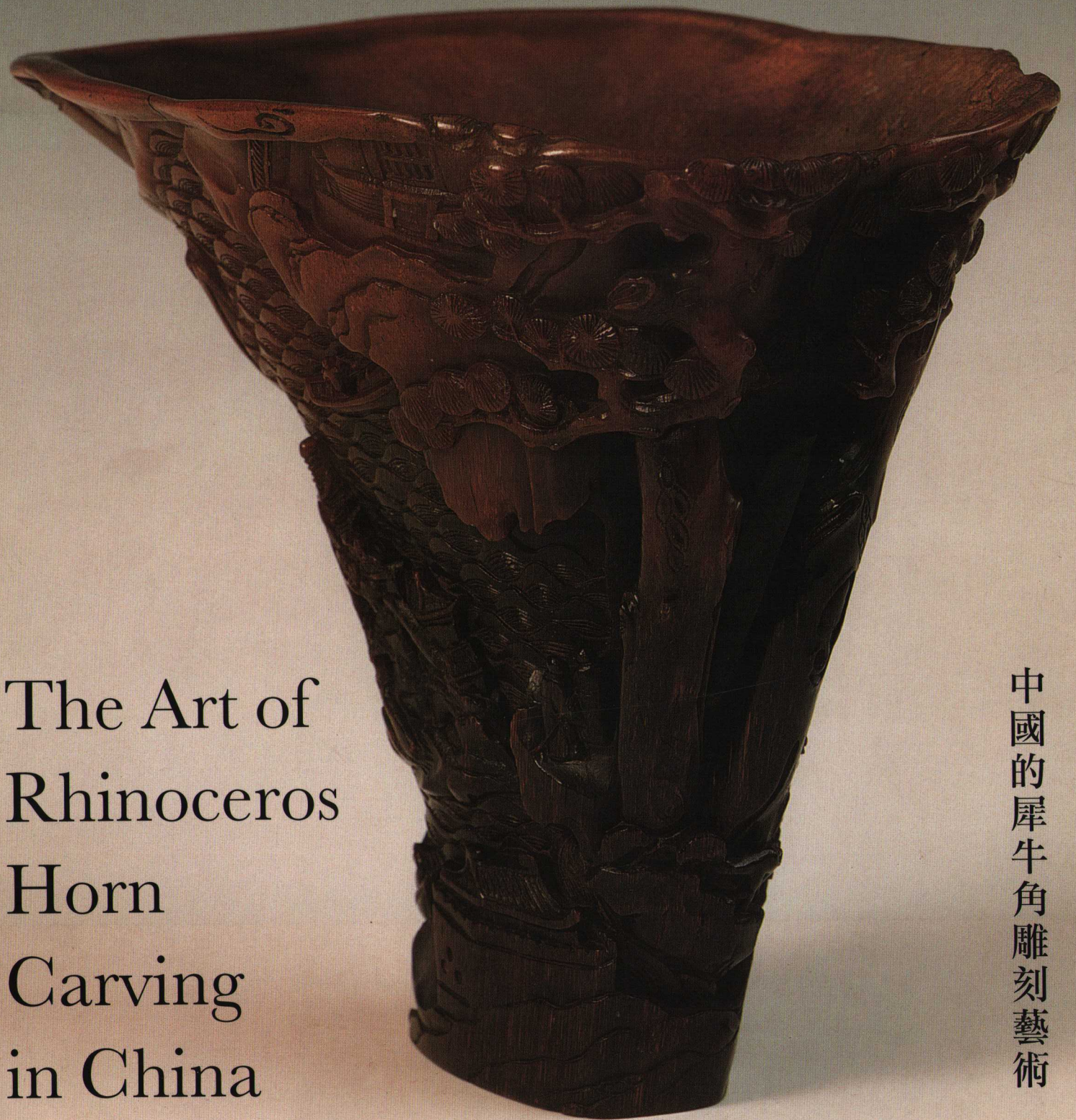


Jan Chapman



The Art of  
Rhinoceros  
Horn  
Carving  
in China

中國的犀牛角雕刻藝術

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MAP OF CHINA SHOWING MODERN CITIES AND REGIONS



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# Preface

The research that has resulted in the publication of this book began as long ago as January 1977. During the intervening years it has been my great pleasure that many of the museum curators, librarians, connoisseurs, collectors, restorers, antique dealers and academics that I have consulted have become personal friends.

In addition to thanking all of them I also want to thank the various rhinoceros experts round the world who have given me invaluable help. Most are zoologists, but there are also people from the world of rhinoceros conservation who have given me information and support beyond the call of duty.

My deepest thanks though, must go to those generous individuals and museums who have either lent or given me photographs for this book. Their patience over the last twelve years since the book was completed but awaiting publication has been heartwarming.

Without sponsorship this book would still be awaiting publication. I take this opportunity of thanking all of the sponsors, but in particular, my friends Gerald Arnhold and Franklin Chow who have supported me every step of the way. I thank everyone connected with the publication for their courtesy, patience and professionalism. Katie Cowan, Debra Sellman and Izzie Thomas warned me that we may not be on speaking terms by publication day. On the contrary, we are still speaking and still friends. Shaunagh Money-Coutts at Christie's Books Ltd was the person who set everything in motion and I thank her for being a tower of strength over the last year and a half.

Last, but not least, I want to thank my husband Tom and sister-in-law Mammie for their unstinting practical support and encouragement.

To all of you, my grateful thanks.

JAN CHAPMAN

1999

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Each time I reread this book I notice the number of 'I's' in the text. Every author of a work involving a degree of original research such as this, is faced with the problem of whether to remove the 'I's' and insert instead 'it is believed that' or some such phrase that results in a text that is both dull and flat. My hope is that the subject will be as interesting to others as it still is to me — and so I have left in the 'I's. I do take this opportunity to acknowledge that all the errors and omissions in the work are my own.

# Chronology

NEOLITHIC PERIOD c.8000 BCE – c.2000 BCE

SHANG c.2000 BCE – c.1027 BCE

ZHOU c.1027 BCE – c.221 BCE

QIN c.221 BCE – c.106 BCE

HAN c.206 BCE – 220

TANG 618 – 907

SONG 960 – 1279

YUAN 1280 – 1368

MING 1368 – 1643

*Hongwu* 1368 – 1398

*Jianwen* 1399 – 1402

*Yongle* 1403 – 1424

*Xuande* 1426 – 1435

*Zhenglong* 1436 – 1449

*Jingtai* 1450 – 1456

*Tianshun* 1457 – 1464

*Chenghua* 1465 – 1487

*Hongzhi* 1488 – 1505

*Zhengde* 1506 – 1521

*Jiajing* 1522 – 1566

*Longqing* 1567 – 1572

*Wanli* 1573 – 1619

*Tianqi* 1621 – 1627

*Chongzhen* 1628 – 1643

QING 1644 – 1911

*Shunzhi* 1644 – 1662

*Kangxi* 1662 – 1722

*Yongzheng* 1723 – 1735

*Qianlong* 1736 – 1795

*Jiaqing* 1796 – 1820

*Daoguang* 1821 – 1850

*Xianfeng* 1851 – 1861

*Tongzhi* 1862 – 1874

*Guangxu* 1875 – 1908

*Xuantong* 1909 – 1911

Republic 1912

People's Republic 1949

# Part I

# The Rhinoceros and its Horn

- 1 THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND  
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# I The Historical Background

## The Literary and Archaeological Evidence

At one time the rhinoceros roamed over the entire land mass of China, as is proved by the evidence of fossil remains. Today no rhinoceros are to be found within China borders and the numbers of the three Asian species dwindle alarmingly year by year due to the depredations of hunters and poachers as well as the steady encroachment of human settlements into the wild areas that they frequent.

