

FROM THE VAULT

Wildlife Conservation

MEREDITH MARTIN ON JEAN-BAPTISTE OUDRY AT THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES



Jean-Baptiste Oudry, *Rhinoceros*, 1749, oil on canvas, 10' ½" x 14' 10 ¾".

BEFORE BARBARO or Dolly the cloned sheep, there was Clara, an Indian rhinoceros who reigned as the biggest celebrity animal in mid-eighteenth-century Europe. Escorted by her Dutch owner, Clara toured the continent between 1741 and 1758, enchanting kings, commoners, and artists alike due to her exotic pedigree, surprisingly docile nature, and ability to slake an Enlightenment thirst for firsthand observation, in this case of an animal that had not been seen in Europe in nearly two hundred years.

During a 1749 engagement at Paris's Saint Germain fair, an annual Dionysian event improbably held during Lent, Clara was visited by the French artist and noted workaholic Jean-Baptiste Oudry, who scrupulously studied her form before embarking on an enormous, life-size rendering of the fabled creature. Oudry's ambition was threefold: to offer a corrective to the prevailing, but anatomically inaccurate, artistic view of the animal in Albrecht Dürer's *Rhinoceros* woodcut from 1515; to solidify his reputation over Alexandre-François Desportes and Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin as the preeminent animal painter of his day; and to cash in on the consumer craze for all things Clara, including Meissen porcelain figurines and what one countess described as ribbons "à la rhinocéros."

The result, an audacious yet disarmingly

sensitive portrait, forms the centerpiece of "Oudry's Painted Menagerie," an exhibition organized by Mary Morton and Scott Schaefer of the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles (where the show opens this month), in association with the Staatliches Museum Schwerin, Germany, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Oudry's *Rhinoceros* appears alongside ten other life-size paintings of exotic animals—among them a cassowary, a hyena, and a mufloon—that inhabited the French royal menagerie at Versailles. Also included are twenty animal drawings, many of which were executed from life in Oudry's elegant, preferred method of black and white chalk on blue paper. A separate section, entitled "Rhino-mania," displays decorative art objects inspired by Clara, and pits Oudry's beast against competing visions by Dürer, Pietro Longhi, and others.

Originally commissioned by Louis XV's chief surgeon, La Peyronie, the menagerie paintings were suddenly left without a buyer when La Peyronie died in 1747. Three years later, the ever-enterprising Oudry offered them (at a reduced price) to his loyal client the duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin, who eagerly snapped them up. These spirited animal portraits, which evince Oudry's particular genius at melding expert illusionism with a palpable expressive force, are now part of the Staatliches

Museum Schwerin, which enjoys the largest holdings of Oudry's work in the world.

Oudry's *Rhinoceros* has a story almost as fabled as that of Clara herself. In the mid-nineteenth century, the work was removed from its stretcher and placed in storage, where it remained for 150 years. In 2002, the Getty's head paintings conservator, Mark Leonard, and curator of paintings, Schaefer, learned about the work while in Germany to seek out conservation partnerships. For the five years since then, Leonard and his staff have been working painstakingly to restore *Rhinoceros* and two other Oudry canvases. When the exhibition opens, their technical prowess will be on display as much as the paintings themselves. (The entire nail-biting restoration process was even filmed by *The Exorcist* director William Friedkin; sections of the documentary will be screened in conjunction with the exhibition.) A preview was provided last January when Leonard moved *Rhinoceros* to a top-lit room in the Getty's East Pavilion, where he applied a final coat of varnish while museum visitors watched.

This act of performative conservation aptly illustrates the show's theme of combining serious scholarship with public accessibility. It seems wholly in keeping with an exhibition devoted to an artist who taught at the Académie Royale and wrote technical treatises on painting while also thrilling Salon-goers with trompe l'oeil displays of deer heads and kitschy fire screens depicting dogs lounging faithfully in front of the hearth. Oudry may have gotten his start churning out portraits of Louis XV's favorite hunting dogs, but even then he rarely missed an opportunity to flaunt his skills at empirical analysis, or his ability to parse the subtlest of canine gestures (as seen in his charming portrait of the royal whippets *Misse and Turlu*, 1725). Similarly, Oudry's exotic animal paintings are at once entertaining, dramatically lit spectacles and faithful documents of natural phenomena, so much so that an engraving based on his *Rhinoceros* was used to illustrate Buffon's multivolume *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière* (1749–89), which aimed to present an "exact description" and "true history" of every species known to man.

Oudry's portraits suggest that, like

his contemporaries, the artist may have used animal imagery to explore larger questions about the nature of human behavior and subjectivity. One wonders whether his vibrantly colored portrait of a *Demoiselle Crane, Toucan, and Tufted Crane*, 1745, which depicts two birds in balletic, nearly identical postures, was a wry allusion to a mode of courtly behavior at Versailles, wherein elaborately coiffed courtiers performed an endless dance of solicitous display for the king. Indeed, Oudry's imperious toucan might be a stand-in for Louis XV himself, who observed his preening courtiers in the Galerie des Glaces as closely as he did the animals in his menagerie.

Certainly, in Oudry's own time, animals were anthropomorphized. Critics lavished praise on the artist's *Bitch-Hound Nursing Her Pups* when it was shown at the Salon of 1753, some regarding it as proof that animals had souls, others that its vision of tender maternity confirmed French women's "natural" place in the home—ideally, breast-feeding.

Animal painting, though too often and too long dismissed as trifling, has been enjoying a renewed appreciation of late. At the Frick Collection in New York, a George Stubbs show is on view through this month, and last year the Bruce Museum in Greenwich, Connecticut, along with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, mounted an exhibition of canine art from Cellini to Cattelan, with a catalogue essay by art historian and dog lover Robert Rosenblum. And in her most recent show at New York's 303 Gallery, Karen Kilimnik exhibited *Imperial Ocelot in Peking*, 2006, a painting that transposes one of Oudry's leopards to a faux-Chinese setting, complete with bamboo umbrella and tiki hut.

Will Oudry's exotic menagerie be able to elicit the same excitement, curiosity, and sympathy from Getty museumgoers that it did from eighteenth-century viewers? Clara, freshly scrubbed and fetching as ever, awaits. □

"Oudry's Painted Menagerie" remains on view at the J. Paul Getty Museum through Sept. 2, and travels to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Oct. 7, 2007–Jan. 6, 2008, and the Staatliches Museum Schwerin, Germany, Apr. 4–July 6, 2008.

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