

THE ART OF RHINOCEROS HORN CARVING IN CHINA

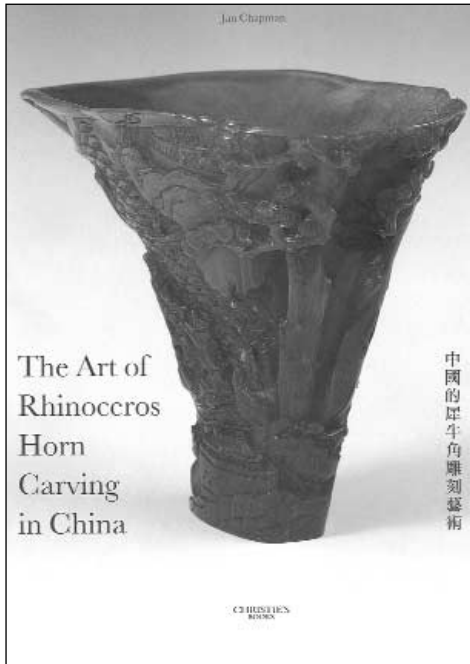
Jan Chapman

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Reviewed by Lucy Vigne
PO Box 24849
Nairobi, Kenya



Having been Far Eastern Curator of the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin for many years, Jan Chapman was able to study the museum's 219 rhino horn carvings, the world's largest known collection, as well as classify and catalogue carvings in other collections throughout the world. Her detailed research has resulted in a magnificent and important book, *The Art of Rhinoceros Horn Carving in China*. Flicking through its beautifully illustrated pages, you can almost feel the smooth texture of the carved and polished rhino horn objects; the quality of the pictures is superb. The aim of the book is to bring attention to this largely ignored Chinese art

form and elevate its status to that of other masterpieces carved in jade and ivory. The book is highly informative and written in an easy, personal style. It is the first of its kind and will be of fascination to art historians, lovers of Chinese art and of rhinos. They have played a unique role in China's cultural history, as the book explains. As a result of this work, Chapman has helped to save many antique rhino horn cups from being ground into powder for Chinese medicines, a sad development of the late 20th century, as described in the foreword by Esmond Bradley Martin.

An excellent introduction full of enticing pieces of information gives the novice a true grasp of the subject and beckons one to read further. Rhino horn is not agglutinated hair but long filaments of keratin packed closely together. The earliest written records refer to rhino horn used as wine cups when rhinos existed in the forests of China. *The Book of Songs*, written in 500 BC and attributed to Confucius, described rhino horn cups, filled with wine as libations for long life. Gradually magical legends grew about rhino horn and the unicorn, from which it was thought to come. But it was never used in China as an aphrodisiac, as Chapman hastens to point out. It was noted in 12th century European writings that poison would bubble and could be detected in a rhino horn cup. For this reason many rulers, such as Emperor Rudolf II of Germany (1522-1612), paid exorbitant prices for rhino horn drinking cups, although some in his collection have proved to be water buffalo horn imitations. In the Bronze Age 2,000 BC the Asian rhino horn cup shape was copied for making bronze wine goblets and could even have been the precursor of the wine glass shape.

The book has three parts, the first on rhinos and their horns, the second on rhino horn carvings, and the third on the impact and influence of rhino horn carving in China, Europe and Central Asia. Chapman gives an historical background with literary and archeological evidence of rhino horn carvings and trade. She then describes the five rhino species and the various shapes and structure of their horns, dealing with water buffalo horn as well. As few zoologists have writ-

ten on the subject, she had to research rhino horn shapes herself, learning that black rhino horn has a round base, white rhino horn a horse-shoe shaped base, that Asian horn tends to have a vertical groove and a splaying skirt, and other such details. She is now an expert at distinguishing the cups, although pointing out that in the future, improved microscopy and carbon-14 dating will more accurately be able to judge the age and type of the horn. The carvings are classified by their shapes. Most carvings are cups (defined as containers capable of holding liquid) and the type of cup shape varies according to the original rhino horn. One of Jan Chapman's favourites, and I agree, is a caryatid cup of a small Chinese boy holding aloft a large lotus leaf by its stalk. There are also carvings from the wall of the horn (used for making leaf-shaped cups), animal and human figures and other objects, such as snuff bottles, boxes for powdered incense, brush stands, ladles, swords and scabbards. Dress fasteners or toggles are rare, probably, Chapman thinks, as many are in collections where they have been mistaken for Japanese netsukes.

Part 2 first explains what we can learn from the carver's inscriptions although only 10% of the cups are inscribed and not usually with the dates or the carver's name, making the puzzle of dating them harder to solve. Rhino horn carvings are also classified by their surface decoration. Generally, the more complex the decoration the later the date of carving. A rare group of cups is undecorated. Half of all the pieces recorded are decorated with flora and fauna such as flowers, trees, fruits, dragons and the phoenix which are comprehensively listed and described. There is also figure decoration, both from the natural world (landscape scenes and historical or legendary events) and the supernatural world (demons, gods and immortals). Chapman then explains the dating of the carvings she has recorded. Tang dynasty (618-907) cups were plain, polished Sumatran horn. Towards the end of the Song dynasty (960-1279), inscriptions started. By the start of the Yuan dynasty (1280-

1368) the Imperial Household employed 150 craftsmen making furniture and ornaments for the palace. In the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), quantities of African horn were imported; the larger ones with light and dark patterning were the most desirable. Although Asian horns dominated the carving industry, African horn cups progressively increased throughout the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), perhaps because horns from Indochina were becoming rarer. Ming cups tend to be honey coloured while Qing cups were dyed mid-brown and by the late 19th century black, and had an increasingly busy composition.

Part 3 shows how rhino horn carvings influenced other types of Chinese decorative art such as the porcelain known as *blanc de chine*, ivory, jade, soapstone, wood, bamboo, silver and bronze which were sometimes carved into the identical shapes of rhino horn cups. Chapman goes on to describe the popularity of rhino horn carvings in Europe from the late 16th century, and how some were carved in the Himalayan region.

One wonders what effect rhino horn carving, the main focus of the book, had on rhino populations in different regions compared with the demand for horn for Chinese medicines historically and with human population expansion. I was also curious to know about the prices of rhino horn cups today. It would be interesting to learn where the cups that were destined for Chinese medicine are now and who has researched this. A follow-up report in *Pachyderm* would be appreciated.

The text could possibly have been set slightly higher on the page, and in a few places I was confused by the labelling in finding a diagram or picture (the diagram on page 253 seems to be missing altogether). An Appendix helpfully lists and describes the major public collections of rhino horn carvings. Jan Chapman's book is a work of art in itself and, with its wealth of information, will surely be a collector's item like the objects she so skilfully describes.