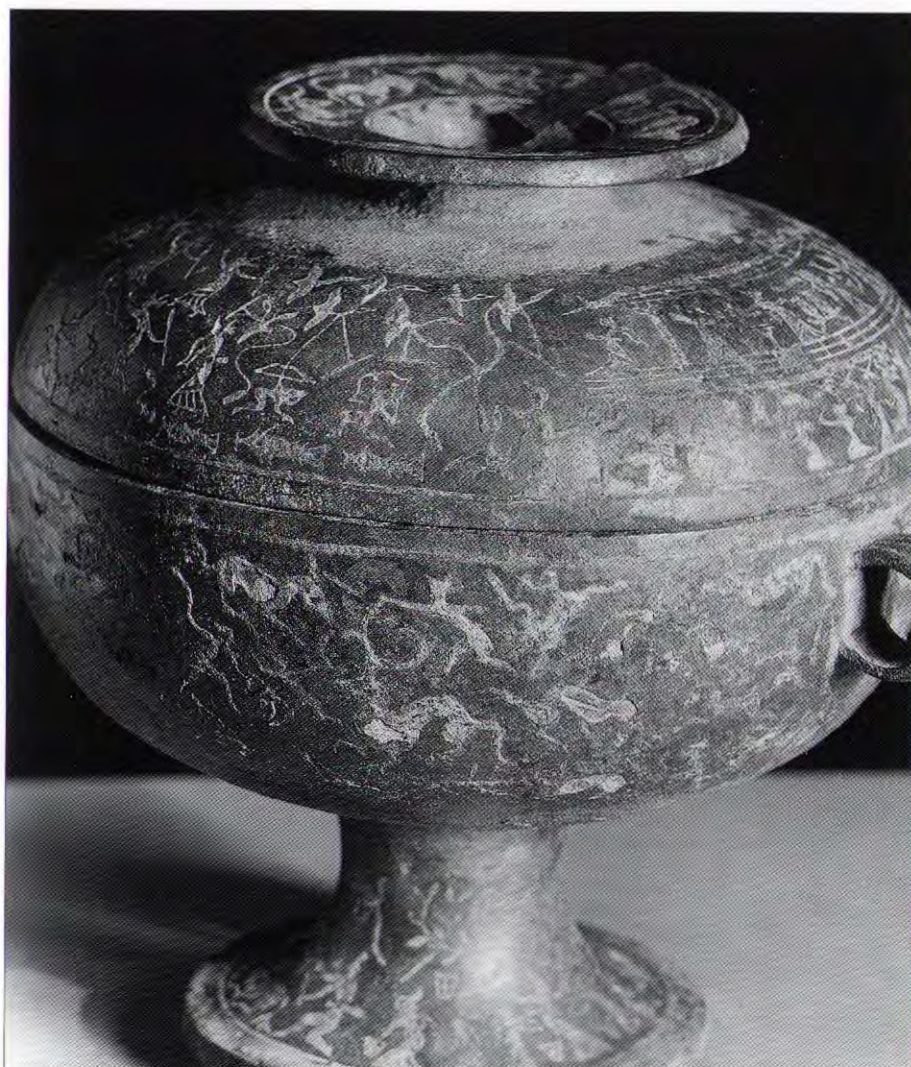
At the beginning of the twentieth century a scholar named Berthold Laufer, working at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, tried to map the gradual disappearance of the rhinoceros from China by searching through the earliest written records for notes of sightings in various parts of the country. As a result, he came to the conclusion that even a thousand years ago in the Song dynasty the rhinoceros was rarely seen and that by the Yuan dynasty it had completely disappeared.<sup>1</sup>

The fact is that the rhinoceros was hunted for its horn, then as now, and that the present-day tragedy of chase and slaughter reflects a situation that is at least two thousand years old. One of the earliest Chinese writings on the subject, dating from the second century BCE relates how the first Emperor of China, the notorious Qin Shihuang who reigned between 221 and 209 BCE, sent out five hundred thousand men to open up south-east trade routes in order to acquire rhinoceros horn and elephant tusks.<sup>2</sup> The text in question goes on to say that there was a tremendous growth in the popularity of articles made from rhinoceros horn.

The search for and the value attributed to rhinoceros horn poses some questions, such as why it was so sought after by the ancient Chinese and what the qualities were that set it apart from the horns of the buffalo or the tusks of the elephant. Then again, what were the articles that were made from rhinoceros horn during, and doubtless prior to, the reign of the Qin Shihuang Emperor?

To understand why it was necessary for Qin Shihuang to send out enormous armies to seek out the rhinoceros horn, it is necessary to trace back the history of the rhinoceros in China to the period before men began to settle in the fertile plain around the confluence of the Wei and Yellow rivers. At that time rhinoceros were to be found in the whole of East and South-East Asia. Gradually, as man began to settle and the population grew, the shy and timid rhinoceros retreated ever farther from human habitation. In this way the ancestors of the modern rhinoceros species were pushed from the central areas towards the remote border regions of ancient China. A passage in the classic text *Mengzi* (The Book of Mencius) tells how the Duke of Zhou who came to power around 1000 BCE established peace throughout his empire by 'driving away the tigers, leopards, rhinoceros and elephants — and all the people were highly delighted.'<sup>3</sup> Since the philosopher Mencius died around 289 BCE and the book which contains his sayings was written by a follower or disciple shortly after this, the passage would seem to tell us that even in the time of Mencius the rhinoceros was extremely rare. Moreover, since Mencius has included the rhinoceros with 'tigers, leopards and elephants,' it is obvious that he believed the rhinoceros to be highly dangerous to man.





3 (left)  
Chinese bronze sacrificial  
vessel *dou* engraved with  
scenes of the hunt.  
First half 5th cent. BCE  
*Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore*

Diagram 1 (above)  
Shape of a rhinoceros  
engraved on the bronze  
vessel.

4 (above)  
Detail of rhinoceros  
engraved on the bronze  
vessel.

The species of rhinoceros which was supposedly 'driven away' by the Duke of Zhou around 100 BCE would have been the ancestor of the present three species of Asian rhinoceros. Although nowadays the three species are widely separated in habitat, both the one-horned and the two-horned species were once to be found living in the South-West of China, specifically in the province of Sichuan.<sup>4</sup> The two-horned rhinoceros from Asia is now known as the Sumatran Rhinoceros (*D. sumatrensis*) in reference to the area which it now inhabits. The remaining two species, the Indian and Javan rhinoceros, both have only one horn. All three species of Asian rhinoceros are fully described in Part I Chapter 2 of this book.

It must be emphasized that the very great physical difference between the two-horned Sumatran and its cousins the Indian and Javan species, is important. The bristly-haired Sumatran looks like a very large, wild boar. In contrast, the two-horned species, that is the Indian and Javan rhinoceros, look exactly as though they have armour-plated bodies. For thousands of years hunters have believed that the armour-like folds of skin of the Javan and Indian species cannot be pierced by arrows and this unfounded belief must surely have added to the animals' fearsome reputation.

Then, as now, capturing the rhinoceros was both difficult and dangerous, especially with the primitive weapons at the disposal of the early hunters. From around the fifth century BCE we have a splendid picture of a wild animal hunt as seen through the eyes of a Chinese artist. The picture is in the form of a frieze of inlaid copper decoration round the body of a bronze sacrificial vessel called a *dou* (see 3). The hunters are shown brandishing spears, swords and bows and arrows as they confront or drag away such animals as buffalo, leopard, deer and the one-horned rhinoceros. It takes little imagination to understand how this terrifying

5 (right)  
Chinese bronze, wine  
vessel or *jue*, used for  
heating and pouring.  
15th–14th cent. BCE.  
38.4 w. 21.6 cms  
*Anhui Provincial Museum,  
China*

looking beast that inhabited the most remote areas of jungle became prey to hunters, both for its horn and for its armour-like hide which, after careful drying out, was made into shields.

This same element of danger and rarity which is associated with the taking of rhinoceros horn by hunters was surely also a prime reason why it became a symbol rather than the horn of the sedentary water buffalo or any other of the more familiar bovidae. Throughout human history we know that man has valued that which is most rare. So, the horn of the water buffalo, which could be picked up as a commonplace occurrence in the fields around human settlements in early China, would have been considered of far less value than the horns of the rhinoceros, which had to be brought back from long distances after incurring great danger.

Having established that rhinoceros horn was sought by early man despite great difficulties, we must return to the question of how it differs from that of the common buffalo. The simple answer is that the horns of bovidae such as the water buffalo are hollow for almost their entire length. A large horn will hold a considerable amount of liquid. The rhinoceros horn, in contrast, is solid for almost its entire length and a large Indian horn will only hold a generous glass of wine whilst one of the smaller horns would hold the equivalent of a small glass of sherry. It follows from this that the common buffalo horn was most likely used to quaff the thirst with a large volume of water, whilst the rare and precious rhinoceros horn would have been used for drinking much smaller quantities of more precious liquid (see 1).

