

Exhibition of a Rhinoceros at Venice (1751) by Pietro Longhi
24 x 21½ in. At the National Gallery, London WC2 (020-7839 3321)

With the carnival in Venice about to begin, this week's picture is Pietro Longhi's depiction of a group of Venetian revellers enjoying the unfamiliar spectacle of a captive rhinoceros. The painting, which was done in 1751, may be seen at the National Gallery in London.

In the 18th century around 30,000 visitors would descend on Venice for the carnival, during which the wearing of a black or white mask guaranteed a welcome in most places. Evenings might be spent dancing, gambling or making amorous liaisons, while in the day there were entertainments such as acrobatic displays, pugilistic tournaments and wild beast shows such as the one shown

here. The artist's interest seems evenly divided (like his composition) between the smallish, festively dressed carnival audience, and the mute, heavy-footed animal in the arena before them.

Pietro Longhi spent much of his career documenting the life of the Venetian patriciate. Like a court and social reporter, he recorded their daily round of coffee-drinking, receptions and soirées. Unusual events were good for business, since he could usually sell several versions of the resulting picture, as he did in the case of the National Gallery's painting. The people whom Longhi painted were also his principal patrons (an inscription on the back of this picture records

that it was done on commission for Girolamo Mocenigo, 'Venetian nobleman'), which may help to explain the characteristic mildness of his art. Like his English contemporary Hogarth, he cast himself as a realist, a painter of social observation; and although he lacked Hogarth's satirical bite, he was by no means devoid of wit, and a sense of irony.

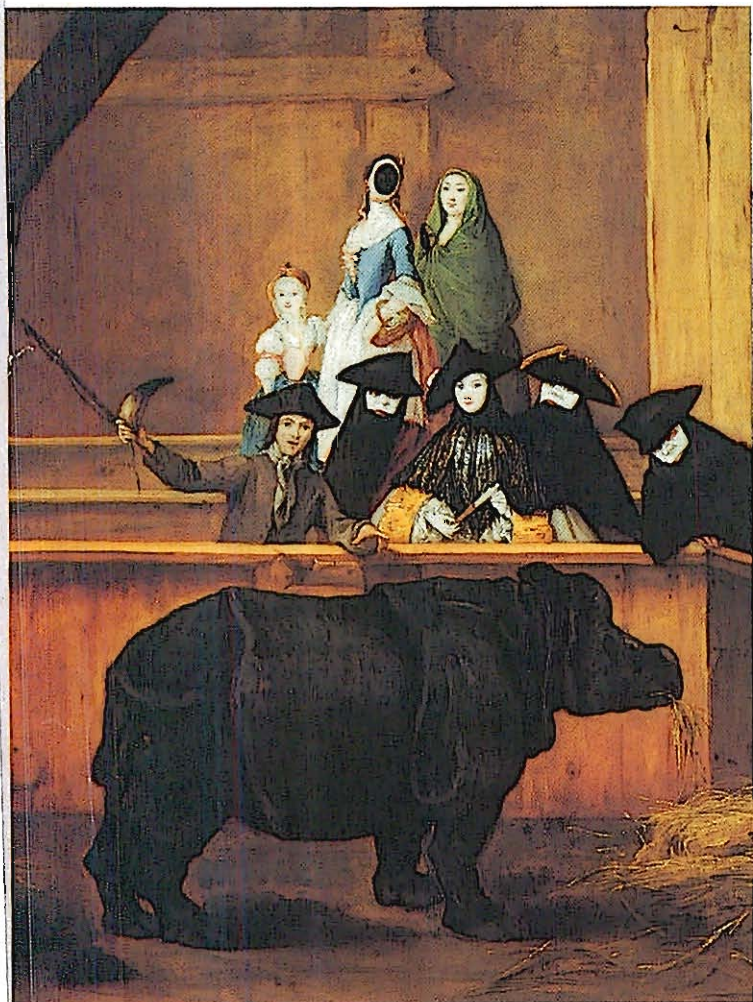
Exhibition of a Rhinoceros is an exemplary piece of reportage, a good story captured with humour and economy. The rhino in Longhi's painting was called Clara, and she was something of a celebrity in 18th-century Europe. According to TH Clarke, author of *The Rhinoceros from Dürer to Stubbs* (out of print), she was only the fifth member of her species to be imported from India to Europe since the fall of the

Leo X. The second pioneer of pachyderm peregrination was given to Philip II of Spain, who turned against the animal when it overturned a chariot full of his court favourites, and cruelly decreed that its eyes be put out and its horn cut off.

