

# CHRISTIE'S 佳士得

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## Christie's Hong Kong to Offer an Important Private Collection of Rhinoceros Horn Carvings from the Songzhutang Collection, Part II



### *Important Chinese Rhinoceros Horn Carvings from the Songzhutang Collection, Part II*

Christie's Hong Kong  
May 31, 2010

**Hong Kong** – Following the success of *Important Chinese Rhinoceros Horn Carvings from the Songzhutang Collection Part I* sold in May 2008, Christie's Hong Kong is proud to offer a further selection of 30 magnificent rhinoceros horn carvings from *Part II* of the collection, 'The Pine and Bamboo Studio', on Monday, 31 May 2010. One of the finest known private collections, passionately assembled by a connoisseur over 30 years, this auction provides institutions and private collectors with a historic opportunity to obtain exceedingly fine, museum-quality, examples of this treasured and honoured art form. Unique in their designs and execution, the works illustrate a range of forms, motifs and techniques. The rich variety of subjects depicted comprise landscapes and figures, plants and insects, fish and birds, as well as scenes from daily life, plays on auspicious subjects, and themes taken from literary works of the time. Spanning the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, with estimates ranging from HK\$50,000/US\$6,500 to HK\$4,000,000/US\$520,000, the collection is expected to realise in excess of HK\$30,000,000/US\$3,900,000.

For centuries, rhinoceros horn carvings have been considered among the most valued of ancient Chinese works of art; combining great rarity, skill and beauty with socio-cultural and historic significance. Highly prized for medicinal and mystical powers, the horn material was extremely precious and expensive to obtain, making carvings such as the present examples very difficult to acquire and commissions rare. Native Chinese rhinoceroses were extinct by 500BC and the majority of surviving horns were special imports,

brought as exotic gifts from Africa, India, Java and Malaya and fashioned by Chinese craftsmen for emperors and the social elite. Today, surviving examples are scarce and highly sought-after, with a maximum of 4,000 works believed to exist. Christie's are pleased to provide this collection with an international sale platform that enables a wide audience to witness the beauty of this art form and to learn about its place in the history of China.



Leading highlights from the collection include themes which are seldom seen on rhinoceros horn carvings, such as an exceptionally rare, crisply carved, *'Hundred Boys'* libation cup, depicting boys occupied with various playful pursuits in a landscape scene (estimate: HK\$3,500,000-4,000,000/US\$450,000-520,000), dated to the late Ming dynasty, early 17<sup>th</sup> century, *illustrated left and page 1, top left*. As early as the Southern Song dynasty, the imagery of boys at play, set in a garden scene, became a favoured theme in paintings popularised by the Southern Song court artist, Su Hanchen, who was active during early 12<sup>th</sup> century. An example of Su Hanchen's painting is in the National Palace Museum collection, Taipei, entitled 'Boys at Play in an Autumn Garden.' The theme of 'a hundred boys' became symbolic of progeny and fulfillment of Confucian ideals in education, and the advancement of sons. As such, this type of pictorial image was propagated on a wide range of decorative objects throughout the late Ming to early Qing dynasties, including porcelain, jade, textile and lacquerware. Once part of the Fowler Museum Collection, California, this cup highlights the fine provenance of works in the Songzhutang Collection.

A further example of such rare themes is an early Qing dynasty, late 17<sup>th</sup> century libation cup, exquisitely carved in high relief to depict *'Eight Stallions'* roaming carefree in a landscape scene (estimate: HK\$2,500,000-3,000,000/US\$320,000-390,000) *illustrated right and page 1, top right*. This theme was inspired by the eight legendary horses that once belonged to King Mu of the Western Zhou dynasty who gave each horse a fanciful name such as 'Beyond Earth' and 'Rush by Night.' In ancient times, horses were symbolic of status and military power. During the Tang dynasty, only the emperor and the nobility at court were able to ride on horses. Horse imagery was popularly portrayed in Chinese paintings from the Tang dynasty onwards but is not thought to have become fashionable as a decorative motif on works of art until the late Ming dynasty. This work, of attractive golden honey and warm walnut tones, has not been on the market for over a decade, when it was last sold in London.



