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Rhino Horns and Scraps of Unicorn: The Sense of Touch and the Consumption of Rhino Horns in Early Modern Iberia

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ABSTRACT In early modern Iberia, rhino horns were widely consumed by high-ranking persons. Rhino horns were often confused with the horns of the legendary unicorn, which were said to be able to transform poison into water with their touch. Consumption of rhino horns is often explained either by their ascribed prophylactic properties or by their use as the symbolic representation items for social manifestation. These motivations have long been identified, but they still continue to puzzle us. In this paper, I argue that a structural belief in the power of touch to transform matter from one stage to another played a central role in early-modern Iberia's consumption of rhino horns. The belief in the transformative power of touch was the framework that can explain the development of a diverse set of

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motivations that fed the market and circulation of rhino horns in early modern Iberia. The socially-constructed perception that touching certain objects could bring transformation sustained the consumption of horns, because it was shared by most agents involved: consumers, apothecaries, physicians, scholars, and so on. Ultimately, this paper contributes to a more complex approach to analysing the consumption of luxurious goods in general. By opening up its scope, this paper shows how understanding consumption dynamics should include social practices, spiritual beliefs, medical knowledge or symbolic representations.

KEYWORDS: Consumption, Iberia, Early Modern, Rhino, Touch

Introduction

On 3 September 1606, the probate inventory of Don Juan de Borja (1533–1606) was concluded.[1] Three days had passed since Don Juan died, after falling down one of the Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial's staircases.[2] Inventory officers went through his possessions and assessed the items that could be sold at auction. The aim was to guarantee sufficient revenue to cover Don Juan's debts. The nobleman had been *mayordomo-mayor*—an office comparable to that of High Steward—to both an empress and a queen. He had been ambassador to Lisbon and to Prague, and a key political agent working at the heart of the Hispanic Monarchy at the turn of the seventeenth century. In his position, Don Juan de Borja accumulated a substantial quantity of precious objects throughout his life. It is not surprising, therefore, that his inventory reveals the extent of his supply network, which stretched from the Holy Roman Empire to Brazil and to China. Amongst his assets were Indian and Chinese textiles, furniture made from tropical woods, and cups from Bohemia. One whole section was dedicated to a single material: rhinoceros horn. Don Juan de Borja was not the only person at the Spanish court to possess rhino horns, but such horns were so difficult to acquire that most consumers would rarely have more than one.[3] Juan de Borja had seven!

Juan de Borja's privileged supply network may account for this large quantity of rhinoceros horn. His connections to merchants in Lisbon, which was a major European trade centre for the importation of African and Asian goods, certainly contributed to his significant assemblage. However, a supply network alone does not explain his motivation as a consumer to acquire rhino horns.

A letter sent by the physician Jorge Godinho to Don Juan in the 1570s provides an insight as to why the nobleman wished to possess so many rhino horns. Jorge Godinho was the physician of the Portuguese king Sebastião (1554–1578), and his epistle to Don Juan is essentially a pharmacological opinion on an Indian rhino

Figure 1
De Monocerote.
Detail from Conrad Gesner's *Historiae Animalium Lib*, 1551-1587
From The New York Public Library, no. b14372551
https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/00cd9300-2841-0130-b3c3-58d385a7b928

horn that had just arrived in Lisbon. Don Juan was interested in purchasing it and required some advice on the matter.[4] Usually, great prophylactic properties were attributed to rhino horns and Godinho's writing suggests that a consumer's key motivation for buying such an item was the possibility that the horn was that of a legendary creature known as a *monocerote* (Figure 1). This Greek term, found in Classical literature, often appears as *unicornu* in Latin-translated texts. The most extraordinary feature about this creature was its single horn. It was said that the horn of a *monocerote/unicornu* could transform poison into water simply by touch. More precisely, if a rhino/unicorn horn so much as touched venom, it would immediately change it to water.

In this paper, I argue that a structural belief in the power of touch to transform matter from one state to another played a central role in early-modern Iberia's consumption of rhino horn. For that purpose, I create a framework that explains several motivations for consumption, rather than just identifying the motivations themselves. My paper seeks to go beyond the existing studies on the diverse driving forces and motivations for rhino horn consumption. Usually, the reasons presented tend to be the prophylactic properties of the material, its appeal as a curiosity for princely collections, or its role in rituals of social manifestation.[5] I wish to go beyond that assessment and look into another feature that can explain consumption: a wider and tacit acceptance at the time that the act of touching a rhino horn could transform physical matter and heal the wounds of the material world.

Ultimately, I hope to contribute to a more complex approach to analysing the consumption of luxurious goods in general. During the past three decades, historians, anthropologists and material culture scholars have stressed the need to integrate cultural factors in the economic dynamics of consumption.[6] In particular, material culture scholars have highlighted the importance of focusing on the interactions between humans and objects for what they can reveal and that typically escapes macro and structural analysis.[7] Therefore, I will go beyond top-down explanations that reduce consumption to either consumers' and suppliers' strategic interests—social mimesis, profit, power, etc.—or symbolic and aesthetic values—fashion, taste, and so on. Instead, my analysis focuses on the ways rhino/unicorn horn is discussed in historical sources and how the items relate to the individual consumer. In the first part of this paper, I review several interconnected individual cases, and I pinpoint that touch was a feature inseparable from consumption practices. In the second part, I explain that there was a transversal belief that touch could transform matter. I demonstrate that the power of touch was not limited to rhino horns in particular, it was a belief applied to other aspects of consumption. My paper ends by demonstrating that sixteenth-century Iberian consumers, merchants, physicians, apothecaries and humanists alike reinforced and were conditioned by the belief in the power of touch.

