

'Sounding the horn': a survey of antique rhino horn at auction in 2017

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Introduction

It is currently legal to sell rhino horn antiques in the UK, provided the rhino horn pre-dates 3 March 1947 (the date defined in EU regulations for intra-EU trade of CITES specimens), and has been 'worked' i.e. has been altered from its original state and is of artistic merit. Export is only permitted by the EU on an exceptional basis, for example genuine artworks exchanged between reputable institutions, or for family heirlooms (APHA 2014). The law on elephant ivory antiques has been similar, but research on the UK trade in these antiques found post-1947 ivory available to buy (Two Million Tusks, 2017), leading the UK Government to conclude that this trade was detrimental to wild elephants. As the conservation issues for rhinos were similar, we examined the UK trade in rhino horn antiques to better understand whether this may also be detrimental to wild rhinos.

Methodology

We analysed all antique rhino horn items offered for sale in 2017 through UK auction houses, to answer the following questions: Can we be certain all auctioned rhino horn antiques were pre-1947 and 'worked'? Were CITES' regulations consistently flagged in the lot descriptions for potential buyers? Is the trade effectively regulated, and are suspect items appropriately investigated? Lastly, could the UK antiques trade be being used to launder modern rhino horn?

The 12-month survey followed UK auction house sales for which online bidding was also possible via at least one of four sales platforms.

The survey did not include items sold by antique dealers, antique shops or private sales, nor UK-based sales on the wider Internet. We identified individual items, described as 'definitely', 'probably' or 'possibly' rhino horn, and we documented how they were described, which auction houses offered them for sale, and the outcome. We did not purchase any items for testing, nor intervene in any of the sales.

Results

We identified 300 items, sold in 323 lots (some appeared more than once). We grouped these into 12 categories: walking sticks (made wholly or partly of rhino horn) were the most numerous (40%), followed by swords/daggers/knives (16%) and libation cups (11%), then much smaller numbers each of swagger sticks, knobkerries, carvings, jewellery, taxidermy (including three full trophy heads with original horns), boxes/containers, cups/goblets/bowls and miscellaneous items.

Twenty-five per cent of the lots were advertised without any assessment of their age, and age estimates, where provided, were generally given in very broad ranges. Higher-value lots were more likely to come with an age estimate, but there was no evidence of any radiocarbon dating to confirm the age of any item. In 89% of cases, the lots also came with no detailed provenance (history) that could have provided a more precise date and origin. Any estimates of age appear therefore to be based on visual assessment.

Eighty per cent of the 323 lots were described as 'definitely' rhino horn—20% as only possibly or probably so. However, no DNA testing appeared to have been undertaken to establish whether or not rhino horn was involved—this assessment was, again, based on visual assessment.

Two hundred and eighty-six lots were sold. The total value of the sale of the 242 lots, for which we were able to obtain the sale price, was £1,287,855. Libation cups (32 lots) were the highest-value items and accounted for 76% of this sum. Sale prices ranged from £30 to £65,000, the median sale price was £400, and 84 lots sold for less than £200: the bulk of rhino horn antiques were not high-value items. We estimate that auction houses earned commission of approximately £575,000 from these sales.

Rhino horn antiques were offered through 51 auction houses. Three of these were major sellers and auctioned 44% of all the lots; a further four houses auctioned another 24%. Thus 68% of all the lots were offered by just seven auction houses. Other auction houses sold small numbers of lots—32 houses sold just one or two in 2017. In 87% of cases, the lots were offered in the South of England (SE England, SW England and Greater London). The reasons for this are not known—it may be a function of where the bulk of UK auction houses are located, of greater affluence levels in the south of England, or an indication that the prime market for rhino horn artefacts is located in the south.

Four auction houses advertised some rhino horn lots in Mandarin (62 lots), and 17 houses stated the weight of the rhino horn element (58 lots).

Seventy-three per cent of all catalogue descriptions did not highlight CITES' export rules for rhino horn, and only half of the auction houses covered this in their statements of terms and conditions.

The number of lots offered per month showed a marked increase from September 2017. We are aware from on going monitoring that this upturn continued throughout 2018.

Concerns arising from our findings

SRI cannot be sure that all items offered for sale were pre-1947 as, to our knowledge, no radiocarbon dating (the only method to accurately detect horn age) was carried out. Eighty-nine per cent of all items were listed without any detailed provenance (history) and 25% with no age estimate at all. Similarly, it is unclear whether or not all items described as rhino horn were in fact made of rhino horn as, to our knowledge, no DNA-testing was apparently carried out, and

20% of all lots were described as only 'possibly' or 'probably' containing rhino horn. Proper vetting of rhino horn antiques is hindered by: the cost and complexity of having them radiocarbon dated or DNA tested; the rapid turnover of lots for auctions; and the lack of expertise in rhino horn antiques in all but a few of the auction houses involved.

