

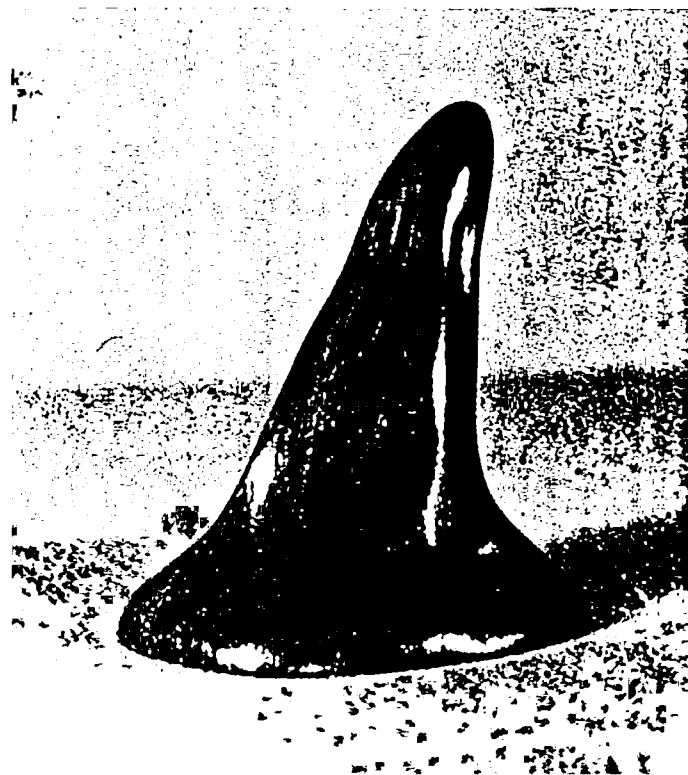
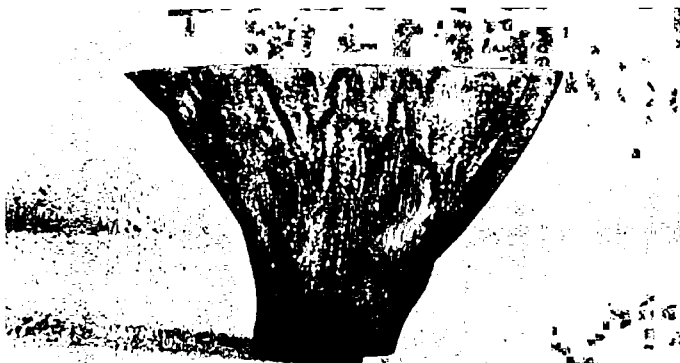
THE CHESTER BEATTY COLLECTION OF CHINESE CARVED RHINOCEROS HORN CUPS

Jan Chapman



*All photographs are by the author,
who is Far Eastern Curator of
the Chester Beatty Library and
Gallery of Oriental Art*

*Shown on this page is a rhino horn
carved to look like an ancient wine
beaker called a ku. Height 13.8 cms*



1. Undecorated cup which has been polished to a high sheen. On the base, within an oval frame, are the characters 'Isüan He, the reign title of Emperor Hui Tsung of the Sung dynasty used between the years 1101–1126. Height 9 cms

2. Undecorated "T'ang type" cup stained in a light honey colour. Length 13.4 cms

2a Interior view of the cup in Figure 2, showing the natural hollow which forms the well of the cup

3. Full tip cup carved over entire surface with scenes of the eight Taoist immortals in paradise. Length 31 cms

4. Bowl-shaped cup in the form of a peach. Two fruit bats are carved in high relief on the exterior. Height 6 cms, width 16 cms

5. The surface of this cup is carved to represent tree bark overlaid with prunus blossom in relief. Height 8.2 cms

THE STORY of why the world's largest and finest collection of Chinese rhinoceros horn cups is to be found in a little-known Dublin museum is really the story of the extraordinary man who collected them. Sir Alfred Chester Beatty was an extremely gifted man with two passions in life—mineralogy and collecting—the former providing the finance necessary for the latter. He was born in the United States in 1875, and made the first of many millions of dollars before he was thirty years old through his skill in discovering new locations from which mineral ores could be mined. Chester Beatty started his collecting career very early, for he describes in his unpublished memoirs how, when he was ten years old, he would spend his pocket money of ten cents a week bidding for mineral specimens at the New York auction house of Bangs & Company.

