

FOR THE COLLECTOR

Rhinoceros Horn Cups

Rhinoceros horn is composed of a solid mass of agglutinated hair, which is unattached to the skull, and the threadlike streaks of the hair structure can be easily identified when the rhinohorn is examined.

This ornamental cup of rhinoceros horn (Fig 1) is most gracefully fluted and surprisingly heavy in weight. The sides are embellished with a border of delicately raised stylized flowers and leaves. The handle is composed of three highly stylized two-toed dragons, all intertwined and carved in very high relief as they clamber up the side of the vessel amongst a trail of flowering lotus. A fourth dragon lurks in the depths of the cup—rather like the frog at the bottom of the old joke beer-mugs. The foot is carved from a separate piece of horn, which is joined on. There is a somewhat similar cup amongst those from the Sir Hans Sloane Collection acquired by the British Museum in 1753.

Rhinoceros horn cups have been treasured for many centuries past, firstly by the Chinese and later by Eastern and European devotees; and especially by powerful rulers with many enemies, as these cups were believed to provide protection against poison. The supposed means by which rhinohorn achieved this varied in different localities; but since many of the ancient poisons were strong alkaloids it is possible that these would actually cause a visible reaction in the presence of shavings or thinly carved pieces of rhinohorn. Such ornamental cups were also used for religious and ceremonial purposes.

Asiatic rhinoceroses are almost extinct, and the African species may soon follow in their footsteps, because they have not only been much hunted in the past but are still ruthlessly poached, chiefly for the value of the horns. For making cups the horn of the Great Indian one-horned rhinoceros has always been considered the best, on account of its superior size, but for other purposes the smaller 'Javanese' and 'Sumatran' rhinoceros horns find

an immediate sale in the central market for all rhinohorn, Singapore. Although still poached on all possible occasions, the one-horned 'Indian' and 'Javanese' rhinoceroses are strictly protected by law, so most of the skins and horns that find their way to the dealers belong to the two-horned Sumatran species, which are not so well under the eye of government.

A few Great Indian rhinoceroses (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) still manage to exist in Bihar, Nepal and parts of Assam, although formerly they ranged over the greater part of India. These are characterized by the powerful single horn, rarely exceeding a foot in length, though sometimes reaching two feet and over. A second Asian species is the Lesser One-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*), sometimes termed the 'Javan' rhinoceros. A few still exist in Java, and possibly in Sumatra and the Malay States. The third Asian species is the smallest, reaching only 4 to 4½ feet at the shoulder. This is the two-horned 'Sumatran' rhinoceros (*Didermoceros sumatrensis*), which, due to its extended range, includes two sub-species, the Chittagong Rhino (*Didermoceros sumatrensis lasiotis*) of Bengal and Assam, and the Malaccan Rhino (*Didermoceros sumatrensis niger*) of Burma, Thailand, former French Indo-China, and the Malay States. The front horn (termed the 'true horn' by the Sumatrans), is typically the longer and is usually under a foot in length; though there is a specimen in the British Museum of Natural History which measures 32½ inches over the front curve. The rear horn (termed the 'false horn' by the Sumatrans) is only about two to four inches in length and is never prominent in the female.

Numerous fossil remains of rhinoceroses have been discovered throughout North China, but it has not been ascertained how late they became extinct. According to Sowerby it was shortly after the Chou or Han period, but some writers say that there were still rhinos in China as late as the



1. Chinese Rhinoceros Horn Cup. Mid-seventeenth century. Height 13.3 cm. Hull Grundy Collection, London

thirteenth or even sixteenth centuries.

The first rhinoceros to reach Europe since the time of Pliny was sent to King Manuel of Portugal by the King of Gujrat (Cambay) and landed at Lisbon on 20 May 1515. Dürer's fine ink drawing, later included in the Sloane Collection given to the British Museum, from which several editions of wood blocks were made, helped to spread the rhino's fame, but the unfortunate animal perished when being sent by sea as a gift from King Manuel to Pope Leo X, for the ship and rhino sank in the Gulf of Genoa.

More numerous than cups are the pierced and carved whole horns, the elaborate late nineteenth-century editions which one associates with inartistic bridges of ivory elephants and brass-topped tables. Fine old rhinoceros horn cups on the other hand are rare, and one only finds them described in sale catalogues a few times a year, usually among the numerous sales of expensive Chinese jade and porcelain. Why they are comparatively cheap and not sought after can only be put down to the fact that most people prefer the glowing colours of jade and china to the dark dingy appearance of rhinohorn. Nevertheless these cups, like T'ang pottery, can look very beautiful and decorative when displayed against a pale background such as a white wall.

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