Also of particular note is a late Ming dynasty, early 17<sup>th</sup> century, rare *'Raft-form'* pouring vessel (estimate: HK\$3,000,000-3,500,000/US\$390,000-450,000) *illustrated page 1, centre*. A highly evocative work, the fine carving shows an idealised depiction of the Han dynasty statesman Zhang Qian floating down the Yangzi River in a hollowed log with swirling waves; he holds a lotus stem and has a basket filled with flowers and peaches by his side. Zhang Qian's travels were later embellished into legendary poems and were a popular theme during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. This subject features in a small number of about twenty other known rhinoceros horn carvings of this date. Executed in a variety of sizes and with different interpretations of the figure, they embody one of the most complex and interesting forms within the

medium. Highly sought after, examples are prized works within the collections of renowned institutions such as The Palace Museum in Beijing; The Shanghai Museum; The Harvard University Art Museum; The National Palace Museum of Taipei; The Asian Art Museum in San Francisco and the Musée des Arts Decoratifs in Paris.



Elsewhere in the collection is a large, yet elegantly proportioned, Ming dynasty, early 17<sup>th</sup> century ‘*Archaistic Chiblong*’ libation cup (estimate: HK\$2,500,000-3,000,000/US\$320,000-390,000) *illustrated left*. Beautifully carved in dark amber rhinoceros horn, the mid-section of the cup depicts a band of stylized phoenix and dragons in shallow relief, with five sinuous *chiblong* clambering up the S-shaped handle, peering over the rim, and two more at the front. This work was also originally part of the Fowler Museum Collection, California.

Other key works include a very fine Qing dynasty, 18<sup>th</sup> century ‘*Three String*’ vase, *lai fu zun* (estimate: HK\$1,800,000-2,500,000/US\$230,000-320,000) *illustrated right*. An elegant form with high-shoulders and a rounded body, the distinctive shape is best known in slightly larger porcelain ‘peachbloom-glazed’ examples from the Kangxi period of the mid 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century, known as *san xian ping*, ‘three string vases’ or *lai fu zun*, radish shaped vases. Together these rare vases form part of a group of vessels made for the scholar’s desk known as the ‘eight prescribed peachbloom shapes’ of the Kangxi period. It appears that such vase-shaped vessels were popular in the Qing dynasty. The warm honey tone of this horn, with darker walnut-brown striations, is very attractive and compliments the graceful line of the vase.



**Notes to Editors:**

**Images are available at:**

<http://cshk.myftp.org/Spring%202010%20Christie's%20Hong%20Kong%20Auctions/WorksOfArt/Rhinohorn/Images/>

**Auction**                      ***Important Chinese Rhinoceros Horn Carvings from the Songzhutang Collection, Part II***                      May 31, 2010

**Viewing**                      **Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center**                      May 27 - 30, 2010

**The importance of Rhinoceros horns in Chinese history:**

Throughout Chinese history there has always been an element of mystery surrounding rhinoceros horns which includes the belief in the horn as having medicinal qualities. When ingested in a ground powered form it is thought to have the ability to cool a fever and prolong life. However, it is probably due to the long-established myth of the rhinoceros horn being able to precipitate poison thus providing a warning to the drinker that these horns were carved into libation cups and decorated into an art form with a wide variety of auspicious decorative motifs, making this exceedingly precious material even more desirable.

**About Christie’s**

Christie’s, the world’s leading art business had global auction and private sales in 2009 that totalled £2.1 billion/\$3.3 billion. Christie’s is a name and place that speaks of extraordinary art, unparalleled service and expertise, as well as international glamour. Founded in 1766 by James Christie, Christie’s conducted the greatest auctions of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, and today remains a popular showcase for the unique and the beautiful. Christie’s offers over 450 sales annually in over 80 categories, including all areas of fine and decorative arts, jewellery, photographs, collectibles, wine, and more. Prices range from \$200 to over \$80 million. Christie’s has 53 offices in 30 countries and 10 salesrooms around the world including London, New York, Paris, Geneva, Milan, Amsterdam, Dubai and Hong Kong. More recently, Christie’s has led the market with expanded initiatives in emerging and new markets such as Russia, China, India and the United Arab Emirates, with successful sales and exhibitions in Beijing, Mumbai and Dubai. For more information, please visit [www.christies.com](http://www.christies.com).

\*Estimates do not include buyer's premium  
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