Early correspondence suggests that he first developed a penchant for Oriental art when he began to buy Chinese snuff bottles at the turn of the century. There are no clues as to when and how he started to become interested in rhinoceros horn cups—perhaps he first saw them in a dealer's shop while purchasing a new snuff bottle. He must have collected quickly and eagerly for, in the year 1917, he cabled to his agent in Tokyo instructing him not to send any more cups as his collection was "almost complete". A typescript catalogue still exists which shows that Chester Beatty had already amassed more than fifteen hundred snuff bottles by the year 1914, but there is no evidence to show how many rhino horn cups were in his collection by 1917.

Chester Beatty was very proud of his magnificent collection of rhino horn cups, which surely must be the first ever made by a Western collector. He displayed them in ornate carved wooden cabinets along the corridors of his palatial London residence, Baroda House, where he lived when he moved from America to England in 1913. The cups stayed in London from 1913 to 1948 when Sir Alfred Chester Beatty, as he then was, left England for good. In that year he removed his vast collection of Oriental art—said to be the finest ever made by one individual—to Ireland. In Dublin he built two display galleries in a quiet road on the outskirts of the city and invited members of the public to see his treasures each Wednesday and Saturday afternoon. After Chester Beatty died in 1968, at the grand old age of 93, his extensive collections of Oriental art became the property of the people of Ireland and, since then, have attracted visitors and scholars from all over the world.

Chester Beatty employed the ablest scholars to catalogue and prepare for publication nearly every section of the collection. The lavish catalogues of the Islamic collections, in particular, have made his Persian, Turkish, Arabic and Mughal material well-known to every scholar in the field. Unfortunately this was not the case with the Far Eastern collections, for, during Chester Beatty's lifetime, only the Tibetan and Mongolian materials, and one small part of the Chinese collection, namely the fifteen Chinese Jade Books, were published. Strange to say, the rhinoceros horn cups had not even been listed before this writer began to catalogue them in January 1977.

The collection of two hundred and twenty cups is remarkable in two ways: firstly, in the uniformly high quality of the pieces and, secondly, in the richness of its scope. Chester Beatty seems to have been gifted with a connoisseur's eye which enabled him not only to differentiate between excellent, good, or mediocre cups, but also to recognise and include as many different shapes and types as possible. As a result, there are very few known shapes or types that are not represented in his magnificent collection. Perhaps even more important is the fact that the two hundred and twenty cups cover the entire period between the early twelfth and the late nineteenth century.

The oldest cup in the collection was made between the years 1101–1126, and bears a seal used by the Sung dynasty Emperor Hui Tsung. There are very few cups still extant of such an early date, and all are similar in appearance, that is, very simple in shape with a minimum of carving. This refinement and simplicity is the logical outcome not only of the taste of the Sung court, but the natural development of the shapes favoured by the preceding T'ang dynasty (A.D. 618–906). In the Shosoin repository at Nara in Japan are to be found a handful of cups brought to Japan from

China during the eighth century. All the Shosoin cups are undecorated, relying only on the beauty of their shape and texture. One particular cup which tallies exactly with a description in the original deed of gift sets the standard for the 'T'ang type'.

*2 It is short and pointed, with a flat lip, very similar to a cup of T'ang type in the Chester Beatty collection which has a rich golden colour with an exceptionally high sheen.

