



# Gigi Bon, the Rhinoceros, Venice, and the Unbearable Heaviness of Being.

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**ABSTRACT** This article analyses the *oeuvre* of the Venetian artist Gigi Bon whose distinctive attitude to her city and the rhinoceros inspired this special issue and the exhibition which preceded it. To enter the *Studio d'Arte "Mirabilia"* of Gigi Bon is to be introduced to a world of sculptures, prints, and objects of wonder in the tradition of the sixteenth-century *Wunderkammer* or Cabinet of Curiosities. But more than this, it is an entrée into the mind and active working studio of an artist who has a unique vision, developed over almost thirty years, of the profound links between her own identity, that of the city of Venice, and the predicament of the rhinoceros. Her artistic output, and in particular her mixed media lost-wax bronze sculptures, prints, and sizeable silken scarves incorporate elements of the precious, the rare, the fantastical, and the whimsical, and all reflect profoundly on themes of self, Venice, and the rhinoceros.

KEYWORDS: Gigi Bon, Rhinoceros, Venice, *Wunderkammer*, *Mirabilia*, lost-wax bronze, luxury, consumption

I feel like a rhinoceros, that shy and solitary animal; I like to think of hiding myself inside its splendid incredible armature—*pulcherrimum monstrum*, beast that arouses marvels and enchantment, living fossil—in order to be removed from the day to day, and in some manner protected from the burden of the “heaviness of living”.<sup>1</sup>

I’ve always felt like a Rhino, ever since, as a child, I looked at the rhinoceros embedded in the marble inlay of San Marco’s exquisite floor, in the Chapel of the Virgin, a magical place where, while meditating, I realised that I too was like that strange animal from another world.

Gigi Bon

In an eyrie above the city of Venice lives a remarkable creature—a polymath, autodidact, sculptor, artist, designer, collector, former financial consultant, and fiercely loyal friend. From an angle of Gigi Bon’s magnificent nest you look straight out to the Bridge of Sighs; from another you are confronted by the five domes of the Basilica di San Marco; and from its highest point you are within a stone’s throw of the Doge’s Palace and the Campanile of the Piazza. It is appropriate that Gigi Bon keeps protective watch over her iconic city whilst nested within its sacred, political, and cultural icons. Gigi Bon’s distant ancestor, Bon da Malamocco, together with Rustico da Torcello, legendarily brought one of the greatest icons to the city in the early ninth century. According to the hagiography, these two merchants appropriated the body of Saint Mark from Alexandria and “translated” it back to its divinely ordained resting place in the city of Venice in 828 where the grateful doge, Giustiniano Partecipazio (825–829), proceeded to build a “chapel” to house his relic. Bon and Rustico, in the act of ensuring the Muslims of Alexandria would not examine the contents of their stolen sacred cargo by festooning it with pork as they made their getaway, are depicted in the tympanum mosaic over the righthand door of the Basilica. And it was in that same Basilica that the young Gigi Bon used to gaze down at the floor at another ancient mosaic—that of a stylised rhinoceros—and immediately felt a visceral self-identification. The mature Gigi Bon was to express that identification in a creative, generative outpouring that is not simply *of* or *by*, but *is* Gigi Bon. Whilst one could analyse the approach and *oeuvre* of Gigi Bon from many aspects,<sup>2</sup> it is her particular identification with, and fusion of, the rhinoceros with the fabric of the city of Venice that is of particular interest and focus here. Bon’s has been a long and often lone voice crying out for the fragility and beauty of both her city and of this animal in all their ancient strangeness. The rhinoceros and Venice are at once both

familiar and unfathomable; strong yet vulnerable; long-lived yet in imminent danger of extinction; objects of wonder yet so familiar as to be part of a natural referential lexicon. We cannot imagine a world without either Venice or the rhinoceros and yet both risk being consumed by a rapacious culture of “the more” that has brought us to a critical juncture. Bon’s Venice/Rhino confronts us all with profound and often troubling questions about what it is to desire the exotic and to consume it.

