

Fierce Friends

Artists and Animals, 1750–1900

LOUISE LIPPINCOTT and ANDREAS BLÜHM

Foreword by DESMOND MORRIS

VAN GOGH
MUSEUM

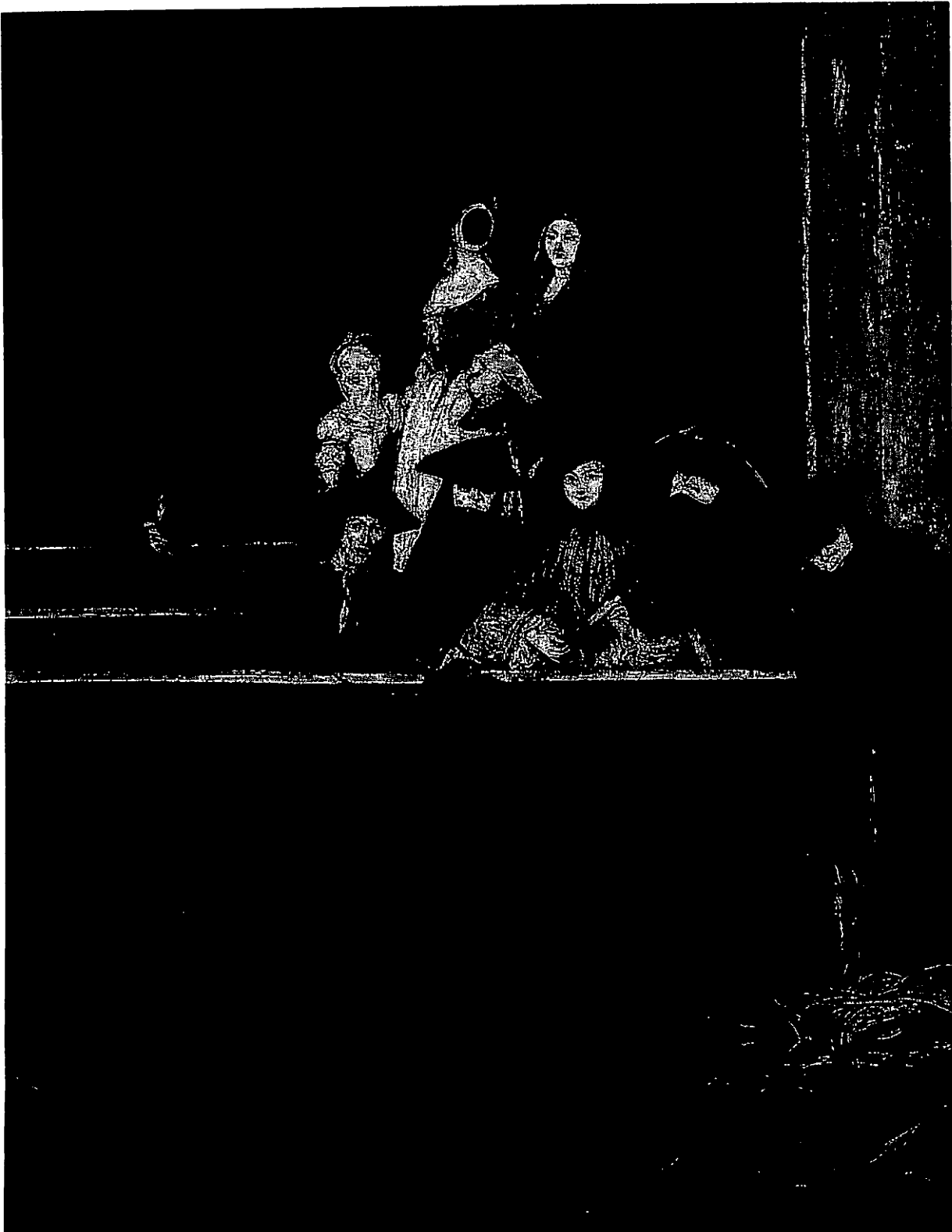


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Rhino in Venice

It is Carnival time in Venice, and what do you do to surprise these sophisticated urban folks who have seen everything? Show them something no one has seen in living memory: a real live monster! There surely could not be a stranger and more terrifying creature than a fully grown rhinoceros. When such a beast was brought to Venice on its tour through Europe, it was the first to appear on the continent for many decades. For those Venetians lucky enough to catch a glimpse, it must have been an astonishing sight.

