

## Rhino Horns Put Europe's Museums on Thieves' Must-Visit List

By SARAH LYALL

IPSWICH, England — The Ipswich Museum contains many alluring and potentially theft-worthy items, including a spectacular 2,000-year-old gold-leaf Egyptian death mask on loan from the British Museum and a rare Hawaiian cape featuring feathers from the extinct o'o bird. But when two thieves forced their way in after midnight on July 28, they were seeking something else entirely.

Never mind that their target, a large rhinoceros horn, was still attached to its owner, which had been standing blamelessly in the museum since 1907.

"They just snapped it off," said Bryony Rudkin, the Ipswich Borough Council member in charge of culture. Grabbing a pair of additional horns (and the rhino skull they belonged to) from a shelf nearby, the thieves disappeared as quickly as they had come. "It was like 'The Pink Panther,'" Ms. Rudkin said. "In and out."

It might have seemed like a bizarre, anomalous incident, the act of someone with a perverse rhino fetish. But similar thefts, as many as 30 so far this year, have been reported in museums, galleries, antiques dealerships, auction houses and homes across Europe as criminals try to feed a growing demand in China and other Asian countries, where medicine made from ground rhino horns is believed to act as an aphrodisiac and to cure cancer and other diseases.

"I was quite surprised, I must admit," said Ian Lawson, a detective in the art and antiques unit at the Metropolitan Police Service in London, describing his first realization that rhino-horn theft had become a serious law-enforcement issue. "It's taken a bit of time for everyone to wake up to the fact that this is a cross-Europe offense, and that they will attack anywhere that has a rhino horn."

Mr. Lawson said that galleries and museums should be alert to what he called "hostile reconnaissance" by would-be thieves. They were also urged to keep images of their rhinos off their Web sites, to lock the horns away, or,

as the Natural History Museum in London has done, to replace them with fake horns.

While horns have sold recently for upward of \$200,000, the powder, Mr. Lawson said, is reported to fetch £60,000 a kilo (about \$45,000 a pound) on the black market — more than gold, heroin or cocaine.

Stricter laws governing the sale of used rhino horns, the kind found mounted on trophies or on rhinos that were long ago killed by big-game hunters and stuffed by taxidermists, have also played a part. This year Britain and other European countries tightened their regulations, making it virtually impossible to export most rhino horns from the European Union legally, thus increasing the value of purloined ones.

That crackdown has inadvertently threatened the efforts of conservation groups to preserve wild rhinoceroses in Africa, as thieves — their supply curtailed — have turned to poachers who hack off horns from live animals, often leaving the rhinos to bleed to death, said Cathy Dean, director of Save the Rhino, an advocacy group in Britain. So far this year there have been 260 rhino deaths from poaching in South Africa alone, compared with a total last year of 333, she added. The problem was a major focus of the recent meeting in Geneva of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, whose members agreed to share information and coordinate anti-poaching efforts.

Rhino experts take great pains to rebut the claims that the horns have medicinal value. Dr. Raj Amin, a researcher at the Zoological Society of London, said recently on an episode of "Nature" on PBS that ingesting rhino horns would be about as healthful as "chewing your own nails."

The law-enforcement organization Europol says the thefts are believed to be the work of an organized gang of itinerant people known as Irish travelers, who are also involved in drug smuggling, money laundering and the less flamboyant crime of distributing fake power tools. Since January the horn thieves have struck a Czech castle; natural history museums in Belgium, Germany, France and Italy; and other tar-

gets in Portugal and Sweden. In Britain rhino horns have also been stolen this year from the Haslemere Educational Museum in Surrey and from Sworders Fine Art Auctioneers in Essex.

In 2009 a rhino skull was stolen from the trophy-display wall of a check-cashing business in Albany, N.Y. But in general the gang seems to be focused on Europe, said Rhishja Larson, the founder of Saving Rhinos, a group based in Petaluma, Calif.

In June the European Taxidermy Federation warned its members to be wary of people asking about rhinos but failing to leave their names and contact information. Such people, it said, "are probably not normal businessmen."

British taxidermists said they were loath to trade in rhino products for fear of attracting criminal elements, anyway. "I wouldn't touch the stuff with a barge-pole, literally," Phil Leggett, a well-known taxidermist, said.

Guy Schooling, Sworders's managing director, said in an interview that the company thought it had averted trouble when, before an auction in February, it locked up its rhino-horn trophies and hired security guards to patrol the premises. But the thieves were too smart: they arrived after closing but before the guards, wrenching the only rhino artifact not locked up — a mounted head — free from a plaque that had been bolted to the wall.

"I would say, to anybody who's got a rhino horn of any sort: 'Do not have it on display. Put a dummy up and booby-trap it,'" Mr. Schooling said.

In Ipswich residents are feeling the loss of their rhino's horn particularly keenly. The rhino, acquired from the Natural History Museum in 1907 in exchange for £16 and what documents from the time call "a rare sort of pig," is considered a town mascot.

A condolence book has been set up next to the rhino, a female christened Rosie after a name-the-rhino competition years ago. "Poor you, Rosie," wrote a girl named Hannah. "Your horn was really pretty."

Museum officials said they debated whether to leave Rosie hornless as a reminder of what had happened, but decided in-

stead to replace her missing horn with an ersatz one.

"We will have a big sign saying, 'This is a fake,'" said Ms. Rudkin, the local council member. "This is not real. So don't come and get it."

**A rhino was left for dead after poachers sawed off its horn.**

**Hannah Freeman-Smith and her son, Liam, at the Ipswich Museum, where Rosie the rhinoceros is now hornless.**