

A RHINO REMEMBERED

On the 500th Anniversary of a Shipwreck

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Is there anyone who has not heard of the terrible tempest on the Ligurian Sea which claimed the life of Percy Bysshe Shelley? In almost precisely the same place, near the mouth of Spezia Bay off the coast of Porto Venere, another storm had wrecked a vessel three centuries before – *O Wild West Wind!* The tragedy took place on 25 January 1516, almost exactly five hundred years ago. The most famous victim on board – *pace* Shelley – was an animal, an Indian rhinoceros to be precise, to whom this essay is dedicated. We will find out shortly what on earth this beast was doing on the boat, tossed about by the raging sea. But let us first have a look at his *curriculum vitae* and a modest presumption which I hope will explain why I accord such significance to an odd-toed ungulate that found a watery grave, and perhaps even what he might have to do with me or, rather, with my professional interests.

The beast probably hailed from Gujarat in Northwest India. Sultan Muzaffar II is on record to have given a gift of the by then fully grown rhino bull he called *Ganda* to the Portuguese military commander Diego Fernandes de Beja, in commemoration of “establishing mutually beneficial diplomatic contact” – politicalese for the sultan’s polite rejection of Portugal’s overtures aimed at colonisation. Beja received the gift on 18 May 1514, and the animal landed in Goa on 15 September, after the commander, bent on getting rid of this evidence of his failed mission, had dispatched it to Afonso de Albuquerque, Viceroy of the Portuguese territories in India. Afonso, himself no novice to the symbolic language of diplomacy, did not warm to *Ganda* either, and resolved to grab the first opportunity to relay the gift on to his King, Manuel I. That opportunity presented itself early the following year when the next ship was set to sail for the motherland. Under the command of Francisco Pereira Coutinho, the caravel named Our Lady of Mercy traversed the Indian Ocean, skirted the Cape of Good Hope, then briefly called at St Helena and the Azores Islands to feed the royal gift and take him for a walk. After a swift journey under lively winds that took all of 120 days, the caravel entered the port of Lisbon on 20 May 1515 and anchored by the site where the foundation works for the Belém Tower had begun a few days previously. It would beggar belief to say that the timing of this homecoming

was a coincidence: 20 May had been declared Navigation Day in Portugal 17 years before, when Vasco da Gama reached India. The tower about to be built in honour of his achievement would have some of the stones supporting the cornice carved in the image of a rhino's head, these still visible today.

It was the first time, if not in history then certainly in many centuries, that a rhinoceros set foot on the European continent. (Ancient Roman authors and coins attest to the possibility of occasional rhino presence in Antiquity.) Early in the summer of 1515, news of the unique beast's arrival spread like wildfire, probably owing in part to the massive cult in medieval Christianity of the mysterious unicorn, the unbridled creature that could only be tamed and rendered docile as a lamb if breastfed by an immaculate virgin. Indeed, the man of the Middle Ages had no difficulty transcending the striking discrepancy between the graceful heraldic animal often seen in miniatures and the hulking newcomer, and quickly came to regard the two as one and the same. True enough, science was not much help in making a rigorous distinction. Even a description of the *monokeros* by Pliny the Elder, widely considered the foremost authority on the subject, did not readily lend itself to telling a rhinoceros from a unicorn: "... [it] has a body like a horse, a head like a deer, feet like an elephant, a tail like a boar; it has a deep bellow, a single black horn two cubits long projecting from the middle of its forehead". King Manuel, who alternately believed and distrusted his scientists, decided to get to the bottom of the legend himself. While he understandably failed in his attempts to find an immaculate virgin who would agree to breastfeed the beast, the fact that he kept several elephants in his court menagerie put him in a better position to verify Pliny's claim, advanced in another passage of *Naturalis Historia*, about the irreconcilable enmity between the rhinoceros and the elephant.

The experiment was arranged to take place on 3 June 1515, the Feast of the Holy Trinity. On this occasion, the rhino faced a young bull from Manuel's elephant stable in a makeshift arena. Happily, the showdown produced no bloodbath as the two animals, frightened to death by the huge crowd, apparently had no inclination whatsoever to help solve the "scientific" problem, whatever it was worth. They simply halted at a safe distance from one another, making a show of giving off a few huffs and puffs and the occasional snort. Then, when the rhino stamped its feet briefly, the elephant thought better of it and bolted for safety, leaving its horned opponent to be declared the winner.

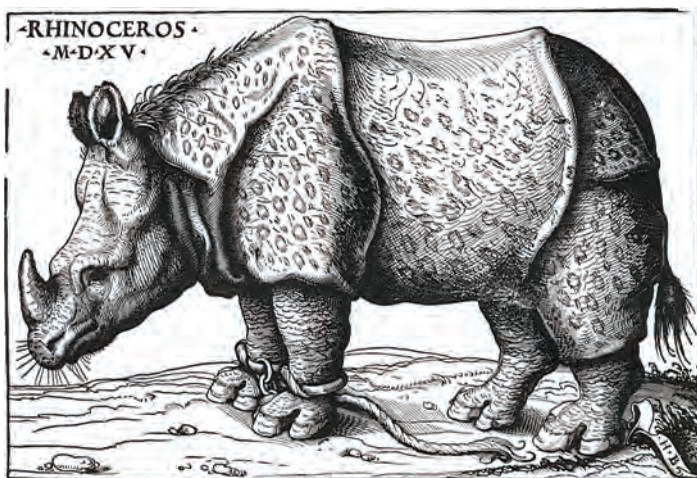
Sitting in the audience was a Moravian named Valentim Fernandes, a translator, printer and book publisher who had been living in Lisbon for twenty years. He was positively electrified by the sight of the rare beast in the flesh, for the very good reason that it was he who had translated, printed and published Marco Polo's Asian travelogue in which mention was made of a strange horned creature he

suspected might be the same as the royal rhino. To be sure, what Marco Polo set his eyes upon could not have been a unicorn, if for nothing else than for the simple reason that it had two horns. In any event, Marco Polo must have had a hard time picturing the boar-headed, armour-skinned brute rolling in the mud as the docile creature taking a virgin's nipple... Posterity, always wise in hindsight, solved the puzzle: what the Venetian seafarer encountered was not an Indian rhinoceros but a specimen of the Sumatran subspecies, equipped with two horns rather than one. This second horn will create a bit of a mess for our own investigation as well, as we shall see shortly. The good Moravian, who corresponded regularly with his German colleagues, wasted no time in writing down his impressions of the beast.



