

How I met Clara, the Dutch rhinoceros

Kees Rookmaaker

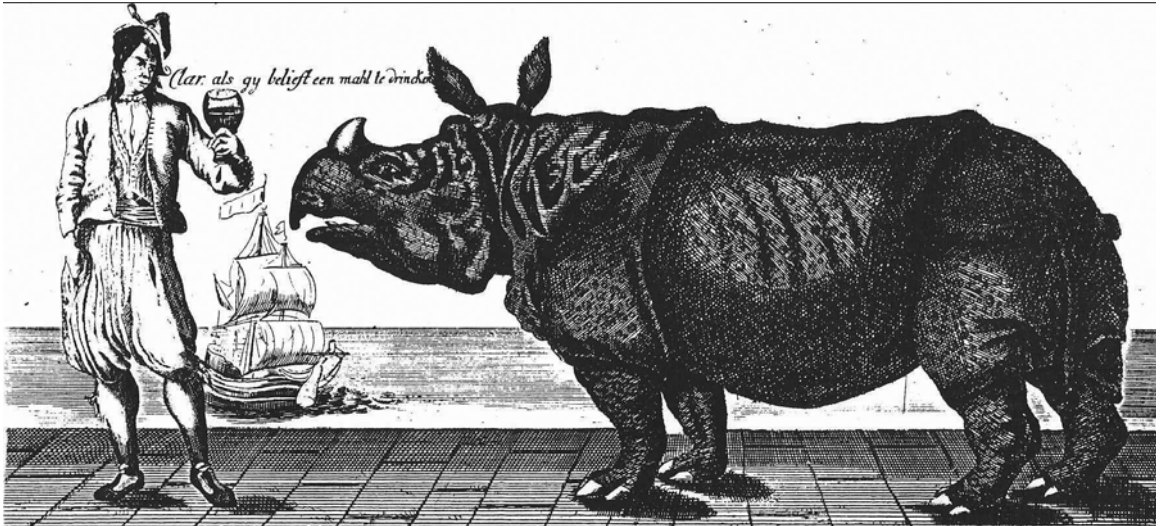


Figure 1. Sailor toasting Clara, the Dutch rhino—as we toast the committees and editors who have been responsible for the publication of *Pachyderm* 1983-2011.

Living in a suburb of Amsterdam as a young man, there were few opportunities to observe a living rhino. There were a few in the zoos around us, but for practical reasons I chose to start my investigations into the natural history of the rhino in one of the greatest zoological libraries of the country. Every Wednesday on a school-free afternoon I would make my way to the Artis Library, which was founded in the early 19th century as part of the zoological gardens in Amsterdam. Although initially baffled by the variety and age of the books on the shelves, I slowly got to grips with the library's extensive holdings and started to learn more about all aspects of rhino biology and history.

When looking through the older books in the library, I noticed a remarkable change in the depictions of the rhino during the 18th century. Before the middle of that century, the rhino was always illustrated by copies of the woodcut made by Albrecht Dürer in 1515. These were easily identified by the heavy body armour and the characteristic twisted hornlet on the animal's shoulder. After 1750, this image was gradually replaced by one which on first sight was a more naturalistic representation of a single-horned rhino. I saw the plates in the famous *Histoire Naturelle* by Buffon, in an anatomical atlas by Albinus and in a host of other books, many of which were seldom referred to and seemed quite obscure to my inexperienced eyes. It turned out that the later illustrations of the rhino were drawn after an animal which had been exhibited alive in all major European cities by a Dutch captain.

When I tried to discover more about the history of this animal as well as about a few other rhinos which had been imported into Europe before the French Revolution, I found that references were few and no comprehensive survey had yet been published. Hence, even before completing my secondary school education, I was encouraged to collate all material, which was then published in the scientific journal of the Artis Library (*Bijdragen tot de Dierkunde*, Amsterdam 43 (1): 39-63, 1973). A large part of this paper traced the route of the Dutch rhino, captured in Assam in 1738, taken to Holland in 1741, shown across the continent and died in 1758. It was a puzzle, of which even now the last pieces have not yet fallen into place.

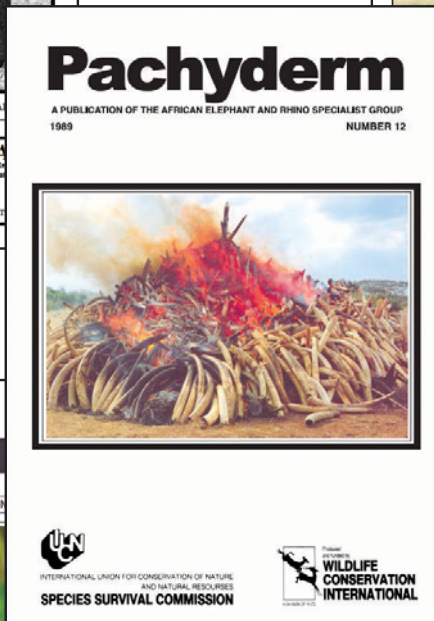
I had only just received my copy of my first scientific publication, on 14 June 1973, when English friends called my attention to a similar study published in the *Connoisseur*, which unlike mine stressed the value of iconography in historical zoology. I soon met the author, Tim Clarke, one of the directors of Sotheby's in London. We shared a passion to learn more about the history and the art of the rhinos which entertained and educated the European audiences and which engraved the image of the rhino on scientists and laymen alike. A decennium later, this quest of the rhino in Europe culminated in Clarke's book, *The rhino from Durer to Stubbs 1515-1799 (1986)*, as well as in a variety of smaller papers.

The Dutch rhino has become famous after this. Her curious story was kindled by the restoration of Oudry's full-size painting of her by the Getty Museum and its exhibition in Schwerin. We had no name for her, until one copy of an obscure copper engraving came to light in Krakow, where a sailor proposed a toast to the rhino calling her 'Clar'. This must have been a version of the Dutch name Klaar or Klaartje, but in the largely Anglo-Saxon world this has rightly become Clara.

Clara died in April 1758, when she was about twenty years old. She not only delighted the public during her tours, but she changed the popular perception of the rhino forever. Sure enough, her presence hampered the discovery of the African rhino, double-horned and smooth-skinned, but that is quite a different albeit equally fascinating story.

Pachyderm

SPECIAL 50th issue—*Pachyderm* past and present





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