As creators of one of the world’s most successful entrepôts, Venetians themselves are not, of course, exempt from craving and profiting from the exotic. A relic as prestigious as that of Mark the Evangelist, brought to the city by these two audacious merchant traders, helped place Venice firmly on the pilgrimage routes which were themselves sources of commerce and trade. Perhaps the most decisive event in developing Venice’s trading supremacy throughout the eastern Mediterranean, however, was the contested and abortive Fourth Crusade led by Doge Enrico Dandolo (1192–1205) which earned him papal excommunication but legendary status in his city’s history. Starting with the siege of the Catholic city of Zara on the Dalmatian coast in 1202, and concluding with the sacking of Christian Constantinople, which was in part vengeance against Byzantine massacres of Venetian communities in that city in 1171 and again in 1182, Dandolo transformed a supposed crusade against the infidel into a wholesale looting of Constantinople and the establishment of a Venetian maritime empire—its *Stato da Màr*. From Constantinople, Venetians brought back to Venice treasures of unimaginable splendour, what David Perry suggestively describes as “sacred plunder,” many of which were used to adorn the Basilica di San Marco thereby embellishing what was, in effect, a magnificent reliquary surrounding their most sacred relic.<sup>3</sup> The Basilica di San Marco, iconic, sacred, weighed down with priceless golden booty and beauty, is thereby also emblematic of the paradox at the core of the modern Venetian dilemma. In the process of creating the modern world’s first consumer society, through trade and “sacred plunder,” the Venetians brought the seeds of their own potential downfall into the heart of their city.

The rhinoceros mosaic on the Basilica floor (Figure 1) that so enraptured a young Gigi Bon is suggestively connected both to this crusade and possibly to another iconic Venetian mercantile figure—Marco Polo (1254–1324). In the colourful account of his voyage back from the Great Khan narrated by Rustichello da Pisa, Polo landed on an island he called Basma, identified most probably as the kingdom of Pasai, now the modern-day Aceh province of Sumatra. There he described his encounter with what he assumed were unicorns:

There are wild elephants in the country, and numerous unicorns ... . They have hair like that of a buffalo, feet like those of an elephant, and a horn in the middle of the forehead, which is black and very thick ... . The head resembles that of a wild boar, and

**Figure 1**

Rhinoceros Mosaic, Basilica di San Marco. Photo Mark Smith.

they carry it ever bent towards the ground. They delight much to abide in mire and mud. 'Tis a passing ugly beast to look upon, and is not in the least like that which our stories tell of as being caught in the lap of a virgin; in fact, 'tis altogether different from what we fancied.<sup>4</sup>

The specificity of the detail provided here has led scholars and biologists to concur that Polo's unicorns were in all likelihood the Sumatran rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*)—a smaller hairy version of its better known African and Indian cousins, and now critically endangered.<sup>5</sup> The location of this mosaic in the Basilica, and the identification of a rhino by Polo as a unicorn are both significant. Though of uncertain precise date, this mosaic is probably the earliest European depiction of a rhinoceros since ancient Roman times.<sup>6</sup> The details of this rhino's anatomy in the absence of any reported contemporary live specimens in Europe, and in the context of this description by Polo, has led Gigi Bon to the conclusion that it likely derives from a close reading of, and possible consultation with, Polo himself. For the same reasons of anatomical specificity, however, Glynis Ridley in her article later in this journal argues for a possible later dating. Whatever its precise date, some who have noted its presence have suggested that its placing on the Basilica floor was meant to symbolize strength. For contemporaries, with no knowledge of the rhinoceros or its strength, this mosaic was, Gigi argues, more likely an attempt to render a unicorn as precisely as the description afforded by Polo. Such an interpretation is supported by its location within the Basilica. It is to be found on the floor before two potent images of the Madonna—the virgin protectress of the city, whose symbol of purity is, of course, a unicorn. Polo's "unicorn" lies immediately beside the entrance to the Chapel of the Madonna dei Mascoli—a votive chapel erected by Doge Francesco Foscari in 1450, and in front of the Chapel of the city's most revered icon after the great Saint Mark himself, the Madonna Nicopeia, or *Hodegetria*

(She Who Shows the Way), looted by Doge Enrico Dandolo from the Monastery of Stoudios in Constantinople. It is appropriate that it was here, cocooned in the dimly lit sacred heart of the Basilica and in front of the Madonna Who Shows the Way, that Gigi Bon had her first, visceral rhino encounter.

