

A Lot to answer for:

How auction houses are milking rhino horns for money

While there is much anguish and press coverage of the rhino poaching crisis that saw 333 rhinos killed in South Africa in 2010, there has been comparatively little attention paid to sales of rhino horn in the UK, which may be directly contributing to the demand for it.

Cathy Dean | Director

A few months ago, I carried out some research to find out the value of rhino horn products sold through the salerooms of Sotheby's, Christie's and Bonham's. I was startled to find that in 2009, 76 items were sold (almost all antique Chinese carved libation cups), totalling £3.9 million. These sales are not considered a problem, in that the works have sufficient artistic merit that they are unlikely to end up ground into powder for use in Traditional Chinese Medicine. There is even a book about them, by Jan Chapman, which identifies carving styles and motifs.

However, it is also – currently – legal to sell trophy mounts of rhino horn. These can be the whole head, treated by taxidermists, but are frequently no more than a pair of horns,

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linked by a piece of preserved skin, screwed to a wooden plaque. As long as the horns are proven to date from before 1 June 1947, and as long as they are 'worked', that is, mounted on a plaque, it is legal to sell them in the UK. The horns might just as well be mounted on a toilet seat, for all the artistic merit they have.

Trophy mounts have been fetching extraordinary prices at auction. Last September, one lot at Tennants auction house was advertised with an upper estimate of £90,000, but went for £155,000. Tennants' commission on that one sale, with 16 rhino horn lots, was over £206,000. The demand for rhino horn is lining their pockets.

Tennants and other auction houses argue that they are operating within the law. True, they travel around Europe finding owners of antique trophy mounts, persuading them to sell in the UK where they can get a better price. True, the law has changed in the UK, Germany and Italy, saying that horn products can only be exported to other EU countries, not to East Asia. However, not all EU countries have put into place the export ban, and only last summer, an antiques dealer was caught trying to smuggle a pair of horns through Manchester Airport.

You might argue that trade in rhino horn from an animal shot over 60 years ago is better than shooting dead animals now. But could this legal trade be helping to hike the prices for rhino horn, and so encouraging criminals to go and poach rhinos?

The UK's Animal Health Unit is convinced that auction houses' sales of trophy mounts are contributing to the increase in demand, and are working to close down the remaining loopholes. Meanwhile, Simon Barnes wrote a piece in *The Times* about the problem, and concerned antiques dealers complain to *The Antiques Trade Gazette*. I hope that the writing is on the wall for rhino horn sales.

Someone contacted us a few weeks ago. They'd inherited a pair of rhino horns. An auction house had advised them to sell 'em quick, before the law changed. They had some qualms about selling: would we be willing to accept a donation from the sale?

The answer is no, we're not willing. These horns have no artistic merit. They were not carved, like the nineteenth-century libation cup that supporter Ann O'Connor sold at auction over a year ago, donating some of the proceeds to us. These horns will fuel the demand. And we're not buying the excuse that their sale is – currently – legal.

Stop Press... Stop Press

We're delighted to report that on 18 February 2011 the UK's **Animal Health's Wildlife Licensing and Registration Service (WLRS)**, following European Commission guidance, **brought into force a ban on the selling of rhino horn trophies**. Auctioneers, with the correct CITES permissions, who were advertising mounted trophies prior to the ban will be allowed to sell these items but thereafter, the ban will be total.