No such fate befell Clara who, having been acquired by a Dutch sea captain in 1741, spent all of 16 years touring Europe, taking in Holland, Germany, Austria, Poland, France and Italy. Her triumphant arrival in Paris sparked an outbreak of veritable rhinomania. Modish ladies wore their hair *à la rhinocéros*, while a certain gentleman of fashion, not to be outdone, is said to have disguised his carriage horses as pachyderms. The thick-skinned showgirl herself seems to have endured her captivity with surprising docility, if the posters proclaiming her arrival in England are to be believed. They declared that she was 'tame as a lambe. And for two years successively has run round the tables of Gentlemen and Ladies like a lap-dog.'

Longhi's portrait of her suggests that by the time she reached Venice Clara had become rather less frolicsome. The painter seems to catch the listlessness that hangs over so many wild animals when they are confined for too long. There is, by contrast, something crass about the exuberance with which the beast's keeper brandishes her horn (which, incidentally, had not been cut off but rubbed off by the rhinoceros herself against the side of her cage) in his left hand.

Longhi's painting is a fascinating slice of the past. I suspect he thought of it as a bit of a parable, a picture designed to provoke thoughts – typically 18th-century, Age of Enlightenment thoughts – about Nature and Culture. The life of the Beast is simple and unadorned, ruled by nature's rhythms alone; to suggest this idea Longhi wittily brackets the creature's form with, at one end, the mound of hay on which it munches and, at the other, the mound of faeces it has deposited. The life of Modern Man (and Woman), masked and hatted, powdered and periwigged, seems by contrast the *ne plus ultra* of artifice. The artist leaves it up to us to draw a moral from the scene, to decide which is the more extraordinary spectacle – the rare beast or its rarefied audience. ●



The beast's arrival sparked an outbreak of rhinomania; modish ladies wore their hair *à la rhinocéros*

Roman Empire. She was rather luckier than some of her predecessors. The first such arrival, the Renaissance rhino famously depicted by Dürer, died in a storm while being shipped to the Vatican as a gift to Pope



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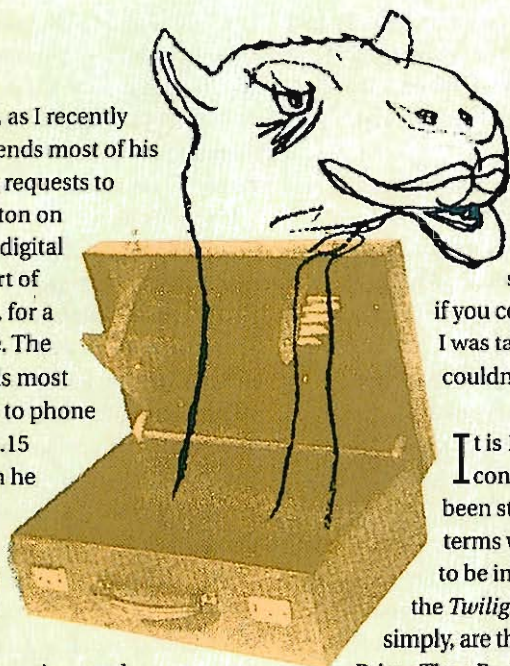
Days like these

My brother, who, as I recently discovered, spends most of his spare time e-mailing requests to 'Diddy' David Hamilton on Prime Time Radio (a digital radio station and 'part of the Saga Group') has, for a change, e-mailed me. The tone of the message is most urgent. He wants me to phone him this evening at 7.15 precisely, whereupon he will relate to me 'a most fantastic tale'. He adds that I might well hear something to my advantage.

