

The Carved Rhinoceros Horns of China

By U. A. CASAL

Except as noted, illustrations from the author's collection

Fig. 1—RHINOCEROS HORN CUPS



a. Strongly ribbed lotus leaf, with lotus flowers, stems, and buds. Dull brown but very translucent. Height, 2.58 in.; diameter, 5 x 3.5 in.; weight, 7.1 oz.



b. Well-veined lotus leaf, plain externally but with a crab and reeds in the cavity. Very dark brown. Height, 2.71 in.; diameter, 4.14 x 3.38 in.; weight, 4.18 oz.



c. Stylized lotus leaf, resting on coiled stem. Dark brown. Height, 2.78 in.; diameter, 6.18 x 3.78 in.; weight, 6.18 oz.



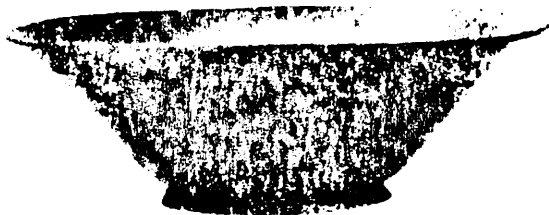
d. Large plum blossom, surrounded by small blossoms on branches which form a pierced base. Two *ama-ryō* support themselves. Almost black. Height, 2.78 in.; diameter, 4.14 x 3.78 in.; weight, 4.38 oz.



e. Plum blossoms, bamboo and pine branches against a plain ground. The rim, inside and out, is heavy with deep-cut rocks. Pierced base. Brown. Height, 3.58 in.; diameter, 5 x 3.38 in.; weight, 6.38 oz.



f. From the Shūsōin Collection of Imperial Treasures, at Nara. Yellowish-brown, oval. Height, 50 mm.; diameter, 155 x 84 mm. Photograph from the *Shūsōin catalogue*



Editor's Note. Concerning carved rhinoceros horns almost nothing has hitherto been written. The present article, by a collector and student of these mysterious objects, is, we believe, the first to present a singularly difficult subject in brief yet adequately comprehensive form. Mr. Casal, now resident in Kobe, Japan, tells us that he hopes some day to combine available fragments of previous information with fresh data in the form of an extended treatise. Meanwhile, the interim notes here offered should find a cordial reception.

CHRONOLOGICALLY speaking, the carved horns to be found in museums or in the market are of comparatively recent origin when opposed to other objects of Chinese craft. The oldest hardly antedate the sixteenth century; the majority are of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The type embraces a range of delicately worked vessels, more or less approximating the beaker form.

Historically speaking, on the other hand, vessels of rhinoceros horn are of great antiquity. The Shūsōin Treasure House at Nara, Japan, harbors several "cups" of this substance, which date at least from the early eighth century of our era. Furthermore, these objects show a quality of balanced workmanship that clearly indicates a long preceding period of evolution. This opinion seems to be confirmed by several of the earliest Chinese texts.

Rhinoceros horn is a compact mass of agglomerated bristles, and is entirely different in structure from any other horn or antler. Growing from the skin only it is distinguished from formations rooted in the skull. Its cavity is slight. It is not, therefore, a natural drinking vessel like, let us say, a bovine horn or a large shell, the earliest "cups" known to humankind. The use of rhinoceros horns as vessels is due to other considerations than those of convenience.

Perhaps since man first began to associate ideas, horns have been symbols of force, even of supreme power, sometimes physical, sometimes spiritual. In the latter domain they were associated with magic as an end in overcoming the powers of darkness. By a process of simple reasoning the horn of a single-horned animal was thought to possess more concentrated potencies than that of beasts with a twin equipment. The Chinese of remote antiquity had in their very midst a creature with such a single horn: the rhinoceros. (Most Asiatic species have only one horn.) The rhinoceros was considered fierce and indomitable, elusive and clever (it actually has an acute sense of smell), a wise recluse (it seldom lives in herds). The horn of such a wonderful beast must needs be supreme in its magic influence. It became, therefore, the most prized material for ceremonial vessels, such as beakers, from which wine was drunk in swearing allegiance, or in affirming the sincerity of one's vows.