Although no comparative dating system for Chinese carved rhinoceros horn cups has yet been published (a catalogue of the Chester Beatty Collection of Chinese Carved Rhinoceros Horn Cups by this author will set out a suggested dating system), a general rule of thumb would indicate that the earlier the cup the simpler the shape and decoration. Conversely, cups dating from the late nineteenth century are generally ornate in both shape and decoration. To illustrate this difference one can compare a T'ang type cup in the collection with an example of the same shape made a hundred or so years

*3 ago. This relatively modern horn is covered over its entire outer surface with complex carvings of gods, animals and landscape scenes and is typical of the intricately carved full tip horns that are to be found in several museums and private collections. The longest cup of this type in the Chester Beatty Collection measures 45 centimetres (18 inches), but even this is short when compared with examples measuring as much as 82 centimetres (32 inches).

Rhinoceros horns vary enormously in shape and size, ranging from the long slender front horns of the African white rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*) to the short and squat posterior horns of the African black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*) and the Sumatran rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*). All rhino horns are conical in shape, and they

*2a possess a natural indentation which originally fitted over a protuberance on the animal's skull. This natural indentation makes an obvious container for liquid and is, therefore, the main focus and purpose of the cup itself.

In their natural state, rhino horns are always grey—the yellows, browns, reds and blacks of the finished cups are achieved by staining with natural dyes. Nowadays the colour most admired by connoisseurs is a rich honey gold and light brown mixture which often shows to best advantage in the flower bowls of sixteenth to seventeenth century date. There are several pieces in the collection shaped like bowls, but they

*4 still fall into the general category of rhinoceros horn cups since they can act as containers for liquid.

Just as the first task of the expert jade carver, when handed a piece of uncut jade, was to decide how the particular stone could best be carved in order to bring out its inherent beauty of shape and texture, so too did the rhinoceros horn carvers consider the raw horn with which they were to work. Their aim was to produce a work of art that possessed an elegant shape, carved with a decoration that perfectly complemented its outline. The details of the decoration must be composed so that all the proportions were in harmony: for example, on a very thin-walled horn the artist would carve out a delicate, almost transparent, cup with flowers or fruit in low relief. If, on the other hand, he was working with an exceptionally thick-walled horn, then he had the material from which to produce a strong, deeply cut carving.

Whilst the most popular shape adopted by the carvers of rhino horn cups is the goblet, by far the most popular of the decorative subjects chosen is that of flowers and plants. Lotus leaves and blossom or prunus bark and blossom are extremely common themes, with the carver frequently utilising the whole surface of the cup to represent the veining of a lotus leaf or the bark of a prunus tree. Some cups are carved all over the surface to represent a single flower or leaf: for example, the lotus flower whose every petal is carefully carved on the interior of the cup or the delicate leaf-shaped cup carved from a small section of the original horn. Fruits are another popular subject of the carver's art. Melons, grapes, peaches, lychees, citrons and pomegranates are all to be found in realistic detail among cups in the collection. Moving from the floral to the animal world we find squirrels, lions and goats among the animals; eagles, herons, parrots and peacocks among the birds; bees, butterflies and praying mantis among the

6. An extremely unusual cup carved to look like a lotus flower and pod. Twelve rounded stems support water plants which rise from the flat circular base. Height 9.6 cms

7. This cup is shaped as a lychee leaf with vein markings on both interior and exterior surfaces. It stands on a base carved as lychee nuts. Height 6.5 cms

8. A rich honey-coloured cup carved in the shape of a melon. Height 9.5 cms

9. A fine example of the popular vine motif. The cup itself is shaped like a vine leaf, and the exterior is decorated with grapes and tendrils. Height 10.5 cms

10. A story cup illustrating the myth of the pearl of immortality which lies in the Dragon King's Palace in the depths of the sea. The pearl is guarded by the animal depicted here: a sea-goat, a unicorn and a winged dragon. Height 11 cms