Giovanni Giacomo Penni: Rhinoceros, woodcut, 1515.

He may have even slipped a sketch into the envelope which ended up on the hands of Albrecht Dürer in Nuremberg. A similar message found another distinguished German artist, Hans Burgkmair in Augsburg. Both men duly got down to work to fashion their own rhinoceros. Fuelled by the glory of becoming the first to create the effigy of an unknown creature, and also not indifferent to the potential profitability of the enterprise, they opted for a woodcut, which lent itself to producing prints in large numbers. The German masters, however, were beaten to the task by Giovanni Giacomo Penni, a Florentine physician, who published a “scientific” treatise in verse about the rhinoceros merely forty days after the “battle” in Lisbon (and 54 days after the rhino had landed on the shore), under the title *The Shape, the Nature and the Way of the Rhinoceros brought by the Captain of the Portuguese King's Armada and other beautiful things brought from the new insulars*. Even more surprising, perhaps, than the sheer promptness of the publication was the unusually high number of copies printed, if we are to believe the only extant copy, which bears the serial number of 2260 and indicates, in handwriting, the name of its owner as Fernando Columbo – the younger son of Christopher Columbus. The cover features a woodcut we may safely regard as the first “authentic” representation of our rhinoceros. Lacking in fine artistic touches as it is, the woodcut would be



Hans Burgkmair: Rhinoceros, woodcut, 1515.

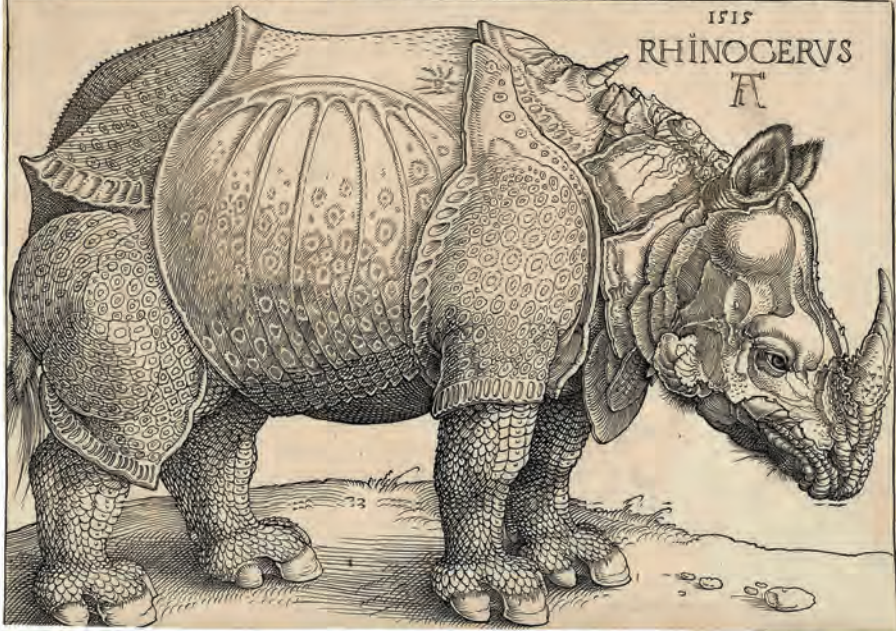
difficult to demonstrate to have been modelled on the same sketch that inspired the German masters, but for a small point that makes us pause (and which will become germane to this narrative later on): the fore legs of the beast are bound together, just as they are in the illustration by Burgkmair. This is not something one just makes up off the top of one's head. If these two depicted the rhino with its fore legs in shackles, then this is how it must have been in the sketch sent to them. On the other hand, it is also clear that no beast in shackles would have had a fighting chance against an elephant. This makes it reasonable to assume that the person from whom both artists took their cue was hardly Valentim Fernandes, who had seen the rhinoceros in Manuel's makeshift arena, but someone who had encountered it earlier, quite possibly when it disembarked the ship.

But let us trace our steps back to Dürer, whose drawing and, even more importantly, woodcut was, after all, what made the Rhinoceros famous as we know it. It is indeed Dürer's iconic representation of the animal which forms the focus of our inquiry. The brown pen and ink drawing is kept in the British Museum, along with several proofs of the cut from various editions. In fact, so many prints of Dürer's woodcut survive that one may actually purchase one for studying in the comfort of one's home, although that intimacy will not come cheap. In January 2013, a specimen from the first edition (there were at least seven posthumous editions) fetched 865,500 dollars at an auction held by Christie's in New York. This rather handsome amount represents a radical shift in the collectors' appreciation of Dürer's oeuvre, given that it surpassed the hammer prices achieved by copper engravings of far greater elaboration and deeper philosophical content, although admittedly smaller in size – not that this should matter, should it? – including *Melencolia* (530,500 dollars) and *Adam and Eve* (662,500 dollars). This shift is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that the woodcut, unlike the copperplates

which the artist engraved himself, was finalised by a master woodblock cutter, albeit obviously based on Dürer's drawing and adorned by his initials.

