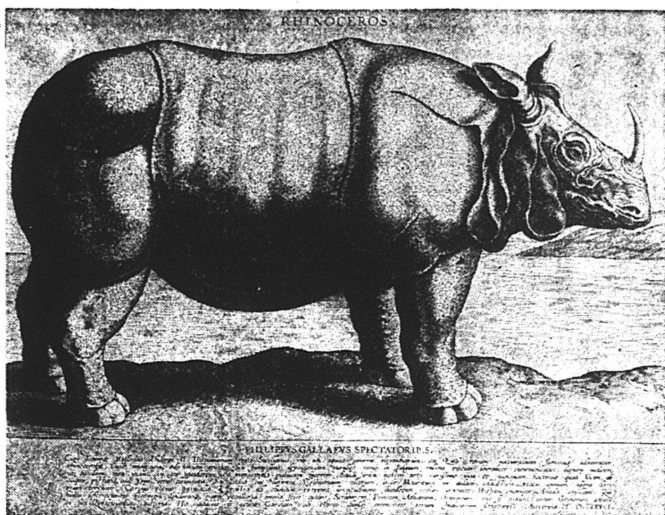


# A European rhino hunt



Engraving by Philippe Galle of Antwerp of the Madrid rhinoceros (1586) — only one impression of this print is so far known to the author.

It began in a most unlikely way. I had arrived at a ducal castle at night, and so noticed only the following morning, on leaving my bedroom, a recess in the corridor filled with a strange service of Meissen porcelain. At eye level was a large dish painted with a rhinoceros, armour-plated, mock-ferocious, a horn on its nose and another on its back, spirally ribbed like a miniature unicorn's horn.

I must admit that Dürer's woodcut of 1515 did not at once occur to me as the source of the decoration on a porcelain *Plat de menage* of 1740: in defence of my ignorance I can only plead that Dürer's quinqucentenary had not yet made this woodcut so familiar and that anyway one would not expect a Meissen painter to go so far back in time for his prototype.

The more I learnt about the rhinoceros in European art, the more I wanted to know. Not that zoology has ever been one of my interests; indeed, I must admit that even now I have never seen a live Indian rhinoceros. What interests me is the history of the one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) as an exotic import into Europe, as a minor branch of chinoiserie. The story is virtually unknown. The art-historians have nearly all got it wrong, and the zoologists by and large have shown little interest.

The first rhinoceros to reach Europe in modern times arrived in the Tagus estuary on May 20, 1515, having astonishingly survived the journey by sea from Diu in Northwest India, a living and stimulating witness to the extent of the Portuguese seaborne empire. This was the animal that Dürer portrayed, evidently inspired by a drawing sent from Portugal; for the *ganda* itself, to use its Indian name, died in February 1516, drowned off Porto Venere on its way to the Pope, and was, so we are told, delivered stuffed, to the disappointment of the Papal court, which had been hoping to match it in combat with the elephant Hanno, a gift of King Manuel of Portugal in the previous year.

Would that Raphael had drawn the *ganda* as he had Hanno! If so, perhaps Dürer's woodcut would not have enjoyed the quasi-monopoly that it held for more than two centuries in both the decorative arts and in zoological literature. The tapestry weavers of the Low Countries, the Flemish painters of Paradise or Noah's Ark, the sculptors in bronze of the west door of Pisa cathedral in 1600, Kirchner at Meissen in 1731—they all relied on Dürer's woodcut.

But a second animal came to Lisbon from Portuguese India in 1579. It was seen in Madrid in 1584 by envoys from Japan. In 1586 Philippe Galle of Antwerp published a copper engraving of this Spanish

rhinoceros or *bada*, as it was called. You will not find this engraving in any of the books in Hollstein, for instance.

A knowledge of the Madrid rhinoceros makes it possible to identify the place of origin of late Renaissance silver or the source of design on a faience wall-tile. In the dining-room of a small Schloss in the village of Wisbergholzen, near Hanover, you can spot two blue-and-white tiles derived from Galle's engraving via a book of symbols; or at the Schönborn home at Pommersfelden, near Bamberg, you can see the Madrid rhinoceros inlaid on a baroque table of Augsburg workmanship. And while there you must ask to be shown what is probably the most sensational of those objects of curiosity to be found in any *Wunderkammer* or "cabinet of wonders": namely, Dürer's rhinoceros or *Panzernashorn*, the back formed of a carapace, the ears and legs of a variety of exotic shells, its teeth of coral. A perfect combination of nature and art, a conchological Arcimboldo.

