

# ON THE TRAIL OF A RHINO CUP

A scholarly adventure in which the author seeks and at long last discovers the rarest of all rare Chinese goblets.

By Jan Chapman

The belief that the horn of the rhinoceros had the power to detect poison reached Europe from China long before the arrival of the animal itself. The first rhinoceros to arrive in Europe was sent as a gift to King Manuel I of Portugal in the year 1515. Having seen this legendary beast, people of means were willing to pay huge sums for a cup made of rhinoceros horn.

Dr. Charles Peter Thunberg, writing about his travels to the Cape of Good Hope in 1773, says: "The horns of the rhinoceros were kept . . . not only as rarities but also as useful in diseases, and for the purpose of detecting poison. . . . It was generally believed that goblets made of these horns in a turner's lathe would discover a poisonous draught that was put into them by making the liquor ferment till it ran quite out of the goblet. . . . Of these, goblets are made which are set in gold and silver and made presents to Kings, people of distinction, and particular friends, or else sold at a high price."

A few cups arrived in Europe during the sixteenth century, among them three listed in the inventory to the collection of Archduke Ferdinand II of Austria. A number of rhinoceros-horn cups in European collections, mounted in either silver or gold, can be dated to the sixteenth or early seventeenth century on the stylistic evidence of their mounts, although none is inscribed.

Rhinoceros-horn cups, expertly carved in China, reached Europe during the sixteenth century via the Cape of Good Hope. The popularity of all things Chinese grew so rapidly during the next two hundred years that a school of decoration called "Chinoiserie" flourished, but, unlike porcelains and silks, rhinoceros horn has always been a scarce and costly commodity in China and very few horn cups were imported.

The Ellane Butler cup first came to my notice five years ago when I found a reference to it in the May 1931 issue of *The Connoisseur*. An article by Lady Evans,

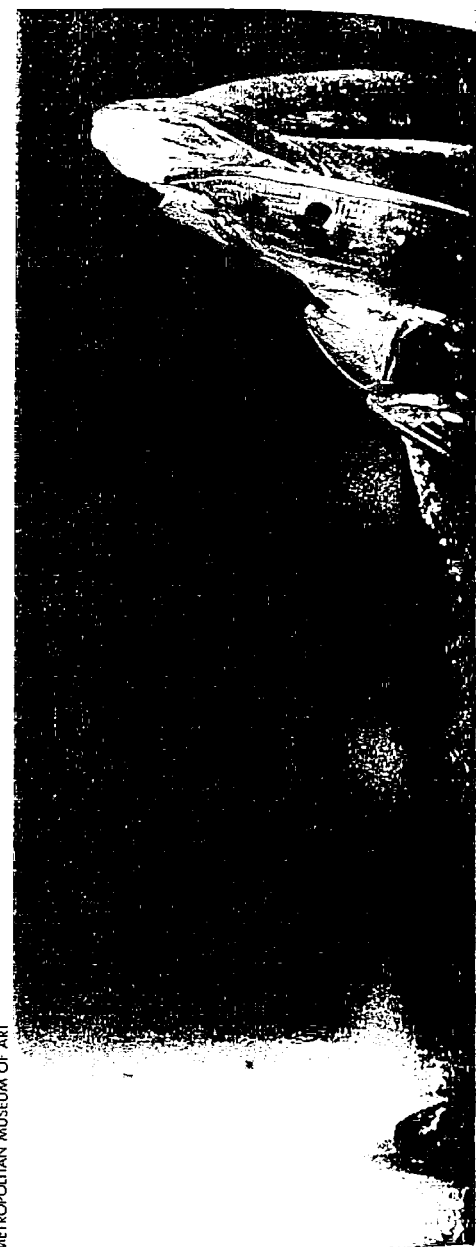
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"Carved Cups of Rhinoceros Horn," discusses the supposed properties of rhinoceros horn and describes cups she has either seen or heard of: "At the Horner's Exhibition, London, 1882, there was lent by the Reverend W. Sneyd of Keele Hall, Stafford, a rhinoceros horn cup, of Chinese work, carved with flowers and leaves, with an English-made silver rim and mount, inscribed 'Ellane Butler, Countess of Ormonde and Ossorie, 1628.'" When I first read this article I did not recognize the importance of this particular cup, for I was just beginning my research into rhinoceros-horn cups. There had never been a serious attempt to establish a system of classification and dating for these beautiful but rare works of art, but I was presented with the opportunity to do just that when I began work on cataloguing the Chester Beatty collection of some 220 pieces—the largest and finest collection of cups in existence. Gradually, as my knowledge increased, I began to realize that the Ellane Butler cup is unique. It simply had to be found.

