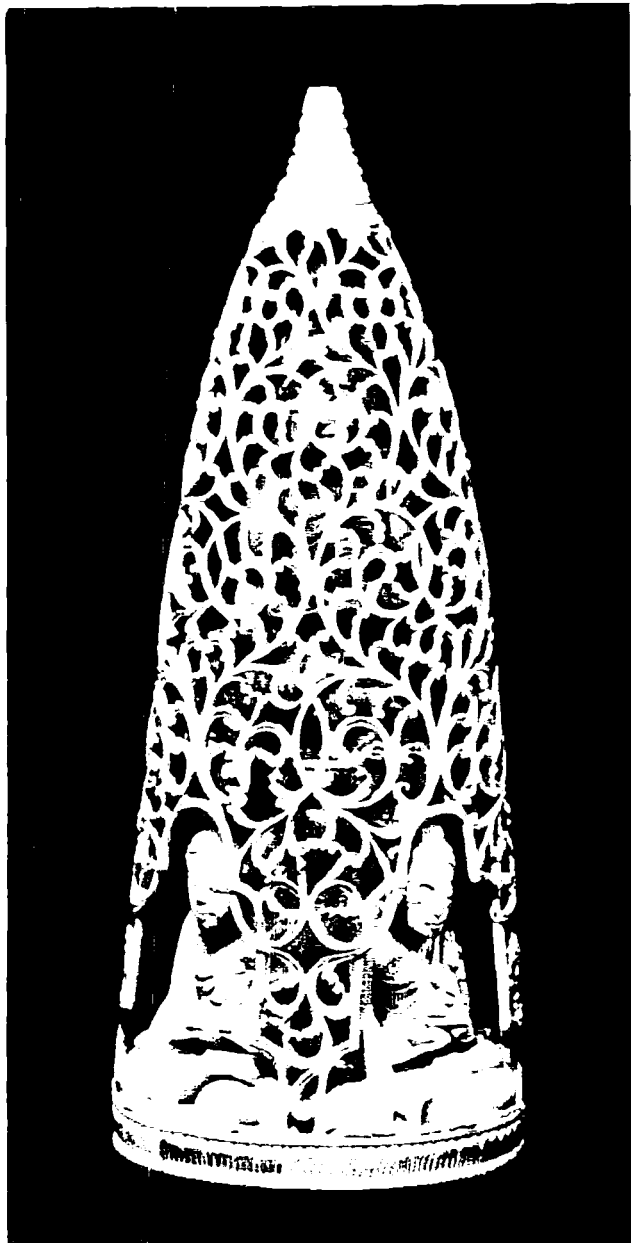
A rare painting by a Myanmar artist of a pair of rhinoceroses (obviously not drawn from life). First half of 19th century. Victoria and Albert Museum, London



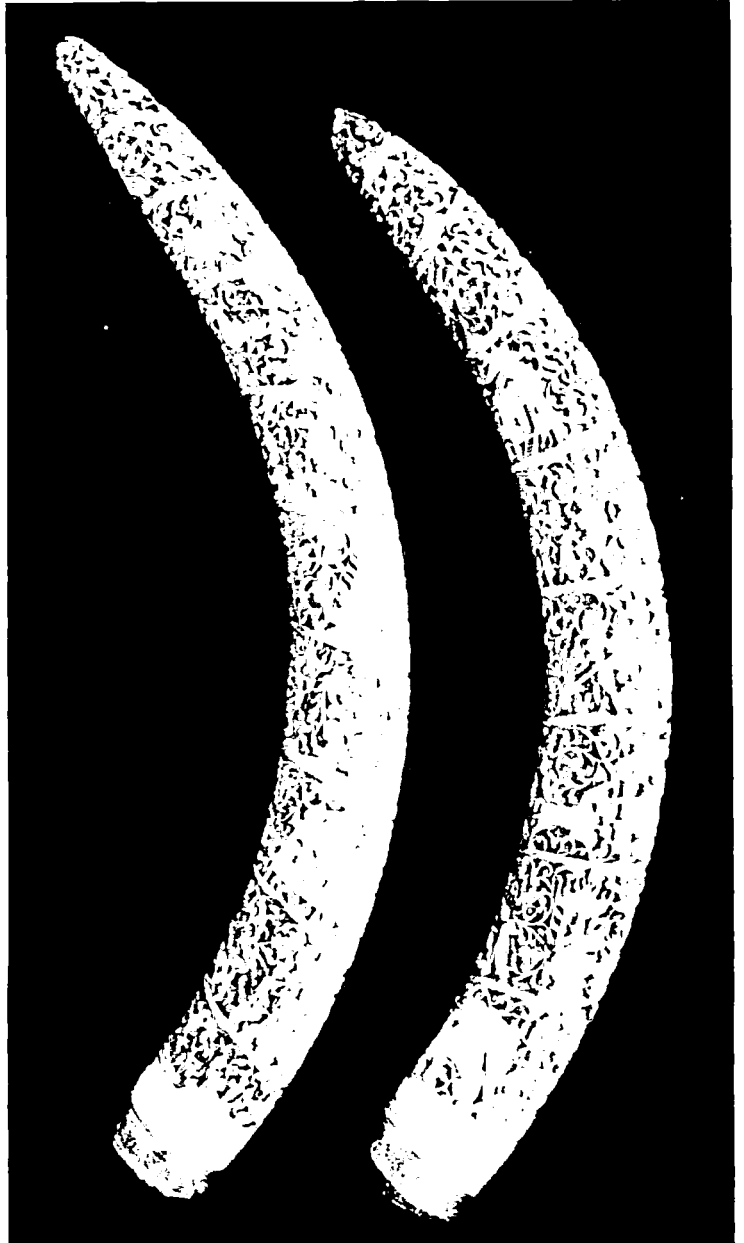
E-nin-ga-kaing, the Mon buffalo spirit and guardian of the old city of Bago. Figure shown in 15th century costume. Since the 19th century the Mon have taken to wearing Myanmar dress



