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*An artist's take on the rhinoceros
by A. J. Fredriksson*

CHAPTER 28

An artist's take on the rhinoceros – A.J. Fredriksson

Growing up in Rhodesia my first sighting of one of these solid chunks of muscle was in the Matopos National Park. They seemed to magically glide over the terrain which gave one the impression that they floated on a cushion of air.

Our friends took our family in their old Kombi and stopped close to a white rhinoceros. The bull started to make a loud snorting sound as he expelled air through those huge nostrils, probably agitated by the exhaust fumes he started to stomp around. The women in the car began to panic and I imagined that sharp horn coming straight through the side of the Kombi where I was now crouched down. The massive beast also decided to take off as we did – in the same direction! Each time the gears changed he also seemed to change his direction and we waited for a collision at any moment.

My mother once said her greatest enemy is her imagination and for an artist this can be more powerful as it is in the imagination that art is born, a vision of something we long to create. At *Kindergarden* one of my best friends, Reg Pitt, lost his father, who was killed by a rhinoceros working as a game ranger in one of the Parks there. The story of how the rhinoceros's horn impaled his father, conjured up gruesome images in my mind. I had played with plastercine from a young age, and loved to make people with all their internal organs.

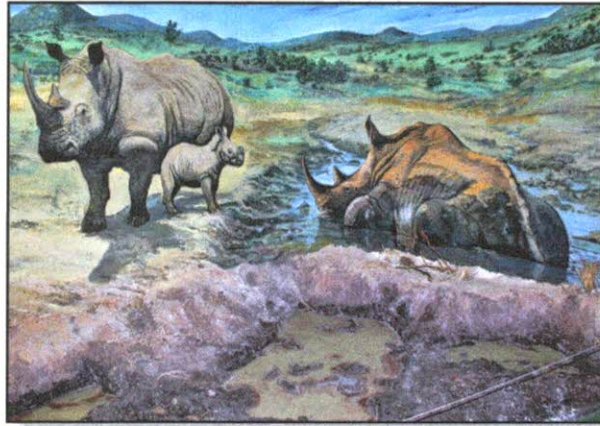
Anatomy is something all artists need to study if you want to understand your subject. Carving a rhinoceros skeleton for one of the displays at *The Rhino Hall* in the Kruger National Park was such a fun project. Jeanette Curling of the Lowveld Honorary Rangers commissioned me to make displays for an educational centre that was planned for Skukuza. This led to designing the displays at *The Rhino Hall* at Berg-en-Dal which only had a fibreglass model of a black rhinoceros. I designed the Hall with a centre stage for this model to include a midden, black- and white rhinoceros skulls, and models of the world record horns of both species. The record black rhinoceros horn was found in Kenya in 1928 and measured a staggering 1.30 meter. The white rhinoceros was shot in South Africa and his horn measured 1.58 meter. Models were also made of the lips of these species which appears next to life-size cameos made much like the face of a coin. These were made in clay and cast in resin. There are numerous paint techniques to reproduce anything from metal to soil or the hide of a rhinoceros. I have often discussed with rangers if we could reproduce fake horns to flood the market!

The one-third rhinoceros scale skeleton was carved out of poplar wood, while the horn was made from fibrous coconut wood. It almost resembles the hair on the base of a rhinoceros's horn. Probably the scene I enjoyed making the most was the mud wallow which has a five meter mural of the Berg-en-Dal landscape. It includes a rhinoceros cow and calf, one

wallowing in the mud and one busy on a rubbing post. I was asked to collect a sample of a bona-fide rubbing post from a sight near Berg-en-Dal.



World record horns displayed in The Rhino Hall



The mud wallow in The Rhino Hall

Don English instructed his guides to take me to the spot where we discussed the history of this particular rubbing post. There was no way of knowing how old it was, but could certainly have been used by a few generations of the rhinoceros. The polished high areas revealed a rich wood contrasting with the mud-encrusted stump. I contacted Don and told him that we would rather reproduce a copy of one from a found piece of wood. Don was most relieved as true to his convictions all things in the Kruger National Park should remain untouched.



Rubbing post described above

I imagined a beauty parlour where the Aunties suddenly find their mirror is missing and imagine what their make-up would look like. What confusion would the bush beauties feel if their rubbing post disappeared from their regular site? We were also on a mission to take a pressing of a granite protrusion that had also been worn smooth by years of use by the rhinoceroses in the area. Both the 'man-made' rubbing post and the cast of the rubbing rock can be seen in *The Rhino Hall* in the reception area in Berg-and-Dal. Ingrid Booyesen composed numerous panels with the entire history of the rhinoceros which also covers the poaching and conservation topics.

I am grateful for the team of Honorary Rangers who I worked with on the project: Grant Coleman, Patrick Reniers and Mike Stevenson. Steven Nell, the camp manager of Berg-en-Dal who has always made sure that we got the necessary natural materials we needed on sight and my son Shaun who made the staging and display pillars for the project.

If the rhinoceros has been immortalized in art, it is no doubt the "Big Five" which has generated more paintings and sculptures of him. The Big Five has also been thrashed out to the extent that they are no longer so fashionable. Years ago I also jumped on the bandwagon and started by making limited editions sculptures of them which I cast in resin and hand painted. The two collections were sold under my business called African Heads and Tails

produced in one tenths and one quarter scale. They were a hit with mostly foreign tourist and went all over the world. I had thirty mammals in the Souvenir set and 14 in the larger collection. The Big Five were the main sellers all limited to 300 of each sculpture.

They were also part of a third set which I produced as The Director's Choice, which were sold as bookends. Many went to hunters at the various outdoor shows until we had sold close to 7000 units. I found a black rhinoceros from the last set for re-sale on Bid-or-Buy selling for R11 000 in 2012, so they are becoming sought after collector's items.

My *Rhinoceros and Calf* sculpture was limited to 12 but I only manage to produce seven before the rats ate the moulds. The first driftwood sculpture I made was commissioned by the Van Rooyen family who owns some of my marine works. He was a hit at my third solo exhibition at the White River Gallery at Casterbridge where he generated a few more commissions. The driftwood sculptures are absolute one-off's and the wood can have such interesting textures that can easily lends themselves to depict the rhinoceros's hide. Probably the most important part of any sculpture is the eyes and the body posture that tells the viewer about the mood of the subject (or animal). The rhinoceros fold its ears back during sparring but they are mostly gentle creatures idly passing their days grazing or snoozing.



Rhinoceros from driftwood by the artist

One of my unusual jobs was to design a logo with a rhinoceros head for a yacht. The rhinoceros has found its way into all forms of art from hairdo's to cuddly toys. Let's hope and pray its legacy will live on and education will triumph over superstition till it is no longer a target but something in God's creation to be admired.

Chapter 9 has an image of a thirty eight year old de-horned rhinoceros. It would be wonderful if they were able to reach a great age undisturbed, so that we could once more see record size horns on them! But perhaps, for their sakes, the dehorning may be their only saving grace. Not many people may purchase a sculpture of a rhinoceros without a horn, but it may well become a familiar sight in future.

