

Mom's Joy Room

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Hand-Carved Wooden Horse with Bone-Inlay Overlay

Indian Bone-Inlay Tradition • Vintage, Mid-20th Century • 14 Inches to the Ears

ESTIMATED WORTH

\$150 – \$350



The overlay construction: individually cut pale segments applied to the carved surface, the black adhesive drawn deliberately into the design

History

Bone-inlay is one of the oldest decorative traditions on earth, and in the workshops of Rajasthan — the desert state of northern India whose capitals, Jaipur and Jodhpur, have been centers of decorative craft for centuries — it became a signature art applied to furniture, boxes, and carved animals for the export trade of the mid-twentieth century. The traditional technique is an **overlay** rather than an inlay: the craftsman carves his wooden form, then cuts dozens of small pale segments — camel bone in the classic work, sometimes shell or horn — one by one, and applies them directly onto the surface of the wood with a dark adhesive mastic. Crucially, the black adhesive is not hidden: it is worked into the design on purpose, filling the gaps between the pale segments so that the finished surface reads as a dramatic mosaic of ivory-on-black. The dark groundwork is part of the pattern, not just the glue.

This horse is a fine example of that tradition. Carved from a dark-stained hardwood with the chisel marks of hand work still visible in the grain, he stands 14 inches to the tips of his ears in the classic display pose of Indian export carving: one front leg raised, mane swept back, tail flowing. His high-relief saddle is a distinct sculpted piece, and the overlay is

unusually generous — pale, individually cut segments with real thickness, applied to the muzzle and cheek, in a band around the chest and shoulder, across the whole saddle and stirrup area, and in a panel on the flank near the hindquarters. The black adhesive between the segments is plainly intentional, framing each piece in dark contrast so the horse reads, from across a room, as if patterned in ivory mosaic. And he carries one more sign of a careful maker: rather than painted dots, his eyes are set glass, giving him the lifelike gaze that separates the best pieces of this tradition from the run of tourist souvenirs.

A nearly identical bone-overlay tradition also flourished in Damascus, Syria, whose woodworkers produced inlaid boxes and furniture in the same period, so a small number of such horses carry Middle Eastern rather than Indian origin. Without a maker's mark — none of these workshop pieces were signed — the attribution rests on style, and this example fits comfortably within the Indian (Rajasthan) bone-inlay school of the mid-20th century.

“Every one of those little tiles was cut by hand and set in black, one at a time, until the horse caught its shine.”

Features & Description

- Hand-carved dark-stained hardwood horse, 14 inches to the ears, mid-20th century
- Traditional overlay technique: individually cut bone or shell segments applied on top of the carved wood (not set into it)
- Black adhesive mastic deliberately incorporated into the design, framing each segment for an ivory-on-black mosaic effect
- Overlay coverage on the muzzle and cheek, chest and shoulder band, full saddle and stirrup area, and flank panel
- Set glass eyes with lifelike gaze
- High-relief sculpted saddle
- Raised front leg, carved swept-back mane and flowing tail
- Visible hand-chisel marks and natural wood grain throughout

Collector's Notes

Attribution is stylistic: the piece is unmarked, as workshop pieces of this tradition almost always are, and its carving and overlay are consistent with the Indian (Rajasthan) bone-inlay school, with a smaller possibility of Damascene (Syrian) origin. The overlay material is likewise identified on appearance: the segments read as bone — the traditional material of this work — though shell and horn were also used; genuine bone shows fine grain and warms slightly to the touch, while shell shows iridescent shimmer when angled toward light. The raised, sculptural quality of the overlay is itself a hallmark of handwork worth pointing out to buyers. Value reflects the unusually generous overlay coverage and the set glass eyes. Dust gently with a soft dry brush — water and polish can dull the segments and soften the mastic — and keep him out of prolonged direct sunlight to preserve the stain and the mosaic's contrast.