



One of a Kind: Clara the Rhinoceros in Eighteenth-Century Venice and the Tale of a Missing Horn

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ABSTRACT In 1741, a Dutch sea captain succeeded in transporting a live female Indian rhino calf from north-east India to his home town of Leiden. Named “Clara,” she was only the fifth Indian rhinoceros to be seen on European soil since the fall of the Roman empire and the only rhinoceros on the continent in the mid-eighteenth century. From 1741 to 1758, Douwemout Van der Meer displayed Clara across Europe to commoners and kings. In 1751, Van der Meer took Clara to Venice, to show her during Carnival. But en route to Venice, Clara shed her horn. Clara and the crowds that queued to see her—even in her hornless state—are recorded in the paintings and etchings of the father and son, Pietro and Alessandro Longhi. The article provides a brief introduction to Clara’s history and mid-eighteenth-century European odyssey, before examining her 1751 visit to Venice. At that time, the fragility of Clara’s status as

the only one of her kind in Europe was further heightened by her shed horn, while rumors that she had been lost to the Grand Canal may be seen as an astute marketing ploy on the part of Van der Meer, and strangely prescient of the potential disappearance of both the rhinoceros and Venice itself.

KEYWORDS: extinction, horn, rhinoceros, spectacle, Venice

The only way to save a rhinoceros is to save the environment in which it lives, because there's a mutual dependency between it and millions of other species of both animals and plants.

David Attenborough¹

Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice.

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*²

In early 2020, before COVID-19 engaged the world's attention as a global rather than a local threat, Venice made international headlines as record flooding deluged its historic center. As the waters ebbed and the clean-up began, the city braced for the beginning of a different sort of spring inundation: that of tourists, approximately 20 million of whom visit the city every year. But as the Covid-19 pandemic spread, global tourism dried up and Venice made headlines again, as locals noticed visibly clearer water in her canals. Even if reports of dolphins in the city's waters proved to be a Covid-era environmental urban myth, it was a myth that the global imagination seemed receptive to, and collectively grateful for; wishfully implying an ease with which fragile ecosystems can recover from the effects of relentless human depredations.³ If tourist numbers in Venice remain depressed for some time, the city will continue, however, under the twin threats of rising water levels and more regularly occurring extreme weather events. The future of Venice is currently no more assured than is the future of the natural world that so many enjoyed contemplating afresh while in lockdown. Venice may be uniquely beautiful and a singular engineering marvel but, in terms of the challenges it faces from rising seas and a changing climate, it may also be seen as synecdochical: one city whose watery fate may prove to be representative of many. And just as cities increasingly contend with existential threats from natural agents (water and fire), so the natural world is disappearing before our eyes. If the Renaissance marvel of Venice is the poster child for cities under threat, then its equivalent in the natural world is surely those apex species (alpha predators and herbivores) whose survival is necessary not only to save the ecosystems in which they thrive, but because we cannot imagine a world without them. Put bluntly, if we cannot or will not save Venice, or the polar bear or tiger, elephant or rhinoceros, what can we be galvanized to save? Many apex species are, of course, in danger not only from the

climate change that threatens Venice, but because of the trade in their body parts, perceived as luxury consumer items in some parts of the world. For example, more sharks are lost worldwide to shark-finers (to make shark's fin soup) than to any other cause, while tigers are now killed more often for their body parts' perceived value in traditional Chinese medicine than for their fur. Among alpha herbivores, elephants continue to be poached to feed the illicit global ivory trade, while rhinoceroses suffer mutilation and death for the supposed medicinal value of their horns. The world's rarest animals therefore become rarer still as they continue to be viewed and traded as a series of desirable body parts fueling a multi-million-dollar illegal global trade. And the collective will—and ability—to save any *one* of these species seems to be representative of our ability to save *any*: a dramatic litmus test of the limits of human concern and ingenuity. If we can save Venice from a watery grave and find an acceptable way of regulating tourist numbers, surely we can save any (historic) city from similar threats? And if we can save the largest carnivores and herbivores in their natural habitats, surely we will save all smaller species in these ecosystems?

While it may seem contrived to consider the fate of an endangered Venice and an iconic endangered species in tandem, circumstances around the exhibition of a one-horned Indian rhinoceros named “Clara” in Venice in January-February 1751 allow both to be brought together.⁴ While in Venice, Clara was rumored (falsely) to have fallen into the water—sinking—as we now know Venice itself is sinking. Even when people could see for themselves that news of her drowning was false, the fact that Clara had shed her horn while en route to Venice raised fears about her health. A series of paintings by father and son Pietro and Alessandro Longhi illustrate aspects of Clara's display in Venice and seem to confirm that she was a crowd pleaser even without her horn. Clara's story and the story of her display in Venice is therefore a story of a unique animal in this most singular of cities. But in order to understand why a rhinoceros on a mid-eighteenth-century tour of Europe proved to be a sensation, it is first important to appreciate its rarity—and the rarity of the chance to see such an animal, when she was the only one of her kind outside her native India.