The search for the cup began with a letter to the bursar of Keele Hall. The reply stated: "This cup was item 93 at a sale at Christie's on 22nd May 1906. It went for £17. 17. 0." Christie's kindly looked up their auction records for me, but these disclosed only that the cup had been sold to a Mr. Ready.

Over the next couple of years I visited many collections in Europe and examined over a thousand cups, but discovered no Ellane Butler cup. Because these cups have been so little studied they are sometimes not recognized for what they are. While visiting private homes, perhaps to look at a collection of Japanese prints, my eye has lighted upon a rhinoceros-horn cup, which the owner professed to know nothing about. Surely, I thought, the Butler cup is hidden away in a private house somewhere.

In 1980, I was at last able to set out on a research tour of rhinoceros-horn cups in American collections, planning to visit any museum that owned more than ten cups. On a hot, sunny day in September, I turned up at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in



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New York and was taken into a gloomy storeroom, where their collection of cups had been unpacked. A single glance and my heart soared. At one end of the group was a small, insignificant-looking cup with a blackened rim. Reaching for it, I exclaimed, "I think I know what this is!" The cup's silver rim and foot were completely blackened, yet despite the tarnish I could read the inscription running round the flat rim: ELLANE \* BUTLER \* COUNTES \* OF \* ORMOND \* END \* OSSORIE \* 1628.

The cup had been presented to the Metropolitan Museum in 1915 by Theodore M. Davis and had been stored unnoticed ever since. Rather small in size, it measures 3 3/4 inches high and 5 1/4 inches wide. It has no handle, and the interior is undecorated. The exterior surface of the horn has been deeply carved with birds and camellias in high relief—in fact, the carver



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strengthen the cup, by the silversmith who mounted it in 1628. Before mounting, it had stood on a circle of flower stems, cut from the horn.

Although Lady Evans states that the cup is mounted in English silver, the evidence suggests that it was mounted in Ireland. Apart from the fact that the cup was owned by an Irish family—the Ormondes of Kilkenny Castle—who would probably have employed an Irish silversmith, one must consider the foot and rim themselves. The cup has the same sturdy shape and broad convex foot found in Irish silver chalices of the period, and the light hatching on the rim is like that on Irish pieces.

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The lack of a hallmark is not unusual, for it was only in 1605 that Irish silver was first hallmarked. The earliest surviving hallmarked silver is a flagon, made in 1638, ten years later than the date on the Ellane Butler cup. Had the Ellane Butler cup been hallmarked, it would be a discovery of enormous importance in the field of early Irish silver. Nevertheless, it is in the field of Chinese, not Irish, art that its importance really lies. Out of the fifteen hundred or more cups I have so far examined, only seven can be unequivocally attributed to the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) by means of an inscription in Chinese characters. Because the Ellane Butler cup is the only one so far discovered that has a European inscription dating it to 1600 or possibly earlier, it must join the small group of dated examples by which the carving technique and decorative style of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century carvings in horn, bamboo, jade, and ivory may be judged. Apart from their value as dating tools, many rhinoceros-horn carvings are of such superior quality, variety, and technique that they should be accepted as part of the mainstream of Chinese art. A fuller study of them will surely contribute a great deal to our understanding of Chinese decorative art as a whole. □



s cut so deeply that the remaining surface is exceptionally thin. The delicacy of the cup is emphasized by its pale honey color. The natural color of horn is gray, and the various tones of yellow, brown, and nearly black found on the cups are artificially produced. The honey-colored patina used in the Ellane Butler cup is characteristic of its period. Several tiny rivets are presumably added, in an attempt to

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