There is no question that in ancient China, as elsewhere in the world, early man used animal horns as the earliest form of drinking cup. Could it be possible, therefore, that when ancient man first began to work in bronze around the year 2000 BCE, he would have modelled his new and precious bronze wine vessels on the earlier goblets made of horn? Would he have also chosen to reproduce the shape of the rare and precious rhinoceros horn cups, rather than the everyday buffalo which could have been used for water rather than wine? There are two pointers which lead to this conclusion. First, a linguistic one: the names used by the Chinese to describe many of their earliest bronze wine vessels incorporate the pictograph for 'horn' which, in Chinese, is *jue* 角. There is, for example, the *guang* 觥 which is a large wine container, the *jue* 角 a heating and pouring vessel, the *gu* 觚 beaker, the *zhi* 卣 goblet, and finally the *shang* 觴 wine cup.

The second pointer concerns the shape of the lip of wine containers used for heating and pouring. Many commentators have remarked on the extraordinary shape of these objects (see 5) with their long spout, pointed ovoid lip and relatively small cavity. I believe that the shape of these ancient bronze wine vessels was based on the Sumatran horn which, as we will see in Chapter 2, can be described as having a pointed ovoid base.

The earliest literary references linking rhinoceros horn drinking cups with wine go back to the Zhou dynasty and the Book of Songs, *Shijing*, said to have been written down by Confucius himself around 500 BCE. One of the most popular of these songs, which has been illustrated in handscroll and album paintings for the last two thousand years (see 6), celebrates the twelve months of



6 (above)  
Album painting in ink and light colours on silk which illustrates the Song for the Tenth Month. Anon. 18th cent. *The Chester Beatty Library, Dublin* (CBC.1315)

the year by describing the various activities which took place during each month. The song describes how, in the tenth month, it was the custom for the people to visit the palace of their prince to offer wine and ‘raise the rhinoceros horn cup with wishes for long life.’<sup>5</sup>

The collection known as *Shijing* contains folk songs which were of great antiquity when Confucius selected them for inclusion in his anthology. We shall never know when the ‘Song for the Tenth Month’ was first sung, but it demonstrates an incontrovertible link between rhinoceros horn, wine and the ‘wish for long life’, which is crucial to our understanding of the importance of rhinoceros horn over the horns of other bovidae.

At the beginning of this chapter the question was posed as to why the first Emperor of China, Qin Shihuang, sent out an army to secure the horn of the rhinoceros. Qin Shihuang was one of many Chinese rulers known to have been obsessed with the search for immortality. One instance cited by later Chinese historians relates how the Emperor sent out several thousand young boys and girls in boats to search for the islands of the blessed. Needless to say, they never returned. He surrounded himself with advisers ready to pander to the worst excesses of his credulity. These charlatans fuelled the Emperor’s obsession while at the same time protecting their own reputations; their search for magic fungus, rare herbs and the pill of immortality had come to nothing, they reasoned, because some sinister influence was working against them. Again and again it is recorded that Qin Shihuang was terrified of threats against his life and how his fear of death led to an obsession with the search for everlasting life. This Emperor

must surely have valued the rhinoceros horn for its supposed magical properties and doubtless this is why he was prepared to go to such lengths to obtain it.

Not long after the death of Qin Shihuang, his dynasty was overthrown and replaced by a strong new dynasty which was to survive for four hundred years. This was the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Recent archaeological excavations have shown that it is from the early part of the Han dynasty that our first evidence of the use of rhinoceros horn in China appears. Strangely, the evidence consists not of the horn but of rhinoceros horn models made from other materials. It has been suggested that no discoveries of rhinoceros horn have been made in tomb excavations because it is an organic substance and would simply have rotted away. This seems to me an unlikely explanation when one remembers examples of rhinoceros horn objects dating from the eighth century, and possibly much earlier, that are still safely stored in the Shoso-in Treasure House in Nara, Japan.

Another possible explanation for the fact that substitute horns were found amongst the personal belongings buried with Lady Li, wife of the Marquis of Dai who died in 186 BCE, might be that possession of rhinoceros horn in that early period was restricted to the Emperor. Lady Li cannot have been too poor to own rhinoceros horn, for in her tomb were found more than a thousand different objects of lacquer, bamboo, silk, pottery and wood. This was a virtual treasure trove since, at that time in history, lacquer cost ten times the price of bronze. Diagram 2 shows drawings of two examples from the total of thirteen wooden replicas of rhinoceros horn found in the tomb.<sup>6</sup>

A more recent excavation in 1981 has revealed a total of nineteen models of rhinoceros horns made from earthenware that had been stored inside a large jar in a Han dynasty tomb at Guangzhou (Canton), in Guangdong province. Details of these earthenware horns have not yet been published.<sup>7</sup>

There are, in addition, a comparatively large number of earthenware models of rhinoceros horn from a later period, the Tang dynasty (618–907), which were manufactured specifically to accompany the dead on their journey to the afterlife. Several of these models and the figurines which carry them are to be found in western collections (see 7).

In the Tang dynasty it became very popular for people to furnish their graves with lifelike models of real people, animals and objects, familiar in their daily lives, which would accompany them on their journey to the afterlife. These earthenware models are known as *ming qi* or grave goods. Perhaps the best known example of this practice occurs from the time of the first Emperor, Qin Shihuang, who employed vast numbers of craftsmen to model and bake several thousand life-sized earthenware models of an entire army, each soldier having a different face. During the Tang dynasty the practice was developed to a point where skilled potters made miniature earthenware houses, farmyards, ovens, farm animals, musicians and so on, which would have been purchased by a man during his lifetime to be placed in his tomb at his death. Among the many thousands of these tomb figures that have been taken from Tang tombs, the high incidence of figurines of foreigners has been remarked upon many times.

Among these figurines of foreigners are several types of men and women who all carry in their arms a large wine container. The containers are found in several

Diagram 2 (below)  
Wooden models of rhinoceros horns found in a Han dynasty tomb c.186 BCE Changsha Mawangdui Yihao Hanmu. Hunan Provincial Museum and Institute of Archaeology





7 (above)  
An earthenware figurine of  
a male wine seller carrying  
a wine container shaped as  
a duck. H. 33.5 cms.  
*Museum Rietberg, Zürich*

different shapes — usually ducks or geese but also parrots, lions and fish. All these shapes are roughly similar in outline and almost certainly represent a development from the animal skin water sack of the type still used in tropical countries. In the neck of each of these earthenware wine containers the broad end of a rhinoceros horn can be seen (see 8). I have argued elsewhere<sup>8</sup> that, in real life, the horn would have acted both as a plug for the wine container and as a cup into which the wine would have been poured. No doubt clients were charged at the rate of so much per cupful. There is always the possibility, of course, that wine sellers, who were presumably importing expensive grape wine from areas such as Turfan, in the far North–West, would have plugged their earthenware animal-shaped wine containers with stoppers which, although in the unmistakable conical rhinoceros horn shape, were actually made from earthenware. This we may never know. There is, however, some literary evidence to suggest that for one short period during the Tang dynasty there was an abundance of horns available — a fact which would inevitably have lowered the enormous cost of the horns and brought them within reach of the merchant class.<sup>9</sup>

Then again, we must not forget the fact that rhinoceros horn was already being used in China as a detector of poison. How and why the horn originated as a means of detecting poison and also as its antidote is lost in the mists of antiquity. The first written reference goes back to the fourth century and concerns a Daoist chemist named Ge Hong who wrote many books on the search for immortality. He said:

The horn is a safe guide to tell the presence of poison; when poisonous medicines of liquid form are stirred with a horn, a white foam will bubble up and no further test is necessary; when non-poisonous substances are stirred with it, no foam will arise. In this manner, the presence of poison can be detected.<sup>10</sup>

Popular songs dating back long before 500 BCE demonstrate that rhinoceros horn cups were used when drinking toasts to wish for ‘long life’. These songs suggest that in the minds of the people rhinoceros horn was already linked with the concept of immortality. How and why this association of ideas developed into a superstition will never be known, but it seems certain that the belief in the magical properties of the horn found its way to the outside world. Travelling merchants, especially wine sellers, would have heard tales about the wonderful powers of the horn and doubtless embellished them in the way that all tales of magic inevitably develop. Whether the plug-and-cup wine container was made of rhinoceros horn or of earthenware is immaterial; the shape alone would have been sufficient to suggest that by drinking from it people were protected from poison and, at the same time, were brought one step nearer to everlasting life.

From early literary texts which still exist, it has been possible to construct a better picture of the sort of articles fashioned from rhinoceros horn. Given the innate conservatism of the Chinese, it is very probable that these same articles were the ones referred to in the passage dating from the second century BCE which says there was a tremendous growth in articles made from rhinoceros horn.

