

Exotic Animals in Sixteenth-Century Europe

Annemarie Jordan Gschwend

WILD AND DOMESTIC ANIMALS from Africa and Asia formed a large percentage of the cargo that Portuguese ships brought back to Lisbon during the sixteenth century. Exotic animals and the formation of princely menageries and aviaries became a fundamental part of the self-imaging of Renaissance courts.¹ The more exotic the animal, the more highly it was prized. The acquisition of foreign, often bizarre, animals became synonymous with the level of luxury and majesty that courts cultivated. Renaissance theorists believed that by taming wild animals, monarchs demonstrated their power and magnificence over the forces of nature.²

Manuel I of Portugal (r. 1495–1521) collected Asian elephants, parading through the streets of Lisbon with no fewer than five. Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528)

immortalized in a woodcut the first rhinoceros seen in Europe since Antiquity, which Muzafar II, Sultan of Gujarat, sent the king in 1515 (plate 3.12). A combat between this beast and an elephant was staged in a courtyard of the Lisbon royal palace; the elephant fled in fright and the rhinoceros was declared victorious by default. Manuel sent this rhinoceros to Pope Leo X (r. 1513–21) in 1516 as a royal gift. Earlier, in 1513, he sent the elephant Hanno to Rome with a formal embassy led by Tristão de Cunha.

The tradition of sending exotic animals as diplomatic gifts to cement relations between princely courts continued under later Portuguese rulers.³ In order to strengthen political ties with Vienna, in 1552 Catherine of Austria (1507–78) and João III (r. 1521–57) sent their nephew, Emperor

3.12 below left
The Rhinoceros of Cambay
 Albrecht Dürer, after a drawing by Valentim Fernandes sent from Lisbon to Nuremberg between 3 June and 1 July 1515
 Pen and ink on paper
 Germany (Nuremberg), 1515
 British Museum, London

3.13
Stool right, above
 Engraved with the arms of Maximilian I and elephant bone
 Austria (Vienna), 1554
 Benediktsschrift, Kresmunster Abbey

3.14 right, below
Labor: Allegory of Autumn
 Georg Hoesfnagel
 Watercolour on parchment
 Vienna or Prague, 1576
 Musée du Louvre, Paris

3.15 far right
The Allegory of Earth
 Giuseppe Arcimboldo
 Oil on panel
 Austria (Vienna), 1570
 Private collection, Vienna





Maximilian II (r. 1564–76), an Indian elephant. It was the first one ever seen in Austria. It died one year later and some of its bones were fashioned into a stool bearing Maximilian's coat of arms (plate 3.13). Through family ties with Portugal, the Habsburg court benefited emblematically from the prestige of an allied kingdom whose power and rule extended over the flora and fauna of a vast overseas empire. Catherine of Austria sent her grandson, Infante D. Carlos (1545–68) of Spain, an African zebra in 1555, the first imported to Europe since ancient times. African and Brazilian monkeys headed princely shopping lists, as did African civet cats, prized for their musk, South American or African parrots and hunting falcons from the Americas (*Aplomados* and *Tagarotes*) (plate 3.14).

Archival documents testify to the quantity of exotic animals exported from the Iberian peninsula to imperial menageries in Vienna and Prague between 1560 and 1621. Many were documented by Maximilian II's court painter, Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1527–93), in his 1570 commission, *The Allegory of Earth*, in which the emperor's animals are depicted, including the elephant sent to him in 1552, a rhinoceros, an Indian antelope (*Cervicapra*), monkeys, a lion, a dromedary, a cheetah and a tiger (plate 3.15).⁴ Exotic beasts fired the imaginations of rulers and princes, colouring daily life and festivities at European courts, where they were kept in early zoos, tamed and used for hunting or immortalized in paintings, frescos and illuminated miniatures in royal collections and palaces.