Of the five species of rhinoceros that survive today, only one was known in the western classical world and up until the early nineteenth century: the one-horned or Indian rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*).⁵ The last recorded use of the species in the Roman games was in 248 C.E., after which there is no evidence of any rhinoceros being seen in Europe until eight of the animals were transported there from India across a roughly three-hundred-year period from the early sixteenth to late eighteenth centuries.⁶ In all literature on this subject, it has become conventional to name each of the eight animals for the place or artist with which it was most associated, and to further differentiate them one from another by referring to the documented

**Figure 1**

Jean-Baptiste Oudry, *Rhinoceros*, oil on canvas, 306 × 453 cm, 1749. Staatliches Museum Schwerin. Public domain.

period of display. (Since some animals were displayed for no more than one year, the difficulty of keeping a captive rhinoceros healthy may be inferred.) T. H. Clarke's widely accepted listing is as follows: the first Lisbon or Dürer rhinoceros of 1515; the Madrid rhinoceros of 1579–87; the first two London rhinoceroses of 1684 and 1739; the Dutch rhinoceros of 1741–58; the Versailles rhinoceros of 1770–93; the third London or Stubbs rhinoceros of 1790–3; the fourth London rhinoceros of 1799.⁷ Of these eight animals, only one—the Dutch rhinoceros—was given a name: Clara.⁸ From this list, it is clear that most of these rhinos were separated from each other by decades and the only two that happened to be in Europe at the same time—the so-called Versailles rhinoceros of 1770–93 and the third London rhinoceros of 1790–3—were separated from each other geographically. It therefore follows that any representation of the rhinoceros in early modern Europe, whether visual or verbal, can be traced to one of these eight animals. In practice, however, only two of the animals listed would shape the European conception of the rhinoceros: the so-called Lisbon or Dürer rhinoceros of 1515 and Clara herself. From 1741–58, Clara was displayed across Europe to commoners and kings by a Dutch sea-captain, Douwemout Van der Meer, who succeeded in doing what no one since the fall of the Roman Empire had done, which was to transport to Europe and sustain for years a healthy Indian rhinoceros. From Clara's arrival in Rotterdam in 1741 until her death in London in 1758, Van der Meer toured the continent with her, displaying her before peasants and princes. In the course of her European odyssey, Clara's likeness appeared in books and on broadsides—she was cast in bronze and molded in porcelain—she appeared in cheap woodcuts and a life-size oil painting by Jean-Baptiste Oudry, originally intended for Louis XV (Figure 1).⁹ It is Clara

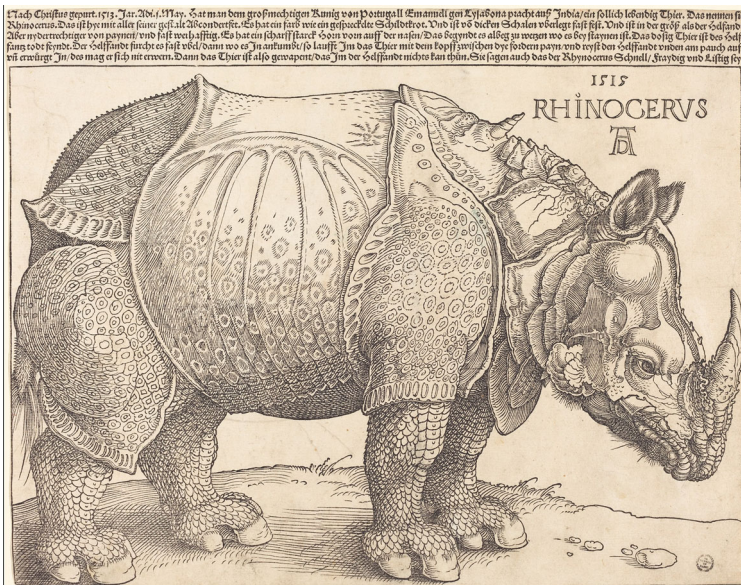


Figure 2

Albrecht Dürer, *Rhinoceros*, woodcut, 23.5 × 29.8 cm, 1515. This impression, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Accession no. 1964.8.697. (CCO 1.0).

who represents the rhinoceros in the pages of both Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* and in Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle*.¹⁰ And wherever her likeness appeared, in whatever medium, it acted as a corrective to the most famous representation of the rhinoceros prior to this time: Durer's *Rhinoceros* of 1515.

The animal that was the inspiration for Dürer's engraving and succeeding woodcut (Figure 2) arrived in the Tagus Estuary in May 1515, and its historic landing would be commemorated within two years when a stone rhinoceros was made one of the corbels on the Belem Tower that commands the estuary's edge. This adult rhinoceros was a gift from the ruler of the Indian state of Gujarat to the Governor of Portugal's Indian territories, who in turn re-gifted the rarity to his sovereign, Manuel. Seeking to ingratiate himself with Pope Leo X, Manuel sent the rhinoceros to Rome, but the ship carrying the animal foundered off the Italian coast in January 1516 and the rhinoceros drowned.¹¹ Its likeness had already been sketched in Lisbon, and possibly also on a stopover in Marseille. But Dürer himself did not see it firsthand, which likely accounts for many inaccuracies present in his famous engraving, including the presence of an anomalous and sharply angular dorsal horn. No species of rhinoceros has a dorsal horn. Yet in the absence of any corrective to Dürer's image, it became the archetype of the species as the woodcut was used in nine separate printings to generate an unknown number of prints. Indeed, for over two hundred years from its first production, Dürer's *Rhinoceros* was the only reference source for