The claim that this is “an accurate representation” of the animal, as the banner text over the woodcut image insists, should be taken with a pinch of salt. The creature's appearance must have changed considerably through its various incarnations, even if no intentional alteration of the image can be presumed. Valentim Fernandes glimpsed the beast fighting or getting ready to fight an opponent – hardly an ideal situation for objective observation – which may have intensified the bellicose traits of the spectacle as transposed into text (the letter) and image (the sketch). Since the banner text itself emphasises belligerence, it is hardly surprising that Dürer set about executing the drawing with a war machine in mind. Having completed the drawing and reworked it somewhat to better accommodate the cumbersome technology of the woodcut, perhaps even copying it on to the wooden plank himself, he handed it to the woodblock cutter, who could not help but make subtle alterations to the master's lines despite his best efforts to trace them faithfully. One might say he *andreälised* it to a point, for the *formschneyder* was most likely the same Hieronymus Andreaä with whom Dürer worked on a regular basis at the time, producing, among other works, *The Triumphal Arch* of Emperor Maximilian, their

Etlich Christen gepent. 1515. Jar. 28. 11. May. Sat man den großmichtigen König von Portugal. Einmal gen Lysabona pacht auf India ein sollich lebendig Thier. Das nennen sie Rhinocerus. Das ist bey mir aller soner gestalt Aberdort ist. Es hat ein fard wie ein gepackete Schildkröt. Und ist vñ vielen Schulen völegit fast ist. Und ist in der geyß alder seltsame Thier nydarnobiger von paynon/ vñ fast wechaffing. Es hat ein schaff stark. Soen vom auff der nase/ Das beynde es allgey wagen wo es bey flaynen ist. Das dorig Thier ist bey self fang todt frinde. Der seltsame furcht es fast vñd/ dann wo es in ankumbe/ d laufft. Im das Thier mit dem kopff zwischen dyc fodern paynt/ vñ reyt dor seltsame vuden am panch auff ein erdige. In. das mag er sich mit erwent. Dann das Thier ist also gewapent/ das Im der seltsame nichta kan thun. Sie sagen auch das der Rhinocerus Schnell/ Straydig vñ Lichtig sey.



Albrecht Dürer: *Rhinoceros*, woodcut, 1515.

largest collaboration. Returning from a trip to the Netherlands in 1521, Dürer made his colleague the symbolic yet practical gift of “an exceedingly large horn” to remind him of their joint achievement, the *Rhinoceros*, which had attained genuine success and popularity, and also to hint in jest to the rapidly spreading rumour that the rhinoceros horn was the most potent aphrodisiac of all time. Keep that enormous horn in mind; we shall take it out shortly.

For now, let us return to the genesis of the famous cut and read to the end the inscription on top from which we have singled out a brief quotation before:

On the first of May in the year 1513 AD [*sic*], the powerful King of Portugal, Manuel of Lisbon, brought such a living animal from India, called the rhinoceros. This is an accurate representation. It is the colour of a speckled tortoise, and is almost entirely covered with thick scales. It is the size of an elephant but has shorter legs and is almost invulnerable. It has a strong pointed horn on the tip of its nose, which it sharpens on stones. It is the mortal enemy of the elephant. The elephant is afraid of the rhinoceros, for, when they meet, the rhinoceros charges with its head between its front legs and rips open the elephant's stomach, against which the elephant is unable to defend itself. The rhinoceros is so well-armed that the elephant cannot harm it. It is said that the rhinoceros is fast, impetuous and cunning.

The text, while giving an incorrect date, does make an initial reference to the specimen in Lisbon, but then proceeds to present the beast in general terms. As such, it is more indebted to Pliny than to the individual rhino that had served as the subject of the woodcut. Although the description quotes directly from *Naturalis Historia*, the image itself hints at an overwrought imagination at work behind the aloof objectivism of natural science. Or is it rather we who unwittingly look for those signs so typical of the age, particularly in German-speaking areas? Is it that the Teutonic soul, predisposed toward the eerie, is better suited to believe that the path to salvation leads through the circles of Hell, and that the Host of forgiveness tastes sweeter after one has emptied the bitter cup of abomination? Or is it simply that the Germanic peoples have a more thoroughly documented history of affiliation with monsters? In any event, unprecedented indeed were the apocalyptic nightmares and throngs of feverish demons that invaded the studios of German painters and graphic artists starting in the second half of the 15th century. Schongauer, Wolgemut, Hopfer, Baldung, Bosch and Brueghel all come to mind. And let us recall that the standard tempters of Saint Anthony, who had just embarked on a spectacular career as a favourite subject of the fine arts, included the unicorn, which sometimes wore its horn on its nose rather than on its forehead (as it did in an altarpiece by the freak-specialist Niklaus Manuel Deutsch) or donned rhinoceros skin (as Grünewald depicted it).

Although both Burgkmair and Dürer qualified as highly trained bestiologists in their own right, they were also known for their penchant for natural history. Shortly before that notorious envelope was delivered to his hand, Burgkmair had finished cutting in the wood block an Indian elephant as part of the *Triumphal March* of Emperor Maximilian, and was likely gearing up for the triptych *Saint John in Patmos*, which was to go down in the annals of art history as the first authentic depiction of tropical flora and fauna. While Dürer's animal portraits – hare, stag beetle, bat, owl, deer head, bluebird, grosbeak, crab – must have been well-known, it was probably owing to his deep, sometimes childishy overheated fondness of all creatures exotic that he was among the selected recipients of the letter. He cut a wild boar, drew a huge stranded whale, painted a whiskered walrus head, and generally hoarded everything he could lay his hands on that he thought hailed from faraway lands. Goethe once reprimanded him for recklessly abandoning his great works for mere parrots.

