

CHINESE CARVED IVORY IN NEW EXHIBIT

By C. MARTIN WILBUR

CURATOR OF CHINESE ARCHAEOLOGY AND ETHNOLOGY

Americans delight in Chinese figures carved of ivory, and in the colorful little bottles ingeniously fashioned by the Chinese to hold snuff. They are "decorative art," frankly made to be sold to persons who enjoy the ownership of such knick-knacks. Most examples are modern—a piece that is two centuries old is counted ancient. It requires no esoteric knowledge to admire such things, and examples selected purely for visual enjoyment have been recently put on display in Stanley Field Hall. They include a few of the more handsome ivories from a bequest left to the Museum by Mr. Louis L. Valentine, and some of the brighter bottles from the collection bequeathed by Mrs. Frances Gaylord Smith, both of whom were prominent Chicagoans. None of these objects have been exhibited previously by Field Museum.

It was about 1680 that Europeans introduced the Chinese to the practice of taking snuff, a powdered form of the American Indian tobacco. For a century and a half the practice was popular in fashionable Chinese circles just as it was in Europe. A gentleman carried his snuff in a fancy bottle that ranged in height from one and a half to four inches, and that held about a tablespoonful. The bottles were made to be shown off and admired, and the artisans used all the colorful materials available. Mrs. Smith's collection affords a wide variety. Among the always popular polished stone bottles, several types of agate may be seen, as well as carnelian, crystal, onyx, lapis lazuli, and turquoise. Jade bottles of many colors from the same collection are displayed in the Hall of Jade (Hall 30). Porcelain bottles followed in miniature the ceramic fashions of the last two centuries, sometimes even copying in decoration the best vases and table ware made at the imperial kilns. Glass bottles were sometimes made of different colored layers carved in cameo style; some are opaque with floral painting in enamel, or of clear brilliant color. The most surprising glass bottles are those painted on the inside with landscapes and floral scenes—painted through a neck one-quarter of an inch in diameter, a feat of skill and patience of the sort in which Chinese artisans surpass all others. Lacquer, ivory, coral, and amber are other materials—only a few of the many that could be shown in the allotted space.

The shape and size of the ivory tusk limit the forms into which it can be carved. Figures of humans, bending slightly, are especially suitable, and these the Chinese seem to enjoy producing. The subjects they choose to portray, however, are rather conventionalized: deities, and persons of Chinese legend and romance. From Mr. Valentine's collection it has been possible

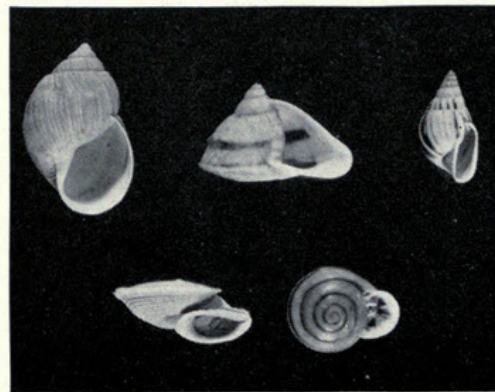
to show a well-carved set of the "Eight Immortals," each of whom has a particular legend known to all Chinese; two representations of the Goddess of Mercy and two of the God of Long Life; and a group from the "Eighteen Buddhist Worthies," who hold a position in Chinese folk art somewhat like that which the Christian saints and martyrs hold in European folk art. This display is a reminder of another group of Chinese ivories exhibited in George T. and Frances Gaylord Smith Hall (Hall 24).

IMPORTANT MOLLUSK COLLECTION ACQUIRED BY MUSEUM

By FRITZ HAAS

CURATOR OF LOWER INVERTEBRATES

Mollusks of both the sea and fresh water, including especially the familiar oysters, clams, and sea-snails, together with the land snails, have been of great importance to mankind since the time of the earliest Stone Age, first as a source of food, and



VARIATIONS IN SHELLS

Five representatives of South and Central American land snails of the family Bulimulidae, showing variations in size and shape. (Figures about two-thirds natural size).

secondarily for tools and ornaments. Their importance in these respects is a reflection of the fact that the mollusks are among the more successful kinds of animals, with thousands of living species, ranging in size from that of minute snails no larger than pinheads to that of the giant squids of the ocean, which may reach a length of fifty feet. At the same time, the mollusk group is one of the most ancient of living types, appearing in abundance in the earliest fossil record.

The attractiveness of snail and bivalve shells as curios led naturally to the formation of large collections of these objects, at first in private hands. Such collections formed the basis of early studies of mollusks, and, as the private collections gradually were transferred to museums, they formed the reference collections on which further scientific research was based. Though the hey-day of great private collections is largely past, this process still continues. The larger and more showy marine shells are naturally important for museum exhibition; the vast number of smaller and less conspicuous species are no less important to zoological

research. Their infinite variety of shape and pattern makes them of extreme importance in evolutionary and geographic studies, as may be seen from published studies of the remarkable Hawaiian snails of the genus *Achatinella*. The fact that the hard shells of mollusks naturally tend to be preserved in great numbers as fossils gives the group a great practical importance to geology, which dates its successive deposited strata by means of the study of such fossil remains.

Through the interest of Mr. Stanley Field, President of the Museum, the Department of Zoology has recently acquired one of the most notable collections of mollusks remaining in private hands. This collection, accumulated over a period of more than forty years by Mr. Walter F. Webb, of Rochester, New York, comprises especially land and fresh water snails and bivalves. It includes about 20,000 lots of shells, with more than 100,000 individual specimens. Mr. Webb, a well-known dealer in shells, accumulated his personal collection as the by-product of his business, retaining the finest specimens and the rarest forms for himself.

The permanent scientific value of the Webb Collection was greatly enhanced by Mr. Webb's purchase of other well-known private collections, such as those of Mr. G. K. Gude, of London, Mr. John Ritchie, of Boston, and Mr. Robert Jetschin, of Breslau. These collections date in part from as far back as the eighteen-sixties; the identifications thus supply a picture of the classification in use at those times by the authorities in the field of conchology. Of still greater scientific importance is the fact that the collection thus includes some of the original specimens on which the descriptions of new species and varieties were based. These are the so-called co-types and paratypes, and they are of special importance for reference, tending to stabilize classification and nomenclature.

The typical material, representing about 800 forms, includes paratypes of most of Gude's species of the snail family Helicidae, and of many of the Japanese forms described by Pilsbry, and by Pilsbry and Hirase. The collection in general was further enriched by extended exchanges with conchologists in all continents, often with the further addition of typical material.

Mr. Webb included with the collection a number of important publications on mollusks, some of them extremely important for their rarity. It is gratifying that he has continued his interest in the collection, supplementing it by gifts of important specimens acquired by himself subsequent to the purchase agreement.

Thus at a single stroke, Field Museum has obtained a collection of world-wide scope that fills a serious gap in its zoological collections, and forms a basis for further active research in the field now usually referred to as "malacology."



Wilbur, C. Martin. 1942. "Chinese Carved Ivory in New Exhibit." *Field Museum news* 13(7), 4-4.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/25719>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/365056>

Holding Institution

Field Museum of Natural History Library

Sponsored by

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: In copyright. Digitized with the permission of the Chicago Field Museum.
For information contact dcc@library.uiuc.edu.

Rights Holder: Field Museum of Natural History

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.