Almost two centuries after Polo's description of his unicorn/rhinoceros, the Basilica di San Marco acquired not merely a representation of such a creature, but tangible unicorn body parts including a rhino horn and narwhal tusks (the latter understood by contemporaries to be a unicorn's horn). Quite when, how or from whom these objects were acquired is not clear, but already in the fifteenth century the Basilica's Treasury had a "unicorn horn" measuring 1.35 metres constructed from three pieces of narwhal tusk and another from fossilised bone, and in the early sixteenth century these were joined by a substantial narwhal tusk of 2.34 metres as well as an actual rhino horn.<sup>7</sup> That these objects were greatly revered and not mere curiosities is made clear in a reference to them by the city's famous diarist, Senator Marin Sanudo, in an entry for 10 October 1511. In his lengthy narration of the lavish decorations and procession in the city held to celebrate the collapse of the League of Cambrai and the formation of the new Holy League between Ferdinand II of Aragon, the Papal States and Venice against France, Sanudo notes that some of the greatest treasures of the Basilica, including the "*licorni*" normally brought out on display for the important feast day of the Ascension (*Sensa*), were *not* displayed on that day. This was because their traditional custodians, the Procurators of San Marco, were required to take part in the procession and so could not adequately guard them.<sup>8</sup>

These objects' prominent role in Feast days of the city was also remarked upon by several sixteenth-century foreigners visiting the city. Their place in the Festa della Sensa, for instance, is recorded by the Portuguese Jewish physician known as Amato Lusitano in a work published in 1532.<sup>9</sup> In that same year, the French priest from Brie, Denis Possot, in his account of his pilgrimage to the Holy Lands via Venice, noted that on the Feast Day of San Marco the Basilica made a rich display of all its treasures including "two unicorn horns, one white and the other of a red hue" (*Deux licornes, l'une blanche, l'autre soubz [sic] couleur rouge*).<sup>10</sup> These horns also feature in the famous account of the city of Venice by prominent humanist Francesco Sansovino, who noted "entire unicorn horns" (*corni interi d'alicorno*) amongst the breathtaking treasures of the Basilica.<sup>11</sup>

Marco Polo and his unicorn are more explicitly connected and depicted in the heart of the Doge's Palace. In the largest room of the Doge's apartments, that of the Scudo, where the reigning Doge's coat of arms were displayed and audiences were held, a grand series of maps embellished its walls (giving this room its alternative name of Sala delle Mappe—Hall of Maps). Designed to dazzle with the breadth of Venetian territories and geographical discoveries,

famous Venetian explorers are also displayed on the wall, including, of course, Polo himself. Under the dogeship of Francesco Donà (r. 1545–1553), four monumental maps were commissioned for these walls to replace those destroyed by a fire of 1487. The task was assigned to the Trevisan geographer and travel writer Giambattista Ramusio (1485–1557) and the Piedmontese cartographer Giacomo Gastaldi (c.1500–1566). Their principal source for depicting the lands of Asia was Rustichello’s recount of Marco Polo’s journeyings. Of their original maps only the drawings of their eighteenth-century restorer, Giustino Menescardi (1720–1776), under the direction of the great naturalist Francesco Grisellini (1717–1783), remain. In the south of China, the Grisellini/Menescardi drawing of Ramusio and Gastaldi’s map depicts a rather bulky four-legged creature with a prominent single horn protruding from its forehead. However Grisellini and Menescardi’s restored map of 1762 replaces this unicorn-like creature with a perfect rendition of a rhinoceros which Hermann Walter has convincingly argued is none other than the Rhinoceros Clara—an Indian rhinoceros whose mid eighteenth-century “tour” of Venice and later artistic representations form the subject of Glynis Ridley and Sophie Bostock’s essays in this volume.<sup>12</sup> The rhinoceros is, therefore, a central, if subtle, iconographical element of the sacred, ceremonial and political centres of Venice.