The Demand for Rhino Horn

The exponential interest that Europeans showed during the sixteenth century in the rhinoceros owes much to the fact that these animals had been virtually absent from European soil since Classical Antiquity. When in 1515 a rhino arrived in Lisbon as a gift to King Manuel I of Portugal, that creature became the centre of a wider European interest, a phenomenon made possible thanks to a woodcut designed by Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) versions of which circulated across the continent. Much of this interest, as well as the subsequent confusion, came from associating the rhinoceros with the legendary creature known as the unicorn. Following the arrival of the first living rhino in Europe in the first half of the sixteenth century, Classical references to this creature were recovered. In Classical texts, the animal was described as a one-horned beast living in North India. Legend had it that if its horn touched poison, then the poison would automatically change into harmless water. In the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* (ca.40–ca.120 AD), Philostratus mentioned the existence of "wild asses" in India with a horn on the forehead, which the Indians used to make cups:

> for they declare that no one can ever fall sick on the day on which he has drunk out of it, nor will anyone who has done so be the worse for being wounded, and he will be able to pass through fire unscathed, and he is even immune from poisonous draughts.[8]

This description seemed to correspond to Aelian's texts written after the account of Ctesias (fifth century BC) which stated that "whoever drinks out of this horn is protected against all incurable diseases" and could not "be cut off by poison".[9]

Information arriving from Asia through merchants and Iberian imperial officers reinforced this data. In his *Coloquios* (1563), Garcia de Orta (1501–1568) recounts that a rhino horn was used as a cup against poison in Bengal.[10] By that time, Orta was already inclined to believe that the rhino was not the unicorn and that the horn did not have the powers that Classical authors or the Bengali ascribed to it.

Nonetheless, almost three decades later, Jan Huygen van Linschoten (1563–1611), while restating Orta's account about the use of rhino horn in Bengal, still recognised the antidotal properties of rhino horns.[11] So pervasive was this view that in 1619, during a visit of Philip III to Lisbon, the Society of Jesus staged a play at the *Santo Antão* College during which a personification of Bengal symbolically offered a "medical rhino horn" to the king.[12]

The allure that these objects generated was, to a certain extent, a result of the ambiguity and misconception about which materials actually corresponded to the unicorn's horn. Until the beginning of the seventeenth century, when narwhal tusks were consumed as unicorn horns, rhino horns were often believed to have been removed from the mythical creature. Consequently, sixteenth-century high-ranking consumers developed a particular interest in rhino horns, while hoping that those were the effective prophylactic horns to which both the Ancients and the Asian sources were referring.

The systematic analysis of Madrid's probate inventories from 1585 to 1626 has revealed that rhino and unicorn horns were often listed.[13] Although the distinction between the real animal and the mythical one is never clear, a total of 25 per cent of the consumers in the sample had items made from either rhinoceros horn or another creature believed to be a unicorn. Amongst 40 inventories, four consumers possessed cups made of rhino horns and another nine consumers had other items made from unicorn, such as cups, spoons, or simply pieces and scraps wrapped in paper.[14] This data needs to be investigated, in order to identify and understand what led consumers in Iberia to make considerable financial investments in these items.

In this section, I explore two motivations for consumption: the horns' ascribed medical properties, and their symbolic representation. It has been argued elsewhere that consumers were mainly driven by a desire for social manifestation and that they saw "an added advantage" in the prophylactic properties of rhino horns.[15] The superficiality of these statements hide, however, a much more complex framework in which consumers carefully analysed and were genuinely interested in the physical properties of the materials. As the following paragraphs reveal, the capacity of the horns to produce physical transformations when in touch with poison was a real concern and an aspect that had to be scrutinised.

Materia Medica

One of the reasons that has been put forward to explain the consumption of rhino horn is its ascribed prophylactic properties. This explanation has been widely accepted, but a thorough analysis from specific case studies is lacking. To fill this gap, I will discuss the case of Juan de Borja and his seven rhino horns.

Juan de Borja was Philip II's ambassador in Lisbon and at some point around 1570 he asked the physician Jorge Godinho for a medical opinion about a rhino horn that had just been brought from overseas.[16] The rhino horn was available for acquisition and Borja wanted to know if this would be a good investment. The physician's reply is essentially an analysis of the prophylactic properties of the item. The text aims at understanding the medical conditions for which it would be used. The Portuguese physician had been informed that this particular type of horn could be used against melancholia, throat swelling and epilepsy, for example. However, his sources were so diverse and scattered that eventually his sole conclusion was that the horn could be used to treat haemorrhoids. In this particular case, the prophylactic properties of the horn seem to be the main motivation for consumption.

This is not unusual. For example, at the turn of the seventeenth century female consumers in Madrid kept rhino/unicorn horn for its prophylactic properties. Inventories reveal that women used to keep horns and scraps of horns together with other materials that were believed to cure medical conditions. There are references to jade to cure a "pain of the side," there were ointments for the heart, jasper to stop haemorrhages, resurrection plants—a species of desert plant that curls into a ball to survive extreme dryness and uncurls after hydration—for when women were about to give birth, and jet to cure melancholia.[17]

The connection between female consumers and materials with prophylactic, pharmacological and/or magic (more precisely, thaumaturgical) proprieties is not surprising, because recent studies have revealed that looking after the human body, both a healthy and an ailing one, was a female task within the domestic sphere.[18] Therefore, the consumption of rhino/unicorn horns seem to be related to their acceptance as *materia medica*.

The great prophylactic properties attributed to rhino/unicorn horns fed a continuous demand for this material. Merchants exploited the uncertainties about the existence and nature of the unicorn and the market flourished. Rhino horns were an interesting source of high profit. The physician Jorge Godinho recognised that fact as early as the 1550s. In a letter to another physician called Francisco Godinho, Jorge Godinho declares that regular people often bought a type of deer antler thinking they were buying a unicorn horn.[19] No wonder that Juan de Borja was interested in investigating the powers and veracity of the horns, so many were the abuses committed by merchants.