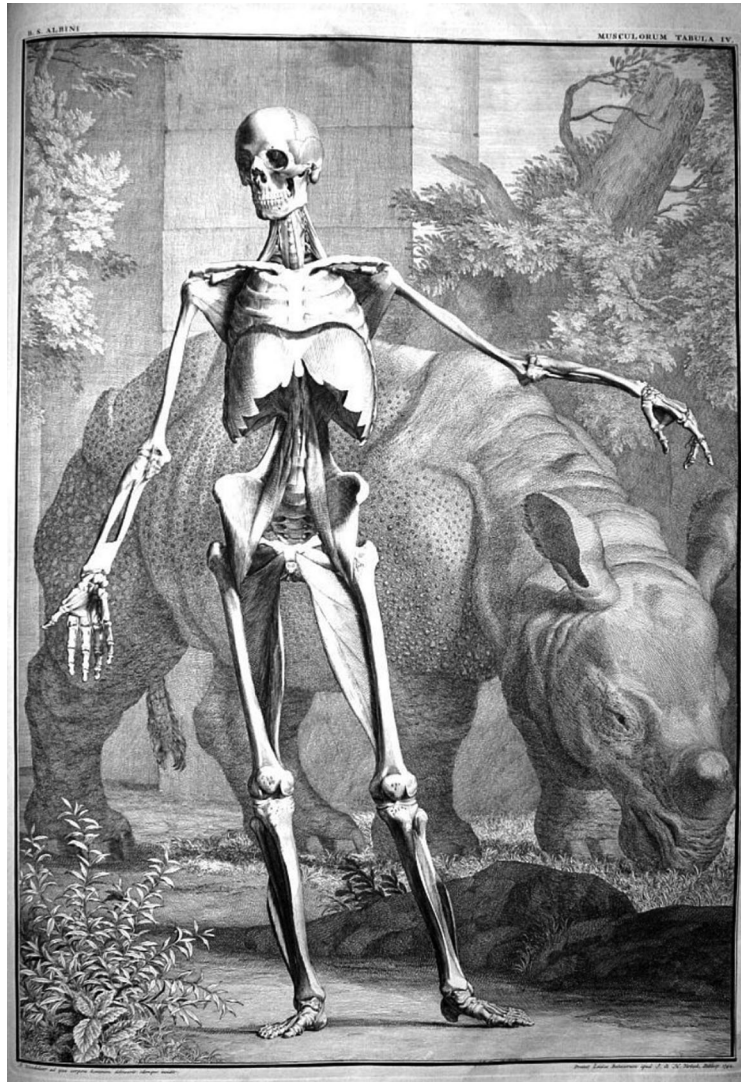


Figure 3

Jan Wandelaar for Bernhard Siegfried Albinus, *Tabulae sceleti et musculorum corporis humani*, Plate IV, line engraving, 1747. © British Library Board: 599.C. (1).
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depicting the species, and his armored beast with its dorsal horn can be seen across a range of media, from London to the eastern border of the Holy Roman Empire. Diverse examples can be found in or on all of the following: in a Grotto by Tribolo at the Villa Castello near Florence (c. 1550); on a bronze door of Pisa Cathedral (School of Giovanni Bologna, 1602); part of the Coat of Arms of the Worshipful Societies of Apothecaries in London (1617); on a Gobelin tapestry panel from the monumental series Les

Anciennes Indes (1708-10, the complete series being on display in the Palace of the Grand Master of the Order of St John in Valletta, Malta); and on a bronze medal carved for Alessandro de' Medici (by Anton Francesco Selvi, c. 1740, now in the British Museum). In European ceramics, paintings, and tapestries made prior to Clara's display across the continent, the legacy of Dürer is apparent in the presence of this second, entirely fictitious dorsal horn, whenever the rhinoceros is represented. The fact that one of the many mosaics of the floor of the Basilica di San Marco, Venice, depicts a rhinoceros without a dorsal horn would seem to be powerful circumstantial evidence in support of the claims of those who argue that the mosaic is a relative late comer to the Basilica, although Kovesi's article in the present volume suggests an alternative explanation for this detail and the anatomy of this mosaic rhinoceros.¹² Whatever the inspiration for the Basilica's rhinoceros, new—and accurate—depictions of the Indian rhinoceros began to appear from 1742 onwards and to supplant conceptions indebted to Dürer, as a Dutch sea captain began to publicize the growing rhinoceros calf that he had brought back with him to Europe from Chinsurah, in Dutch Bengal.