Perusing his *Diary of a Trip to the Netherlands* one encounters a rapid succession of relics from newly discovered lands and the strange creatures inhabiting them. Quite conceivably, Dürer was at this time preoccupied with plans along the lines of Leonardo's collage technique, whereby the Italian master – as alleged by Giorgio Vasari, for the work did not survive – created a horrific Medusa head by fitting a round shield with snakes, frogs, lizards, bats and other bizarre critters, which coalesced into a lurid face when viewed from a distance. The method, which universal art history would later link to the name of Arcimboldo, influenced many including Dürer, who tried his hands at the genre a few times. His *View of Arco*, for instance, lends itself to visualising several human faces simultaneously, provided you stare at it long enough and of course with sufficient empathy. What emerges from Dürer's travel log is a long inventory of *naturaliae*, rare animals and diverse exotica, purchased for money, bartered, or received as a gift, including the already mentioned enormous horn as well as a huge fish bone, coconuts, horns of oxen and water buffalo, a miniature skull carved from ivory, a small live monkey, gigantic fish scales, shells of tortoise, snails, and clams, white coral, a musk ball cut from the musk-deer, a shield made from candied fish skin, lemon peel, elk claws, a stone pine cone, a fish fin, bamboo sticks, parrot plumes, dried fish and capers. Although tight-fisted in every other way, Dürer accumulated an expensive collection of curiosities large enough for him not to carry on his person, and had to hire a forwarding agent to deliver his new treasures home to Nuremberg crossing no fewer than 32 various customs jurisdictions. The artist must have intended this collection as a catalogued portfolio which he could draw on later and retrieve any item that could aid him in executing certain details of a hitherto unknown creature.

Boasting a good command of Latin, Dürer probably often thought of Horace's *Ars poetica*, perhaps even quoting for himself the vitriolic opening lines of the



Erhard Schön: Albrecht Dürer, woodcut, 1528.

poem which ridicule precisely his brand of creating art by cobbling together mismatched body parts:

If a painter had chosen to set a human head
On a horse's neck, covered a melding of limbs,
Everywhere, with multi-coloured plumage, so
That what was a lovely woman, at the top,
Ended repulsively in the tail of a black fish:
Asked to a viewing, could you stifle laughter, my friends?

(Translation by A. S. Kline)

Yet all these curiosities that took Europe by storm in the wake of the great geographical discoveries clearly overwrote the classical canon. Dürer was no less likely than the next man to doubt that zoological miracles would continue to pour in. Since the day he was born the number of animal species known to inhabit the Earth had doubled, and he had reason to believe this number would double again by the time he died. A dyed-in-the-wool naturalist may have harboured reservations about the supposedly infinite number of permutations in the living world, but nothing like this could have occurred to the true believer, for whom questioning the endless variety of species would have been tantamount to doubting the infinite power of the Creator. In a work entitled *The History of Four-Footed Beasts* (1607), Edward Topsell, an English scientist from the Norman's land separating natural history from theology, attempted to popularise his theory about cross-breeds, positing, among other assumptions, that the giraffe descended from the camel and the leopard. Such conjectures inherently led to the observation that the combinatory process was unstoppable, the potential number of chimeras infinite, the sky the only limit.

The Rhinoceros woodcut wears its technique on its sleeve; all we need to do is revisit the text borrowed from Pliny. *It is the colour of a speckled tortoise, and is almost entirely covered with thick scales.* Dürer's collection was hardly short of tortoise shells; he only had to find the right drawer where he kept a speckled one. *It is the size of an elephant but has shorter legs and is almost invulnerable.* Elephants were not unheard of or unseen in Europe at the time; Manuel, for one, maintained a menagerie of several specimens as we have seen. We will touch upon Hanno, the white elephant in due course. For now let it suffice to hypothesise that a few drawings or cuts representing elephants could have found their way to Nuremberg. If only those legs could be shortened and covered in fish scales (let's find some in one of those drawers), the image of the beast could transport us smack in the middle of the distant Indies! *It has a strong pointed horn on the tip of its nose, which it sharpens on stones.* The collection has plenty of horns (of ox, bison, buffalo) to choose from, but if something more spectacular is called for, there must be a narwhal tusk or a pointy pine cone somewhere in there... Let us see which one will show to better effect. *The elephant is afraid of the rhinoceros, for, when they meet, the rhinoceros charges with its head between its front legs and rips open the elephant's stomach, against which the elephant is unable to defend itself.* Those tortoise shells, if fit together deftly, will make a credible image of a massive, robust creature, whose special tactic of warfare – dashing back and forth between the legs of an elephant – would seem to benefit from a sharp horn protruding from its back. It was probably this consideration that resulted in that second horn on the rhino's withers, which quickly became the hallmark of the Dürerian representation. What it resembles most is the shell of the door snail family (*Clausiliidae*), which is not unlike the twisted single horn donned by unicorns in typical renditions.

I promised to come back to Valentim Fernandes in connection with the second horn. Well, the good translator was certain that the animal he saw at the court of Ribeira Palace was the same that he had read about in Marco Polo's account. He was not in the least swayed in his conviction by the minor discrepancy that the Venetian roamer mentioned two horns while the specimen in Lisbon seemed to wear only one. That second horn, for all he knew, may have broken off in the heat of another fracas... Or he may have simply visualised the ancillary horn in his mind's eye. It is also conceivable that he very deliberately supplied the sketch dispatched to Nuremberg with the second horn allegedly observed by Polo. This was, after all, how science made progress, was it not? The strange add-on horn may be the most oft-cited quirk of the woodcut, but it is far from being the only peculiarity about it and, as we have seen, was not even necessarily Dürer's own invention. That strange gorget, the precisely riveted seams connecting the individual armour plates, the relief motif hinting at the position of the ribs, the hard scales covering legs, and the sheer decorativeness of the animal's appearance make it impossible to rule out that the rare beast was indeed dressed in armour for that showdown in Lisbon. Yet in view of the mission the beast was to be given to help bring prosperity to Portugal – a task which will soon force me to make yet another detour – it would have seemed odd to adopt any precautionary measure to bolster its already well-protected bodily integrity. Then again, the rhino was to triumph in the duel in Pliny's assessment. It is another matter whether the elephant subscribed to this view.