It is precisely the high price that some clients were willing to pay for these horns that led sixteenth-century scholars to evaluate the effectiveness of the prophylactic properties of the horns. One of the first authors to forward evidence against the usefulness of the horns was Andrea Marini who, in 1566, published his *Discourse against the fake opinion about the Unicorn*. The aim was to defend the interests of princes exploited by "astute merchants [who] found room to deceive them".[20] Despite the increasing frequency of these critical texts, it seems that the market continued to be fed with counterfeit horns. In 1613, Francisco Velez de Arcinega, the apothecary of the archbishop of Toledo, stated:

> Some apothecaries have in their shops rhino horns, so that they can make ostentation to the common people, and deceive them, saying that these are from real Unicorns, but they are not [...] nor they have more utility or virtue than regular horns.[21]

As this quote reveals, it was known within scholarly circles that merchants were profiting from an item that had no medical utility. Nonetheless, scholars, humanists and apothecaries did not refute the existence of the unicorn nor question its powers.[22] For example, the same Velez de Arcinega who denounced abuses by merchants who sold fake unicorn horns, provided a recipe against poison. That recipe could only be used, however, by people who could get hold of a "real" unicorn horn.[23] Apothecaries did not deny the existence of the unicorn, because its existence was perfectly plausible within early modern systems of knowledge. On the one hand, Classical and medieval authors as well as contemporary accounts arriving from Asia attested the unicorn's existence. On the other hand, the natural world was only then starting to be indexed and catalogued and, since there was "too much to tell" about the diversity of the world, the unicorn could just be waiting to be found.[24] Such context of plausibility would sustain the belief in the unicorn's existence for quite some time.

The same argument could be raised about the most extraordinary capacity of the unicorn: its ability to transform poison through the touch of its horn. However, the fact that it could transform matter by simply touching it did not pose any bewilderment in itself. It fitted into a system of knowledge in which the use of the sense of touch was inseparable from medical practice.[25] Touch was the main sense to ascertain the health of a patient, it allowed assessing organs according to their texture, their density and their temperature.[26]

It was the sense of touch that, through perception, bridged theoretical knowledge and the development of experimental knowledge, building a new epistemological context for early modern humanists and physicians.[27] One such example is how the Italian physician Girolamo Fracastoro (1478–1553) interpreted and made use of the work of the Roman philosopher Lucretius (ca.99 BCE–ca.55 BCE). In a recent comparative study, Pablo Maurette asserted that "both

authors understand touch (*tactus*) as a bodily sense that functions at a perceptive level, but also as an ontological mechanism that glues reality together and operates at an imperceptible, atomic, or corpuscular level."[28] In Lucretius *De rerum natura*, the word *tactus* can refer to the "means by which composite bodies are altered, grow, multiply, deteriorate."[29] As Maurette has shown, this ontological principle supports a study of contagion conducted by Fracastoro. According to Fracastoro, two bodies touching was the source of all forms of contagion, even at a distance. There was always a point of contact between invisible particles that would travel through air until they infected a body by touching it.[30]

In Iberia, Oliva Sabuco was the first to discuss the importance of the tactile action in the spread of contagion. In her *Nueva Filosofia de la Naturaleza del Hombre* (published in Madrid in 1587), Sabuco declares that what provokes the plague arrives either by air or through another contagious illness passed on by "air's touch" (*el tacto del ayre*).[31] According to Josep Lluis Barona, the former statement shows that Oliva Sabuco considers the noxious aerial element to be the cause of the contagion.[32] However, an alternative interpretation suggests that it is not the air in itself that causes contagion. Although the plague travels by air, it is the "air's touch" (*el tacto del ayre*) that causes the transmission. As Luis Barona also noted, when Sabuco described the contagion of the evil eye, she mentions "a poison that is passed on by the air and that enters through the eyes, breath or nose, by means of the touch of the air (*mediante el tocamiento del ayre*) without feeling it, and provoking the damage when it reaches the brain."[33] Again, it is when air touches the brain that the poison produces its effects.

The whole work by Oliva Sabuco addresses the balance between body and soul, a dichotomy that was integral to sixteenth-century Iberian thought. The human senses, in particular the sense of touch, were considered a frontier, meaning that they were viewed as the best tool to communicate between the material and the immaterial worlds. For example, touching and smelling the beads of a rosary could lead to divine intervention in the event of a melancholic state. In the same manner, evils and epidemics were seen as transmissible through the simple act of touching.

A Cup for a Prince

Beyond its medical use, the rhino horn's ascribed prophylactic properties became the source for symbolic meaning. Such meaning motivated consumption amongst high-ranking nobility. As the following paragraphs reveal, the horn's capacity to transform matter by touch found a parallel in other thaumaturgical rituals associated with royalty in late medieval and early modern European societies. Iberia was no exception and the unicorn's purification ability soon became associated with the monarch's role as purifier in matters of faith.

Purification as an action of the highest nobility led the rhino/unicorn horn to be appropriated as a princely prerogative.

The association between rhino/unicorn horns and high-ranking nobility is apparent in the description that Sebastián de Covarrubias provides for the word *cuerno* (i.e., horn) in his famous 1611 dictionary. Commenting on cups made of horn that the Ancients used for keeping anointment oils, the author states that ordinary men used bull horns, but high-ranking men used rhino horns instead.[34] A similar social-status-based contrast between the appropriate material for a privileged person and one suitable for a commoner is to be found in the second edition of Robert de Nola's famous recipe book *Libro de guisados, manjares y potajes intitulado Libro de cozina* (1529):

> In truth, great lords must never drink but in glass cups. Mostly in a very fine glass which is said to be from *selicornio*, because in this glass no one can offer poison to be drunk, for it is not possible for the good glass to support it without breaking itself. And, for this reason, great lords should drink in cups made of glass instead of gold or silver.[35]

In this early text, *selicornio* (i.e., unicorn) is a material fit for princes due to its capacity to detect the presence of poison simply through the touch of the two materials: the unicorn "glass" and the poisonous liquid. This extraordinary property of the unicorn cup was even present in courtly ritual. Nola explains that before a high-ranking noble was served, a ceremony called "of the salver" (*cerimonia de la salva*) had to be performed. In later medieval and early modern Europe, serving a high-ranking person at the table was a highly ritualised ceremonial and every single movement was strictly codified. Serving a drink to a monarch or a noble was a very important moment. According to Nola, the ceremony "of the salver" required two individuals: one held the cup and the salver and the other held the ewer and tasted the drink to ascertain that it was poison-free. Then, the drink could be served. If it were a unicorn (*selicornio*) cup, it was said to break if it came into contact with any kind of poison.

