

Indian Rhinoceros

Painted in 1790 or 1791

Canvas 27 × 36½ (69.9 × 92.7)

The Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons of England

Provenance: purchased (? and commissioned) by John Hunter for his museum, whose contents were entrusted after his death by Parliament to the Royal College of Surgeons of England

Exhibited: Liverpool 1951 (57); Whitechapel 1957 (53, as c. 1772); National Gallery of Art, Washington, *The Eye of Thomas Jefferson*, 1976 (122); Tate Gallery 1984-5 (87)

References: William Clift, 'A List of Paintings and Drawings numbered according to the situation in which they were placed ... in M^r Hunter's Museum in Castle Street, Leicester Square', MS, 1816, no. 7, p. 5; ditto, 'Pictures delivered May 3rd 1819', MS, no. 5; 'List of Portraits in the Court Room of the College, MS. 1820', no. 31 (these MSS are in the collection of the Royal College of Surgeons); Keith 1930 ('Indian Rhinoceros, by G. Stubbs'); Taylor 1955, pp. 36, 63; Taylor 1971, pp. 30, 210, as c. 1772; T. H. Clarke, 'The Iconography of the Rhinoceros from Dürer to Stubbs', *Connoisseur*, CLXXXV, 1974, p. 115 (as 'c. 1790'); Egerton 1976, p. 31; Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London*, 1978, p. 19; T. H. Clarke, *The Rhinoceros from Dürer to Stubbs 1515-1799*, 1986

The foremost authority on the rhinoceros in art was T. H. Clarke (d. 1988), to whose research (generously conveyed in engaging correspondence) this entry owes much, particularly over the dating of the rhinoceros painted by Stubbs. Although a date of c. 1772 had previously been assigned to this painting,¹ Clarke established that the rhinoceros painted by Stubbs was the animal which arrived in London in 1790, and was put on show at the Lyceum in the Strand.

In the summer of 1790 a rhinoceros, apparently a young animal, arrived in an East Indiaman as a gift to Mr Dundas, who either gave or more probably sold it to Thomas Clark, lessee of Exeter Change and the Lyceum in the Strand, where he mounted exhibitions of curiosities, not merely animal. The rhinoceros was on public view in the Lyceum by 26 July 1790, when the *Morning Herald* reported: 'We hear Mr Clark of Exeter Change is singular in his possessions, having perhaps what no Englishman before has had, the supporters of the King's Arms alive, a Lion and a male Unicorn ... a greater living curiosity has never appeared in this country' (though here the journalist was wrong: the first rhinoceros to be seen in England arrived in 1684, and a second in 1739).

Clarke 1986 quotes what was evidently a first-hand account of the rhinoceros, recorded by the Revd W. Bingley in 1805: 'He exhibited symptoms of no ferocious propensity, and would even allow himself to be patted on the back or sides by strangers. His docility was about equal to a tolerably tractable pig ... He was very fond of sweet wines, of which he would often drink three or four bottles in the course of a few hours. His voice was not much unlike the bleating of a calf. It was most commonly exerted when the animal observed any person with fruit or other favourite food in his hand ...' In December 1790 the rhinoceros was joined in the Lyceum by 'three stupendous Ostriches' and also by the 'Royal Lincolnshire Ox, allowed by the best judges to be the largest and fattest cow bred in this or any other country'. Stubbs's portrait of the Lincolnshire Ox (No. 277) is likely to have been made at much the same time as that of the rhinoceros.

As with much of Stubbs's work, his painting of the rhinoceros was evidently preceded by preliminary chalk studies. His studio sale included 'Nine studies of the rhinoceros, in different attitudes' (lot 15 on 26 May, in the section devoted to 'Drawings, Studies from Nature, Sketches etc.'). These were sold, with lot 16 ('A pencilled drawing of a Lion, 3 ditto of Pointers, and a study of a Cow') to anon for a total of 1s. 6d.; but like all the drawings in Stubbs's sale, they have vanished. The drawing of a sleeping rhinoceros, in black and white chalk on blue paper, published by Taylor 1971 (plate 71) as by Stubbs is now, with a similar drawing in the collection of the late Sir John Witt, generally accepted to be by Johann Elias Ridinger.

The rhinoceros passed from Clark's ownership to that of Gilbert Pidcock, a showman with a gift for exuberant advertising who issued handbills, posters and token halfpennies bearing the rhinoceros's image. On 3 June 1793 the rhinoceros appeared by royal command at Windsor: 'This day Her Majesty sent to Mr Pidcock the Exhibitor of the Rhinoceros, for that Animal to be brought to the Queen's Lodge, for the Queen and Princesses to view it. It was of course immediately drawn in the Machine before the Lodge, the appearance of which highly gratified them and the King'. A few days later it was on show at Ascot races, and then began a western tour; but it injured one of its forelegs and died at Corsham near Portsmouth later in the summer of 1793.

John Hunter was particularly interested in the rhinoceros unicornis. There is no doubt that this painting was in his museum when he died on 16 October 1793. What is undoubtedly odd, as Clarke 1986 notes, is that Stubbs's name was not attached to the painting until Keith's catalogue of 1930 (cited under *References*). The probability is that Hunter hung the painting in his museum unattributed, some time before 14 February 1792, when his careful recorder and assistant William Clift entered his service, and that the question of who painted it was never discussed. For John Hunter, subject-matter was usually of more importance than connoisseurship. There can be little doubt that the realism with which Stubbs observes the rhinoceros is consistent with Stubbs's other work for John and William Hunter, and the manner in which the animal's solid bulk fills the canvas is characteristic of Stubbs.

Note

1. As Clarke noted, an error in Gustave Loisel's *Histoire des menageries de l'antiquité à nos jours*, Paris, 1912, appears to have been responsible for the previous dating of Stubbs's rhinoceros to c. 1772. There was no rhinoceros in London c. 1770-72; Loisel's statement that a rhinoceros has arrived in London in 1770 appears to have been a printer's error of '1770' for '1790'.