Articles made for women included toilet boxes, hairpins, combs, beads, bracelets, paper and curtain weights. Those made from rhinoceros horn that are

mentioned in early texts also include some that have been made for the gentleman scholar. These include belt plaques, belt toggles, chopsticks, scroll ends, seals and articles for writing and painting such as brush waters, water droppers and brush handles.

Apart from the written evidence, there is a second source of knowledge concerning the kinds of objects that were produced during the Tang dynasty. This evidence results from the fact that in the year 756 the Empress Komyo of Japan, who was a devout Buddhist, gave the entire household equipment of her deceased husband the Emperor Shomu to the Todaiji Temple at Nara. The collection, numbering over ten thousand objects and ranging from household furniture to military equipment, was installed in a huge log building set on stilts which was built in the grounds of the temple. This building — the oldest museum in the world — remained untouched for centuries out of respect for the imperial seals attached to its great doors, placed there at the time of its dedication. The log building, known as Shoso-in, is the Imperial Household Repository. Most of Emperor Shomu's household equipment was of Chinese manufacture for, at that period, the Japanese court had already adopted a Chinese lifestyle and had imported large quantities of Chinese household goods and works of art suitable to life at court. This desire to emulate the Chinese began during the regency of Prince Shotoku (574–622) as a result of the glowing reports of the splendour of the Chinese court brought back to Japan by embassies which travelled to the Tang court after its establishment in 618. It was Prince Shotoku who introduced Buddhism to Japan and encouraged the adoption of all things Chinese in the daily life of the Japanese ruling class.

Among Emperor Shomu's household effects still in store in the Shoso-in, there are fragments of two belt girdles which must have come from China as gifts. One of these girdles was made of moleskin, lacquered black and fastened with a silver buckle. Originally attached to the belt were a series of rhinoceros horn plaques of which ten still exist that were attached to the belt by gilt nails. Similar belt girdles are known to have been worn during the Tang dynasty by high officials such as the Prime Minister; whilst in the year 710 it was recorded that 'for imperial audiences and state banquets, the first and second rank of officials are permitted to wear carved rhinoceros horn or striped rhinoceros horn.'<sup>11</sup> Arab writers later confirmed that rhinoceros horn belts continued to be worn in China. One wrote:

With the help of leather straps, girdles are made of these horns on the model of gold and silver ornaments. The Emperors and grandees of China value this adornment above everything else so that they pay as much as two or even four thousand dinar. The clasps are of gold, and the whole is of an extraordinary beauty and solidity. Sometimes one applies different inlays of precious stones with long, gold nails.<sup>12</sup>

It seems that not only was Emperor Shomu's leather belt decorated with square and elliptical pieces, but he also hung small rhinoceros horn ornaments from the belt by cords. One such ornament is in the form of a miniature horn, around 8 centimetres long which has a wooden lid carved in a floral design.<sup>13</sup> The container, although carved of rhinoceros horn, looks much more like the horn of a buffalo. Two small fish pendants carved from rhinoceros horn and only 3.5

centimetres long were each suspended from a belt by cords attached to a silver ring which pierces the mouth of the fish. The pendants are most probably magic amulets, for it was believed by one Chinese philosopher writing in the early fourth century that 'if a man carries a small piece of rhinoceros horn carved in the shape of a fish in his mouth, he can pass both through and under water.'<sup>14</sup>

It need hardly be said that the pendants hanging from the studded belt were probably considered of only minor magical efficacy as compared with the greater protection afforded by wearing the rhinoceros horn belt itself. There is no doubt whatsoever that during the Tang dynasty rhinoceros horn objects were not only immensely valuable in terms of monetary cost, but even more precious in terms of the protection they gave to their owner against all kinds of human disaster. Above all, of course, the belts were valued for their magical properties against death — in other words, as a means of achieving everlasting life.

According to the original Deed of Gift dated 756 which lists all the items donated to Todaiji Temple at Nara by Empress Komyo, the rhinoceros horn belt described above originally had six small knives attached to it, of which only two are still in the Shoso-in collection.<sup>15</sup> These knives each have a rhinoceros horn hilt, as do several other knives still in the Shoso-in that do not form part of Emperor Shomu's collection. In addition, there are other small knives with rhinoceros horn scabbards.

Also described in the catalogue of the Shoso-in is a group of Buddhist *nyoi* sceptres, four of which are partly made from rhinoceros horn, and a foot-rule or measuring stick which looks remarkably like a modern ruler.<sup>16</sup> The *nyoi* or 'wish-fulfilling' wands with curved tips were held by Buddhist priests in a dignified manner whilst expounding the holy scriptures.

There are four cups made from rhinoceros horn at present stored in the Shoso-in, although, as Soame Jenyns points out, only one of these tallies with the description of the cups given in the original Deed of Gift. Even so, since these pieces are our earliest evidence for the types and shapes of early rhinoceros horn drinking cups, they remain of paramount importance to any study of the subject and will be described more fully in Part II Chapter 3.

We have to return to literary sources for indisputable evidence of rhinoceros horn carving in the succeeding Song and Yuan dynasties. For, although there do exist some carvings which carry the seal of the penultimate ruler of the Northern Song dynasty, it is always possible that the seals were added at a later date. We do not, as in the case of the Shoso-in pieces, have a surviving Deed of Gift which gives the carvings a definitive *post ante quem* date.

The evidence we have is in the form of a short passage in the chronicles that were written by official historians shortly after the fall of the Yuan dynasty in 1368. The writer states that a special workshop was established for workers of carvings in ivory and rhinoceros horn which produced 'couches, tables, implements and girdle ornaments inlaid with ivory or rhinoceros horn for use in the imperial household.'<sup>17</sup>

Then again, although the above passage fails to mention that the imperial workshop produced rhinoceros horn cups in addition to girdle ornaments, we may infer that this was the case from a different text which states that 'in the year

1291 the Emperor (Kublai Khan) presented a rhinoceros horn goblet together with a jade goblet, to a Korean prince as a mark of his esteem.<sup>18</sup> Gifts such as these would have been carved in the imperial workshop by master craftsmen employed by the royal household. It is worth noting that an official was appointed as head of the imperial workshop for rhinoceros and ivory carvers in 1283. He had received a further assistant by 1288, by which time there was a force of 150 craftsmen at work.

We do not know what happened to the rhinoceros horn and ivory workshop during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) for our next reference to the existence of an imperial workshop does not occur until the succeeding Qing dynasty. In the year 1680 it is recorded that the Emperor Kangxi of the Qing dynasty established a series of craft workshops in the Forbidden City in Beijing. These workshops, of which twenty-seven are listed, were set up to manufacture all kinds of works of art for the imperial household, items such as jewellery, armour, watches, enamelling and printed books. The finest craftsmen were summoned to court to staff these workshops and the whole project was administered by the Bureau of Works. The official list of imperial workshops does not, in fact, include an atelier for the production of rhinoceros horn carvings. Even so, there exists a second piece of evidence in the form of another literary source, which makes it clear that rhinoceros horn carving was being carried out in the imperial workshops during Kangxi's reign. The text is a biography of a particular carver named You who came from Wuxi in Jiangsu province. The biography states 'he was summoned to court in the middle of the Kangxi period.'<sup>19</sup> The Kangxi Emperor reigned from 1662 to 1722, so the date fits exactly. The career of this particular carver is discussed in detail in Part II Chapter 1.

The fact that rhinoceros horn carving was being carried out in quantity during the Ming and Qing dynasties is beyond dispute for, in addition to the ample evidence in the form of extant and dated carvings, we know that trade reports written in the early seventeenth century prove that rhinoceros horn carving was a flourishing industry in south China.<sup>20</sup> What is of interest is the type of horn that was being used to make these carvings and, as a corollary, the value being placed upon them.

## Trading in Horn

Even at a time when the rhinoceros was still to be found within the borders of China, the animal must have been so difficult to hunt, and the number of horns obtained so few, that gifts of carvings must have been highly valued by early rulers. Before the first Emperor Qin Shihuang unified the country in the third century BCE and China became one huge Kingdom, it was separated into many different states that were each ruled by a different King. In the fourth century BCE, during the period known as the 'Warring States' when the whole country was in continual conflict, we have our first literary reference to the practice of sending rhinoceros horn as a gift. It is recorded that in the year 311 BCE the King



of Yue sent three hundred boats, five hundred thousand arrows, elephant tusks and rhinoceros horns to the King of Wei.<sup>21</sup> Yue, which is now known as South-East China and North Vietnam, is the same area into which Qin Shihuang was to send his armies to hunt for rhinoceros horn a hundred years later. Even in 311 BCE, therefore, we can assume that the horns were being used both as drinking cups and also for the making of small luxury articles.