The first known representation of Clara, the Dutch rhinoceros, occurs in a plate engraved by Jan Wandelaar for an anatomical atlas, the *Tabulae sceleti et musculorum corporis humani* of noted anatomist B. S. Albinus (Figure 3).¹³ While the accompanying text in the atlas makes no mention of Clara by name, the fact she was the only live rhinoceros in Europe at the time and was stabled in Van der Meer's hometown of Leiden where the atlas was first published, makes her the only candidate for the artist's rhinoceros model. (Had Wandelaar based his representation of the species on the most widely reproduced image of the rhinoceros at this time—Dürer's *Rhinoceros*—then Wandelaar's copy would exhibit the same erroneous features as Dürer's original). A plate in an anatomical atlas is, admittedly, an unpromising beginning to the making—and marketing—of a celebrity, but plate IV enjoys a particular distinction among all those in the atlas. Surprisingly, the unique nature of this plate is not its inclusion of the most accurate representation of an Indian rhinoceros in western art at the time, for plate VIII shows a dorsal view of the same scene, allowing the viewer to appreciate the anatomy of both Clara and the accompanying juvenile male skeleton from behind. Rather the singularity of plate IV lies in the fact that, out of all the plates engraved by Wandelaar for Albinus, this one was issued singly in 1742, fully five years before Albinus's complete atlas was pulled from Leiden's presses. Published as a stand-alone engraving, it is inconceivable that plate IV did not hold its own when competing for viewers' attention in the many shop fronts of Leiden's thriving print industry. And not only could the arresting image be purchased but, for a small charge, its subject could be seen in the flesh and even touched.

Wandelaar's composition of the scene depicted in the plate sets up a series of implicit contrasts: man and beast, flesh and bone, life and death. And because the plate was designed for an anatomical textbook, one would expect Wandelaar's rendering of the skeleton to be the most important element of the engraving. But any attention directed to the vertical axis occupied by the skeleton pales in comparison to the visual interest of the horizontal background plane wholly dominated by Clara. As she grazes, it is hard to resist the temptation to say that the skeleton averts his gaze: she eats to preserve life and to continue to grow; he is diminished to nothing and sensuous pleasures are now impossible for him to enjoy. Yet the juxtaposition of Clara and the skeleton surely recalls the tradition of the *memento mori* and, in doing so, it reminds us that all flesh is liable to decay: underneath her three-inch thick hide, Clara is blood and bone and is subject to the same processes of decay that the human skeleton represents. Everyone who saw this image on its first release in Leiden would know that Clara was unique—the only one of her kind to be seen. The Lisbon rhinoceros engraved by Dürer survived less than one year on European soil; the London rhinoceros lasted for only two years in captivity. Foreshadowing Van der Meer's later media manipulations, the image reminds us that Clara may look indestructible, but she too is mortal. It is a subliminal exhortation to pay the price of admission to see a live rhinoceros while she is still able to be seen. And those who would pay the price of admission to see Clara would find her to be perfectly tame, as she was already when Van der Meer purchased her from a Dutch East India Company representative, J. A. Sichterman, stationed in a company outpost in Bengal.

Sichterman claimed to have had Clara since she was very young, and that she came into his possession when her mother was shot by hunters. As a party piece, Sichterman had trained the calf to come into his home at the conclusion of an evening's dining, and to lick clean the plates of guests, much as if Clara were a large dog. Clara's experience in Sichterman's household made her used to the company of humans and she likely imprinted upon them. Indeed, Clara seems to have been unique among those rhinoceroses displayed in early modern Europe in having been habituated to human presence and human touch. And humans had nothing to fear from her: Wandelaar's engraving accurately depicts the bulbous, unthreatening appearance of the budding horn of a juvenile Indian rhinoceros. While Van der Meer waited for Clara and her horn to grow, Wandelaar's engraving, issued singly as a broadsheet around Leiden, allowed Van der Meer to gauge public interest in the singular creature he had brought back from his last voyage to India. Her origin story, of being orphaned while young, found its echo in a rising tide of sentimental art across Europe, and promised an unthreatening encounter with a creature at once exotic, powerful, and yet tame.

Through Wandelaar's engraving, Van der Meer's rhino calf was introduced to Leiden's residents and visitors. Like any media icon, Clara would quickly prove her bankability by simultaneously generating and feeding a public appetite, the scale of which had simply not been anticipated. To make a lucrative income from Clara's display—enough to cover her upkeep and surely also in hopes of making a profit—Van der Meer had to overcome the two obstacles that had prevented anyone previously capitalizing on a live rhinoceros on early modern European soil: Clara had to be kept alive and a means had to be found for transporting what would be her fully-grown weight of three tons across thousands of miles of unforgiving coaching roads.¹⁴ While Van der Meer did solve both problems, he was not beneath capitalising on public concern regarding Clara's relative fragility, since he appears to be the likeliest source for rumors that surfaced periodically speculating about her health—or even premature demise. Most of these stories recall the fate of Dürer's rhinoceros, in implying a watery grave for Clara. For example, in November 1749, the German paper *Auszug der neuesten Weltgeschichte* reported as a fact the overturning of the small vessel transporting Clara from the quayside of Marseilles out to a waiting sailing ship for the next stage of her tour.¹⁵ But the German story was neither probable nor possible, given the dockside mechanisms used for winching cargo—including exotic animals—aboard ships at the time. The Memoirs of the Marquis d'Argenson preserve another story about Clara's supposed drowning, insisting that as the ship taking her down the western Italian seaboard passed Rome on its way to Naples, the vessel had been lost, and Van der Meer supposedly lost along with Clara, weighed down by the money she had brought him.¹⁶ This is at once a morality story—a sort of eighteenth-century parable about the destructive pursuit of earthly gain—but in recollecting the true fate of the animal engraved by Dürer two centuries previously, it also speaks to the inescapability of dealing with the dangers of the sea in an age of sail.

