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CHINESE
DECORATIVE
ARTS

Denise P. Leidy

Wai-fong Anita Siu

James C. Y. Watt

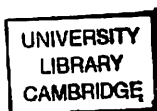
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BAMBOO, RHINOCEROS HORN, WOOD, AND AMBER

During the Ming and Qing dynasties carvers of small items often worked in more than one medium. A result of this practice was that carvings made from different materials—such as bamboo, rhinoceros horn, ivory, wood, jade, and so on—were fashioned in similar modes reflecting common aesthetic concerns. The craftsmen's sensitivity to the textures of the various media is evidenced in the fine surface polish they customarily applied to the objects. Such finish enhances the fibrous texture of bamboo, the grain of hardwoods, and the translucency of horn, and in general enriches colors. From the seventeenth century onward there was an increasing interest in dense, miniaturized carvings. Narrative scenes with figures in landscapes, drawn from both popular and literati traditions and based on templates supplied by local painters, depicted details with meticulous attention. Designs inspired by interest in antiquities, such as the rhinoceros-horn "champion" vase, were also popular.

Bamboo carving is an example of how artistry transforms a humble material into highly valued works of art. Bamboo fascinated scholar-officials because of the attributes and symbolism attached to it. Its hollow stalk symbolizes an unprejudiced mind and humility. The resilience of its branches in withstanding strong winds is a metaphor for scholar-officials, who must maintain their principles when challenged by adversaries. Thus, bamboo was popular for objects used in scholars' studios, such as brush holders, wrist rests, perfume holders, and fan ribs. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries bamboo carving flourished in Jiading, Jiangsu Province, where three generations from the Zhu family produced distinguished works with an emphasis on dynamic compositions and high relief. The Zhu family was succeeded by many followers. Also working in Jiangsu Province, Zhang Xihuang practiced a different technique, which was characterized by extremely shallow relief, incorporating part of the bamboo skin, and landscapes featuring both grand vistas and minute details. The city of Nanjing was famous for talented carvers of bamboo fan ribs. In addition to relief carving, artisans also manufactured small three-dimensional objects from bamboo roots. The designs of these small carvings are often very similar to those in other materials. For example, the design of a small amber carving illustrated on page 52 could easily have been adapted for bamboo root.

Works crafted in hardwoods were also highly prized. After a ban on maritime trade was lifted in 1567, tropical hardwood was available in great quantities to Chinese carpenters, who until this time had been working mainly with native deciduous woods. Among the various kinds of

imported lumber *huanghuali* (*Dalbergia odorifera*) and *zitan* (purple sandalwood) were the most highly valued. The density of these materials allowed the carpenter to construct sturdy furniture and utensils with sophisticated mortise-and-tenon systems. Instead of applying many coats of lacquer over the final product for protection and decoration, as in the case of objects crafted from softwood, carpenters invested their labor in polishing the hardwoods to show off their natural grain and dark colors. The hardness of the material encouraged the execution of lavish and intricate designs, such as openwork, relief, and semiprecious stone inlay. The carving of hardwood flourished until the eighteenth century, when the supply began to diminish because of scarcity.

Rhinoceros horn was also imported from the south. The rhinoceros was once found in China, but by the Han dynasty it had become an exotic species whose skin was sought after for making armor and whose horns were carved into drinking cups. By the Tang dynasty rhinoceros horns were imported into China along with foreign goods such as pearls, sandalwood, and camphor. Horn varies in color from dark brown to yellow, sometimes with spots of contrasting tones. Its natural texture, pattern, and translucency sparked the imagination of connoisseurs, who gave the patterns names like "clouds," "raindrops," and "millet spots."

A number of desirable properties were attributed to rhinoceros horn, including medicinal uses, which led to many objects in this medium being ground into powder. As a result, few works in horn have survived. Extant examples consist mainly of wine cups datable to the Ming and Qing dynasties, although back-scratchers and girdle plaques were known to have been made from it. Tradition has it that a rhinoceros-horn cup will react with poison and thus protect its user. Li Yu, a connoisseur from the late seventeenth century, also recommended rhinoceros-horn cups because they enhanced the fragrance of wine and because this material, though precious, was not ostentatious. Many rhinoceros-horn cups are superb works of sculpture.

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Cup

Qing dynasty, 18th century

Rhinoceros horn

L. 4 1/2 in. (11.2 cm)

Promised Gift of Florence and Herbert Irving

The oval vessel is carved in the shape of waves, which part in the center to reveal two dragons' heads. It must have been an extraordinary sight to see the dragons partially submerged when wine was poured into the cup. The bodies of the dragons appear on the exterior as if they are maneuvering through the waves, which break in crests on one side to form a handle. The undulating contour conveys a sense of motion suggestive of the ever-changing nature of water.

The dating of rhinoceros-horn cups is still imprecise, and very few examples have firm dates. Judging from the vivid illusionism of the design, however, this example is datable to the eighteenth century. WAS



[scroll] 18, leaf 15a, published 1750) and dated to the Tang dynasty; however, this dating needs further investigation.

During the middle and late eighteenth century, the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–95) exhibited a fondness for multibodied vessels, as evidenced by porcelain produced for the court. Champion vases were popular during the middle and late eighteenth century and were manufactured in different media, including

jade, cloisonné enamel, and rhinoceros horn.

The designs on rhinoceros-horn champion vases usually reflect a strong archaic inclination, characterized by the integration of animal motifs with fancy angularized scrollwork. On this vase a wide horizontal band, raised by carving the background away, displays a dragon-headed scroll pattern, which was adapted from woodblock illustrations of antiquities. WAS

"Champion" Vase

Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–95)

Rhinoceros horn

H. 3 3/8 in. (8.6 cm)

Promised Gift of Florence and Herbert Irving

This vessel has two narrow vertical compartments connected by a carving of a mythical bird. The term "champion" vase, which appears only in Western writings, may be derived from two possible sources. It has been suggested that winners of archery competitions were rewarded with rhinoceros-horn cups during the Ming period. The term also may have been a loose translation of *yingxiang bei* (hero's cup), referring to the bird (*ying*) and the bear (*xiong*) it is standing on.

The origin of the champion vase is not exactly clear. Double cups with carvings of birds had been made from lacquered wood as early as the late Warring States period (481–221 B.C.), but their relationship to champion vases is not obvious. A bronze version with partially fluted walls from the Qing palace collection was illustrated in *Xiqing Gujian* (Catalogue of Xiqing Antiquities, *juan*

