

# CARVED RHINOCEROS HORNS OF CHINA

BY

U. A. CASAL

Kobe (Japan)

These little known and even less scrutinized objects of the Chinese carver's skill are of particular interest to the art-student of Holland because the material itself came from those islands which are now your colonies—Borneo, Java, Sumatra—where only a few remaining rhinoceroses testify to their far greater occurrence in centuries gone by. The several varieties are akin to those found on the opposite Continent, that is in Malaya, Assam, the Himalayan districts, etc. and, formerly, also in the wild countries of south-western China. The Chinese animals were exterminated at an early date; those of Indian regions principally supplied the Indian and more occidental markets; the Archipelago became the main source for Chinese consumption.

The world-wide importance of the rhinoceros horn was chiefly due to the conviction that it was not only the most medicinal of all animal substances, but that it could advertise any poison with which it came into contact. The former belief is partly substantiated by modern therapeutics—salutary reactions are proved with horn-decoctions taken in the case



1. Simple, conventionalized landscape.



2. Deer under stylized trees.

of certain fevers—and of old was magnified by the “singularity” of the animal's horn, whose “power” must therefore be marvelously concentrated. The latter was a spontaneous corollary to every extraordinary substance and was later applied, *i.e.*, to porcelain and crystal. By a combination of both conceits, the rhinoceros horn had power to counteract any accidental or intentional poisoning, and therefore was used as a beaker.

In China, the lore of the rhinoceros horn is not only of greatest antiquity, but also became involved, in prehistorical days, with tales of supernatural animals of both native and foreign conception. One result was the evolution of several single-horned beasts which we know under the common denomination of *ch'i-lin*. In Europe, under Near Eastern influence during the Crusades, these Asiatic creatures underwent further changes and emerged as the horse-shaped Unicorn; the rhinoceros horn itself, which was known and esteemed by the ancient Alexandrians, Greeks and Romans, at the same time was supplanted by the narwhal “horn”, introduced by Nordic



3. The Eight Immortals.

sea-farers but for long believed to come from "Tartary". It took over all the characteristics of the rhinoceros horn creed.

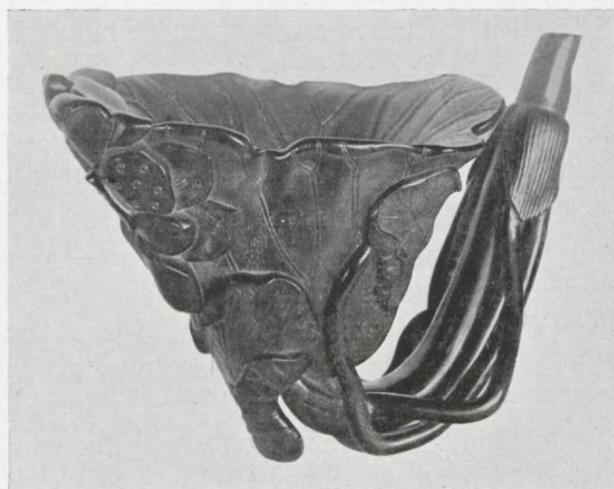
Rhinoceros horn beakers were used in China centuries before our era, with a symbolical meaning; that much results from ancient texts and their logic interpretation. But we have no indication as to their shape. The oldest known cups in existence are three pieces kept in the Shōsōin Repository at Nara (Japan), dating from the 8th century A.D. but possibly older, as one of them is badly chipped and betokens considerable use before its embodiment in this venerable collection. They were employed for versing medicines—perhaps nothing more than wine or water which had stood in them for some time. In Japan the horn was never regarded with a deeper mystic import. These antique cups are rather flat, slightly dish-shaped, the point having been cut off just below the horn's cavity. A few ridges, as decorations, prove that in those days they underwent some fashioning; but the main concern remained the material, for its beneficial effects.

Unless unexplored Chinese collections give us future clues, nothing definite will be known of the horns of subsequent centuries. Literary references to "carved" horns are

vague: they do not indicate subject or manner.

With a resuscitation of trade intercourse in the 16th century, Chinese rhinoceros horns were once more imported into Europe, and now we find them to be of an elaborately carved kind, of a workmanship evidently based on the treatment of wood and ivory, if influenced by the natural cast of the horn. The few examples which may be dated from European 17th century catalogues prove them to have been fully evolved by then; various considerations make me believe that this style was begun, rather abruptly, in about the middle of the 15th century, only becoming more general a hundred years later. We can but conjecture as to the reasons for its creation. The most logical one seems to be that the horn had lost its paramount intrinsic value, and that a fresh importance was imparted by an artistic fashioning hitherto lacking.

It is these horns that the collector knows. Their production continued up to about *Tao Kuan* times (1850), then appears to have ceased as suddenly as it had started. The explanation may be that the material ran short, again increasing its value—as plain medicine—to an extent which halted its use as a



4. Lotus leaves and pods. The stems form a hollow bundle, the bottom of the cup being perforated. Evidently for medicines to be sucked in a recumbent position.



5. Large, more ornamented „Jug” of bronze type.

medium for art. Even to-day, fine sculpted horns are bought by druggists to be ground into medicinal powders.