We have, of course, moved beyond the age of sail, but recurring stories of Clara's loss to the sea remind us that what is rare may still be lost—to water or to apparently insatiable human appetites. Clara had not been lost to the water in either Marseilles or off the Italian coast but it was true that both she and Van der Meer suffered a significant loss on the Italian leg of her European grand tour for—in June 1750—as Clara continued to thrill crowds even after three months in Rome, she unexpectedly shed her horn.

The phenomenon has been observed since rhinoceroses were first held in captivity, and it continues to frustrate and concern modern zookeepers. In the wild, rhinoceroses are not observed to shed their horns, leading to fierce arguments about the conditions of their captivity. Do captive rhinos rub off their horns as part of the repetitive behavior patterns noted in many captive species? Is such behavior indicative of boredom or stress? And how bored or stressed does a

rhinoceros have to be in order to erase its own horn (if these psychological states are indeed what produces such self-destructive behavior)? Even today, we simply do not know the answer to these questions, but we at least understand that the phenomenon occurs and that the horn will regrow from the base if lost under such circumstances, with no apparent long-term detriment to it or the animal that it adorns. But in 1750, Van der Meer had no means of knowing what—if anything—a shed horn might signify. Placing ourselves in his shoes for a moment, we can readily imagine his horror at the horn's loss and what it might mean for Clara's health. We can also see that the horn's loss immediately presented Van der Meer with a marketing problem, for how were his eighteenth-century audiences to understand a rhinoceros without a horn?

As proof that the loss of Clara's horn was deeply unsettling for Van der Meer, we can point to the fact that she was a 'no show' in Florence, where she had been expected following her display in Rome. As early as May 1750, Sir Horace Mann confided to his good friend, Sir Horace Walpole, that Florentine women were obsessed with the fashion for dressing hair "a la rhinocéros,"—which presumably means having the hair swept up and dressed to face forward.¹⁷ But as May 1750 and succeeding months passed in Florence, Clara did not arrive. In August 1750, Florentine society—and its hairdressers—heard rumors that Clara had entered Bologna in a carriage drawn by twelve oxen. If these rumors proved true, and Clara was heading north, it presumably meant she was sure to end up in Venice during Carnival.

Florentine rumors about Clara's presence in Bologna can be substantiated in the papers of the Italian theatre historian, Corrado Ricci, who records that Clara entered Bologna in a large wagon drawn not by the usual complement of eight horses, but by six pairs of oxen.¹⁸ As we know that Clara's wagon was covered and did not allow expectant crowds to see her for free, Van der Meer's decision to swap his usual team of horses for twelve oxen worked to his advantage in two distinct though related ways. Firstly, as the oxen pulled in tandem, their stately pace would surely hint at the extraordinary might of what the wagon contained. Those watching would immediately endow Clara with attributes of size and weight, that any viewing would still deliver, despite the loss of her horn. Secondly, the team of oxen displayed twelve fine pairs of horns between them. If the image of these horns registered in the mind of anyone watching Clara's wagon enter the city, it would no doubt reassert itself at some subliminal level when they saw Clara herself: horns, real or imagined, would remain very much a part of the experience.

To Van der Meer's immense satisfaction and relief, Clara was as much a sensation in Bologna as she had ever been—even in her hornless state. Indeed, the souvenir business was so brisk that Van der Meer sold out of commemorative items printed in Italian and began meeting demand through sale of tin medals left over from



Figure 4

Pietro Longhi, *Il rinoceronte* [The Rhinoceros in Venice], oil on canvas, 62 × 50 cm, 1751. Ca' Rezzonico, Venice. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

Clara's tour of France and inscribed in French. Clara's Bolognese audience was apparently not perturbed, and happy to pay simply to own a copy of her likeness, no matter the language of surrounding lettering. Could it be that the loss of Clara's horn had generated sympathy and concern? Were the crowds in Bologna bigger than expected because of the failure to appear in Florence? Whatever else Van der Meer learned from his experience in Bologna, he certainly realized that a rhinoceros was as big an attraction without its horn as with it and it was surely with renewed optimism that he resumed his plans and prepared to take Clara to Venice, to be there during Carnival.

It was widely rumored that Van der Meer and Clara would arrive in Venice in early January 1751. But in a city swarming with tourists from other parts of Italy and from further afield, it was somehow inevitable that rumors of Clara slipping between ship and quayside would

resurface. Unsurprisingly, when Clara was discovered to be alive and well, Venetians and visitors alike queued to see the creature that had—if rumor was true—so recently cheated death. This pattern—of increased interest in Clara after fears that she had died—may be seen as sadly prescient of today’s public’s response to news that a species, or a city, is about to be lost forever. We live with a faster news cycle than mid-eighteenth-century audiences and the ability to appreciate global phenomena such as extinction and climate change, yet news of the impending loss of something iconic—whether natural or man-made—cuts through the 24/7 churn of news and, if only temporarily, causes (renewed) concern and calls for action to avert disaster.