Sixty-three per cent of auction houses offered only one or two rhino horn items in 2017; expertise (by auction house personnel) in identifying suspect items will be limited when so few rhino horn items are seen.

Based on auction catalogue photographs, all items could be defined as 'worked' but, in some cases, the working appeared minimal or crude.

CITES permit issues and export regulations were inconsistently flagged on auction houses' websites, sometimes not at all, meaning that buyers may be left unaware of these regulations, and auction houses can inadvertently support resale of rhino horn.

The fact that some auction houses are advertising lots in Mandarin, and/or stating the weight of the rhino horn in catalogue listings, suggests that particular markets are being targeted. Eighty-four of the 242 lots sold, for which the sale price is known, were sold for ≤£200, which is, potentially, substantially less than the 'grind-down' value of rhino horn. With a median sale price of £400, most of the items in our survey are vulnerable as a cheap source of supply for the illegal, commercial trade in powdered rhino horn.

Furthermore, professional associations such as the *Society of Fine Art Auctioneers and Valuers* and the *National Association of Valuers and Auctioneers* work hard to promote and improve best practice, but most of the auction houses (34 of the 51 surveyed) appear not to be members. This means that any stakeholder engagement on these issues must be on a one-to-one basis, and that reforms cannot be easily made uniform without regulation. Formal investigation of suspect items is hampered by lack of local experience, resources, professional input, technical back-up and time.

Conclusions and next steps

The Survey revealed worrying loopholes and trends that we believe render the UK antiques trade open to exploitation by those trafficking modern horn or cheap, older ground-down horn.

We make the following recommendations for short

and longer-term actions to close the identified loopholes in the system.

Further research and monitoring

A period of scientific testing (radiocarbon dating, and/or DNA testing as appropriate) of all suspect items referred to the police. Monitoring of the continued upturn in monthly sales and examination of the possible reasons for this. Further investigation as to why 87% of all lots offered are in the south of England. Ongoing monitoring of UK rhino horn antiques sales using the same methodology as was used in this Survey. Expanding this research to include sales through antiques dealers and shops; as well as research into buyers' motives for collecting particular types of rhino horn antiques.

Immediate 'best practice' improvements

All items should be accurately dated before sale, using radiocarbon dating methods, unless a reliable provenance is available. The age should be confirmed in catalogue adverts, along with the source of the evidence. Every listing should verify that the item is definitely 'rhino horn', whether via DNA-testing or a reliable provenance. The weight of the rhino horn item or component should not be stated.

Items highly unlikely to gain an export licence should not be advertised in Mandarin. CITES export regulations should be flagged in all adverts and described in detail in auction houses' Terms and Conditions. More guidance should be issued on best practice in trading procedures and in dealing with suspect items. Regular updates should be provided to auction houses about any suspect categories of items that may be circulating, for example recently carved bead necklaces, 'upcycled' items and inexpertly or minimally worked carvings.

Strengthening current controls

A 'Lifetime Passport' system should be put in place for every rhino horn antique offered for sale, with a full statement of provenance, and certificated proof of age and material. Taxidermy trophy rhino heads should be reclassified from 'worked' to 'unworked' artefacts, as the horn itself is 'unworked'.

Only a small number of auction houses, with proven experience, should be able to sell rhino horn antiques. *Again, SRI believes that it is desirable to create a pool of vendors with proven expertise in this field, who could work closely with wildlife trade regulators and enforcers.

Investment should be increased in the UK National Wildlife Crime Unit, and all local police forces should engage Wildlife Crime Officers. And finally, a UK-wide ban on the sale of rhino horn antiques should be considered, along the same lines as that implemented for elephant ivory through the Ivory Act (UK Parliament 2018).

We are heartened that, since our findings were published, the British Association of Dealers in Antiques (BADA) has called for a ban on the sale of most rhino horn antiques in the UK. Two major auction houses (Bonhams and Sotheby's) have also announced that they will stop selling rhino horn antiques worldwide; Christie's having previously done so.

We invite all stakeholders—auction houses, trade associations, policymakers, legislators, regulators, enforcers and other NGOs—to join in discussing our findings and recommendations so that we can ensure that rhinos in the wild are not put at risk by loopholes in UK antiques trade sales.

References

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