All primitive people believed in the medicinal value of certain parts of various animals. The rhinoceros horn stood at or near the top of the Chinese pharmacopoeia. And it is a fact, admitted but not explained by modern western science, that a decoction of rhinoceros horn is beneficial in the case of some fevers.

From accepting the rhinoceros horn as a curative agent the step was short to belief that the substance was an antidote against poisoning

archaic designs in low relief, including the *tao-t'ieh* monster head, and what is known as the "key pattern." Horns in this group are of very regular and symmetrical outline. They constitute but a small proportion of all the carved horns, and approach, more closely than any others of the genus, the style of ancient cups found in the Shōsōin.

These four groups exemplify the principle of libation vessels even where too much elaboration has robbed them of practical utility. Objects which do not at least suggest such a function are of the greatest rarity. My own collection — consisting of some sixty horns — has but one such piece, and even this is a "container." It represents the god of literature leaning against a symbolical well-bucket. It was intended to repose on a writing table and hold the water needed for rubbing india ink on the ink stone. The few other exceptions that I have encountered were all of recent manufacture, and made for export.

The figures sold and commonly accepted as of rhinoceros horn, and representing goddesses and Taoist patriarchs, are of some rare buffalo horn. They are handsome, have an amber sheen, and as high a polish as the true rhinoceros horn can take. But the "grain" is different, the base spreads less, and the cross-section, near the base, is triangular instead of oval or squarish. Such horn figures are quite scarce, and from a technical as well as ornamental point of view, may well be included in an assortment of rhinoceros horns — all the more so since they belong to the same era.

The high values, intrinsic and sentimental, placed on decorated rhinoceros horns in former times prompted emulation in other materials. Versions in jade, the most precious medium of the Chinese — more expensive even than gold — were meant to emphasize the veneration accorded to the horn.

Some fairly ancient jade examples survive. Due to the hardness of the material they are generally simple in outline and decoration, though sometimes provided with an *ama-ryō* as a kind of handle. It is only natural that versions in cheap and easily manipulated materials should have been made of old for folk not in a position to purchase a real horn. Examples in wood or in bovine horn seem not to have survived the effects of time. Those made of porcelain, however, especially of the white variety known to collectors as *blanc de chine*, are still numerous. They were manufactured at Tê-hua, chiefly during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and continued to be produced there and elsewhere until some fifty years ago.

The increasing shortage of rhinoceros horns coincided with an increasing skepticism as to their efficacy as an antidote. During the first half of the 1800's some carved horns were still produced. Like all articles of post-Ch'ien Lung handicraft, they are comparatively heavy, coarse, and unbalanced in workmanship. As suddenly as these objects emerged — seemingly at some time during the sixteenth century — quite as suddenly did their making cease about a hundred years ago.

During these three hundred or more years, carved horns were produced by a particular, and evidently small, guild established at Canton in South China. In the earliest centuries of our era that city, then P'an-yu, was already the great emporium of the horn trade; it was nearest to the sources of foreign supply, Malaya, India, Borneo, Sumatra, Java, and probably even Africa. And it is most interesting to note how these horns, emanating from one restricted region, and at first only appreciated by Chinese and Indian princes, have conquered not only Western Asia and North Africa, but also the whole of Europe.



Fig. 9 — RHINOCEROS HORN CUP
Octagonal, lobed body with flaring rim and widening stem. Low-relief arabesques and the eight Buddhist emblems of luck. Four entwined *ama-ryō* form the handle, the head of one bending over the rim; seven smaller *ama-ryō* decorate the body, in high relief. Light brown. Height, 4 1/4 in.; diameter, 5 1/2 x 4 1/4 in.; weight, 8 1/2 oz.