The crowds that queued to see Clara in Venice in January and February 1751 are recorded in greater detail than those at any other point of the Tour, chiefly in the oil paintings and etchings of the father and son, Pietro and Alessandro Longhi. Out of at least eight known illustrations of Clara’s time in Venice, the most intriguing are undoubtedly two closely related canvases by Pietro Longhi. *The Rhinoceros in Venice* (1751), in the possession of the Ca’Rezzonico, Venice (Figure 4), and the *Exhibition of a Rhinoceros at Venice* (1751), on display at the National Gallery, London, both show essentially the same scene. Clara stands in the center of a wooden enclosure, eating hay. She is conspicuously lacking her horn, which is held up for display by a young man in a tricorne hat at the left of the canvas. Though sometimes identified as Van der Meer himself, the man’s angular face bears little resemblance to the rounded features of the sea captain found on a selection of the publicity broadsheets. It therefore seems more likely that the hornholder pictured by Longhi was a young man employed as Van der Meer’s assistant. The fact that Clara’s shed horn was made available to those who came to view her is worth pausing over, for it surely suggests that physical proximity to Clara served to legitimize the horn as “belonging” to her. Indeed, no evidence has yet come to light to indicate that the shed horn was ever displayed on its own. There is a jarring historical irony here: today, an illegal trade in rhinoceros horn has caused game reserves to dehorn wild rhino and museums to remove centuries-old horns from public display, separating horns from bodies in the hope of frustrating demand for rhino horn with all its bloody and tragic consequences. Whatever value eighteenth-century European viewers placed upon seeing Clara’s shed horn seems, however, to be a direct consequence of its display alongside her. And even though there may be a huge gulf between eighteenth- and twenty-first-century ideas about the ethics of touring with and displaying a wild animal, our own sensibilities seem to be aligned with Clara’s original audiences in one important respect: a rhinoceros can lose its defining attribute of a horn and still be an object of wonder, as Pietro Longhi’s paintings of Clara demonstrate.

Whichever version of the painting one considers, Van der Meer's young assistant has the company of seven others in a tiered seating area. While the canvases differ in how many of these spectators are masked for Carnival, both paintings show Clara's appeal to men and women, the old and the young, and those of different social classes (assuming dress is indicative of the wearer's wealth). At the right of the Ca'Rezzonico's version of the canvas, a notice is shown on the wall, stating the painting to be "a true portrait of the rhinoceros brought to Venice in 1751 and painted by Pietro Longhi as a commission from the nobleman Giovanni Grimani dei Servi: Venetian Patrician." No such explanatory notice is present in London's National Gallery's version, where more figures are masked; more identities concealed.

The London canvas was also commissioned by a nobleman—Girolamo Mocenigo—but he clearly had no wish to proclaim his patronage within the frame of the painting itself. Indeed, the sole individual whose identity is clear is Clara herself, who is painted in the act of eating and with piles of dung evident in the foreground. Even so, she has turned her back towards the painter. The only figure who confidently returns the painter's gaze (in both versions of the painting) is a richly-dressed young woman in the front row of those viewing Clara.¹⁹ And as the young woman stares straight out of the canvas, it is impossible to escape the sense that she shares an affinity with Clara, for both are creatures on display. Given that the version of the painting in the Ca'Rezzonico, Venice, was commissioned by Giovanni Grimani dei Servi, while its counterpart in London's National Gallery was painted for Girolamo Mocenigo, this invites speculation as to whether both men had a shared interest in the human enigma at the center of their respective commissions? When each placed his own version of Longhi's canvas on his wall, did he see Clara as its exotic subject, or did he see himself as regulating access to the young woman, just as Van der Meer controlled the display of Clara?

Whatever the answers to these questions, Longhi's paintings of Clara executed in 1751 are much more than faithful records of the Venetian crowds who came to marvel at the only rhinoceros in Europe at that time—the only rhinoceros that those crowds ever expected to see. Rather, these paintings pose complex questions about the relationship between appearance and reality, men and women, ownership and freedom. That these questions were asked in a city where disguise was *de rigeur* and nothing was as it seemed only serves to entangle Clara still further in a complex web of private allusions on a very public canvas.

One thing is certain, however: for sophisticated Venetian Carnival-goers, the experience of seeing Clara, and seeing pictures of themselves viewing Clara, was full of meaning. Following the contemporary success of *Exhibition of a Rhinoceros at Venice*, Pietro Longhi would execute commissions for pictures including elephants

**Figure 5**

Alessandro Longhi, *Il gran Rinoceronte*, etching (after Pietro Longhi), 41.4 × 51.5 cm. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY.

and lions also displayed in Venice. Always these exotic animals are surrounded by *bauta*-wearers and the odd individual who dares to show his or her face, posing intriguing questions about who, or what, was really on display in a city whose life blood was the masquerade.