The longer I stare at the woodcut the less likely it seems to me that I am looking at a "dressed-up" rhinoceros. This is not to say, of course, that Dürer thought so, too. In any case, neither the letter he received nor the sketch accompanying it warranted such an inference. Dürer set about working in good faith, taking without second thoughts those armour rivets for hardened warts of the skin, the greaves for scales, and the bayonet fitted to the animal's nape for a second horn. Dürer may never have been to Portugal, but he was certainly familiar with Italy, so he must have known a thing or two about ceremonies in the Latin world, where decked-out animals were not only ubiquitous but central to the cultural tradition. Ultimately, however, Dürer was a child of the cool-headed North (and also of the Puritanical, Calvinist East owing to his Hungarian ancestry), so it probably never crossed his mind that the animal in the sketch could be wearing a costume of sorts.

If the above conclusion is correct – that is, if the rhino in the sketch wears ornate armour plates rather than being presented naked in the flesh – this would suggest that the image advertises the horn vs. trunk fight of 3 June. If it does, it raises the problem of genre, for it removes the rhinoceros from the category of bestiary engravings (or, more precisely, from that of illustrations in natural history) and places it in the genre of ephemera as a veritable foreshadowing of the modern billboard. In this view, the composition combining a *lemma* (text) and *imago* (image)

as was customary in *emblemata* sheets, must be seen as promoting the spectacle in the palace of Lisbon (*post factum* as that advertisement may have been). This same dual structure would inform the street billboards emerging in the 19th century.

Although our previous reasoning – namely that Dürer was unaware of dealing with a costumed rhino – would seem to lead to the easy conclusion that he did not intend the print as an instance of *ephemera*, the question is definitely worth dwelling on. So-called “applied graphic art” is normally practised on commission. Did Dürer make his woodcut to order, or to his own pleasure and satisfaction? His triumph from the previous year, *Melencolia*, is a genuinely independent work, identified by Panofsky as a spiritual self-portrait, and it was obviously not made to order. On the other hand, Dürer spent much of the year 1515 working on *The Triumphal Arch*, commissioned by Emperor Maximilian. We do not know if the person who delivered the letter and the sketch from Lisbon to Dürer specifically placed an order for the work, but the possibility cannot be ruled out. Indeed, one of the financiers on the artist’s radar screen would soon flaunt the woodcut as his own property. In the fifth book of *Pantagruel*, Rabelais mentions a man named Harry Clerberg who showed him the portrait of a rhinoceros. Since this Harry Clerberg was none other than Hans Kleeberger of Nuremberg, Dürer’s neighbour and model before he moved to Lyon, as well as the son-in-law of his friend Pircheimer, we can be certain that the image described by Rabelais was the woodcut we are concerned with here. A man always on the road, Kleeberger is as likely a candidate as any for having brought news of the rhino to Nuremberg, and, as one of the wealthiest bankers in Europe, called “the good German” by the French on account of his charity, was clearly in the position to commission a drawing from Dürer.

A piece of autonomous graphic art, or an expert illustration in natural history? A voluntary work or one made to order? The animal in the flesh or clad in armour plates, ready for the battle? I have been known to argue, and even to set it in writing, that the life of a work of art would be incomplete without taking into account all opinions ever attached to it, be they mutually contradictory views, arbitrary misinterpretations, or lopsided distortions. Yet now I would not mind if I could collect the branching threads of this draft and point them toward a single conclusion. Perhaps we shall be better off if we try and strip the work of all accrued knowledge and added information, and view the image in its stark intrinsic reality.

The paper sheet measures 23.5 by 29.8 cm, roughly the size of standard A4 paper, and was printed in black printer’s ink from a letterpress woodblock. It consists of three clearly distinct parts: the profile image of the animal viewed from the right; the inscription in capital letters RHINOCERUS; and an explanatory note striving to describe the animal with the succinctness of a dictionary entry. These three features stand for three markedly different ways of approaching the same

subject, and in rather thought-provoking ways. Do these three approaches overlap completely? Do they faithfully represent each other? Or are they juxtaposed to jointly represent something else, an elusive notion that emerges in us, and only in us, as we gaze at, read about, and mull over the idea of the rhinoceros? I venture the hypothesis that, instead of focusing on the aesthetic aspects of execution, Dürer here is preoccupied with grasping the very concept of expression. In other words, he transcends the subject of representation to attempt to define the language thereof. In a manner of saying, we witness an artist straying into the field of art philosophy. But is he by so doing going *astray*? Does he entangle himself in the net of tautology by mistake and accident, or has he developed a sincere interest in transgressing the disciplinary border on purpose? Before essaying an answer, let me recall that the “Daedalian master”, as Karel van Mander called him, had an equal command of the visual and verbal idioms, and was fascinated with ways of making the two media correlate or bleed into one another. He touches on this in his *Praise of Painting* (1512) and reiterates the idea in *Food for Apprentice Painters* (1513) as follows: “What you see is always more believable than what you hear. But what you can both hear and see is easier to understand and will keep longer in memory. This is why I fuse word with image, so that the whole may be better remembered.”

Gombrich's notion of the “conceptual image”, understood as the opposite of the “visual image” – that is, the notion that the artist does not draw what he sees but what he knows – applies self-evidently to the case at hand, given that Dürer never saw a rhinoceros in the flesh, and even the assumption that he saw a sketch of the animal is supported by no evidence other than by the overall precision of the representation, which is remarkable despite a few obvious inaccuracies. While drawing the image of a beast he had never seen but knew full well to exist, Dürer had to realise that the tension between a work of art and reality was just as powerful as that between reality and the words intended to convey it. It dawned on him that representation by language and representation by images are two aspects of the same thing, of the reality, he might say, which some Greek authors argued could only be approached through such aspects or projections at best, while most of the time we are relegated to groping around among diverse shadows and mirror images. The “handy” – because easily rendered – reality of stag beetles, bats and hares was suddenly called into question and yielded to a “conceptual” depiction from multiple directions as the safer solution, which Dürer now attempted for the first time in his *Rhinoceros*. A proto-conceptual work indeed, as those well-versed in the art of the second half of the 20th century might say, thinking of something like Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*. Widely recognised as the epitome of the Conceptual Art movement, this latter work, so notorious that it borders on a cult classic, consists of a real chair, a life-size photograph of it, and a mounted photographic enlargement of the dictionary definition of “chair”. But where is the “real chair” here? – one might counter the proposed parallel between Kosuth and Dürer, pointing out that