Trade in horns began as an exchange of gifts and gradually extended into what became euphemistically known as a 'tribute'. After the unification of the Empire in the third century BCE, China's power and influence expanded rapidly into the outlying border regions. The peoples who came under her influence were expected to regularly submit to the Chinese court by sending representatives to the capital with quantities of local merchandise and rarities which were carefully noted down by the Chinese. In exchange, after the 'tribute' had been graciously accepted by the Chinese rulers, the missions would return home laden with Chinese goods, especially silks, which were likely to be of much higher intrinsic value than the original gift or 'tribute'.

By the Tang dynasty (618–907) the 'tribute' system was thoroughly established. Articles of exceptional rarity and value were regularly sent to court from the regions where they were produced and, in return, these regions received 'gifts' at the court's discretion. It is well documented that not only did 'tribute' arrive at the capital from within the provinces of China, but was also brought in by foreign merchants from far outside China's borders.<sup>22</sup> It seems that the Tang dynasty rulers were particularly interested in foreign exotica such as pearls, furs, elephant tusks and kingfisher feathers. In return for these precious objects, the foreign emissaries would receive precious silks and other goods.

It is recorded that rhinoceros horns, considered to be of special value, were also transported back to the capital by Chinese-born administrators who had been sent on tours of duty to the outlying regions in order to report on local affairs. Smuggling was practised on a large scale during the late Tang dynasty if we are to believe the evidence of a report contained in the official Tang histories. For it seems that in the year 771 the governor of Canton had occasion to search his retainers and found rhinoceros horns hidden amongst their baggage. The governor is said to have 'thrown these horns into the river'.<sup>23</sup>

Since the south-east ports of China, such as Amoy, were already very busy during the late Tang dynasty, one cannot help wondering whether the servants of the governor of Canton had purchased horns from the crews of trading vessels. It is known that horns arrived by sea from a text which states 'the commodities of the outer nations arrive daily: pearls and aromatics, rhinoceros horn and elephant tusks, tortoise shell and curious objects — these overflow into the Middle Kingdom beyond the possibility of use'.<sup>24</sup>

It was not just the horns of the dead rhinoceros that were sent to China in the form of tribute. Live animals too are known to have reached the Chinese court. One such animal, which arrived at the capital city of Chang'an (modern-day Xi'an) in the year 796, was so highly prized that the Emperor arranged for it to be housed in special quarters in the Shanglin Palace with its own official keeper to care for it. We do not know which of the three Asiatic species it was but, from the

evidence of the poem written to commemorate this particular beast after it died of cold a year later, can guess that it was a Javan or Sumatran animal which would have been sent from the south:

The birthplace of the tame rhinoceros is in the heat of the southern quarter  
Where there is no white dew in autumn or snow in winter.

That the rhinoceros which died in the Shanglin Palace in 797 was 'tame' is particularly interesting, for there is clear evidence that tame rhinoceros were known in China as early as the third century BCE. This evidence does not come from an historical text but from the existence of large bronze ritual vessels cast in the shape of a rhinoceros. These vessels, called *zun*, always have an opening in the centre of the back to reveal a hollow recess inside the body which contained wine. Picture 8 shows an example of the type which has two horns and is clearly modelled from life. This rhinoceros must have been tamed, for between its front and hind legs there is a wide girthband to hold a saddle in place on its back. It is the saddle which lifts up and down as a flap covering the wine. The two horns of the animal are well developed showing that this was a mature rhinoceros, and the artist who modelled the beast paid such attention to detail that even the broad 'skirts' which surround the Sumatran horns are clearly visible. There is no question but that the animal was modelled from life, even though the body has been lightly decorated all over its skin surface with a pattern of abstract design. In reality, the skin of the Sumatran rhinoceros resembles the appearance of a large hairy pig.

This bronze wine container, now the emblem of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, is extremely important to our knowledge of the early rhinoceros in China, since it seems to be the earliest example of a live rhinoceros being used as a model by Chinese artisans. Here is our proof that as long ago as 1000 BC the Chinese were not only familiar with the animal but already associated it in their minds with wine.

When and how the horns of the two African species of rhinoceros first reached China is the subject of some controversy. There are, of course, two routes by which the African horns could have reached China. First, overland with the foreign merchants who the Chinese court preferred to believe were offering 'tribute' to the Chinese Emperor. Tang dynasty literature cites many examples of rhinoceros horn arriving as tribute, but of course the species of horn they brought is unknown.

The second route by which rhinoceros horn reached China was by sea. It is known that by the seventeenth century large quantities of African horn were being shipped into China through the south-east coastal ports, but the question of when this trade began and how much was imported is extremely uncertain. The first textual evidence we have for the existence of African horn in ancient China is the existence of a small handbook for traders to India and China written in the first century by an Egyptian Greek who says that 'rhinoceros horns were one of the chief exports from four ports on the East African coast'.<sup>25</sup> The ports listed are modern Massawa on the Red Sea, Bandar Hais in Northern Somaliland, Ras Hantara, and Rhapta which is probably either Bagomoyo or Dar-es-Salaam.



8 (above)  
 Chinese bronze wine  
 container in the shape of  
 a Sumatran rhinoceros.  
 13th–11th cent. BCE  
 H. 21.5 L. 37.5 cms  
*Avery Brundage Collection,  
 Asian Art Museum,  
 San Francisco*

There is no reason to suppose that the trade in African horn did not continue through the first millennium, since in the year 1226 the Commissioner for Foreign Trade in Fujian province reported that African as well as Asian horns were being imported through the Fujian ports. Discussing the products of the Berbera Coast (nowadays known as Somalia) he says that there are 'rhinoceros horns of over ten catties in weight'.<sup>26</sup>

By the Ming dynasty, large quantities of African horn were being imported into the south-east coastal ports of China and the value of these horns depended on two attributes: weight and patterning. Since African horns are so much larger than Asiatic horns the African horns would have been preferred. The most desirable type of horn, therefore, would be large and heavy with a light and dark patterning. The local gazetteer of Zhangzhou prefecture in Fujian province states that in the year 1615 the authorities distinguished between patterned white horn and black horn, taxing the former at almost three times the rate of the latter.

I had long been puzzled how the customs authorities of the Ming dynasty could grade the various horns for tax purposes without first stripping off the protective outer sheath known as bark. The answer to this question came in 1988, when I was invited to examine a trunkful of twenty-five African Black rhinoceros horns recently arrived at the Museum of Natural History in Paris. The horns had been taken from animals shot by poachers and subsequently seized by the customs authorities. Of the twenty-five horns thirteen had black cores whilst twelve were of a uniformly dirty, pale-yellow colour, indicating that no black core

was present. It is clear, therefore, that it was not necessary for the Chinese customs authorities to strip off the bark from imported horns in order to assess their value. The patterning effect of black against a pale background would have been visible at a glance and even these patterns varied from a small, round, central black mark to a large, wide-spreading mark sometimes with smaller spots of black at the periphery. Since I had never previously seen this black and white effect in the numerous museum specimens I had examined, I can only assume that the surface of the horn base loses its two-toned appearance as it dries out.

This black patterning which occurs on some rhinoceros horns has been of value since at least the Tang dynasty, for we learn that:

If the specks are deep in colour the horn is suitable for making into plaques for girdle ornaments. If the specks are scattered here and there, and light in colour, the horn can be made only into bowls and dishes.<sup>27</sup>

An Arab writer who died in 956 described the magnificence of these girdle ornaments and went on to say ‘the emperors and grandees of China value them above everything else, so that they pay as much as two and even four thousand dinars.’<sup>28</sup> Yet the huge prices paid for rhinoceros horn were soon to fall sharply, for it seems that at the end of the tenth century a royal decree was issued which abolished the custom of wearing rhinoceros horn belts.<sup>29</sup> No doubt the Emperor was alarmed by the fact that the material had become, weight for weight, far more expensive than gold. As a result of the sudden fall in demand the price of horn dropped until its value was equal to or even less than that of gold.

Although some African horn was being imported to China during the Ming dynasty, I cannot agree with Soame Jenyns’ opinion that ‘the bulk of Ming and Qing rhinoceros horn cups were made of African and not Asiatic horn.’<sup>30</sup> Rather I would say that during the Ming dynasty cups were mostly carved from Asiatic horns. It is only from the late eighteenth century onwards that large numbers of cups seem to have been made from African horn.

