

Rhino horn trade in the UK

Over recent years, I have discovered a worrying loophole in the illegal trading of rhino horn. As an outsider to the animal conservation scene, I had recognised a pattern of trade that seemed to be obscure to the majority of wildlife conservationists.

Karen Rennie | Antiques dealer

When I worked at Sotheby's in the early 1980s, hardly any 'worked' pieces of rhino horn appeared at auction. This was before any regulations were in place regarding the sale of such items. They were catalogued as 'extremely rare'.

Around 2009, I started noticing the regularity with which rhino horn artefacts were being advertised in our weekly trade journal. These were predominantly appearing in provincial UK salerooms, were evidently neither rare nor old, with often extremely crude carving. The astronomical prices of rhino horn reaching tens of thousands of pounds at auction were front-page news.

The problem, as I saw it, was an unregulated UK auction business. Anybody can legally conduct an auction. Several provincial UK auction houses openly tout for business and indeed celebrate the inclusion of rhino horn libation cups and other endangered animal artefacts.

The loophole is the quick run up time for a provincial auction: it is a matter of weeks from the item being brought in, to the time the hammer falls. Until CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora)

certificates were required in 2010, an auctioneer could accept the rhino horn without question, sell the object to anyone in the room, by phone or internet. Once paid for, the horn could leave the premises immediately.

Up until May 2013, the law stated that rhino horn artefacts such as libation cups could be sold if they were acquired pre-1947, part of a family relocation or a 'worked' item derogation that is, part of an artefact of 'artistic merit' or for a bona-fide research project.

When deciding whether a rhino horn artefact is 'pre-1947', aside from carbon dating, this is merely the opinion of the auctioneer. There is only one, now scarce, reference book on the subject of rhinoceros horn artefacts. Carbon dating is costly and time consuming, therefore, an auctioneer will merely state their 'opinion' on the authentication of the piece, which can be very inaccurate. Being 'part of a family relocation' is certainly a loophole that has been used by poachers according to Caroline Rigg of Wildlife Licensing.

Since May 2013, an important breakthrough has occurred. DEFRA (the UK's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) has announced much stricter laws regarding the sale of 'worked' items containing wild animal parts, including rhino horn. Many items now require a certificate issued

by the European Commission, much to the dismay of many UK auctioneers. The good news is the noticeable decline in the advertising and trading in rhino horn artefacts in the UK.

I and others in the antiques trade believe that the UK had become the *de facto* clearing house for the illegal trade in rhino horn. The antique status conferred by an auction legitimises these objects, which would then be bought by wealthy Asians as trophies or subsequently ground down for 'medicinal' use.

Internet buying allows these items to be bought anonymously, with the vendor's and buyer's identity known only to the auctioneer. I believe that a total rhino horn trade ban in the UK would send out a moral message, to Europe and beyond, that we must not collude in this activity. Trading in second-hand rhino horn artefacts simply fuels the insatiable demand for rhino horn in Asia.

In 2012, Sotheby's and Christie's announced they would not allow the sales of rhino horn throughout their salerooms worldwide; however other UK salerooms have been slow to follow suit. Another concern is that several UK salerooms are opening offices in Hong Kong and China, potentially providing another loophole and opportunity for 'laundering' poached rhino.

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Clockwise from top: Mounted rhino horn 'trophy'; antique libation cups and antique rhino feet; crudely worked 'cup'



ALL OTHER IMAGES: KAREN RENNIE