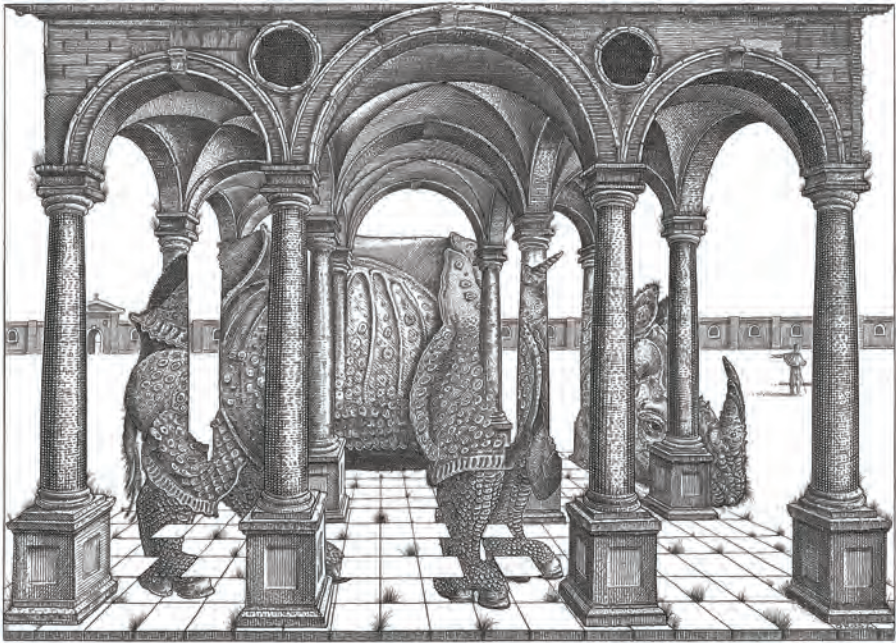
Dürer's tautology is not threefold but two-and-a-half fold at best, since the woodcut juxtaposes a visual depiction to two verbal representations, moreover that the referent is missing, because a tangible, three-dimensional rhino is not part of the equation. You want a real rhinoceros? How about a metonymic part of it? At this juncture, let us recall the reportedly huge horn Dürer brought from the Netherlands as a gift for his *formschneyder*, Hieronymus Andreä. Europe may not have seen a rhinoceros in the flesh, but the occasional rhino horn had already found its way to the continent to occupy pride of place in many a *Wunderkammer*, or to transmit the virile vehemence of its former owner as an expensive aphrodisiac. Although we have no knowledge that either the xylographer or the designer stood the horn next to the image as it was drawn and cut, it is without a doubt that the juxtaposition transpired mentally, on the level of a thought experiment – which, as we know, takes precedence over the finished work in the eyes of any conceptualist worth his salt.

Perhaps it is not besides the point to mention another, less conspicuous detail – a sort of “secret sign” if you will – which forms an equally important part of the complex whole of the work: a watermark. The paper chosen by Dürer and Andreä for the prints reveals the image of an anchor set in a circle if held up against the light. The original symbolism of this watermark (security, fidelity, faith) as commonly used by the papermakers of the era is, in this instance, overwritten by the thematic application, as the anchor alludes to the animal's arrival by sea. Now, the quadruple constellation of rhino horn, rhino image, rhino entry and rhino watermark is a combination with which even the most seasoned concept-art connoisseurs cannot have a bone to pick with!

The phenomenon of art would be placed in a new context nearly five centuries later, vindicating Kosuth's dictum which holds that pronouncements on and exegeses of art are indistinguishable from art itself – to put it more simply, that the problems of art are essentially linguistic in nature. Kosuth's tripartite work is not complete without the fourth element, the seemingly trite title of *One and Three Chairs*. In other words, the single chair as a concept is authenticated by the three phenomenological incarnations in which it is made to appear to us. If it appeared to us in one of its forms only, it would not deserve to be called a chair, just as the pipe in Magritte's 1929 painting *The Treachery of Images* can not properly be called a pipe, no matter how alluringly it evokes the pipiest pipe ever seen on a tobacconist's shop sign. Think about it: if you placed a real pipe next to the painting, you would quickly come round to the view expressed in the inscription therein: “*Ceci n'est pas une pipe.*” If I want to further elaborate the distinction between visual and linguistic representation, I might as well start by pointing out that the visual image (such as Dürer's woodcut) and the linguistic representation (Pliny's description), each a systematic arrangement of black lines and spots on white paper, are much more akin to one another than either has in

common with that thing of entirely different dimensions, weight, colour, smell, temperature, feel and dynamics which goes by the name of rhinoceros.