One reason for the preponderance of African horns during the latter part of the Qing dynasty could be that they had become much cheaper than those from Indochina. Writing in 1863, the author of *The Chinese Commercial Guide* states that horns from Siam and Cochinchina fetched three hundred dollars each, whilst horns from India, Sumatra and South Africa fetched thirty dollars or more as they were considered to be an ‘inferior sort’.<sup>31</sup> The ‘best sort’, that is those from Siam and Cochinchina, are likely to have been Javan horns.

The importing of rhinoceros horns for use as carvings appears to have ended sometime during the late nineteenth century when the type of carving seen on full-tip African horns, sometimes described as ‘Canton carvings’, ceased. I am not aware of any carvings made during the twentieth century in China, although there must presumably be some small seals made of the material. This does not mean to say that the importation of rhinoceros horn has ceased, since, for the last thousand years at a conservative estimate, the Chinese have customarily used rhinoceros horn powder as medicine to reduce fever.

## The Impact of Chinese Carvings in Europe

Even though I have come across several examples of rhinoceros horn carvings that were made in Europe, I have made no attempt as yet to delve into the general history of this craft.<sup>10</sup> Instead, this chapter will concern itself with a group of European horn carvings that were almost certainly produced as a direct result of contact with Chinese carvings.

It is now generally accepted that the legend of the unicorn, so widely prevalent throughout Europe, especially during the medieval period, is founded on superstitions concerning the magical properties of rhinoceros horn. Tales concerning the powers of the horn of the Asian rhinoceros — the one-horned Indian and Javan species — that were widely accepted in India and the Far East, seem gradually to have spread further and further westwards as they were told and retold by travellers and merchants. By the time these travellers' tales had arrived in Europe, even as early as Roman times,<sup>11</sup> they had become transformed into stories of a fabulous one-horned beast whose horn was able to detect poison, heal wounds and perform other magical feats.

It was not, however, until the early years of the sixteenth century that a living one-horned rhinoceros was brought to Europe. The first living rhinoceros — which was of the Indian species — arrived as a gift to King Manuel of Portugal in the year 1515, and as can be imagined, created a sensation.<sup>12</sup> People flocked to see this strange beast with its armour-like body and single horn rising from its snout in exactly the same way as the horn of the unicorn. Working from a drawing and description of the animal sent to him from Portugal, the German artist Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) made a detailed drawing in which the rhinoceros is shown with a short hairy tail, scaly legs, armour-clad body, and two horns. One of the horns rises up from the snout as it does in life, but Dürer drew a second smaller horn on the neck of the beast. The woodcut made from Dürer's largely imaginary drawing proved so popular that for more than two centuries this strange and wonderful creature became a favourite subject for artists throughout Europe.

Unfortunately we do not know at what period rhinoceros horn, or vessels carved of rhinoceros horn, were first brought to Europe. The first acceptable written evidence occurs at the end of the sixteenth century when we learn that 'a vessel made of rhinoceros-bone, ornamented with silver, most artfully and prettily made'<sup>13</sup> was presented to the Governor of Portugal by a group of Japanese Christians. This group had travelled from Japan to Europe in a Portuguese ship, calling on the way at various Portuguese settlements in Asia. It is possible, therefore, that the rhinoceros horn vessel they had with them had been fitted with silver mounts by a craftsman in one of these Asian settlements. The Christians visited several places in southern Europe between the years 1584 and 1586.

Just a few years later, in 1601, it is recorded that '*Un corno di rinoceronte*' was one of the many rare and precious articles taken to Beijing by the Jesuit missionary Father Matteo Ricci<sup>14</sup>. It is ironic that Father Ricci must have believed that he was presenting an article of extreme rarity and value as a gift to the Chinese Emperor. He no doubt thought that the horn was something the Emperor would never previously have seen, as was the case with the musical instrument, glass prisms and breviaries that were also in this group of gifts. He cannot possibly have realized that this rhinoceros horn — which had been sent out from Europe in

385 (right)

A cup decorated with magnolia blossom and buds. The lip and base of the cup are mounted in an elaborate gold filigree so as to transform it into a stem cup. See 338 for the back of the cup.

H. 9.0 W. 17.5 cms

*Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (3757)*



1601 — was already a familiar object to the Wanli Emperor, and neither can Ricci have known that the superstitious beliefs in the special powers of the rhinoceros horn that were then current in Europe had originated more than a thousand years previously in China.

It was during the late sixteenth century that European interest in all things Chinese grew into a craze for importing every kind of Chinese decorative art. Among the many different types of article brought to Europe by sea were porcelains, silks, enamels, lacquerware, jade, ivory and hardwood furniture, to mention just a few. In addition to this list we must add a small number of carved rhinoceros horn cups. These cups, whether originally made to satisfy the Chinese market or else especially commissioned by European traders for members of the European nobility, found their way into the ‘cabinets of curiosities’ which housed the collections of exotica that became so fashionable at that time.<sup>15</sup>

According to an Inventory compiled between the years 1607 and 1611, the Emperor of Germany Rudolf II (1552–1612) had in his possession a total of thirteen ‘rhinoceros horn vessels’, nearly all of which are stated to have been mounted in gold, silver or silver-gilt. A group of these carvings is discussed in Part II Chapter 3 under late Ming (see 336 to 342), though it must be noted that 341 is in fact made of buffalo horn not rhinoceros horn.

One of the finest Chinese carvings in Rudolf II’s collection is shown in 385, which is the reverse side of 338. This cup, which must have been produced by a Chinese carver in the earlier part of the sixteenth century, is made from an Asian

horn which has been carved into the shape of a magnolia blossom and decorated over its whole exterior with magnolia flowers, buds and branches. Both the handle and the stand on which the cup sits are composed of interweaving magnolia branches. Why, then, did Emperor Rudolf II go to the additional expense of setting his rhinoceros horn cup on a gold filigree stand and protecting the lip with a gold filigree mount? The first answer is that the cost of the gold mount would have paled into insignificance when compared to the money he must have paid to obtain this cup. The gold mount is not only to give added protection against damage, but also to demonstrate the very high value placed on the rhinoceros horn cup. Emperor Rudolf II must have been fully aware that rhinoceros horn cups such as this would, so he believed, detect the presence of poison. This particular superstition is thought to have been introduced by Arab doctors to Europe around the thirteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

The magnolia cup illustrated in 385 may usefully be compared with the rhinoceros horn stem cup in 386. It seems to me that the stem cup was carved by a European craftsman who has probably borrowed the idea of an all-over design of branches from the type of Chinese carved cup already in Europe and exemplified by the one shown in 385. Three more examples of Chinese carvings which have an all-over design of branches are illustrated in 336, 337 and 340. Whilst the Chinese carvers have used the magnolia branches in a very free-flowing and naturalistic manner, the European carver of the stem-cup in Emperor Rudolf's collection has arranged the pruned branches so that they form a sort of grille through which we can see a number of facial masks, butterflies, and



386 (above)  
A stem cup mounted in silver gilt.  
H. 49.7 w. 27.5 cms  
*Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (3709)*



387 (left)  
A cup decorated with grapes and vine leaves. Mounted on a silver filigree stand. H. 12.7 w. 14.6 cms  
*Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (3739)*

388 (right)  
 A cup mounted in silver-gilt showing a European figure opposite the handle.  
 H. 17.1 W. 10.8 cms  
*Collection Thyssen-Bornemisza, Lugano, Switzerland*



insects which are carved in low relief. The stem of the cup is formed of more high-relief carving of branches which part to show two animal heads. An in-depth study of the symbolic meaning of the various motifs on this carving would, I am sure, reveal much more of its hidden message.

A third example from Rudolf II's collection is illustrated in 387. As the handle-less cup cannot stand upright of its own accord, it must have been the carver's intention from the outset to embellish the Asian rhinoceros horn with a silver stand. On the basis of the style of silver mount, this elaborate work has been dated to the year 1600. Like the cup shown in 386, this grape-decorated cup seems to me to have been made by a European carver who saw a Chinese carving decorated with grapes and leaves. This is a cup made for drinking wine and the grape and leaf motif serves as emphasis. It was believed that if the wine had been poisoned, then the magical properties of the rhinoceros horn would cause the liquid to either bubble or smoke.<sup>17</sup> This belief seems to have continued from the twelfth century until the mid-eighteenth century or even longer. Writing in 1763, an Englishman named Dr Brookes wrote, 'when the wine is poured therein it will rise, ferment and seem to boil; but when mixed with poison it cleaves in two.'<sup>18</sup>

In Part II.3 on page 236 whilst discussing a mounted cup in the Collection Thyssen-Bornemisza, Lugano, I pointed out the difficulty of deciding whether the carving was made in Europe or in China since, although the landscape design is typically Chinese in technique, there is a European figure in relief (see 388). The type of hat worn by the soldier is of a special type known as a



*morian* — which indicates that the man may be either of Spanish or Portuguese nationality. In his left hand he is grasping a pennant, the handle of which is broken off below his wrist. Is it possible that a Chinese carver could have been commissioned by a Portuguese merchant to carve this piece in European style? Or was the entire carving made in Europe using elements of the Chinese landscape in parts of the design? A similar problem is presented by the rhinoceros horn full-tip cup, illustrated in 389.