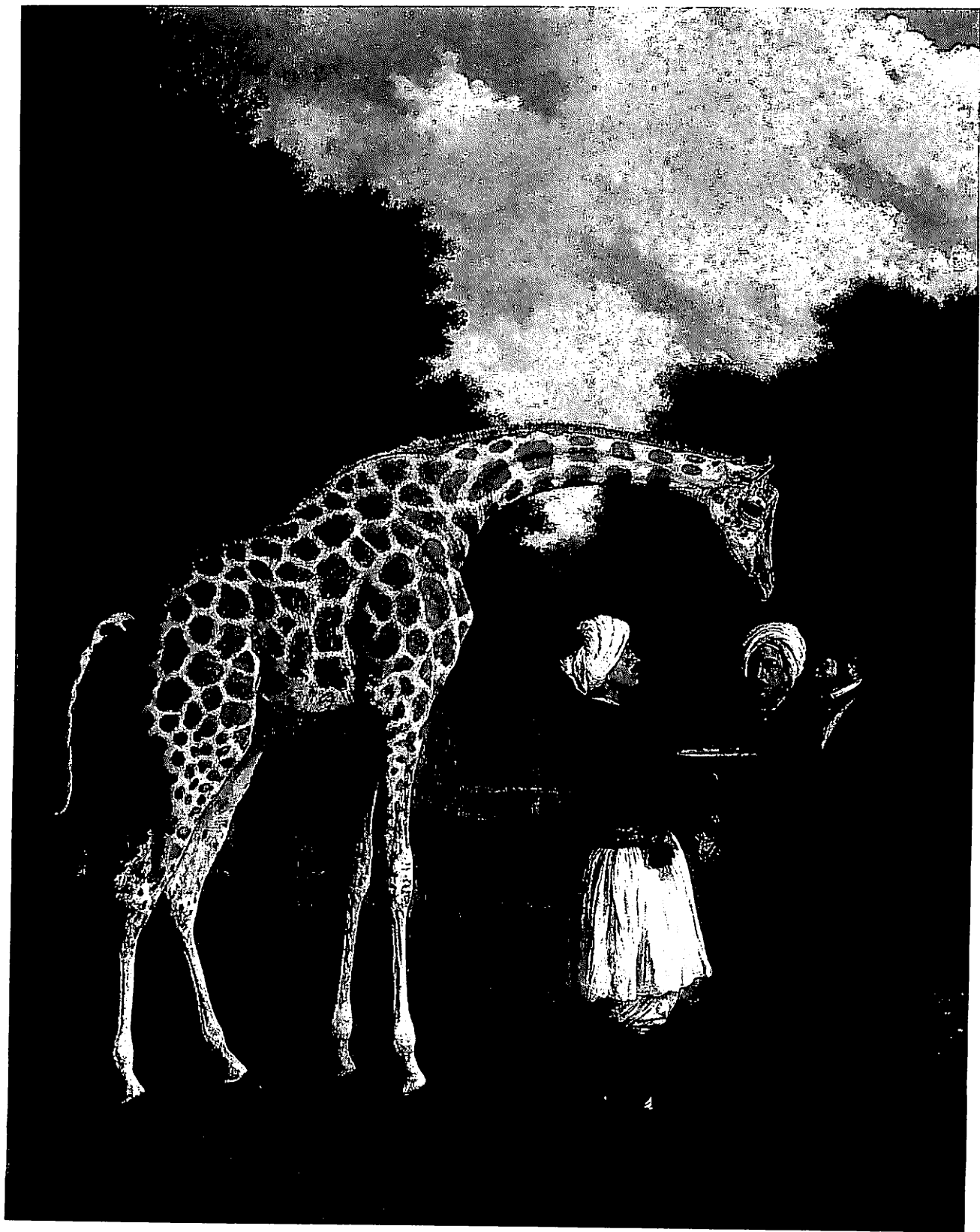
And yet there is a definite lack of excitement in this picture. Rather than being moved by terror or joy, most spectators are portrayed with indifferent expressions. Only eight individuals are gathered around the animal, and some of them wear masks, hiding their identity. Seeing and being seen or, rather, not being seen—that is the real appeal of Carnival. So who are we actually looking at?

Pietro Longhi, a fashionable painter in Venice, was commissioned by local noblemen to record the event. He proudly announces in writing in the upper right that this painting is made after nature. What were his choices? He does not focus exclusively on the animal nor on the spectators' reaction. The space is evenly divided into two halves, the lower one for the animal, the upper one for the humans. The rhinoceros, with its huge, plump, and dark body, has little to no expression. It is reduced to basic vegetative activities, eating and defecating. Strangely enough, boredom seems also the overarching emotion of the audience.