Rather than simply jotting down the title RHINOCERUS, Dürer vouches for it by affixing his own trademark initials, a letter D squeezed between the legs of a capital A, which seems particularly oversized even in comparison with his normally rather self-assertive signing habit. This is an authentic rhinoceros – the claim is stated and warranted by a man no less than Albrecht Dürer himself. It is as if the letter D stood between the doorjambs formed by the A, or stepped forth from that doorway to greet us. Indeed, that letter A might be taken to stand for the Hungarian village of Ajtós (literally “the place with doors”) from where his father hailed, changing his name to *Tür* (“door” in German), which in pronunciation turned into *Dür*, and eventually into *Dürer*. That the initials form a pictogram becomes obvious upon the first glance at the Dürers’ family crest, which features a door in a more readily recognisable form. Seen in this light, the paraphrase of the formula in words perhaps no longer seems so pretentious: I the undersigned Albrecht Dürer open a door for you so that you may step into the world I have drawn for you. Of course, five hundred years on the habits of viewing a picture have inevitably changed. The technique of relief printing, xylography, and the attendant crisp, contrast-driven visual language, which were regarded as a novelty, even breathtakingly modern at the time, have since gone out of fashion. There is a deep chronological chasm from which we view the rhinoceros, a miraculous beast then recently discovered in the New World, as a paleontological relic of a species on the brink of extinction today. Yet if we dwell on the image, taking the time to acquaint ourselves with the details of its history and destiny, all of a sudden we will recognise the symbolic in it. Nor is it necessary to explain the subtle sense of self-irony that emerges if we take ourselves too seriously as we subject the rhino image to profound scholarly scrutiny. For this cumbersome, heavy-set, slow-to-move, near-extinct creature is indeed the mirror image of the woodcut, of graphic design, of the hand-crafted illumination – in a word, our dying trade. He is there lurking in the beautifully ham-fisted fiascos of manual work, in the derailed pencil lines, in the marks left by the slip of the knife, in the broken contours, in the inadvertent smudges and spills of paint. I have heard rumours about tiny fits and starts, bursts of random noise built into the latest computer programmes in an attempt to make them seem more live and natural, a bit more *rhinocerean* if you will. Perhaps the artist’s initials directly underneath the title are part of the tongue-in-cheek self-irony. Just read the two together: RHINOCERUS – AD could mean “Albrecht Dürer, the rhinoceros”. Having completed his self-portrait in the wistful *Melencolia*, the artist moved to create a playful and mocking double for himself, as if to say, “This is me, too, please recognise me!” First seen as boastful, ostentatious and haughty, the initials now quietly turn in upon themselves as the artist laughingly lays bare his own *rhinoceroïd* nature for all of us to laugh at, which he apparently does not mind at all. In the year of the *Rhinoceros*, Dürer was a mature man whose likeness to



István Orosz: *Rhinoceros Paraphrase I*, etching, 2007.

his idealised self-portraits in youth had faded, and who had begun to look increasingly like his portrait cut during his last year on earth by his disciple and colleague Erhard Schön. It shows the profile of a burly heavyweight wrestler with the pigheaded beady gaze of a rhinoceros, and a massive nose better described as a *rhinome*. Juxtaposing this late portrait to the Rhinoceros print seems to corroborate the belief professed by all masters of dogs that the relationship between man and his pet will sooner or later manifest itself in physical resemblance. Who knows how many, if any, were tuned in to Dürer's intent to discover any single aspect of the artist's encrypted self-reflexive attitude in the *Rhinoceros*? Whatever the truth, the work itself attained fame quickly.

"Shall the rhinoceros be willing to serve thee, or will he stay at thy crib? Canst thou bind the rhinoceros with thy thong to plough, or will he break the clods of the valleys after thee? Wilt thou have confidence in his great strength, and leave thy labours to him? Wilt thou trust him that he will render thee the seed, and gather it into thy barn floor?" I purposefully selected this quote from Job 39:9-12 in the translation of the Douay–Rheims 1899 American Edition. When Luther, in his 1534 German translation of the Old Testament, writes *Einborn*, it is unlikely that he had in mind the ethereal unicorn, often depicted in the company of angels in late medieval paintings. It is far more plausible that he refers to the single-horned rhino or *Nasborn*. It is more or less apparent from the context that the creature named *reym* in the Hebrew original possesses a horn or horns of some sort and that

it must be a large, powerful and fierce animal. Accordingly, the diverse translations including the Hungarian versions of the Bible (Károli, Káldi, the Hungarian Bible Society, the St Stephen Society) render the Hebrew variously as bull, ox, buffalo, wild cattle, or bison. I am quite sure that Luther's ingenious choice of the word rhinoceros was inspired by the famous woodcut by Dürer; the two had known each other since 1518. Indeed, Luther's translation hits a bullseye, since the rhinoceros is more apt than anything else as a vehicle for the message, which rhetorically questions the absurd idea that any wild and independent creature of God could serve man as some sort of domesticated day labourer. However, Luther would not have been able to sleep well after committing this word to paper in his German translation had his compatriots had no idea what beast he was talking about. While we have no evidence that anybody in Germany had heard of the animal before 1515, two decades later everyone seemed to be perfectly familiar with the beast – and they were familiar with it because they had all seen Dürer's image of it. The prints sold at markets everywhere had a generally beneficial influence on the democratisation of art, but Dürer's *Rhinoceros* surpassed them all in its sheer influence. The artist himself dealt in various woodcuts, buying, selling, trading and swapping whatever he could lay his hands on (in those days, print runs were not really limited until the elmwood block gave in under the load). In this specific case, not only did prints of the rhinoceros not run out, but their number started to rise exponentially after a veritable industry of making copies of Dürer's work had sprung up. It was cut over and over again to be inserted in various books, compendia and encyclopaediae. By the middle of the 16th century, the only people who had not seen a rhino were those who had no eyes to see one.

The emerging art market was normally divided along well-defined lines, with peasants buying wood prints and the bourgeoisie hoarding copper engravings, while collecting paintings remained the privilege of the aristocracy. Our rhinoceros, however, permeated social boundaries and even national borders. A case in point was Kronborg, Hamlet's castle, with its huge, resplendent tapestry, epitomising the loftiest genre fit only for kings and queens. It was woven around 1550 in Flanders, from where it travelled to Denmark, probably on commission from our own Dowager Queen Mary of Hungary, widowed by Louis II who had perished in the Battle of Mohács. The tapestry features a rhinoceros with the second ancillary horn clearly visible, which proves beyond a shadow of doubt that its source was Dürer's armoured beast. "*Armed rhinoceros*" – I am now quoting Macbeth exhorting Banquo's ghost to appear in the form of the beast, for even that would be less terrifying for him than the intangible apparition haunting him. Shakespeare penned his tragedy around 1606, when no rhinoceros had ever set foot on the isle of Albion, but he could be sure that his audience in London would readily envision the armoured beast – owing to Dürer's widely circulated print. Although in *Julius Caesar* he mentions a unicorn, he probably had the rhinoceros in mind (and this is indeed how the word was translated into Hungarian by Vörösmarty, the great 19th-century poet).