Where Pietro Longhi seems to have worked to a very specific brief for his patrons, his son Alessandro worked under no such constraints, and preferred to situate Clara among the performers and human attractions of Carnival. Six etchings of Alessandro's from 1751 show actors dressed in costumes that were instantly recognisable to his contemporaries as representing figures of the *commedia dell'arte*. In the etching *Il gran Rinoceronte*, Alessandro Longhi borrows the scene already established by his father in the two commissions for Venetian noblemen: Clara stands in her wooden booth, only now she faces to the left, rather than to the right (Figure 5). In the front row of spectators, immediately above her, Van der Meer's assistant displays her shed horn in his outstretched left hand. A young woman immediately behind him has just removed her *domino* (an oval black mask kept in place by a button held beneath the teeth and that could be kept in place only if its wearer remained speechless).

There the similarities between the pictures of father and son end. To the right of Alessandro's etching, a clown from the *commedia dell'arte* stands staring at Clara. His true expression is impossible to read, for he wears the mask of Punchinello, a favorite with the Venetian gentry and one whose grotesque nose was conventionally

understood as a phallic symbol. From Punchinello's head, a conical hat of between two- and three-feet tall rises above the heads of the crowd and towers over Clara's horn, which Van der Meer's assistant is waving in the air. It is as if Punchinello has been inviting Carnival-goers to compare his mock horns (both nose and hat) with Clara's real one, and to find Clara wanting. But now that he stands staring at her, he is disquieted. Clara has her massive back turned towards him, and as she eats her way through a pile of hay, so she drops her dung only inches from his feet.

In this game of one-upmanship, Alessandro Longhi shows us that Clara will always be the victor: the longer we stare at the clown, the more ridiculous and pathetic he appears. Those who have queued and paid to see Clara want the experience of her, and not the simulacrum offered by Punchinello—a clown masquerading as a creature with a horn. Like Clara, the clown is used to being stared at, but unlike Clara, he is not indifferent to the responses of the crowd around him and they have come to see "il gran rinoceronte"—as great a draw as ever—even despite the separation of Clara from her horn.

Since Clara's stay in Venice in 1751 followed five years of intensive touring across mainland Europe, during which Van der Meer had shown her in present day Austria, France, Germany, Italy, and Switzerland, it is little wonder that Van der Meer then returned home to Leiden for a period of recuperation for both. The financial success of the tour may be gauged by the fact that, despite Clara's gargantuan appetite, Van der Meer did not feel the need to tour with her again until 1758, when he took her to London. While some details of his touring with her across the years are still unknown, the London visit is not in doubt, for it was there that Clara died, her death recorded on a broadsheet on 14 April 1758, with no indication that she had shown any signs of ill-health leading to this outcome.²⁰

Clara's popularity with London crowds presumably became a local cultural memory—a story or series of anecdotes so tantalizing in their promise of ticket sales that a later entrepreneur tried to repeat Van der Meer's success. In the 1790s, Gilbert Pidcock, owner of the Exeter Change menagerie in The Strand, managed to import two Indian rhinoceroses to London, but one survived only from 1790 to 1793 and the other for less than twelve months in 1799. Poignantly, the walls of Pidcock's Exeter Change menagerie were painted with the very exotica that he had tried in vain to display, including the "true unicorn" or rhinoceros. And as in London, so it was in Venice, where Clara's widespread appeal appears to have generated a clamor for further exotic animal imports. In 1762, the ruling council of Venice thought it appropriate to license the display of a lion in St. Mark's Square. While the symbol of the evangelist St. Mark was supposed to be terrifying in its power and majesty, the lion of 1762 proved surprisingly tame and therefore capable of being read as a symbol of a Venetian state reduced to a shadow of what it had been at the height of its power.²¹ Then, as now, a flesh-and-blood animal

can quickly be co-opted as a symbol for the wider health and vitality of the surrounding environment and culture.

What best symbolizes Venice today? In early 2020 that question might have been answered with reference to images of its historic center, impacted first by rising waters and then emptied by a global pandemic. What would be a fitting symbol for the Venice that emerges from these twin threats? Certainly no one would think of proposing a caged lion in St Mark's Square, for tourists to stare at and remember as their defining experience of the city. And surely no one would propose displaying a live 3-ton rhinoceros in the city either. Yet for residents of Venice and tourists alike, the defining symbol of the city in 1751 was Clara the rhinoceros—the only one of her kind in Europe at that time in the only city of its kind. How poignant—and how prescient—that she appeared in Venice without her horn—the defining feature of her species that may ultimately cause its downfall. Or can both the rhinoceros and Venice be saved? If such a future can be achieved, then dolphins in the canals of Venice may not be so fanciful after all.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. <https://www.facebook.com/SirDavidAttenborough/posts/the-only-way-to-save-a-rhinoceros-is-to-save-the-environment-in-which-it-lives-b/2507149252683280/>
2. Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 86.
3. For an overview of popular social media misinformation on this topic, please see: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2020/03/coronavirus-pandemic-fake-animal-viral-social-media-posts/>
4. A full account of Clara's seventeen-year European odyssey is given in my book, *Clara's Grand Tour*, winner of the Institute of Historical Research (University of London) Prize 2004. For a more succinct account of Clara-omania in eighteenth-century Europe please see Morton, *Oudry's Painted Menagerie*, 90–103.
5. Five species of rhinoceroses are alive in the world today: the Sumatran and Javan rhino are both reclusive forest dwellers, making their numbers in the wild hard to gauge, and it has been suggested that the Javan rhino is already functionally extinct (that is, population numbers are too low for the species' long-term survival). Africa is home to two species—the black and the white rhino—and today both are found only in sub-Saharan Africa. Both have two horns at the end of their nose, in contrast to the single horn of the Indian rhinoceros.
6. Rookmaaker, *The Rhinoceros in Captivity*, 29.
7. Clarke, *The Rhinoceros from Dürer to Stubbs*.
8. While reasons for the choice of the name "Clara" are unknown, the name is confirmed in the caption to a sketch by Anton Clemens Lünenschloss, made when Clara passed through Würzburg, Germany on 3 October 1748 and which refers to her as "Jungfer Clara."
9. Oudry's painting of Clara was the subject of a high-profile restoration project by conservators at The Getty Museum, Los Angeles, culminating in the restored painting's public unveiling at the 2007 exhibition, *Oudry's*