11. The squirrel and grape motif is very popular in Far Eastern art. In this cup the body of the squirrel acts as the handle of the cup. Height 8.5 cms

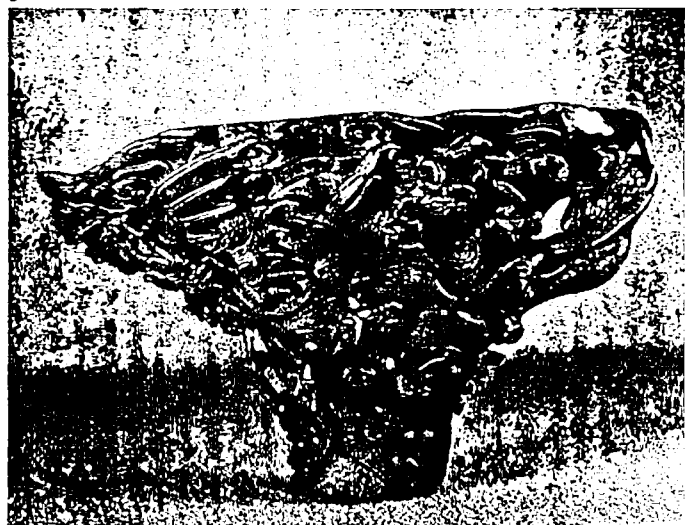
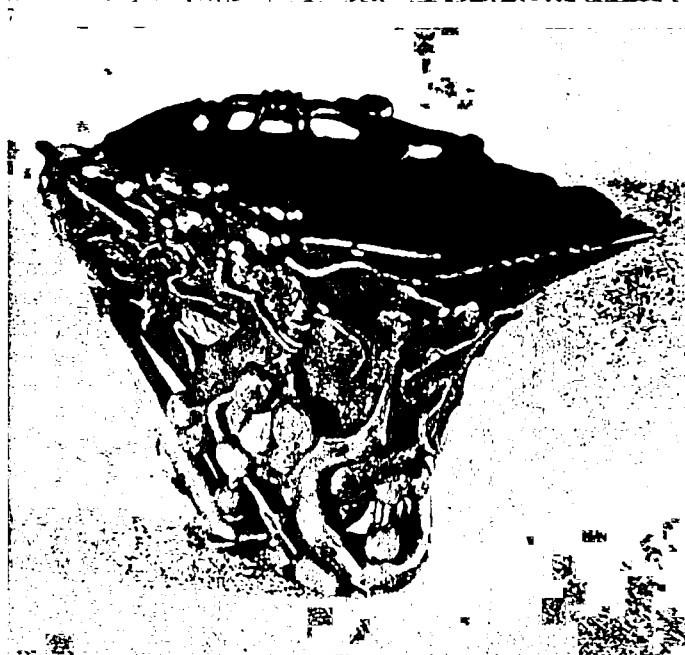
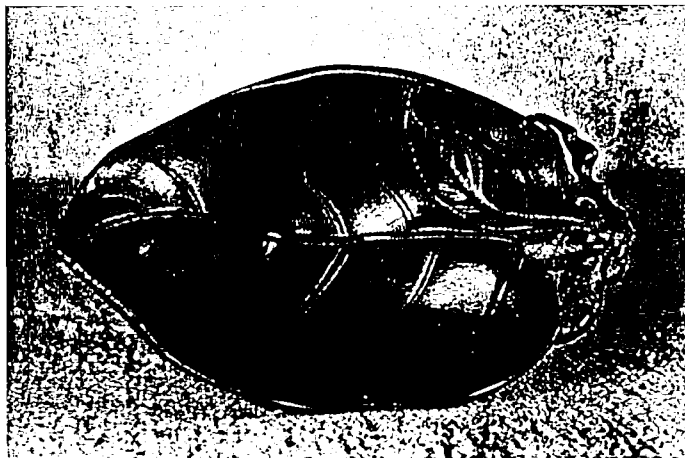
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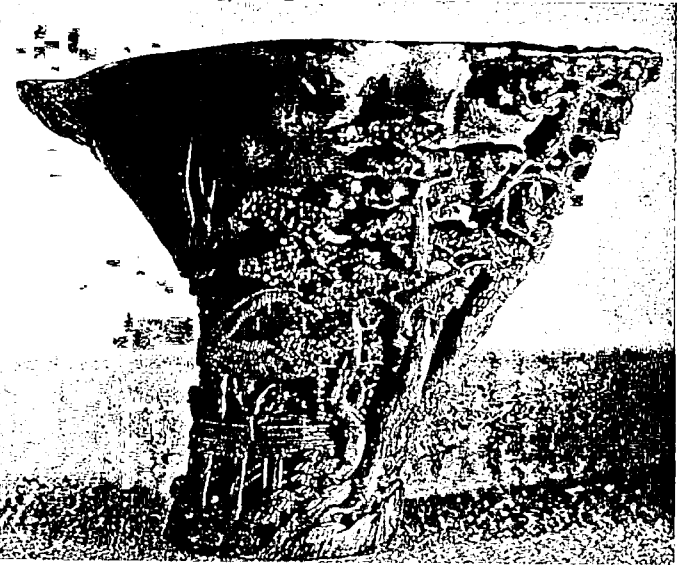
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12. Two cranes stand out against a rock carved in low relief in the centre of the cup. On the back surface (not visible here) are parrots, cranes and phoenix. Height 9 cms