Meanwhile, our perissodactyl's career took a political turn when Alessandro de'Medici, the rough-faced, violent dictator of Florence decided, perhaps in a fit of self-irony, to make a personal emblem of Dürer's armour-plated, militant rhinoceros with that add-on dorsal horn, supplemented by the banner inscription "I shall not return without victory" (1536). A little later, in 1549, Henry II, the son of Francis I of France was greeted upon his march into Paris with the gift of an enormous rhinoceros statue (perhaps partly in tribute to his father's tryst with a rhino, as I will explain shortly). The beast, sculpted by Jean Goujon – and another Dürer replica, needless to say – stood in front of Saint-Sépulcre church and supported an Egyptian obelisk on its back. In neither case did the rhino turn out to be a good omen: both Alessandro de'Medici and Henry II died a violent death.

In vain would we prefer to behold beauty in our rhinoceros, or at least to appreciate its positive aspects, for the innocent beast somehow invariably ended up on the dark side as a symbol of terror. As early as in 1593, Cesare Ripa in his *Iconology* recommended a blind woman with the head of a rhinoceros as the most fitting allegory to represent fury. The French revolutionaries saw it as the emblem of absolutism; the rhinoceros Louis XVI kept at his palace in Versailles met the fate of his master shortly after he was executed. Hitler renamed his gigantic tank destroyer *Nashorn* because he thought its original name of *Hornisse* (hornet) was not menacing enough. The rhinoceros became Ionesco's animal of choice to debunk the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century in his eponymous play, written in 1959. As I am typing these notes I get this email from K. A., who is unaware of the subject preoccupying me at the moment, asking for permission to use one of my own rhino drawings on the cover of his new book on political systems.

So it seems we are stuck with politics if we wish to carry the vita of our rhino to its logical and sad conclusion. Bear with me, for the end is nigh. In order to demonstrate his loyalty to Pope Leo X (born de'Medici), Manuel I of Portugal, often referred to by historians as Manuel the Fortunate (nota bene, the epithet *Unfortunate* would be more apt in light of the passage that follows), sent the rhinoceros off to Rome along with various exotica including Indian slaves, Persian horses, parrots, leopards and bong pipes. Manuel had reason enough to lavish all these gifts on Leo, for the Pope had the ultimate say in the size of colonies Portugal was allowed to acquire. Although Pope Alexander VI in 1494 had sanctioned the Treaty of Tordesillas which divided the world between Spain and Portugal, the two major colonising powers, during the twenty years that followed new discoveries changed the face of the Earth to such an extent that it became pressing to renegotiate the deal. Manuel knew well that the Pope would be amenable to corruption by the gift of the rhino, because he had been so delighted by Hanno, the white elephant sent to him upon his inauguration, that he started bouncing up and down in joy (and apparently oblivious to the audacity of taunting an obese, elephantine pontiff with

a real elephant). Manuel also knew that he had to act fast lest the foxy Spanish pre-empt him by bribing his holiness with an even more curious creature. So pressed by circumstance, Manuel did not wait until spring and launched the invaluable cargo in January, when the sea was always unpredictable. The ship moored at the island of If off Marseilles harbour on 24 January, and the rhino was led ashore to be marvelled at by Francis I of France and his entourage, who had interrupted an official programme and made the detour just to see the beast. Then the ship set off for Rome via Porto Venere, where it met its well-known fate. The claim of zoological textbooks about rhinos being good swimmers could not be substantiated or refuted as the case may be, owing to the shackles fastened to the rhino's fore legs (as seen in the cuts by Burgkmair and Penni), which did not leave the poor soul the smidgen of a chance to escape. The curious crowd that had gathered in the harbour of the Eternal City had to make do with rhino-motif trinkets hawked by market pedlars and prints from local shops. They compensated themselves by embellishing and relaying the horror stories circulating around the city about the Beast being invisible to all except to genuinely holy men and truly innocent virgins, who alone earned the privilege of laying eyes on him by their virtue. For our part, let us content ourselves with the familiar wisdom that passing on a gift brings misfortune. If my reckoning is correct, our rhino changed hands no fewer than four times, along the Muzaffar II – Diego de Beja – Afonso de Albuquerque – Manuel I chain, before his delivery to his hopeful fifth master, Leo X, was foiled by the shipwreck. As far as we know, none of the Europeans bothered to give it a name, thinking that the honour of baptising the beast would devolve to the next rightful owner. The viceroy considered the task of naming the animal to be a royal one, while the king reasoned that no one lesser than the Pope should be entitled to the privilege. We know subsequent rhinos of fame by name (Abada and Clara come to mind), but the one who was seen and owned by so many dignitaries was and remains linked to the name of a man who never set eyes on him. We call him Albrecht Dürer's rhinoceros.

Whatever is left of the animal's mortal remains is probably still lying at the bottom of the sea, ducked by occasional schools of fish. Others conjecture that the carcass of the drowned rhinoceros was found, stuffed with straw, and sent to the Pope in this shape, and that it has been collecting dust in an obscure storeroom of the Vatican's fine art workshop. If this is true, let us hope that the times have not completely consigned to oblivion the old custom among art students there, particularly among woodblock cutting apprentices, of rising upon their toes on a three-legged stool so that they can grab the humongous horn of the beast, the better to whisper the arcane text of their vocational oath in its large, shaggy ear.

Translation by Péter Balikó Lengyel