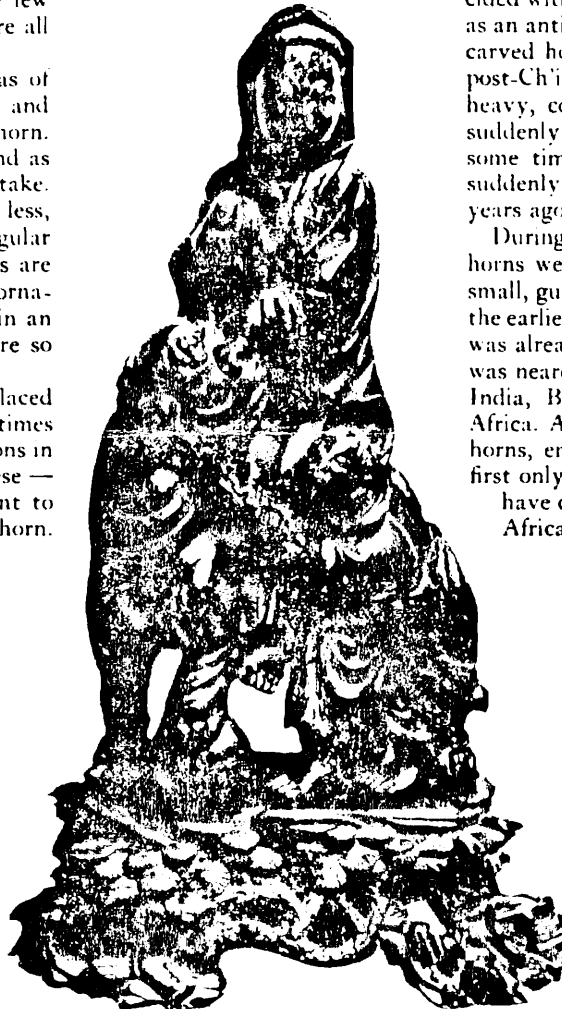


Fig. 10 — GROUP IN SO-CALLED "RHINOCEROS HORN"
Actually some kind of buffalo horn: the goddess of long life, Si Wang Mu, holding a peach of immortality, and riding on a *skisbi*, which steps on a "brocade ball" and is led on a chain by an attendant. On wooden stand. Very translucent horn, of brown amber tint. Height, 6 1/2 in.; weight (without stand), 8 3/4 oz.

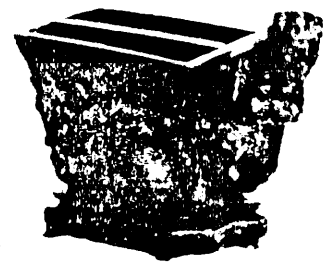


Fig. 11 — ORNAMENTAL WATER CONTAINER FOR THE WRITING TABLE
Rhinoceros horn: the god of penmanship, Wen-ti, holding a writing brush, and standing against a vessel in the form of a well-bucket, ornamented with plum blossoms. On carved hardwood stand. Dark brown. Height, 2 7/8 in.; diameter, 4 3/8 x 2 7/8 in.; weight, 4 1/2 oz.

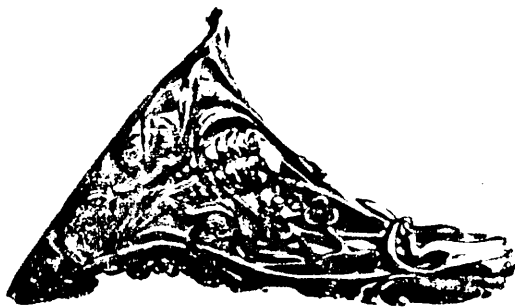


Fig. 12 (left) — RHINOCEROS HORN ORNAMENT, IN CUP STYLE
Lotus flowers, leaves, and stems, plum blossoms, reeds, and other plants. An *ama-ryō* forms the point, while a heron stands among the plants. A small boy slides out of the cavity. Brown. Height, 8 1/4 in.; diameter, 6 1/4 x 3 1/4 in.; weight, 9 1/2 oz.

Fig. 13 (right) — LIBATION CUP IN BLANC DE CHINE PORCELAIN (eighteenth century)
Shaped like a conventionalized rhinoceros horn cup. Decorated with various animals and flowers in relief, with a rim suggesting overhanging rocks





Fig. 5 -- RHINOCEROS HORN CUP
Faint rock-landscape with two prominent pine trees. Taoist immortals with their respective attributes in bold relief. Brown. Height, 3 3/8 in.; diameter, 5 3/8 x 4 in.; weight, 6 3/8 oz.