Although this carving shows no signs of having previously been mounted on a precious metal stand, originally there must have been some method whereby the cup stood upright. The European connection is clearly visible in the form of a coat of arms (the ownership of which has not been traced beyond the fact that it is certainly Spanish) positioned in the midst of an otherwise all-over design of animals in a rocky landscape. When I first examined this cup some twenty years ago I decided that it was of European workmanship, but recently I have changed my mind. The reasoning behind this change lies in the technique which is clearly visible in the illustration (see 389) in which a narrow line incised just below the top of the rocks is visible. Referring back to the dating of late Ming carvings, I have pointed out that this special technique occurs repeatedly in Chinese rhinoceros horn cups of that period and several examples are illustrated throughout this book. It is my belief, therefore, that this cup was made in China as a commission from a member of the Spanish nobility whose arms it bears. The coat of arms would have been copied onto the horn by the Chinese craftsman using a diagram provided by the person who commissioned it, in just the same way as armorial



389 (left)  
A carving on a full-tip  
Asian horn showing  
animals in a rocky  
landscape and an  
armorial bearing.  
H. 16.44 w. 16.2 cms  
*Kunsthistorisches Museum,  
Vienna (3742)*

390 (right)

A rhinoceros horn bowl decorated with leaves. Mounted on a gold stem and stand and with a gold cover made in Spain around 1600.

H. 15.2 w. 18.0 cms

*Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (3764)*



crests were placed on sets of porcelain commissioned in Canton for the European aristocracy.

Also from this collection of Emperor Rudolf II comes the rhinoceros horn bowl containing a bezoar stone illustrated in 390. Here again I am unable to make up my mind whether this beautifully proportioned carving was made in China or in Europe, even though the gold mount and cover are of Spanish workmanship from around the year 1600. The problem lies in identifying the leaves with which the bowl is decorated. Whilst some authorities believe that the leaves are those of the acanthus which would tend to indicate a European carver, there are those who believe that the leaves are of the chrysanthemum, which would certainly indicate a Chinese carver since the chrysanthemum was not known in Europe at the time the gold mount was manufactured.

The difficulty of deciding whether several of the cups illustrated above were made in China or in Europe merely serves to show that members of the European nobility in the late sixteenth century were almost certainly unable to differentiate between the two. It would be surprising indeed if European carvers did not try to pass off their own work as that of Chinese carvers when one considers the huge sums of money that are said to have changed hands for the purchase of the oriental carvings. Emperor Rudolf II, it will be noted, went to the expense of mounting not only genuine Chinese carved cups but also European-made carvings of rhinoceros horn, as well as buffalo horn cups carved in China, in order to imitate the more expensive material.

In addition to the wine cups described above, there is another small group of carvings made in Europe which were influenced by Chinese beliefs and practices. Rumours of the medicinal uses of rhinoceros horn had undoubtedly reached Europe by the sixteenth century, almost certainly spread by merchants trading in China who would have witnessed the widespread use in that country of rhinoceros horn powder as a treatment for fever and other ailments. How, otherwise, can we explain the fact that a rhinoceros forms part of the armorial bearings of the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries of London? The original blazon of arms, dated 1617, depicts an Asian rhinoceros clearly copied from the Dürer woodcut, which surely indicates that its horn was perceived as possessing special medicinal and anti-toxic properties. Following from this, we can put an early date on the remarkable little mortar from the collection of Mr Gerard Levy with its Greek inscription reading 'Hippocratos' and two snakes (see 391). I suggest that the word Hippocratos in Greek lettering was added later in Europe at the same time as the two snakes whose heads point to the inscription.

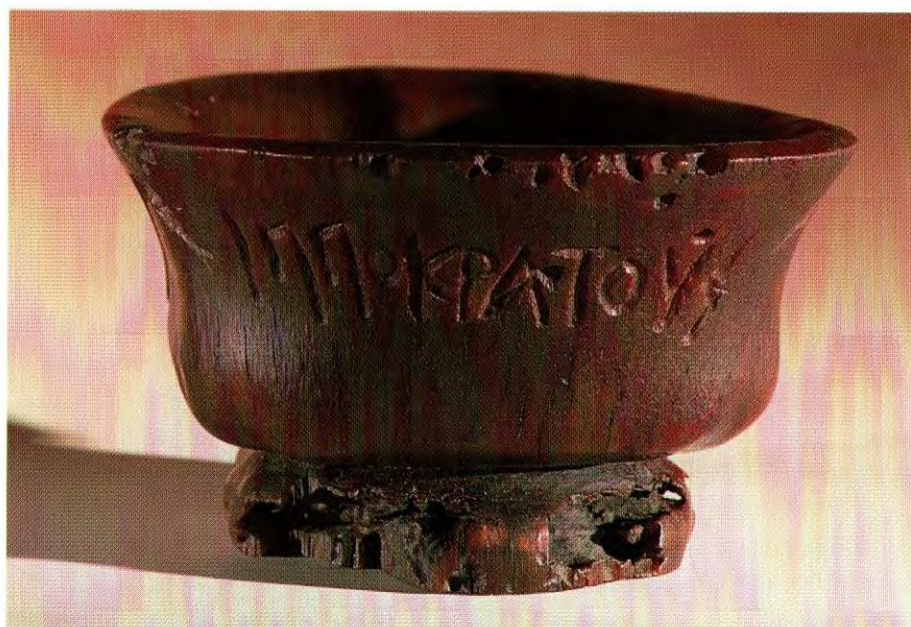
I personally lean to the view that this bowl-shaped carving arrived in Europe from China and was transformed from a wine cup into a medicine receptacle. It would, of course, have been used with a pestle for the grinding of herbs and other medicinal compounds. For the sake of comparison, however, I also illustrate a much larger vessel, which I believe also to be a mortar, which was almost certainly made in Europe. This mortar (see 392), is of undyed horn which shows obvious marks of having been turned on a wheel.

Since the main focus of this book is concerned with the art of rhinoceros horn carving in China, I have dealt only briefly with the fascinating subject of the interrelationship between rhinoceros horn carvings made in China and those made by European carvers. Yet even this short chapter will, I hope, give rise to a much needed longer study of the subject by a specialist in European carving.



391 (below)  
A rhinoceros horn mortar with the word Hippocratos incised in large Greek letters  
H. 5.5 w. 3.2 cms  
*Gerard Levy Collection, Paris*

392 (above)  
Rhinoceros horn mortar made in Europe.  
H. 18.0 w. 12.5 cms  
*Gerard Levy Collection, Paris*



## Carving in Central and South Asia

Little is known about the rhinoceros horn carving in the Himalayan region of Central Asia other than a small group of carvings in the form of bowls, all of which are roughly similar in shape and decoration. All the bowls are carved from the horns of the Sumatran rhinoceros, easily identifiable by its pointed ovoid shape, and they vary considerably in size; the smallest I have seen measures only 6 centimetres across the widest part of the bowl. It is obvious from the shallow sides of all the bowls that the carvers have deliberately cut away a portion of the base of the horn so that they would be left with the thicker wall section nearest to the 'well' of the horn. Possibly this has been done so that the finished bowls resemble metal bowls more closely.

Inside the bowls the carver has taken advantage of the raised area at the rounded end of the horn (which corresponds to the Asiatic groove on the exterior) to carve a small figure. The Hindu deity Vishnu, shown in 393, is bare chested with crown and body ornaments. In his left hand he holds aloft a club whilst his right hand is raised with palm outwards to show reassurance. In all the bowls of this group that I have seen Vishnu is placed on a ledge and surrounded by a frame in the manner of the carved friezes of Buddhist rock temples, or the small votive portable shrines used by travellers or monks of this region.