The tattooed figure of Sao U Taing, a Shan spirit and the protector of men who work with elephants



Ivory shrine with Buddhas enclosed within a mesh-like cone of leaves. Late 19th-early 20th century. Glasgow Museum and Art Gallery, Scotland



A pair of tusks carved with scenes from the jatakas. Late 19th-early 20th century. Glasgow Museum and Art Gallery, Scotland

a protection against sorcery. Men in the timber trade often carry a small gilded elephant of ivory ridden by Sao U Taing, a Shan *nat* (spirit), an ethereal harpist whose music is said to soothe the most ferocious of beasts. This type of charm could only be made from a *man yasair*, a fragment of the tusk broken off in an accident or a fight.

The turn of this century saw an increase in the ivory industry; statuettes, paper knives and handles for cutlery were made exclusively for the European trade. Tusks were carved with scenes from the *Ramayana*, with *jatakas* (stories of the Buddha's lives) or with Buddhas enclosed within a mesh of delicately pierced leaves. Shan craftsmen having a particular talent for this type of intricate work. For the Buddhist population, images, rosaries and tiny figures of the

saint Thewali (Sivali) are still popular. Other subjects, similar to woodcarvings found in the precincts of shrines but with a greater degree of detail, consist of characters borrowed from religion and mythology. A *zandar* or horoscope of an individual, which is usually of palm leaf, is sometimes carved out of ivory and decorated with gold leaf.

Some experts have claimed that ivory from the Asian species is liable to turn yellow faster than that of the African variety, but many nineteenth century Myanmar examples now in Western museums still maintain their whiteness.

Despite the ban on imports by most countries, which stops a valuable source of income from the tourist industry, ivory objects are still being made. But lack of

monetary incentive, which invariably comes from the visiting foreigner, can only lead to a gradual deterioration and final demise of this craft. This may already have begun. Although superb nineteenth and early twentieth century pieces are met with, the quality of some of the recent carvings is generally inferior.

One would have thought that the restrictions imposed on ivory articles would lessen the pressure on this creature. Until the 1960s, the elephant and the rhinoceros roamed the Myanmar forests, but now most of their habitat is being denuded of precious trees by a government desperate for foreign currency. Frequent clashes between the various ethnic freedom fighters and the state army is also causing concern for the survival of wildlife in the country.

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Contributors

EMILY BYRNE CURTIS, a snuff bottle collector since the 1960s, has lectured and written a book on the subject, with articles published in *Arts of Asia* and the journal of the International Chinese Snuff Bottle Society, of which she is a board member.

MARIAN L. DAVIS, Associate Professor at Florida State University, teaches historic textiles, visual design and international home economics. Author of *Visual Design in Dress*, she has studied and collected ethnic textiles worldwide, including in the Philippines during a UNESCO assignment there.

IRWIN HERSEY was the founding editor and publisher of the *Primitive Art Newsletter*, which appeared from 1978 to 1983. He acts as a consultant to museums and collectors, and is the author of *Indonesian Primitive Art*, just published by Oxford University Press.

MARYLIN M. RHIE is Professor of Art and East Asian Studies at Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts; ROBERT A.F. THURMAN is Jey Tsong Khapa Professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Studies at Columbia University, New York; GENNADY LEONOV is Curator of the Tibetan and Mongolian Collection at the State Hermitage, Leningrad; and KIRA SAMOSYUK is Curator of Chinese and Central Asian Art at the State Hermitage, Leningrad.

NOEL F. SINGER was born in Burma in 1937. Trained as an artist, he moved to London in 1962 and works as a freelance illustrator and designer. Since 1986 he has been a regular contributor on Burmese topics, and is consulted by museums for his unique knowledge of the country now known as Myanmar.

SUE THOMPSON graduated from Cambridge University in Japanese studies in 1979. She pursued an investment career in Tokyo from 1981 to 1986 before taking the London School of Oriental and African Studies/Sotheby's postgraduate Asian Arts course. She is now a freelance writer, researcher and Japanese translator.



Cover: Milarepa and Scenes from His Life (detail), eastern Tibet, late 18th-early 19th century, tangka no. 111 in a series, gouache on cotton. 32 7/8 x 21 1/8 inches (83.5 x 55.5 cms). Folkens Museum Etnografiska, Stockholm.
 Photo: John Bigelow Taylor

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