The gentleman on the left is the animal handler. He is either the Dutchman Douwemout van der Meer, who brought the rhino from Indonesia to Leiden in 1741, or his assistant. Here he waves his right arm and points to the rhinoceros, as if such a gesture were necessary. His desperate efforts may have something to do with the fact that there is definitely something missing about the animal. The showman holds a whip and what seems to be the rhino's horn. How and why did it get off the animal's nose? It is recorded that the rhino lost its horn when rubbing it against its cage when in Rome. As the horn is the essential attribute for the rhino, like the trunk of an elephant or the feathers of a peacock, the handler must have been in considerable trouble. To the public a rhino without its horn must have looked like an animal deprived of its potential danger, almost as if castrated—even if this one is a female.

Was the public really unimpressed by what it saw, or did Longhi want to make a deliberate statement? By the mid-eighteenth century, the greatest days of the republic of Venice had come and gone: without its strong and dangerous fleet, which had controlled half of the Mediterranean Sea, it had lost its role as a major power. Although culture, art, and entertainment thrived, the republic was politically and economically on the decline. Perhaps Longhi was making a comparison between the disfigured rhinoceros and the decadence of his fellow Venetians.

Pietro Longhi
Italian, 1702–1783
The Rhinoceros, 1751
Oil on canvas
60.4 x 47 cm (23¾ x 18½ in.)
National Gallery, London



Walking to the zoo



Anonymous
French
Giraffe, c. 1785
Oil on canvas
165 x 122 cm (65 x 48 in.)
Bibliothèque Centrale du Muséum
National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris

Before 1800, few Europeans had the chance to see a live giraffe. Skeletons and skins had arrived earlier, but the attempts to reconstruct the animal accurately from the material at hand and the occasional drawings were largely unsuccessful. The explorer François Levaillant (1753–1824) had presented evidence of the graceful African animal to the comte de Buffon, director of the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris. By combining scientific and commercial interest, Levaillant was a typical example of an adventurer–scientist in the Age of Enlightenment. In 1781, he traveled to southern Africa, and he is now most famous for having published some of the most beautiful books on birds ever seen (see p. 21). When he returned to Paris in 1784, he brought more than one thousand stuffed birds and the skin of this giraffe. This skin and a few drawings formed the basis for the painting that the museum commissioned. The anonymous maker surely tried his best, but the animal shows serious anatomical flaws, because it is not painted from life. We may assume, though, that Levaillant, the man next to the giraffe, is represented more accurately.

The Parisians had to wait forty-three years before they could see the first living specimen. In 1827, Pasha Muhammad-Ali, the Ottoman Viceroy of Egypt, wanted to improve his relationship with the major European nations, namely France, Britain, and the Austrian Empire. The tokens in the service of diplomacy were giraffes. It is easy to imagine the wonder and excitement experienced by the citizens of Paris, London, and Vienna when a Nubian giraffe was put on public display in their respective cities.

The story of Zarafa, the giraffe that walked all the way from Marseille to the French capital, captured the public imagination. Thousands of people lined the streets to cheer the amazing creature on its journey through France, and it received a triumphal reception when it arrived. More than half a million visitors are said to have visited Zarafa in the first months at her new home, the Jardin des Plantes. Not only did the animal entertain the masses, but its presence broadened the horizon of many and inspired a fashion for natural history.

The Paris giraffe outlived its London and Vienna counterparts by many years. The London giraffe was first shipped to Malta to spend the winter there, and then continued by ship directly to the capital. It arrived on August 11, 1827, at Waterloo Bridge. From there the journey brought the giraffe to Windsor. This is where we see it in this work by the Swiss animal painter Agasse, who was the first choice of natural historians when it came to render hitherto seldom seen species accurately (see pp. 76–77). The giraffe is shown with the two Egyptians who accompanied it on its journey, as well as with a representative of the animal's host nation (whose identity is uncertain). In the background, two cows can just be distinguished. They would have provided the giraffe with milk, which was the only food the animal was given; it seems that this is the nourishment the Egyptians are offering her in a large bowl. The giraffe has to bend down to drink it, when it would no doubt much rather pick a few leaves from a tree. Agasse has made a harmonious composition and avoided any dramatization of the scene. The giraffe is seen in profile, the best position for us to see its shape and color, following the tradition of scientific illustration.

Today, a child growing up in a city may well see a living giraffe before he or she sees a deer or even a cow. Non-indigenous *artiodactyla* (even-toed ungulates) are more likely to be encountered than native ones. Thus has the whole notion of what is regarded as exotic changed over the last two hundred years. Some zoos answer to this new vision of animals by adding local cattle to their collections. That, however, may make a cow look even more exotic.

Jacques-Laurent Agasse
Swiss, 1767–1849
The Nubian Giraffe, 1827
Oil on canvas
127.3 x 102 cm (50% x 40% in.)
The Royal Collection, Her Majesty
Queen Elizabeth II