13. A deeply carved cup showing a bird of prey swooping down against a background of waves. Height 12 cms

14. A praying mantis is shown resting on a bamboo branch. Height 7.4 cms

15. A boy watches two old men playing "go" inside a cave. This is the story of Wang-chih who discovers that centuries have gone by when he finally leaves the cave. Height 10.2 cms

16. A masterpiece of carving by the 17th century artist Ch'ou Wen-shu. It is based on a painting and shows a rotund scholar lying naked on a bed being fanned by his servant. Height 11.5 cms

17. The God of Immortality, Shou Lao, riding a crane through the clouds in the land of the immortals. Height 15.1 cms

insects and several different types of fish and crustaceans.

For sheer interest it would be hard to beat the landscape cups, and many connoisseurs seem unaware that there are any other types. The landscapes consist of rocks, trees, plants and water under a cloud-edged sky. Sometimes the scene shows only animals, but more often it is the people inhabiting the scenes who are the focus of interest. Men and women, scholars and servants, gods and hermits, can be seen amongst trees and rocks, whilst all kinds of boats and boatmen are shown on rivers and waterways. Although most of these scenes are depicted from a distance, occasionally the carver moves to a close-up view of house interiors where we can see chairs, tables, screens, etc., in addition to the carefully robed figures of the individual people.

One subject which is a great favourite among Chinese artists of all kinds, including painters and carvers, is the prose poem *Ode on the Red Cliffs* by the Sung dynasty poet Su Shih, also known by the name Su Tung-p'o (1037-1101). In 1079 Su Shih was exiled for political reasons to Hopei province on the River Yangtze and it was there that he was inspired to write his long prose poem which describes how, on two separate evenings in the year 1082, he took two of his friends out on the river in a small boat to look at the Red Cliffs. These cliffs are the site of a famous battle which took place in the period of the Three Kingdoms (A.D. 220-280). Su Shih and his friends Fo Yin, a Buddhist monk, and the scholar Huang Lu-chieh, are depicted sitting round a table in the middle of a small open boat against a background of deeply carved cliffs. Rhinoceros horn is an ideal material on which the carver can use his cutting techniques to best advantage in depicting the three-dimensional effect of the much indented and uneven surface of the Red Cliffs contrasting with the minute details of the boat and its three passengers.

