

RHINOCEROS

? painted in 1790 or 1791

Oil on canvas, 27½ × 36½ in.

(69.9 × 92.7 cm.)

Private Collection

PROVENANCE

Presumably commissioned or purchased by John Hunter for his Museum, which was later entrusted to The Royal College of Surgeons of England by Parliament

EXHIBITED

Liverpool 1951 (57); Whitechapel 1957 (53); *The Eye of Thomas Jefferson*, National Gallery of Art, Washington 1976 (122, repr.)

LITERATURE

William Clift, 'A List of Paintings and Drawings numbered according to the situation in which they were placed . . . in Mr Hunter's Museum in Castle Street, Leicester Square', MS, 1816, p. 5, no. 7; do., 'Pictures delivered May 3rd 1819', MS, no. 5; 'List of Portraits in the Court Room of the College', MS, 1820, no. 31 (these manuscripts are in the collection of the Royal College of Surgeons); Sir Arthur Keith, *Hunterian and other pictures in the Museum Collection of the Royal College of Surgeons*, 1930, no. 9 ('Indian Rhinoceros, by G.

Stubbs'); Basil Taylor, *Animal Painting in England*, 1955, pp. 36, 63; Taylor 1971, pp. 30, 210, pl. 72; Parker 1971, p. 86; T.H. Clarke, 'The Iconography of the Rhinoceros from Dürer to Stubbs', *Commissar*, CLXXXV, 1974, p. 121, repr. p. 115 as 'c.1790'; Egerton 1976, p. 31; William Gaunt, *Stubbs*, 1977, p. 7; Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London*, 1978, p. 39

The foremost authority on the rhinoceros in art is Mr T.H. Clarke. The compiler is extremely grateful to Mr Clarke for allowing her to read the relevant chapter in his forthcoming book *The Rhinoceros from Dürer to Stubbs 1515-1799*, and to use his research for this entry.

Mr Clarke asks two key questions about this picture: when was it painted, and how can we be sure that it is by Stubbs? In the 1957 Stubbs exhibition catalogue the picture was stated to have been painted 'circa 1772' from an animal then on show in London, and all subsequent references (except for Mr Clarke's 1974 article) have accepted that dating uncritically, since it seemed to accord with a statement in Loisel's pioneer work on European menageries that 'at the end of the century . . . the London public had the opportunity of seeing two rhinoceroses, one that was exhibited in 1770 and the other in 1799'. But as Mr Clarke points out, there was no rhinoceros in London in 1770; Loisel's '1770' must be an error (possibly a printer's error) for '1790', when there certainly was a rhinoceros. It was the third to be seen in England; the first arrived in 1684, the second in 1739.

In the summer of 1790 a rhinoceros, apparently a young animal, arrived in an East Indian man as a gift to Mr Dundas, who either gave or more probably sold it to Thomas Clark, lessee of Exeter Change and the Lyceum in the Strand, where he mounted exhibitions of curiosities, not merely animal. The rhinoceros was on view at the Lyceum by 26 July 1790, when the *Morning Herald* reported 'We hear Mr. Clark of Exeter Change is singular in his possessions, having perhaps what no Englishman before has had, the supporters of the King's Arms alive, a Lion and Male Unicorn . . . a greater living curiosity has never appeared in this country'. Clarke quotes what is evidently a first-hand account of the rhinoceros, recorded by the Rev. W. Bingley in 1805: 'He exhibited symptoms of no ferocious propensity, and would even allow himself to be patted on the back or sides by strangers. His docility was about equal to a tolerably tractable pig . . . He was very fond of sweet wines, of which he would often drink three or four bottles in the course of a few hours'. His voice was not much unlike the bleating of a calf. It was most commonly exerted when the animal observed any person with fruit or other favourite food in his hand, and in such cases it seems to have been a mark of his anxiety to have it given him.'

Over the next year, the rhinoceros continued on show at the Lyceum, where it was joined in December 1790 by 'three stupendous Ostriches' and by 'The Royal Lincolnshire Ox, allowed by the best judges to be the largest and fattest cow bred in this or any other country'. Stubbs's painting of the

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Lincolnshire Ox is in the collection of the Art Gallery, Liverpool.

From June 1791 until early in 1793 advertisements for the rhinoceros, which had been on tour. On 7 February 1793 G. Bingley announced that 'having purchased the rhinoceros as part of Mr. Clark's collection, in accordance with his own, he flatters himself that it is the first collection of the Animal and Feather ever exhibited to the Public'. This was a period of exuberant advertising, in which Bingley issued handbills, posters and halfpennies bearing the rhinoceros. On 3 June 1792 the rhinoceros appeared in the command at Windsor: 'This Rhinoceros was sent to Mr. Pidecock the Exhibitor of the Royal Menagerie that Animal to be brought to the Queen and Princesses for the Queen and Princesses to view. The picture course immediately drawn in the Menagerie at the Lodge, the appearance of which has been seen by them and the KING'. A few days later the rhinoceros showed at Ascot Races, and then began its tour; but it sustained an injury to one of its legs in the summer of 1792 and soon afterwards, at Corsham near Portsmouth, the rhinoceros died.

This compiler has little doubt that the most reliable of the rhinoceros is by Stubbs; the date at which it is observed is consistent with the evidence of the paintings by Stubbs for John and William Hunter and the manner in which its solid form is rendered on canvas, the colouring and the use of light and foreground shadow and distant light are characteristic of Stubbs. Hunter was particularly interested in the *rhinoceros unicornis* and