Painted Menagerie (May 1–September 2, 2007): <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/10/arts/design/10wyat.html>

10. Le Rhinocéros after Oudry. From *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des arts et des métiers par une Société de gens de lettres: mis en order et publié par M. Diderot et, quant à la partie mathématique par M. d'Alembert*. Paris: Briasson, 1751–1780 t. XXIII. Pl. I. The same image was repurposed by George-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, in the *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière, avec la description du Cabinet du Roi*. Paris, Imprimerie Royale, 1749–1804 t. XI. Pl. VII.
11. The ill-fated voyage of this rhinoceros is the subject of Norfolk's novel, *The Pope's Rhinoceros*.
12. The rhinoceros mosaic is in front of the Chapel of St. Isidore. The Getty Museum's website dates the mosaic to the 12th century: <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/rhinoceros-detail-from-the-mosaic-floor-st-marks-basilica-news-photo/154718929>, though, unless the mosaic copied an earlier source, no longer extant, the mosaic's maker would have had no image upon which to base a rhinoceros at this time. Since the mosaic floor of the Basilica has been renovated across the centuries, proponents can be found in support of dating the rhinoceros to each of the last eight centuries. Whatever the inspiration for the image, it was clearly not inspired by Dürer's depiction.
13. Albinus, *Tabulae Sceleti*.
14. The large covered wagon used to transport Clara across Europe's primitive roads is shown in a painting known as *The Rhinoceros in its Booth* (1750–1). Oil on canvas, Vicenza, Banca Cattolica del Veneto. The wagon is best imagined as an oversized modern horse box. Accounts of a similar vehicle used to transport the so-called Versailles rhinoceros (1770–93) from its landing port of Lorient to the Royal Menagerie at Versailles show that the French government paid for two days of work by carpenters, thirty-six by locksmiths, fifty-seven by blacksmiths, and seventy-two by a team of wheelwrights. The hardest part of getting a rhinoceros on the eighteenth-century road was clearly securing wheels to a vehicle sturdy enough to manage an adult rhino's 3-ton weight.
15. *Auszug der Neuesten Weltgeschichte*, 1748, No. 97.
16. *Journal et Mémoires du Marquis d'Argenson*, vol. VI (1864), 77.
17. *Horace Walpole's Correspondence* entry for 8 May, 1750 vol. 20 p. 148. Walpole also discusses Clara-mania in an earlier letter of 13 March, 1750, when he describes news that Van der Meer has been made a Baron of the Holy Roman Empire after his presentation of Clara found favor with the Habsburg family: please see entry for 13 March, 1750 vol. 20 p. 128.
18. Ricci, *I Teatri di Bologna nei Seicoli XVII e XVIII*, 692.
19. The website of the Ca'Rezzonico identifies the young woman common to both versions of the painting as Caterina Contarini, the young bride of Giovanni Grimani dei Servi, and suggests he is pictured beside her, though why Caterina should appear in Girolamo Mocenigo's commission also can only be a matter of speculation:
<https://carezzonico.visitmuve.it/en/il-museo/percorsi-e-collezioni/second-floor/longhi-room/>
20. Clara's death is recorded on a commemorative broadsheet of the kind typically sold on her tour, with text in both German and French. A newly added last sentence states: "Er ist alt geworden 21 Jar, in London crepirt 1758 den 14 April," that is "At the age of 21 it died in London on 14 April 1758." A copy of the memorial broadsheet, known as *The Death of 'Jungfer Clara' in London* is held by the Staats-und-Stadtbibliothek, Augsburg.
21. The tameness of the lion of 1762 may be gauged from Pietro Longhi's painting, *The Booth of the Lion* (1762) in which the lion is lying down and appears to tolerate a small dog on its back, and the close proximity of a number of people. For discussion of how "the tamed lion which was shown

in St. Mark's Square during the carnival of 1762 was the image of the Republic's decline" please see Brion, *Venice. The Masque of Italy*, 173 and discussion of the same theme in Monnier, *Venice in the Eighteenth Century*, 234.

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