Fig. 6 -- RHINOCEROS HORN SACRIFICIAL VESSEL
Shaped like an archaic bronze tripod with two handles. A band in low relief is intersected by four heavy, dented ribs. Three flat, curved legs with low-relief monsters are of one piece with the body. Color, yellowish brown at the base of the horn (top), darkening to almost black at the point of the legs. Height, 5 in.; diameter, 5 x 3 3/4 in.; weight, 4 3/8 oz.

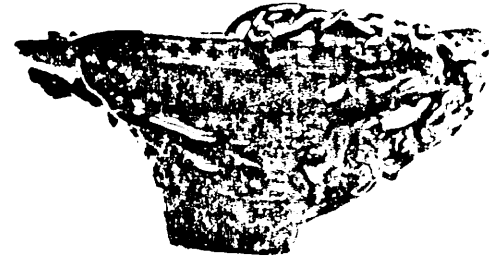


Fig. 7 -- RHINOCEROS HORN CUP
Archaic shape with low-relief band. Several amaryllis in bold relief form the handle or crawl over the body and one reaches into the cavity. Dark brown. Height, 3 1/4 in.; diameter, 6 3/8 x 4 in.; weight, 8 oz.

From the few datable pieces in foreign collections we may surmise that, from the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth, the design and execution of rhinoceros horn carvings underwent little change. Good, bad, and indifferent examples were, of course, turned out, and some late pieces show a more complicated execution than their predecessors. But in general it is safe to say that the subjects depicted, as well as the methods of embodying them in objects of circumscribed dimensions and perplexing outline, remained identical during these three centuries. It is, therefore, difficult to date with any degree of certitude such horns as we may encounter. Their color is of no assistance. While the material darkens with age, its shade may also be influenced by the use to which the object has been put, by the amount of handling it has received, and — worse for the investigator — by the fact that no two fresh horns are of the same color and structure. Likewise be it remarked that shed horns, or diluvial ones (which are still found and traded in Siberia), differ from fresh ones. All these variables will naturally affect the aspect of the carved object, whose color may range from almost yellow tones, through sundry browns, to almost black.

While the ancient examples in the Shōsōin would indicate that originally only the base of the horn was utilized, Ming and later pieces generally reveal employment of the entire horn. The point is no longer sawed off, with the exception, perhaps, of the extreme tip. But since the horn of the Asiatic rhinoceros is usually well curved, the problem of "balancing" it had to be solved.

When steamed or heated, rhinoceros horn becomes soft and pliable. The indicated procedure was, accordingly, to soften the horn sufficiently to permit its stretching, straightening, or bending as desired. Longitudinal cuts assisted this shaping and overcame ugly deformities. Horizontal cuts near the point, or penetrating the horn from the apex inwards, permitted a spreading of that portion which, in the finished article, had to become the foot. Tree trunks, stems, and other forms were carved in sections drawn away from the main body of the horn. These elements added poise as well as force to a design usually cut in bold relief on the remaining surface.

The horn's normally slight cavity was seldom widened or deepened, but at times it received some decoration. The pride of the craftsman seems to have lain in preserving as much as possible of the original material, while adapting the decoration as closely as possible to the natural shape of the horn. Hence, little imagination is needed to recognize the original outline of the horn in the ultimately decorated cup.

At first sight the horns suggest objects

wrought in hard wood. Their carving is, at times, of great delicacy. And while their color often prevents immediate perception of the components of the decoration, closer inspection may reveal an astonishing wealth of detail; and, remarkable in such diminutive and intractable objects, an underlying breadth and grandiosity of conception seldom found in other small works produced in China during the same periods.

The decorative motives of carved rhinoceros horns may be placed in four categories, which, however, sometimes overlap. By far the larger proportion of cups show a floral relief. The lotus flower, signifying purity, predominates; but magnolias, plum blossoms, and other emblematic flora also abound. In objects of the later periods — the Ch'ien Lung era — embellished horns virtually lost their significance as beakers. The stems became very elongated, the point so sharply drawn out as to require a stand for its support. The object became purely ornamental and symbolical.