Of the rhinoceros that was to be seen in London in 1684, you can read in Evelyn's diary: "she appeared like a greate coach overthrowne". The undergraduates of Oxford are alleged to have tested her strength by piling sacks of corn on her back until it broke. But she had no influence on the arts to speak of. Nor did the next rhinoceros to come to Europe, the second London rhinoceros of 1739. But it is another story with the two-year-old that was imported by the Dutch sea captain, Douvemon van der Meer, in 1741.

For a decade this rhinoceros, the fifth to arrive alive in Europe, toured the great cities—Berlin, Vienna (where it was escorted by cuirassiers), Dresden, Munich, Zurich, Nuremberg, Strasbourg, Paris (where Casanova met it in untypical circumstances), Rome (for the jubilee year of 1750), Florence, where Horace Mann told Horace Walpole of the medal struck in its honour, and, finally, in December, 1751, London. It sat to two most distinguished painters, Oudry and Longhi. The former's life-size painting, three metres long, is in the museum at Schwerin; a preparatory drawing is in the British Museum. There are two versions of the Longhi scene of the rhinoceros in its booth at the Carnival in Venice in 1751, one at the Ca' Rezzonico, the other in the National Gallery. The Courtauld Gallery owns one of the six drawings on blue paper made on June 12, 1748, in Augsburg by the celebrated animal artist Johann Elias Ridinger.

Captain Douvemon van der Meer proved to be a capable impresario. He had advertisements printed in German, French and English, sold prints in three sizes at each stopping place, minted medals in Nuremberg and Strasbourg, in both

base metal and silver, in Italian as well as German and French, so that there is much collectable rhinocerotica to be found. At least three different models of this rhinoceros are known mounted as clocks, in Louis XV and Louis XVI style. There are porcelain figures from Meissen and Frankenthal, and independent bronzes. Plenty of scope for research and mistaken attributions.

We end with Stubbs. He painted a portrait of the seventh rhinoceros to be seen alive in Europe, one that was to be seen at Pidcock's menagerie in the Strand in 1790 (not 1772 as some authorities maintain). It can be seen today in the Hunterian Museum in the Royal College of Surgeons in Lincoln's Inn Fields. The drawings by Stubbs which were included in his posthumous sale have never been discovered; here is an opportunity for the ardent rhinocerotophile. But I will more likely have to content myself with copper tokens of Pidcock's animal, still to be found for a few pounds. The poor beast died of an inflamed knee joint near Portsmouth in October, 1792; we are told of him that "his docility was about equal to that of a tolerably tractable pig", and he was a lover of wine.

The eminent sinologue Berthold Laufer, of Chicago, described the rhinoceros in 1906 as an animal that lacked "those aesthetic qualities of form which tempt the brush of the painter". More recently Peter Fleming has returned to the same theme: "aesthetically, one fully realizes, the rhinoceros has missed the bus". I wonder, can Dürer, Oudry, Longhi, Stubbs, to name only a few, all be wrong? Beauty is said to lie in the eye of the beholder, and I for one am not going to be put off collecting at least Indian rhinocerotica.

It is difficult to give any clear tips as to how to start collecting. As a decorative motif the rhinoceros may turn up on glass, on porcelain, silver, in paintings or prints—even on furniture; any and every dealer in London could have pieces from time to time. Perhaps it is best to start with prints to get the basic images, copied by other craftsmen, firmly in your mind. Colnaghi's or Craddock and Barnard should be able to help. For medals and tokens, which are still reasonably easy to find, you can turn to Spink's. In fact, once you are seriously interested in the rhinoceros, you will begin to meet him wherever you go, in auctions, antique shops, museums and even the houses of your friends; they are surprisingly plentiful, but you have to be sensitized to notice them.

T. H. Clarke

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