The unicorn's capacity to destroy poison is taken to a higher level by Baltasar Gracián. In his *El Criticón* (1651–1657; second part from 1653), the author creates an analogy with Queen Isabella I of Castile's and King Ferdinand II of Aragon's action against heresy. Heresy was regarded as the poison that prevented the ruling elite's political ideal. Taking that into account, Garcián described the visit of two men, Andrenio and Critilo, to the house of a nobleman called Salastano. During the visit, the characters talk about how the states of the Hispanic Monarchy were going to be happy because they had been purified by the actions of their kings. Salastano then proceeds to compare the kings to unicorns:

> tell me, did our immortal hero the Catholic King Ferdinand not purify Spain from Moors and Jews […]? Did King Philip not purge

> the Moorish poison from Spain again in our time? Were they not prophylactic unicorns? Believe me, the happiness of the States of the House of Spain and Austria is indebted to their crowned unicorns.[36]

To support his argument, Salastano invites his guests into another room:

> Come to this room, for I want to show you the many preservatives and antidotes that I keep. With this rich unicorn cup, the Catholic Kings of Spain made a toast to the purity of faith. These ear-rings, also made of unicorn, belonged to Queen Isabella who used them to keep her ear free from poisonous and malefic information.[37]

In these excerpts, the Catholic Monarchs of Spain were "prophylactic unicorns" who transformed poison (i.e., heresy) into a harmless and purified water (i.e., the Catholic faith). This was a transformative power that was shared by the Catholic Kings and the unicorn alike. For Salastano, the unicorn objects in his room stood for the monarchs themselves and they should be preserved in the same way as a precious relic would be preserved.

The Transformative Power of Touch

For early-modern scholars the debate about the unicorn was centred on the unicorn horn's capacity to transform poison into clear and harmless water. The conundrum did not concern, however, the capacity to transform poison upon touching it. It concerned the capacity of a specific material—unicorn—to produce such transformation. In other words, the continuing discussion was about the result of the tactile action between two materials—and not about the act of touching. The aforementioned references to the work of Fracastoro and Sabuco showcase that the transformation of certain matter when touching specific materials was accepted by early-modern scholars. The early-modern belief in the transformative power of touch has usually been dismissed by modern scholars. Notwithstanding, reconsidering the transformative capacity ascribed to touch can provide a more complex explanation for the dynamics of consumption, as I will demonstrate in the following paragraphs.

Most studies on the consumption of luxurious goods in early modern Iberia tend to look for pragmatic or mundane explanations as to why consumers bought and used a number of items. It could be because of a need to showcase splendour, it could be for liturgical rituals, it could be to demonstrate social status, amongst others.[38] A thorough review of the sources, however, reveals that the senses are constantly mentioned as a form of appraisal or evaluation.[39] For example, there are references to the visual pleasure obtained from looking at patterns of design, feeling the texture of surfaces, or smelling the materials.[40] Geraldine A. Johnson, for instance, was one of

the few scholars who focused on the pleasure in the act of touching and handling small-sized bronze statuettes in Renaissance Italy.[41] The author explains how the fruition of an object impacted its production and consumption. Hence, pleasure obtained by touch—one of the five senses in Western tradition—was surely a motivation for consumption, too.[42]

That said, pleasure was not the only outcome of a tactile action. The tactile action also impacted human perception. For instance, touch played a central role in the way humans developed knowledge or reinforced their faith in late medieval and the beginning of the early modern period in Western Europe.[43] The debate about the role of the senses in perceiving the world is not new, but recent research on the topic has revealed that ocular centrism is not an intrinsic feature of Western cultures.[44] Emotions are constructed more than just "socially and individually."[45] More to the point, several historians have called attention to the fact that the role the senses play in the way humans perceive the world went through a process of revaluation during the late medieval and the early-modern periods.[46] Maurette has demonstrated that during the second half of the sixteenth century, Italian scholars started to reinforce the lower senses' importance in the relationship between body and soul. There was a revaluation of "the role of corporeality in general, and tactility in particular, by presenting the tactile as a key player in the dialectics of human love".[47] Touch took the foreground in medical praxis and "after more than a millennium of neglect, [in which it was] accorded the last place in the hierarchy of the senses, touch acquires substantive ontological, epistemological, and aesthetic prevalence in early modern discourse."[48]

In the Iberian Peninsula, the royal physician of Charles V, Bernardino Montaña de Monserrate, considered the sense of touch above all others. Touching objects allowed humans and animals to know the things that could affect them.[49] This opinion was shared by physicians and treatise authors and it became part of the processes of knowledge production.[50] It has been argued that the redefinition of the sense of touch allowed scholars to challenge the authority of the Classics.[51] This ascension of touch in the hierarchy of the five senses prompts an explanation for what motivated rhino horn consumption.

In the next section, I explain how touching materials and objects could trigger supernatural manifestations. In the context of confessional societies of early modern Iberia, the transformative capacity of touch was seen as a frontier between the material world and the spiritual world. Although rhino horns are not known to have had a particular religious connotation in Iberia, a comparison with religious convictions is possible. On the one hand there was a spiritual belief that touch could trigger a divine intervention in the human body and soul. Importantly such beliefs did not depend on touching the Divine Himself, but even objects associated with Him. This is apparent in

the case of the woman healed of her haemorrhage by merely touching the fringe of Jesus' robes in the crowd (Matthew 9:20–22; Mark 5:25–34; and Luke 8:43–48). As Matthew concludes his account of this miracle: "As many as touched it were made well." (Matthew 14:34–36). On the other hand, equivalent beliefs in the power of touch provided a context of plausibility for the occurrence of transformations in the natural world.

A Material Trigger

To support my argument, I will start by looking at how high-ranking people of noble birth believed that the transformative power of touch was inseparable from the consumption of *materia medica*.

Rhino and unicorn horns appear amongst the possessions of both men and women in Madrid between 1585 and 1626. They are mentioned as being stored inside fall-front cabinets and chests of female consumers, revealing that women kept *materia medica*, including unicorn, together with objects for spiritual comfort. For example, one of the consumers kept her rhino horn cup together with scented water and liturgical objects. Another kept her unicorn scraps alongside praying beads. Searching further through the drawers of these women's fall-front cabinets, there will be many more examples of rhino horns' scraps stored with religious items such as images of saints, crucifixes, rosaries, books of hours and holy relics.[52]

As Monica Green and others have highlighted, "spiritual care" could not be separated from the practices of "bodycare".[53] A good example of this is the fact that early-modern recipes often include a metaphysical ingredient such as a prayer. In one of these recipe books, for instance, there is a cure for madness that requires that a beverage (made of a mixture of nettle seeds, white wine, ivy, rue and fennel) be drunk whilst reciting the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary or the Apostles' Creed.[54] In other words, without divine assistance, there was no guarantee that the medicament would be effective.