Another large category is that of horns decorated with a landscape composition. Where the principal cuts were made in the side of the horn, two large trees will generally appear, standing out boldly from the "body," and often projecting their crowns over the rim into the cavity. Heavy rocks are a recurring feature; so, too, is water, without which no Chinese artist can conceive a landscape. Boats will be sailing to unknown ports over stylized waves. In the same group must be included horns portraying sublime gardens, with pavilions and terraces, trees and shrubs, and little bridges spanning brooks. Sages, attended by a boy, or by small groups of youngsters, may be seen leisurely walking the paths or tranquilly contemplating the full autumn moon.

Persons and animals as major motives of carved rhinoceros horns rarely occur. The only human figures thus used are Taoist immortals, indicating the wish for a long and happy life, or groups of little boys, representing numerous progeny, so desirable to the Chinese. True animal forms are even rarer, and always convey an emblematic meaning, like the deer, which augurs official advancement. As an exception to the rule, it may be noted that the crabs, fishes, shells, and so on occasionally appearing on lotus leaves, are quite incidental. Of purely fanciful animals, one only is represented, but that very frequently. It is the *ama-ryō*, a rain dragon, used in conjunction with floral decorations or on symmetrical vessels. It is a symbol of fertility.

The last group includes horns copying ancient sacrificial bronze receptacles. In form most of these may be roughly compared with a short and broad cream jug. Others assume the shape of a tripod (very scarce), or of a bronze beaker. All are ornamented with

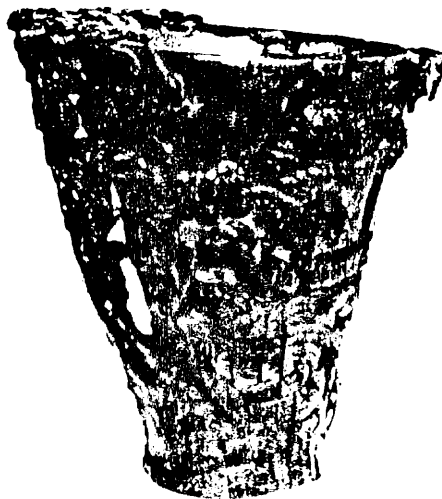


Fig. 8 -- RHINOCEROS HORN CUP
Rocky background; two large pine trees, with branches descending deep into the cavity, and a variety of other trees. A fortified gate, with a flag on a long pole and two men in front of it. Several war boats are in port, and another arrives at full sail. Very dark brown. Height, 7 3/4 in.; diameter, 7 1/4 x 5 5/8 in.; weight, 2 lbs. 13 3/4 oz.



Fig. 2 (left) — RHINOCEROS HORN ORNAMENT, IN CUP STYLE

A lotus leaf covered with lotus and other flowers, buds, and leaves, all on entwined long stems. On hardwood stand carved in waves. The base (top) of the horn is light brown, darkening toward the point, which is almost black. *Height (without stand), 6 7/8 in.; diameter, 5 3/8 x 3 7/8 in.; weight, 7 3/8 oz.*



Fig. 3 — RHINOCEROS HORN LIBATION JAR

Very regular and archaic shape, with low-relief design. Single, broad handle. Dark brown. *Height, 2 3/8 in.; diameter, 4 5/8 x 3 in.; weight, 4 oz.*

and, even more important, a revealer of poison. A poisoned drink poured into a cup of rhinoceros horn would foam ominously. And since poisoning was an accepted means of liquidating one's enemies, in China as elsewhere, self-preservation urged the employment of a rhinoceros beaker for drinking, or of a bit of like material for stirring one's food.

Like many other superstitions, this one probably worked satisfactorily. If the horn infallibly indicated the presence of poison, of what avail was spiking the drink of a person armed with such a detector?