On the second of the two pleasure trips, which took place on the fifteenth day of the tenth month, the three friends were moored in midstream below the Red Cliffs around midnight. Suddenly, in the eerie silence, they hear the wail of a single crane as it flies over the boat and continues its journey westwards. After returning home from the outing, Su Shih dreams that he meets a Taoist monk who asks him whether he has enjoyed his trip to the Red Cliffs. Puzzled, Su Shih enquires the name of the monk but gets no reply. Then, with a flash of inspiration, he realises that the monk must be the lone crane that had flown over the moored boat on its journey to the western paradise which is the land of the immortals. When he asks the monk whether or not he was the crane, the monk smiles back at him but, before he can reply "Yes" or "No", Su Shih wakes from his dream and the monk is nowhere to be seen. Of the eight cups in the collection which depict the story of the Red Cliffs, three of them show the scene of the crane flying over the lonely boat at midnight. All are superbly carved, and in one, probably the finest of the entire group and one of the best cups in the collection, the carver has inserted a jade eye in the head of the crane. The detail on this cup is so perfect that a tiny fish can be seen in the fisherman's hand at the base of the cup.

In addition to one or two story cups which depict well-known legends, there is a very representative group of cups showing the eight Taoist immortals, often with accompanying animals. This type of cup is not uncommon and would well repay a separate study. There is no difficulty at all in recognising the eight figures once one makes oneself familiar with the different accoutrements such as lotus, flute, crutch, etc. that they carry, and once one realises that there are almost always nine figures, not eight, in the group. The eight Taoist immortals are usually grouped round or looking towards the figure of Shou Lao, the God of Immortality himself. Shou Lao is one of the easiest immortals in the pantheon to identify because he has a very high pointed head and a long white beard. He is frequently shown riding on a crane or, if not, accompanied by a deer.

Fifty cups in the collection are carved neither with figures, animals nor plants. Instead, the carvers have aimed to create copies in rhinoceros horn of ancient Chinese sacrificial vessels manufactured in bronze. Cups of this type are normally described

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*Full descriptions of these cups will be found in the
captions to the black and white illustrations*

as being "archaic". During the Shang dynasty (1765?–1123? B.C.) the bronze casters produced a group of distinctively shaped vessels for ritual use, each with a specific name and purpose. Most of these vessels stood either on three or four legs or had a round foot to support the main body of the vessel, and this practice is echoed in the feet of archaic rhinoceros horn cups. There are three *ting** in the collection, each with the characteristic attribute of three long curving legs and a pair of small round handles on the lip; a *chiao* that has three legs but no handles, and a *ku* which is a tall, slim wine beaker standing on a flat rounded foot. These distinctively shaped cups are the exceptions, however, since the majority of archaic style rhinoceros horn cups are shaped like a goblet with a handle and an elegantly shaped foot. A great many of the cups are carved with dragons or mythical animals, and several cups in this group show a uniquely Chinese decorative motif known as *t'ao t'ieh*, an animal mask which is found on Chinese bronzes as early as the middle of the second millennium B.C.

Undoubtedly the most interesting cups in any collection are those which carry inscriptions. There are twenty-three cups in the Chester Beatty collection carrying inscriptions ranging from as short as two characters to as long as a hundred and twenty-four characters. There is no traditional place on which the carvers chose to incise or carve them, and I have to admit that in some cases a one- or two-word inscription has been so cleverly hidden that I have handled the cup a dozen times before spotting the hidden characters concealed in foliage. Inscriptions on rhino horn cups vary not only in length but also in subject-matter. Some are simple signatures consisting of two or three characters; some are signed and dated; and some are even signed, dated and titled. One cup, for example, carries the signature of the master carver Ch'ou Wen-shu, a cyclical date (probably 1598), and the information that he has carved the cup in imitation of a painting he has seen by the Ming dynasty painter Wen Po-jen (1502–1575). Information such as this is invaluable because it tells us the earliest possible date on which the cup could have been carved and may even extend our knowledge of paintings by well-known artists. There is, for example, a Wen-shu cup in a European collection with an inscription which tells us that it was made as a copy of a hitherto unknown painting by the Yüan dynasty master Chao Meng-fu (1254–1322). Chou Wen-shu's name does not appear in any of the reference books, but the inscriptions he has left on the nine cups I have so far traced to his hand have yielded a nucleus of information about him. We know, for instance, that he was born in Nanking, and that he lived around the end of the Ming dynasty. The fact that he almost certainly had access to the works of some of the most famous painters in China also suggests that he was himself a scholar.