Likewise, spirituality often required an object, such as a rosary, to trigger divine intervention. Rosaries were the most intimate objects when it came to a believer's relationship with God. Made of different types of material, rosaries were used as instruments to maintain focus while praying. In addition, these religious objects were a path to divine intervention in the physical world. For instance, probate inventories mention beaded rosaries used against melancholia, a term used during the early modern period to designate a whole range of medical conditions, comprising emotional and mental disorder.[55] Melancholia could be a serious concern, especially for a courtier. Baldassare Castiglione maintained that the melancholy was always miserable, vain and an enemy of illustrious thoughts, and hence, not welcome at the court.[56] For Luis Vives, it was a dark veil that blurred the mind.[57]

In order to protect courtiers against peril so great as melancholy, the rosary beads would be sourced from a carefully chosen material. In 1573, Juan de Borja sent a rosary to Gabriel de Zayas, King Philip II's secretary in Madrid. This rosary was chosen specifically for the colour and fragrance of its prayer beads.[58] The material is not mentioned, but it is likely that it was made from either jet or agarwood. While jet had long been regarded as a magical product against troubles of the mind, the scent of agarwood was associated with the treatment of the body of Christ after the Crucifixion.[59] These two materials, jet and agarwood, seem to have taken pride of place amongst rosaries, given their ascribed capacity to produce spiritual comfort once activated through touch. Agarwood's fragrance, for example, could only be released by rubbing the material.

The belief that touching a rosary could unleash divine intervention to cure troubles of the mind suggests that rare consumable goods, such as rhino/unicorn horn, could be kept as material triggers to heal the wounds of the material world.[60]

Healing Relics, Healing Touch

Amongst the materials that triggered divine intervention, none was more sought-after than holy relics. Inside the cabinets of early-modern and high-ranking women in Madrid, holy relics and reliquaries were stored together with rhino/unicorn horns and other *materia medica*. One such example is Maria de Aragón's inventory (1593), where a rhino horn and "a bit of unicorn" are mentioned together with religious images with attached relics.[61] In 1596, in the cabinets of Ana de Toledo y Colona and her daughter there was a small casket with a thorn from the crown of Christ; two reliquaries with relics wrapped in paper; an image of Saint Anthony inside a small bag of relics, and several other boxes of relics. These are mentioned amongst bezoar stones, some pills (*pastillas*), a unicorn cup, jewels, civet and deer musk, as well as ointments for the heart.[62] Another such example is Juana de Aragón y Colonna (1617). Inside the drawers of her fall-front cabinets, Juana de Aragón kept several crosses, boxes and relics' bags together with jewels and musk; "virtuous" stones (*piedrecillas virtuosas*); an image of an *agnus dei*, and agarwood powder.[63] The relics in these inventories differ quite significantly from other more famous sets of relics. They are not fancifully displayed in reliquaries in oratories. They are wrapped in paper, and placed amongst bezoar stones, rhino cups and unicorn fragments.

The above observations suggest that this type of relic could have had a role in healing practices. The use of relics to cure illnesses or assist in the recovery of the sick is as old as the practice of assembling relics itself.

There are many sixteenth-century examples of holy relics being used to heal illnesses by touch. One famous case occurred in 1518. After the body of Saint Julian had been found in Cuenca, believers

poured to the city's cathedral to touch the saint's remains. Through touch, some sort of relief could be obtained. Some scratched the coffin and the earth within it, others pulled splinters out and picked up portions of earth to dissolve in water and drink. After doing so, they asserted they were cured.[64] Given the number of people that claimed to be healthy again after ingesting or touching one of Saint Julian's relics, this saint seems to have been regarded as a prolific healer. The most renowned case is that of a fourteen-year-old boy who recovered from a broken arm after touching Saint Julian's corpse three times. The boy also had to confess to the cathedral's treasurer and to pray before the saint's coffin, but it was the triple touch that helped him to fully recover.[65] After the Council of Trent (1545–1563), this case is just one of numerous accounts of the healing power of relics.

In his 1611 manual on the veneration of relics, Sanchez Dávila presented examples of how touching a relic had miraculous effects on a believer's body. A blind woman recovered her sight, for example, after bringing a relic of Saint Stephen up to her eyes and touching it—with her eyes. This miracle led to Dávila asserting that:

> Never have relics been so searched for as today, neither have they been so appreciated when they are found. [It does not have to be] whole bodies, nor some of their notable parts, but *any dust of its ashes*, or of the earth of their burial sites, or some small part of their clothes.[66]

The practice of getting hold of even the most insignificant ashes of a saint had a very famous archetype: Philip II of Spain. Philip accumulated more than 7500 relics in the Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial. When his first-born son, Prince Don Carlos, fell ill in 1562, the king ordered the body of Saint Diego of Alcalá to be put in his son's bed hoping that it would cure the prince (Figure 2).[67] Philip's dependency on relics was particularly evident in moments of agony: on his deathbed, in 1598, the king asked for the relics of Saints Sebastien, Vincent Ferrer, Alban, and others. The relics were to be brought to him to alleviate his pain.

In all the above examples, physical proximity, particularly touching something, was the necessary trigger to divine assistance.

