

Quelle

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# An Indian rhino in Lisbon

The Rhinoceros from Dürer to Stubbs: 1515-1799  
by J. H. Clarke, Philip Wilson, pp 219, £29.50

Desmond Morris

AT A TIME when publishing is supposed to be in the doldrums, with telly-viewing replacing book-reading as the great occupier, anyone eccentric enough to produce a large volume described as "a study of the single-horned Indian rhinoceros as depicted in the arts of Europe between 1515 and 1799" deserves a special award for bravery. Apart from a small handful of art historians, and an even smaller handful of professional rhinocerotologists (Indian branch), it is of no use to anyone. But forget about utility, this is a beautiful book on a fascinating subject and should be read just for the sheer pleasure it gives. For the natural scientist who has everything, it is the ideal Christmas gift

What was so special about the rhino? Well, although the Romans knew the animal, it vanished from Europe for over 1200 years. Then, on 20 May 1515, a ship arrived in Portugal from Goa, laden with a cargo of rare spices and... a live specimen of the great Indian rhinoceros. Its impact was as electrifying as if someone arrived today with a live dinosaur. There were several reasons for this. First, there was its

novelty value and its impressive size. Secondly, there was its amazing coat of armoured plates, which stunned a population so devoted to the production of fine armour for human battle. It was as though Mother Nature were somehow giving her blessing to armoured warfare. Thirdly, there was the large single horn at the front of the animal's head, which seemed to provide support for the existence of the unicorn.

In short, the Lisbon rhino of 1515 became a great star. Its fame spread rapidly across Europe and a sketch of it, with accompanying notes, inspired the German artist Albrecht Dürer to produce one of the most memorable animal images in the history of art. Dürer, who was actively engaged at the time in designing Roman armour, let his imagination run riot, adorning the great rhino with elaborate flanges and plates that went far beyond the natural armouring of the animal. He also added an extra horn, protruding mysteriously from the animal's shoulders.

In Dürer's beautiful ink drawing of the rhino (now at the British Museum) this second horn is

tiny, only 1/4th of the length of the true horn. But as the years passed and his depiction was copied and copied by other artists, the shoulder horn grew in size until, a century and a half later, Herport's 1669 engraving shows it to be as large as the true horn. Plagiarists beware of zoological errors by great artists!

This first Indian rhino was set to fight an elephant on Trinity Sunday in Lisbon, but the elephant turned tail and fled at the sight of it, which spoiled the royal entertainment and ruined the chance to prove the legend that, in the wild, rhinos employed their horns to rip open the bellies of their enemies. After this, the rhino was despatched as a gift to the Pope, dressed as a bride, with a gilt-iron chain and a green velvet collar gilt with roses and carnations. Sadly, the ship sank and the rhino went down with it.

This animal was followed by a total of nine more over the next 300 years and the book charts their progress around Europe. Some made amazing journeys from city to city; others died soon after their arrival. Each one in turn became a star attraction and left its mark on the art of its period. The book has been lovingly researched and lavishly illustrated. It also reintroduces to the English language that marvellous but long-forgotten word "rhinocerotie", which seems wonderfully apt for an animal bearing such a splendidly phallic appendage.



..... TRAVELS OF THE FIRST LISBON OR 'DÜREN' RHINOCEROS OF 1515-16 (see Chapter 1)

— TRAVELS OF THE 'DUTCH' RHINOCEROS OF 1741-58 (see Chapter 4)



The first and fifth rhinos in Europe. The Lisbon rhino of 1515, immortalised in the drawing of Albrecht Dürer (left), was the first seen in Europe for 1200 years