I do not know whether Chester Beatty realised that the collection of rhinoceros horn cups he assembled early this century was both the largest and finest in the world. I suspect that he did and, moreover, that he saw them not as an isolated group, but as playing an important role within his ultimate ambitions for the collection. Chester Beatty told his friends that he aimed to assemble in one place examples of every material through which man had communicated with man throughout all the regions of the world from the earliest times to his own. This grandiose scheme explains why the Dublin collections contain such heterogeneous items as Babylonian clay tablets, biblical manuscripts on papyrus, medieval Islamic, Western, Indian and Armenian manuscripts on vellum and paper, the earliest printed books from Japan, and writings on silk, jade, lacquer, palm leaves, copper, etc., to name but a few in addition to rhinoceros horn.

Among the decorative arts of China, rhinoceros horn carvings are rare. So rare, indeed, that many museums with good collections of Chinese material do not possess a single example. Yet, for those who have been fortunate enough to examine some of the exquisite work of the Chinese rhinoceros horn carvers, their whole conception of Chinese decorative art has been broadened and their admiration for the unmatched skill of the Chinese craftsmen remains unbounded.

18, 19. *Two views of a superb Red Cliffs cup showing the three friends in the moored boat watching the crane fly overhead at midnight. The carver has inserted a tiny jade bead eye into the head of the crane. Height 13.1 cms*

20. *The eight Taoist immortals carved in high relief round the exterior of a cup. The God of Immortality, Shou Lao (not visible here) is riding on a crane. Height 8 cms*

21. *A goblet-shaped cup in a rich honey colour standing on a low foot. Height 8.5 cms*

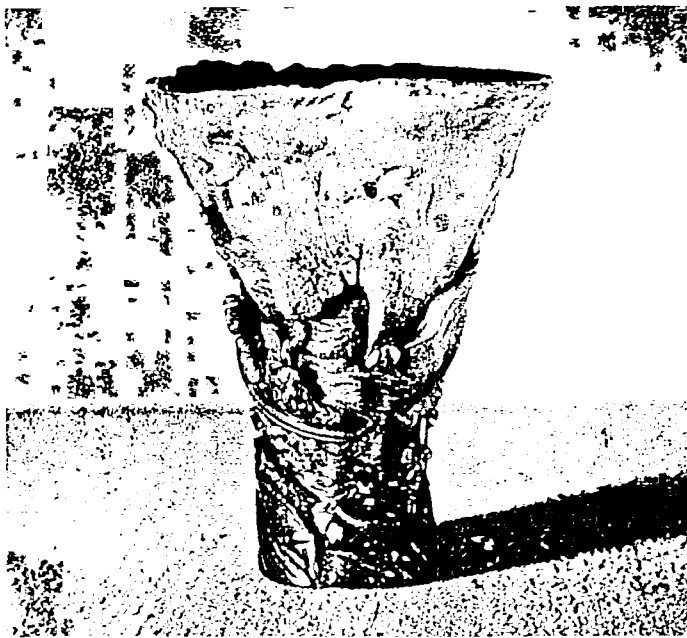
22. *An elegant goblet with an imposing dragon handle. Height 11 cms*

23. *A typical example of an "archaic" cup showing a stylised t'ao t'ieh animal mask. Height 11 cms*

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