Whilst most of the figure carving in this group of bowls is extremely crude the carving of the decoration of the bowl shown in 393 is of a much higher standard than usual. The crispness of the carving enables a clear identification of the god Vishnu to be made especially since the outer surface of the bowl is carved with a continuous band of cartouches each of which represent Vishnu in one of his principal incarnations (see 394). These symbolize the various transformations undergone by Vishnu in order to restore universal harmony to the world and are as follows: a fish, a tortoise, a boar, a man-lion, a dwarf, Rama with an axe, Rama the hero of the *Ramayana*, Krishna's brother Balarama, the Buddha (as a false prophet) and Kalkin, who appears in horse-headed form. Not all the exteriors of bowls in this group are decorated with scenes of Vishnu, which is decorated with a continuous band of lotus leaves.

Pictures 393, 394, 395 and 396 indicate the considerable difference in quality found in these carvings whose origin has long been disputed, some saying that they were carved in Tibet, others that they were made in Nepal. Nepal has always seemed the more likely place of origin due to the fact that Vishnu, the deity portrayed in these carvings, is the most popular of the Hindu deities worshipped in that country. Moreover, in 1911, the King of Nepal who is himself considered to be an incarnation of Vishnu, presented such a bowl to King George V of Great Britain which is at present on loan to the Victoria & Albert Museum. The carving style is not of the highest quality and as far as I could determine the interior and exterior surfaces, though not the base, were once covered in some sort of paint which has left traces in all the crevices.

A further clue to the provenance of this group of carvings comes from a conversation which took place between the eminent rhinoceros conservationist Dr Esmond Bradley Martin and a Nepali carver named Ratna Lal Silpakar. This carver told Dr Martin that forty years ago he had been in the habit of carving cups decorated with motifs relating to the god Vishnu. Apparently he was able to



393 (above)  
An interior of a bowl  
showing the deity Vishnu.  
On the lip of the bowl is  
a serpent whose head is  
shown on the pointed  
end of the bowl.  
Maximum width 17.2 cms  
*Gerard Levy Collection, Paris*

394 (below)  
Exterior of bowl with a row  
of cartouches showing the  
principal incarnations of  
the god Vishnu.





395 (above left)  
Interior of a bowl carved from a Sumatran rhinoceros. The figure of Vishnu is at the rounded end. w. 9.0 cms  
*Gerard Arnhold Collection, Brazil*



396 (above right)  
Exterior of bowl showing band of lotus leaves and a plain flat base.

397 (opposite)  
A carving of The Green Tara depicted in Nepalese style.  
h. 9.2 w. 6.8 cms  
*Gerard Levy Collection, Paris*

carve nine cups a year and each carving took just over two weeks to make. This practice had been carried on by him until the Rana regime fell in 1951.<sup>19</sup> What is not known, however, is whether Ratna Lall Silpakar was following in the footsteps of a long-standing tradition of carvers of these bowls which may have stretched back several hundred years. At present we have no means of knowing when the bowls illustrated were carved, and nor do we know how many different carvers have practised the craft in Nepal.

The only three-dimensional figure carving in rhinoceros horn from the Himalayan regions that I have personally handled is a superb Green Tara in the collection of Mr Gerard Levy. The Green Tara is one of the female deities amongst the numerous gods and goddesses worshipped by followers of the type of Buddhism practised in Nepal and Tibet, called Lamaism. The figure shows the Green Tara in a Nepalese or even Indian style — with thin hips, special facial features and jewellery and head-ornaments typical of the region (see 397).

Approaching the question of figure carving in Tibet, we are on somewhat firmer ground since it is known that the craft was practised by the tenth Black Hat Lama of Tibet in the early seventeenth century. The biography of the tenth Karmapa Lama, who lived between 1604 and 1674, relates how he carved five statues from rhinoceros horn during a visit he made to the Tsurphu monastery, which is roughly seventy miles west of Lhasa. These figure statues are now among the most treasured possessions of the Karma-Kagyupa sect and are still preserved at the Rumtek Monastery in Sikkim. All five carvings are said to be partly gilded



398 (right)  
A carving with five  
bodhisattvas and the poet  
Milarepa on the exterior  
surface of an Asian horn.  
H. 19 w. 19 cms  
*Courtesy of Sotheby's*



and painted and are illustrated in a recent book giving the life histories of the sixteen successive incarnations of the Black Hat lineage.<sup>20</sup> From the evidence of the photos alone it must be said that the tenth Karmapa, whose name was Chos Ying Dorje, may have been a competent carver but he was certainly not a brilliant one. In addition I have recently learned from a Tibetan source that there is a possibility that the figures may in fact have been carved from horn other than rhinoceros, but without close examination it is extremely difficult to be sure.

A rather different type of Tibetan figure carving is shown in 398. This is a full-tip Asian rhinoceros horn that has been decorated on the outer surface with the figures of five bodhisattvas round the sides, each of which is shown riding on the back of an animal. Into the solid area at the tip end of the horn a niche has been carved which represents a cave where the figure of Milarepa, the most famous of the Kagyupa lamas, can be found. He was both a poet and an ascetic and lived between 1040 and 1123. The figure of Milarepa is shown sitting cross-legged at the front of the cave and wearing the light cotton robe which he wore at all times, even in the depths of the Tibetan winter. Above him is a smaller carving of Amitayus, the Buddha of eternal life.

Still in the Himalayan region of Central Asia, we come to a piece of carving which is said to have been made in Bhutan (see 399). The carving was apparently presented to the Tangu Monastery by the King of Bhutan's mother.

I have not, myself, handled the carving and find it difficult to identify the figure that is shown riding on an animal.





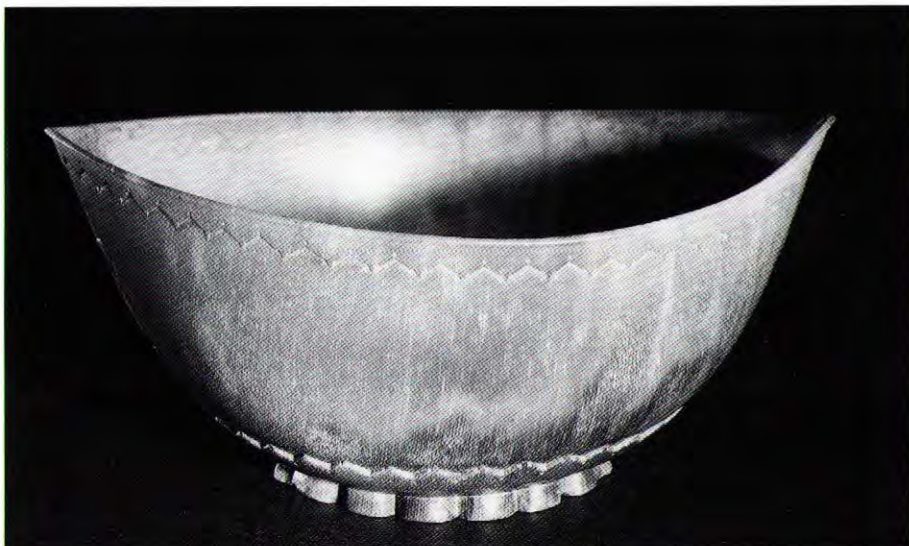
399 (left)  
A carving said to have been  
made in Bhutan.  
H. 4 w. 5.5 cms  
*Rietberg Museum, Zürich*

Picture 401 illustrates what may be a unique piece. It is a Buddha's tooth carved from solid rhinoceros horn. It is, of course, impossible to decide from which type of rhinoceros the tooth was carved, its date of carving, or even its place of manufacture. The only clue to its provenance is the fact that the tooth is supported in a silver mount which suggests Thai origin.

Finally, in this short chapter, we come to a rhinoceros horn drinking cup which appears to have been carved in North India (see 400). The boat-shaped cup was formerly in the possession of Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753) whose collection formed the basis of the British Museum collection. The carving itself is believed to have been made around the year 1525. In some quarters it is thought that this drinking cup once belonged to Emperor Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty of North India. In his diary, Emperor Babur wrote that during the year 1525–6 he had a drinking cup made from the horn of a rhinoceros. Furthermore, the specific word he used in his diary to describe the cup was *kishti* which means 'boat'.<sup>21</sup> Possibly, therefore, the British Museum cup is the one to which he refers.



400 (below)  
A drinking cup made in  
Mughal, India.  
W. 15.1 cms  
*Courtesy of The British  
Museum, London*



401 (above)  
A carving in the  
shape of a Buddha's  
tooth mounted in silver.  
H. 12.5 w. 7.7 cms  
*Gerard Levy Collection, Paris*

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