I am most painfully curious and can barely wait, so I determine to while away the hours by refurbishing an old photo-album that belonged to our late father. Most of the photographs in it are of his father, my grandfather, whom I never met, and in nearly all the photographs he is standing alongside a camel. There's 'Freddie in Egypt with Camel', or 'Freddie in Baghdad with Camel', or 'Freddie in Morocco with Camel'. I've often wondered if it is the same camel, or different camels.

At 7.15 I phone my brother. I am glad to have the chance to speak to him because I have come across some photographs, tucked surreptitiously into the back cover flap of the album, of a very glamorous-looking woman who, according to jottings in pencil written on the back, is called Gwladys. I remember either Jeeves or Wooster warning that people should, as a rule, be wary of women called Gwladys with a 'w'. I am particularly intrigued to know who this particular Gwladys with a 'w' might be, though, because there were touching little pencilled hearts on the back of the photos alongside her name.

My brother might know if my grandfather or even my father in his youth ever dallied with a woman called Gwladys with a 'w'. But his number is engaged. What is the point of him e-mailing me and asking me to phone him at precisely 7.15pm if he's going to be on the phone all evening? I bet he keeps the line



free for 'Diddy' David Hamilton. Eventually, at 7.26pm, his phone rings and he answers. 'Oh, good, it's you,' says my brother. 'Sorry if you couldn't get through, but I was talking to Gwladys. I couldn't get her off the phone.'

It is 12 hours since that conversation and I have been struggling to come to terms with the fact that I seem to be involved in an episode of the *Twilight Zone*. The facts, put simply, are these: as a subscriber to Prime Time Radio, a digital radio station and 'part of the Saga Group', my brother is the lucky recipient of a free subscription to *Saga* magazine. Over the years he has amassed a number of these magazines which, for reasons best known to himself, he keeps in the loo.

One day recently my sister-in-law, for reasons best known to herself, picked up a copy of *Saga* and began to flick through it. It would be unfair on her to attempt too accurate a visualisation of the scene. Suffice to say that, within seconds, she was in the sitting-room shouting, 'Look at this!' at my brother and jabbing furiously at the personal ads, because someone called Gwladys with a 'w' was asking to hear from anyone who knew anything about our father. There in black and white was his name and last known address.

Gwladys, it turns out (and my brother was dragging the story out with terrible pauses for effect; so much so that, more than once, I had to ask him quite waspishly to 'just get on with it'), was the sister of our grandfather's second wife, Peggy, and when Peggy had died, some 20 years after our grandfather, Gwladys had been left to sort out all his effects and now she wanted to find the right home for them.

It was my brother's wife who made the initial call to her (I think she felt especially close to Gwladys after her discovery in the loo), and it turns out that Gwladys has a small

brown attaché case containing photographs and some documents. There is also, apparently, an alligator-skin lampshade. We imagine there might also be a Post Office savings book which will lead us to a large, life-changing inheritance.

We are a small family and both my brother and I feel very touched that Gwladys, a spinster in her late eighties, went to such lengths to contact us. This, and an almost uncontrollable curiosity, is why we are here now with her at her small cottage in Devon. She has prepared tea for us - scones, jam, cream, fruitcake, Earl Grey - and there on the table next to a Bizzy Lizzy is our grandfather's attaché case. I am desperate to open it but don't wish to appear rude. So we have tea and talk about ourselves and I ask Gwladys why she never married. 'Oh,' she says, looking a bit flushed, 'no reason really. It just wasn't meant to be.' And then she says quickly, as if to change the subject, 'Come on, let's have a look.' I open the lid of the brown leather attaché case and the first thing I see is the alligator-skin lampshade. It is squashed flat and looks like road kill. Underneath is Freddie's passport and

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his divorce papers from his first marriage to our grandmother; there is a letter to him from my father and his death certificate. But apart from that there are only photographs, nearly all of them featuring a camel. There is no Post Office savings book but there is a carbon copy of an IOU made out to someone called Alijah, who may well have been the camel's owner.

As we get up to go and Gwladys hands me the road-kill lampshade, I hand Gwladys the photographs I found tucked in the back of my grandfather's album. 'They've got your name on the back,' I say, 'and some pencilled hearts.' 'Ooh,' she says, flushing redder than her Bizzy Lizzy. 'Now I wonder why he would do that.' ●