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Rhinoceros Horn Libation Cup

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Rhinoceros Horn Libation Cup

Abstract

On display in the “Wonders of Nature and Artifice” exhibit at Gettysburg College is an exquisitely carved Chinese rhinoceros horn cup decorated with many images of animals, from dragons to tortoises. The rhinoceros horn has been noted by the Chinese as early as the T’ang dynasty (618-907) to have magical properties, and it was believed that when a poisonous liquid was poured into a rhino horn, the horn would change colors to alert to the presence of poison. Due to these magical properties, rhinoceros horns have been regarded as especially valuable. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

rhinoceros, John H. Hampshire, Chinese art, Tang Dynasty, Qing Dynasty

Disciplines

Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | Fine Arts | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Industrial and Product Design | Intellectual History

Comments

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Original version online at <http://wonder-cabinet.sites.gettysburg.edu/2017/cabinet/rhinoceros-horn-libation-cup/>

Rhinoceros Horn Libation Cup

By Erin Catherine Harten



Rhinoceros Horn Carving from Gettysburg College Special Collections

Rhinoceros Horn Libation Cup, China, 1735-1799, Horn, 14.2 x 14.6 cm., Gift of John H. Hampshire, Special Collections and College Archives, Gettysburg College.



[Ornamental Rhino Horn](#) by [stjohn.smith](#) on [Sketchfab](#)

On display in the “Wonders of Nature and Artifice” exhibit at Gettysburg College is an exquisitely carved Chinese rhinoceros horn cup decorated with many images of animals, from dragons to tortoises.

The rhinoceros horn has been noted by the Chinese as early as the T’ang dynasty (618-907) to have magical properties, and it was believed that when a poisonous liquid was poured into a rhino horn, the horn would change colors to alert to the presence of poison.¹ Due to these magical properties, rhinoceros horns have been regarded as especially valuable.

Carving of the rhinoceros horn started as early as the T’ang dynasty primarily used as sacrificial cups and as drinking containers to use during ceremonies honoring ancestors.² Later, the pieces were mostly for decorative purposes.



Rhinoceros horn cup with eight Daoist immortals, Qing dynasty, late 18th-19th century, Metropolitan Museum of Art

The rhinoceros used to roam the valleys of China, but by the time of the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) the rhinoceros had vanished primarily due to human predation.³



One horned Asian rhinoceros
Dulal, Krish. Rhinoceros in Bardiya Nepal.

But by the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) during the height of rhinoceros horn carvings, the Chinese had established trade with Africa, giving them access to the horn of the African rhinoceros.⁴ The African rhinoceros has two horns that are substantially larger than that of the Asian. The piece on display here is most likely carved from an African rhinoceros horn.



African rhinoceros
[Max Pixel](#), public domain

This Chinese carving in rhinoceros horn was donated to Gettysburg College's Special Collections and Archives by Mr. John H. Hampshire on December 9, 1964. Mr. Hampshire was from Baltimore, Maryland and was an avid collector of Asian art, donating numerous pieces to the College.



John H. Hampshire, Special Collections at Gettysburg College

The horns were crafted during the Qing dynasty at the time of Qianlong's reign (1736-1795). Qianlong was heavily invested in the arts and was very influential in Chinese art conservation and collection.⁵ Qianlong, an avid poet, wrote poetry specifically devoted to the carved rhinoceros horn and had horns crafted specifically for his collection.⁶ The horns of this period have extremely intricate designs carved on them, and this rhino horn is a perfect example of the elaborate detail seen in rhinoceros carvings of this period.



Emperor Qianlong
Wikimedia Commons Public Domain

The horn shows animals, such as dragons and horses, surrounded by clouds and waves, resembling a mountain with the shape of the horn. In the Taoism belief system, mountains, like the one depicted on the carved horn, are the home of the immortals. This motif originated in the Han dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD).⁷



Photograph by Ana Georgetson



Photographs by Ana Georgetson

Dragons, like the one depicted on the handle of the cup or at the top of the mountain, are celestial beings that live with the immortals in the tops of the mountains.⁸ At the very top of the horn, a

beautiful dragon with piercing eyes forms the handle to represent the top of the mountain of immortality.



Dragon handle
Photograph by Ana Georgetson

Depicting this scene of nature on a rhinoceros horn is the perfect choice of a canvas. The Chinese were often known to bring nature indoors. Ornamental rocks, or Scholars' rocks brought nature closer and into the scholars' studios.² Similar to these Scholars' rocks, the rhinoceros horn brought its owner closer to nature.



Scholar's Rock Late Ming or early Qing dynasty, 17th-18th century, steatite
Exhibit in the Brooklyn Museum – Brooklyn, New York, USA. Public Domain

The collection of Chinese rhinoceros horns carvings in Europe likely started in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. One of the earliest rhinoceros horn carvings featured in a collection was the cups in the Hapsburg Collection curiosity cabinets of Archduke Ferdinand of Tyrol and Emperor Rudolf II.¹⁰ Below is a detail of a lion carving from one of these horns.



Hapsburg rhinoceros horn carving detail in Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, Austria, 1611.

The trade of rhinoceros horns has been illegal in China since 1993 and is illegal in the United States under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.¹¹ The art of rhinoceros horn carving fueled the poaching of rhinoceroses, leading to their destruction in China and endangerment throughout Africa. The trade and transportation of antique rhinoceros horn carvings is regulated through laws in both countries. Antique rhinoceros horn carvings are permitted to be sold and auctioned if for purely artistic intentions.¹²

The collection of Chinese rhinoceros carvings has long history in both China and Europe with the height of collection of the horn libation cups occurring from 1565 to the early 1700s.¹³ The Qianlong period cup to be on display at the Wonders of Nature and Artifice exhibition at Gettysburg College is a perfect example of a later carving done in the style of the original horns produced during the height of production.

Find the rhino horn in the Wonders of Nature and Artifice exhibit!



Photograph by Felicia Else

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