Accounts of healing after touching holy relics grew considerably during the first decades of the seventeenth century. Relics became instrumental in the mobilisation of believers. Ecclesiastical authorities, from parish priests to bishops, exploited these phenomena to attract larger crowds. For example, on 3 May 1614, a vicar of the small town of Yeste (Murcia), in Castile, dipped the parish cross that held a relic of the Holy Cross into a nearby pond. After this ritual bath, all the "lames, cripples, one-armed, and sick people" of the parish were encouraged to bathe in that same pond. Some dove into the water, others merely dipped the aching part of their body into the water. Some preferred to drink water directly from the pond. This spectacle

Figure 2
The mummy of Saint Diego of Alcalá being placed in the bed of Prince Don Carlos.
Detail from *S. Didacus Complutensis*, seventeenth century.
From KU Leuven Libraries Special Collections, no. PA04737
http://depot.lias.be/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE4811600&

lasted until 12 June with 35 people considered to be miraculously healed. Nevertheless, all these tactile acts still required true devotion that had to be demonstrated by attending mass or praying at church.[68] The aforementioned cases show the belief that God's miraculous healing needed to be enhanced by a trigger. In these cases, that trigger was the sense of touch. Proximity to a relic could suffice to cure a believer, but touching it would always be more effective. As José Luis Bouza described, holy relics were items situated at the frontier between material and immaterial worlds. Christ's, the Virgin Mary's or saints' materiality (the relics) gave way to immaterial divine grace. More precisely, one could touch the supernatural.[69]

There is a parallel to the belief of recovering health after touching relics. That parallel can be found in a ceremony called the "Royal Touch". These "Royal Touch" events used to take place at English and French courts during the medieval and early modern periods. In

them, individuals suffering from certain illnesses—most often scrofula—were brought into the presence of the king. As with Christ, monarchs would lay a hand on an ill person to cure them miraculously. After touching the infirm, monarchs also distributed gold coins for people to hold. Touching these coins would likewise provide healing powers.

Marc Bloch, who famously investigated the "Royal Touch" practice in his work *Les Rois thaumaturges* (1924), explains the phenomenon. Bloch claims that there was a "collective mentality" attributing magical powers to kings.[70] The existence of a "collective mentality" is today highly debatable, however. Recently, Stephen Brogan approached the topic and offered a more nuanced argument. According to Brogan, individuals travelled long distances to receive the king's touch for three main reasons: faith that God would intervene through the royal touch; opportunism, because individuals would effectively receive a gold piece afterwards; and pragmatism, because all other treatments had failed.[71]

Neither the "Royal Touch" ceremony, nor what led people to attend it, can be transplanted to early modern Iberia. Nonetheless, these well-researched ceremonies provide a referential framework. They show that people believed in the power of touch and that that belief resulted from a confluence of vectors, different groups' agenda and individuals' needs. In Iberia, for example, the transformative power of touch was sanctioned and promoted by several social bodies.

In the first part of this paper, I addressed the relevance of the sense of touch for medical practitioners and high-ranking consumers. Popular adherence to the notion that touch had a transformative effect can also be considered an outcome of the Catholic Church's reformative decisions made at the Council of Trent (1545–63). Reforming agents, such the members of the Society of Jesus, supported and reinforced the consumption of relics as gateways to the divine. One of the most renowned manuals for the veneration of relics was written by the Jesuit Martin de Roa. His 1623 text, *Antiguedad veneracion i fruto de las sagradas images, i reliquias,* is of particular interest because the Society of Jesus had a significant outreach throughout Iberia.[72] Moreover, the Jesuits played a leading role in the circulation of relics within Europe, and from Europe to America and Asia.[73] Large collections of holy relics in Jesuit churches reinforced the belief in the power of relics. The collection of relics at the Church of Saint Roch in Lisbon was bequeathed by Juan de Borja in 1588.[74] Borja himself was the son of a Jesuit and he is the very same individual who amassed the seven rhino horns mentioned at the start of this paper. Rather than coincidental, the case of Juan de Borja unveils how the sense of touch was construed by individuals. Not only did people build a belief in the power of touching certain materials, but their behaviour was also affected by those same beliefs.

The Mystic Touch

As I explained in the previous section, sensorial experience became a way to reach the divine in the confessional societies of post-Tridentine Iberia. Apart from the Society of Jesus, other reformative movements within monastic institutions also believed so.

After the reforms set forth by Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582) in the Order of Carmel, the action of the Spanish mystics, as they became known, had an impact well beyond the walls of their convents and monasteries. The writings of Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross, Luis de Granada, Luis de Léon, and John of Ávila claimed for a more intimate and personal relationship with God. That relationship had to be worked and perfected individually and required full devotion. These texts and ideas found a very receptive audience in court and spread amongst the same individuals who were consuming rhino horn and unicorn horn.

The writings of the Spanish mystics aimed at liberating the soul from the senses to reach God. Rather than it being a mere moment, mystical experience was a long path to self-improvement, it was *The Way of Perfection.*[75]

The way of perfection pertains to be a walk of love, requiring continuous work. The climax is the union between soul and God: an ineffable moment. Spanish mystics struggle to find words to describe the experience.[76] Therefore, sensorial occurrences describe and explain the ineffability of the mystical ecstasy. The texts of Teresa of Ávila and Saint John of the Cross use metaphors to explain the immaterial and invisible and to make understandable an achievement limited to those who dedicate their lives preparing their soul for the moment it reaches God.[77] Hence, metaphors based on the material and sensorial world become the main communication tool.

Saint John of the Cross' words merit some discussion. They materialise the ineffable and immaterial union between God and the human soul. Saint John described the climax of mystical experience as *tactus*, i.e., touch. Medieval mystics had already used the word *tactus*, but Saint John of the Cross translated the Latin term into Castilian not as the tactile sense (*tacto*), but as touch (*toque*). In doing so, and according to the philologist Helmut Hatzfeld, Saint John loaded the term with a much more concrete meaning, absent in medieval Latin texts.[78] In other words, Saint John of the Cross chose to use a physical action, rather than the sense itself, to describe the ineffable moment in which the soul is transformed through the union with God. That moment is best described in one of the saint's most-analysed poems: *The Living Flame of Love*:

> […] O sweet cautery,
> O delightful wound!
> O gentle hand! O delicate touch

> that tastes of eternal life
> and pays every debt!
> In killing you changed death into life.[79]

That change is the ultimate goal. The path to perfection walked by a soul. All aspects of the material world have been left behind. When the soul is burned and wounded there is actually no pain to be felt. The "gentle hand" heals and transforms the perfected soul into true life. The soul's substance is transformed into the loving substance of God.[80] As the Catholic scholar Mary Frohlich synthesises, "in John's view the soul that is touched by God in its very centre becomes 'God by participation'".[81]