Roughly speaking, the carved rhinoceros horns can be classed into five categories. The oldest ones are evidently those of severe contours founded on sacral bronze vessels, ornamented with a frieze of fanciful lines or some head of *t'ao-t'ieh*. They are rare. Their shape demands a great deal of trimming, especially because of the projecting handle, and the Chinese, since of old, were inclined to cut off as little as possible from the raw material if it were in any way uncommon.

As a natural consequence of this attitude, a shape more conform with the original substance must have been sought at an early date, and for various occult reasons connected with the “purity” of the horn, the lotus blossom and leaf—supreme symbol of Purity—was chosen. The earlier horns of this class retain archaic conceptions: a big leaf forms the goblet, thicker portions being sculpted into a bud or two. Various floral themes followed, of equal simplicity. It was only with the exuberant *Ch'ien Lung* times (1736—1795) that they became complicated and gave us the most prodigal kind of rhinoceros horn carvings:

lotus flowers and leaves full of details, with entwined stems and other aquatic plants, interspersed with insects and birds.

Third in order of evolution we must place the landscape cups. Some of them show quite plain, almost stiff workmanship: a few trees, some shrubs, a pavillion or two and perhaps the moon high in the skies suggest a poetical taoist ideology of quiet and happiness. This class, too, underwent a change towards complexity, and some of the later work is so full of particulars as to be practically a miniature reproduction in a plastic material of some vast landscape painting.—The “handle” in this class of cups usually consists of two large pinetrees.

The fourth group, with animal representations, is an elaboration of the first and second, in rare instances of the third kind. The “animal” most generally found is the *ch'ih-lung* (Jap. *ama-ryō*), a rain dragon of lizard affinity, emblem of Fertility. One or more of them crawl over an antique bronze vessel or may form the handle of a lotus cup. The *ch'ih-lung* itself may have stylized, hyperbolic features, or look like a sportive and very real newt.—Other animals are very scarce.

Some deer or hares, a tiger or *ch'i-lin*, monkeys or squirrels may appear in suitable sur-



6. Group of *karako* in a „garden”, at play.

roundings; whatever the creature, it is surely one of good omen, and stands not for its actual picture but for its esoteric significance.

The last section embraces human images. It is the least numerous of all. I feel confident, also, that it constitutes the latest development. The cup capable of preventing poisonings had become the "cup of longevity": the figures delineated are taoist immortals and the *karako*, "Chinese boys", auguring the progeny necessary to ensure a man's soul attaining Paradise. The setting will be a more or less conventional landscape.

While the earlier carved horns retained all the features of a libation vessel, if of decorative value, later ones neglected the practical side more and more and became plainly objects of ornamentation. Their unbalanced form demands a pedestal to keep them in an upright position; in some instances the design is so conceived that the horn must lie on its side for best effect. From these ornaments then issued the very large and elongated horns of most intricate carving which are found in some European collections, mounted on a base which not only is clumsy but detracts from the



7. Landscape with boats etc; on the verso a fortified tower, flags, more boats. Very large horn.



8. *Ch'ib-lung* (five) crawling over an octagonal beaker.

article itself, because of its extravagant shape and crowded sculptures. Such "cornucopias", some two feet and more in length, were evidently made for export (from African horns) early in the 19th century; based on a degenerate Chinese art, they were further influenced by the conceptions of foreigners as to what constituted "real" *Chinoiseries*.

My investigations have led me to the conclusion that all these carvings were produced by a special guild of craftsmen in Canton, and nowhere else. Canton, since the early *Han* dynasty (202 B.C.—221 A.D.), was known as the main emporium for imports of rhinoceros horn.

China, furthermore, appears to have been the only country where rhinoceros horns were utilized for ornamentation: not only as cups, but long ago also in the way of plaques and pendants, or as decorative seals. India and Arabia knew rhinoceros horn beakers as poi-

son preventives, but theirs were either dyed or mounted in precious metals; they knew bangles and rings as amulets, or dishes as medicinal containers, but all of these were simply turned on the lathe.

The important role held by the carved goblets in China is best illustrated by the fact that porcelain reproductions have been numerous since about A.D. 1600, the famous *blanc de Chine* ware of Tê-hua specializing in them. Of particular interest to Europe is the circumstance that such porcelain copies, exported to England, Holland and Germany, guided, our own porcelain manufacture in a pronounced manner. From comparative studies it becomes manifest, for instance, that our cream jugs, sauce boats and similar porcelain vessels are not so much due to the influence of European precursors, but may be directly traced to

just such rhinoceros horn imitations made at Chinese kilns. All that was needed, at the utmost, was the addition of a larger handle and of a foot, in chased metal. Objects dating from the *Baroque* period show that such supplements were usually given to all sorts of oriental cups and bowls, and the identical features were later adopted by our potters.

These few remarks will prove that the carved rhinoceros horns offer many points for study. The basic information is of the most meagre, and much will have to be left to deduction and intuition. Concurrently it is evident that these horns deserve more than the desultory attention which they have received so far, and that while their history is obfuscat-

ed they have, for an immemorial time, played a prominent part in the religious, superstitious and emblematic thoughts of the Chinese.



9. Floral „ornamental” Cup.