A chapter might be written on the relationship between the rhinoceros of fact and fancy and the fabled protector of innocent maidenhood, the unicorn, which wore on its forehead a single slender horn to which were ascribed the all-revealing attributes likewise credited to the nasal adornment of the rhinoceros. Not only the rhinoceros but the narwhal, a cetacean equipped with a long twisted tusk, appear, with the horse or Indian ass, in the lineage of the unicorn. But the whole story is too long for present recital.

While European imaginations were busy in evolving the unicorn, in part from the rhinoceros, Chinese imaginations were occupied in gradually transmuting the rhinoceros into the benevolent *K'i-lin*, symbol of prosperity for the emperor, and most important of all the "hairy creatures." While in general aspect the *K'i-lin* created by Chinese artists bears no perceptible resemblance to the rhinoceros he still retains the horn of his remote ancestor. That again, however, is another story.

Arab writers confirm the tales of fabulous sums paid by the Chinese for horns which showed certain natural "designs" in their cross-section. Such horns were used for decorative plaques on belts, for dagger handles, medicine containers, and various household utensils and ornaments. In the second half of the thirteenth century an imperial atelier, with one hundred and fifty craftsmen, worked exclusively in ivory and rhinoceros horn.

The Shōsōin collection includes a number of objects made from rhinoceros horn, dating from the early T'ang Dynasty, evidently presents from the Chinese court. They offer extremely interesting examples for study. No known specimens of horn having survived from the succeeding period of seven or eight hundred years, we must rely on Chinese chroniclers for our information concerning them. However, this era seems to have been marked by a gradual but noticeable decline in regard for the wonder-working powers of the horn. Instead, the material

had come to be accepted as a suitable medium in which to exhibit a carver's skill. The general tendency of all Chinese art is to strive for involved details, a wealth of decoration, and intricacies of technique manifesting craftsmanly skill and dexterity rather than loftiness of conception. This tendency, first observable under the later Ming emperors, naturally expressed itself in rhinoceros horns, as well as in other domains of art.

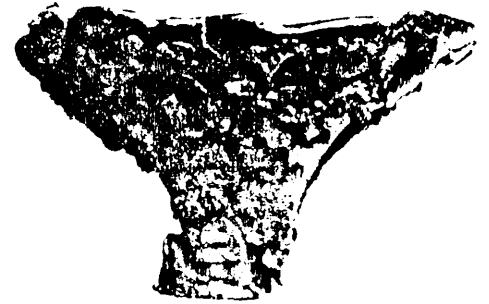
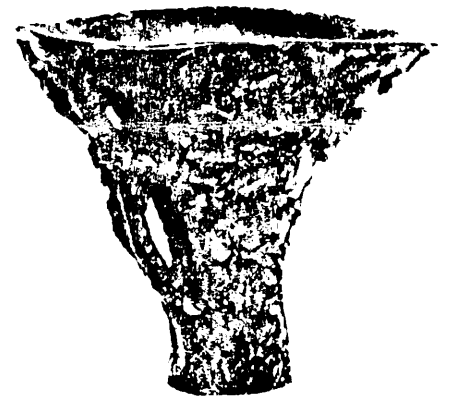


Fig. 4 (right) — RHINOCEROS HORN CUPS

a. Garden landscape with pavilions, bridges, and many "sages." In the cavity eight little boys (karako) at play. Emblematic of long, happy life and numerous progeny. Dull, dark brown. Height, 4 1/8 in.; diameter, 6 3/4 x 4 1/8 in.; weight, 10 5/8 oz.



b. Rocky landscape with pines and other trees, water, a boat with four people, pavilions. Brown. Height, 5 1/4 in.; diameter, 6 x 4 in.; weight, 10 1/8 oz.



c. Bold, heavy rocks and large pine trees, continuing into the cavity. Sundry other trees and a waterfall. Reddish brown. Height, 4 1/2 in.; diameter, 6 1/4 x 4 in.; weight, 13 1/4 oz.



d. Rocky landscape with pines and other trees, pavilions, water and boat, and two men promenading. The cavity also decorated with rocks and trees. Dull brown. Height, 5 in.; diameter, 6 3/4 x 4 1/8 in.; weight, 14 7/8 oz.