In this transformation, touch is used to describe the total unity of soul and God, and the reciprocity of the experience.[82] Touch is the only sense entirely reciprocal. One cannot touch without being touched.[83] It is in that moment of contact that the soul is transformed.[84] As García Palacios described, it is a moment of "high state of spiritual communication" in which the soul experiences the divine.[85]

Saint Teresa of Ávila uses other metaphors to describe the climax of the mystical experience. She uses the words comet or thunder, but there is one reference that comes closely to the idea of touch as described by Saint John. In this excerpt, Saint Teresa describes her experience as having been touched by a spark from a burning furnace. That burning furnace is in fact God:

> I have been thinking that God might be likened to a burning furnace from which a small spark flies into the soul that feels the heat of this great fire, which, however, is insufficient to consume it. The sensation is so delightful that the spirit lingers in the pain produced by its contact [touch].[86]

In the original text Saint Teresa uses the term *tocar* (i.e. touch) to refer to the effects of the spark on the soul.[87] When the flying spark touches the soul, it produces a mystical ecstasy of union. Like Saint John of the Cross, Saint Teresa uses the term *toque* to describe the action that leads to a transformation that results in "great benefits left in the soul".[88]

Finally, the effect that Saint Teresa describes brings to mind Oliva Sabuco's description of contagion. For Saint Teresa, "a small spark flies into the soul" which, then, "lingers in the pain produced by its contact". For Oliva Sabuco, contagion occurs when poison "passes on through the air, and enters through the eyes, breath or nose thanks to the touch of the air," eventually damaging the brain and destroying its delicate harmony.[89] In both examples, touch happens at a frontier zone between the material and the immaterial and it succeeds in generating a drastic transformation.

Conclusion

The consumption of rhino horns has usually been explained by describing consumers' or suppliers' motivations. However, the motives are seldom explained in a wider context.

This paper highlights a connection between buying and consuming rhino horns and the socially constructed perception that touching certain objects brings transformation. As a result of that awareness, there are social practices, spiritual beliefs, medical knowledge and symbolic representations that need to be taken into account when analysing consumption of certain products. By opening up its scope, consumption dynamics include agents beyond final consumers, suppliers and intermediaries.

The analysis of the consumption of rhino horn has revealed that the circulation of these items was shaped by the agendas and interests of diverse social bodies and individuals. All these individuals shared a belief in the transformative power of the sense of touch that supported their interest in the horns. Physicians regarded the sense of touch as part of the processes of contagion and healing; apothecaries and merchants sought higher profits by promoting stories about the healing effects of touching a unicorn; treatise authors aimed at pleasing princes, defending a noble exclusiveness in touching rhino horns due to an ensuing transformation; influential religious authorities and high-ranking consumers validated and reinforced the belief in the healing power of touch; mystical writers used the sense of touch to describe the transformative moment of the union between the human soul and God.

The net of relations in which a sixteenth-century rhino horn was embedded expanded across diverse social bodies. Understanding the early-modern enthusiasm about its consumption requires a thoroughly analysis of all these relations and the individuals involved. This paper begun with the case of the consumer Juan de Borja, whose interest in rhino horns cannot be separated from his access to the supply network in Lisbon, his connections to the Portuguese royal physician, his high-ranking social status, his connections to the Society of Jesus, and his collection of holy relics. Many other early-modern Iberian high-ranking consumers shared similar contexts. Yet, the individual circumstances of each case can still add new layers to the understanding of consumer behaviour and the popularity of the horn of the unicorn.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. Historical Archive of *Protocolos*, Madrid. Protocolo 2626: 1008–1078v.
2. Martinho, "Beyond Exotica"; Escrivà Llorca, "Erudito, Pietas et Honor."
3. Martinho, "Beyond Exotica," 131–35.

4. Ajuda Library, Lisbon. Cod. 46-VIII-12: 121–22. The author would like to thank António Manuel Lopes de Andrade for drawing attention to this source.
5. Martinho, "Beyond Exotica"; Crespo, "À Mesa Do Príncipe"; Bamforth, "On Gesner, Marvels and Unicorns"; Mosco, "The Medici and the Allure of the Exotic"; Jordan, "A Masterpiece of Indo-Portuguese Art."
6. Findlen, "Introduction: Early Modern Things" and *Possessing Nature*; Berg and Clifford, *Consumers and Luxury*, Preface; Roche, *Histoire des Choses Banales*, 26–27; Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the Demand;* and "The Empire of Things"; Appadurai Introduction: Commodities: 3–63.
7. Ingold, "Bringing Things to Life;" "On Weaving a Basket," and *Lines. A Brief History*; Miller, *Materiality*, 1–50; Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*; Johnson, "Mixing Humans."
8. Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius*, 235.
9. Aelianus, "Fragment XXV," 54.
10. Orta, *Coloquios*, 75.
11. Linschoten, *The Voyage of John Huyghen*, 96.
12. Mimoso, *Relación de La Real Tragicomedia*, 50v.
13. Martinho, "Beyond Exotica," 121–24, 131–35.
14. Ibid., 131–35.
15. Jordan Gschwend, "A Masterpiece of Indo-Portuguese Art," 49; Mosco, "The Medici and the Allure of the Exotic"; Crespo, Hugo Miguel. *À Mesa Do Príncipe*.
16. Ajuda Library, Lisbon. Cod. 46-VIII-12: 121–22. I would like to thank António Manuel Lopes de Andrade, from the University of Aveiro, for having drawn my attention to this source.
17. Historical Archive of *Protocolos*, Madrid. Protocolos 1578; 4442: 59 onwards; 2322: 22v; 2322: 17; Martinho, "Beyond Exotica," 131–35.
18. Fissell, "Introduction," 5; Cabré, "Women or Healers?" 36–37; Green, "Women's Medical Practice."
19. National Library of Portugal, Códice 7198: 82–82r.
20. Marini, *Discorso Contra,* 7.
21. Velez de Arciniega, *Historia de Los Animales*, 50.
22. Martinho, "Beyond Exotica," 126–27.
23. Velez de Arciniega, *Historia de Los Animales*, 44–45.
24. Leitão and Sánchez, "Too Much to Tell."
25. For Iberian knowledge production, see Leitão and Sánchez, "Too Much to Tell;" Costa, *Medicine, Trade and Empire*; Barrera-Osorio, "Knowledge and Empiricism," *Experiencing Nature*, and "Local Herbs, Global Medicines;" Brotóns, *Más allá de la Leyenda Negra*; Cañizares-Esguerra, *Nature, Empire, and Nation* and "Iberian Science."
26. Bau, "Elogio de la Mano," 111; cf. Moliner, *Diccionario del Uso*.
27. Bau, "Elogio de la Mano," 106, 110; see Barrera-Osorio, "Knowledge and Empiricism;" Cañizares-Esguerra, *Nature, Empire, And Nation*, 19; Smith and Findlen, *Merchants and Marvels*, 163–81.
28. Maurette, "De Rerum Textura," 312.
29. Ibid., 314.
30. Ibid., 327–28.
31. Sabuco, *Nueva Filosofia*, 49v.
32. Barona Vilar, *Sobre Medicina,* 141–42.
33. Sabuco, *Nueva Filosofia*, 52; cf. Barona Vilar, *Sobre Medicina,* 142.
34. Covarrubias, *Tesoro de la Lengua Castellana,* 174, citing Martial, *Epigrams*, Book 14.
35. Nola, *Livro de Guisados* VII-VIIv, my emphasis.
36. Gracián y Morales, *El Criticón*, 227–28.
37. Ibid.
38. Ago, "Splendor and Magnificence," 64–70.
39. Welch, "The Senses in the Marketplace."

