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## News Article

## Rhino horn collections at risk

By Kelly Enright

As followers of Antiques Roadshow now know, art fashioned from rhinoceros horn holds significant value. However, this has been true for many years.

When surrealist artist Salvador Dali examined a rhinoceros horn, he praised its perfect logarithmic spiral and attempted to recreate the repeating pattern in his art. While the rhinoceros itself has long been marginalized by its rather unattractive and prehistoric-looking body, its horn has often been considered a thing of beauty. When explorer Marco Polo traveled through Asia, he reported seeing mythological unicorns when what he was really looking at were rhinos. Ironically, it is this feature that has cost many rhinoceros lives. Its horn is an Achilles heel of sorts. Or, as ecologist Lee Talbot noted many decades ago: “The rhino’s great misfortune is that he carries a fortune on his nose.”

While American viewers of Antiques Roadshow sat stunned as Asian art expert Lark Mason appraised a Tulsa man’s collection of cups and bowls made of rhinoceros horn for a record-breaking \$1 to \$1.5 million, thieves were stealing rhino horns from museums around Europe and poachers were killing rhinos in South Africa. Though the official spokeswoman for Antiques Roadshow, Judy Matthews, says the price of the objects reflects a growing interest in Chinese antiques, there is much more to the story.

The skyrocketing price of rhino horn has no easy economics. Its value — now worth more than its weight in gold — is driven by an illegal trade that collects an endangered species for a drug. Even antiques are caught in this unsavory black market.

In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), rhinoceros horn, called xi jiao, is valued for dozens of diseases, from melancholia to typhoid. (Importantly, TCM makes no claim that rhino horn is an aphrodisiac or a cure for impotency. This seems to be a rumor spread by westerners.) Such medicinal uses have been practiced for 2,000 years, but western scientists who tested the chemical composition of rhinoceros horn (made of keratin, essentially the same product as fingernails) deny any medicinal value. Whether western science or 2,000 years of tradition is correct remains to be seen.

One 16th-century TCM text claims that rhino horn is effective in reversing poisonings, possessions, and hallucinations. Asian cultures have long used cups and bowls carved from rhino horn to detect poisons, and western science confirms some validity in this practice.

Although rhino horn cups date to the first centuries BC, these were more utilitarian objects acquired along with other valuable rhinoceros commodities, specifically its hide which was used for armor.

Not until the Ming (1368-1644) and Ching (1644-1912) dynasties did rhinoceros horn carving become an intricate art. Usually, carvings include elements of nature, such as lotus leaves, magnolia flowers, birds, fruits, landscapes, and sometimes mythical creatures and Daoist immortals. Asian art specialists estimate there are a mere 4,000 such carvings in museum and private collections around the world.

In the 20th century, western hunters in Africa increased demand for a different kind of object using rhinoceros horn — big game trophies. Mounted head and horns were common, as were rhino hide

tables and footstools, and canes, amulets, and cups carved from the horn. These objects were created from a rhino shot by the hunter who would take home these “trophies.” Though less intricate in artistry, sales and auctions of such objects are now regulated.

In the Middle East, rhino horn is used as decorative handles on jambiyas, daggers worn as status symbols. The demand for these increased in the second half of the 20th century, but in the 1990s, Islamic law prohibited rhinoceros killing.

An illegal trade remains, but does not appear to be the root of today’s poaching and thievery.

When TCM began using rhino horn for medicine, Asia had an abundance of rhinos. There are five species of rhinoceros — two (white and black) live in Africa and three (Indian, Javan, Sumatran) in Asia. Due to habitat loss, overhunting, and demand for horn, all three subspecies were endangered by the start of the 20th century. While one of the Asian subspecies, the Indian rhinoceros has rebounded, its two others—the Javan and the Sumatran — are critically endangered and, in some regions, extinct. Last year, a dead Javan rhinoceros was found in Vietnam and is thought to have been the last one remaining in the nation. Its horn was removed.

The recent surge in demand for rhino horn in Asia is based on a few reported cases of its ability to fight cancer. But with depleted rhino populations in Asia, the horn must be acquired from African animals. Vietnam leads the demand, but pharmacies in South Korea, China, Thailand, and Taiwan also carry the powdered drug. Though China has officially banned xi jiao, TCM practitioners there do not deny its effectiveness. Many hope to end the ban, and there is evidence China has plans to begin farming rhinos specifically for their horn.

During the 1970s and 80s, African rhino populations declined dramatically, losing more than 80 percent of their total population. International wildlife organizations placed regulations upon hunting and trading the species and, during the 1990s and first decade of the 21st, saw a decline in poaching incidents. In 2010, however, South Africa, whose poaching had fallen to a dozen rhinos a year, saw that number skyrocket to more than 300 such cases. Time magazine, which recently ran a feature on the rhinoceros problem, quoted the African Rhino Program manager of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Josef Okori, stating emphatically that rhino poaching is more than the death of a few unusual animals. “We are waging a protracted war,” Okori declared.

Until two years ago, rhinoceros trophies, including carved horn objects, were protected under endangered species laws set and regulated by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). All five species of rhinoceros are listed as endangered and protected under regulations that prohibit the international and domestic trade (by CITES members, including the U.S.) of rhino products. Essentially, products made from rhinoceros were treated the same as living animals.

In 2009, however, the European Commission distinguished between nature and art by making the sale of rhinoceros trophies legal. The move was meant to open the market for antique dealers. When big game trophies went on auction in England, however, Asian buyers suddenly flooded the market making auctioneers suspicious about the intended use of the antiques. Were they going to display them as art or grind the horn down for medicine?

Thus, the EC rewrote the law, redefining which rhino horn is to be considered antique. They now, along with CITES, have a ban on the trade of all rhino horn, whether raw or worked, with the exception of carved horn dating previous to June 1947. This means that a rhinoceros head or horn mounted as a big game trophy cannot be legally sold in CITES member nations. But trade of Ming and Qing dynasty rhino horn cups, such as those featured on Antiques Roadshow, continues because of their antiquity.

This reworked regulation has decreased the availability of rhino horn objects, driving up the price among collectors. It has also created increased interest in rhinoceros horn objects, mainly in Europe, where black market criminals have scoured auctions for rhino horn and are now robbing museums of their rhinos, as well.

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