40. Martinho, “Beyond Exotica,” 246–51.
41. Johnson, “A Taxonomy of Touch;” “In the Hand of the Beholder;” “The Art of Touch” and “Touch, Tactility.”
42. As systematized by David Howes, senses are culturally categorized and there are several perspectives about the number of human senses: Howes, “The Expanding Field of Sensory Studies,” 12–14.
43. Bau, “Elogio de la Mano,” 102–106; Maurette, “Plato’s Hermaphrodite,” 872–74; Classen, *The Deepest Sense*; Johnson, “Touch, Tactility,” 66.
44. Baum, *Reformation of the Senses*; Johnson, “A Taxonomy of Touch”; Harvey, *Sensible Flesh.*
45. Amelang and Tausiet, *Accidentes del Alma*, 11.
46. Maurette, “De Rerum Textura,” 311.
47. Maurette, “Plato’s Hermaphrodite,” 873.
48. Maurette, “De Rerum Textura,” 311.
49. Montaña de Monserrate 1551: 134r; cf. Bau, “Elogio de la Mano,” 111.
50. Bau, “Elogio de la Mano,” 112–22.
51. Maurette, “De Rerum Textura,” 311.
52. Historical Archive of *Protocolos*, Madrid. Protocolos 1578: 158v-159v, 1344-1347v; 2021: 905–906, 909.
53. Fissel, “Introduction;” Cabré, “Women or Healers?”; Pérez Samper, “Los Recetarios de Mujeres”; Green, “Women’s Medical Practice.”
54. National Library of Spain, Manuscripts, Mss. 1462: 65.
55. Historical Archive of *Protocolos*, Madrid. Protocolo 1578; Amelang and Tausiet, *Accidentes del Alma*, 71–98; Schmidt, *Melancholy and the Care of the Soul,* 2.
56. Gambin, *El Debate Sobre la Melancolía*, 54.
57. Amelang and Tausiet, *Accidentes del Alma,*78.
58. Letter from Juan de Borja to Gabriel de Zayas, Lisbon, 31 December 1573, in General Archive of Simancas, Spain, Estado–Portugal, Leg. 391, n. 4.
59. Gambin, *El Debate Sobre la Melancolía*; Bible, Gospel of John, 19: 39–40; and Psalm 45.
60. Holohan, “Mesoamerican Idols.”
61. An *agnus dei* refers to a medal, usually made of wax, with a carved lamb as representation of Christ. See Historical Archive of *Protocolos*, Madrid. Protocolo 1578: 158v-159v.
62. Historical Archive of *Protocolos*, Madrid. Protocolo 1578: 1344-1347v.
63. Historical Archive of *Protocolos*, Madrid. Protocolo 2021: 905–906, 909.
64. Cofiño-Fernández, “La Devoción a los Santos,” 362.
65. Ibid.; Carrasco, *Solidarités et Sociabilités,* 37–8.
66. Dávila, “De la Veneracion,” 11.
67. Ferrer García, “Felipe II,” 85; Christian 1991:192.
68. Lemeunier, “Dossier: Los Milagros de la Cruz.”
69. Bouza Álvarez, *Religiosidad, Contrareforma*, 42; cf. Pascua “Las Falsas Reliquias,” 224.
70. Bloch, *Les Rois Thaumaturges*; Brogan, *The Royal Touch*, 6–7.
71. Brogan, *The Royal Touch,* 21.
72. Roa, *Antiguedad veneracion i fruto de las sagradas images*.
73. Coello de la Rosa, “Reliquias Globales.”
74. Carvalho, “Os Recebimentos de Relíquias”; Campos, *Relaçam do Solenne Recebimento*.
75. Ávila, *The Way of Perfection.*
76. Salgado Gontijo, “Sabor de Vida Eterna.”
77. Ibid.; James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* 159.
78. Hatzfeld, *Estudios Literarios*, 111–20.
79. Frohlich, “O Sweet Cautery,” 323.
80. García Palacios *Los Procesos de Conocimiento*, 201; Cross, *En Una Noche Oscura,* 23:12.
81. Frohlich, “O Sweet Cautery,” 314.

82. García Palacios, *Los Procesos de Conocimiento*, 201; Cross, *Obras del venerable Padre,* 168; Subida del Monte Carmelo: 26:5.
83. Bau, "Elogio de la Mano," 112.
84. Bezerra and Bezerra "A Linguagem Nupcial," 227–32.
85. García Palacios, *Los Procesos de Conocimiento*,198–202.
86. Ávila, *The Interior Castle,* 167.
87. Ávila, *Libro de las Moradas,* 102.
88. Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, 169.
89. Sabuco, *Nueva Filosofia*, 52.

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