Mythic Venetian–Rhino resonances of a less spiritual nature are also contained in the building that houses Gigi Bon’s atelier. Heralded by a sign of a rhinoceros made of Venetian seashells on Calle Malipiero, and nominated *Studio d’Arte “Mirabilia,”* Bon’s atelier is located in the building where Giacomo Casanova lived for five years from the age of three, and in a locality where he continued to live after his father’s untimely death in 1733. Casanova too, is linked into the strange leitmotif of Bon’s rhinos for Clara, the rhinoceros depicted in the map on the wall of the Doge’s palace, was viewed by the legendary lover himself. In Paris in 1750, over fruit at a lively luncheon at Lady Lambert’s, Casanova writes, everyone was talking “of the rhinoceros that one could see for a fee of 24 soldi at the Foire of Saint-Germain” (*del rinoceronte che si poteva vedere per ventiquattro soldi alla fiera di Saint-Germain*). That Clara should be a pay-for-view exotic display in one of the oldest and most popular fairs in Paris, where textiles, paintings, and other luxury commodities were on sale, is emblematic.<sup>13</sup> And that such an animal in its lineaments was still completely unknown to most, is recounted, in Casanova’s usual droll style, by the fact that a young marchesa in their party asked the burly and “virile” African man dressed in African costume (*alla foggia Africana*) who took their money at the door, if he was himself the rhinoceros. Once she saw the animal, the marchesa felt mortified by her mistake, and apologised to the gatekeeper for her error on account of the fact that she had never seen one before.<sup>14</sup>

Though often playful and whimsical in her art, there is, however, nothing of the droll or voyeuristic in Gigi Bon’s approach to her city





**Figure 2**

*Studio Mirabilia di Gigi Bon Venezia, May 2019. Photo Mark Smith.*



**Figure 3**

*Studio Mirabilia di Gigi Bon Venezia, May 2019. Photo Mark Smith.*

or the rhinoceros. To enter her *Studio d'Arte "Mirabilia"* is, in part, to be absorbed into a world of sculptures, prints, and objects of wonder in the true tradition of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century *Wunderkammern*, or Chambers of Wonders. Her styling of her studio as a *mirabilia* in conscious evocation of *Wunderkammern* is also one in constant creative development, and every visit to her studio reveals another curiosity or wonder, however large or small. One of the earliest of these Chambers of Wonders was the museo of Francesco Calceolari (1521–1600), a botanist and apothecary from Verona, whose cabinet of curiosities inaugurated in 1571 the first natural history and mineralogical museum in the world.<sup>15</sup> The *kammer* of Ferdinand II, Archduke of Austria, built over the period 1572 to 1583, was a *Kunst und Wunderkammer*—a chamber of art as well as wonders.<sup>16</sup> Such *kammern* became known for their *artificialia*, *naturalia*, *scientifica*, *exotica* and *mirabilia*, and that is what you



**Figure 4**

Museo of Ferrante Imperato, woodcut, illustrated in: Ferrante Imperato, *Dell'istoria natvrale di Ferrante Imperato napolitano libri XXVIII [...]*. Naples: Nella Stamparia à Porta Reale, per Costantino Vitale, 1599. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/47563649>. Downloaded with permission.

will find if you have the good fortune to wander down the Calle Malipiero. Freely open to the public, you are forced to stop, and gaze in wonder through the windows and, on entering, to try and comprehend the creative mind that put together such an assemblage (Figures 2 and 3).

Whilst Cabinets of Wonders and Curiosities have been much studied for their role in the development of what became the modern museum,<sup>17</sup> they are also central to a history of consumption and the reification of the exotic. A development from the earlier Renaissance *Studiolo*, the earliest extant pictorial representation of such a room is a double-spread woodcut of the “museo” or museum of the Neapolitan scholar apothecary Ferrante Imperato (1550–1625) which served as an illustrative opener to his twenty-eight book work collectively called *Dell'istoria naturale* (1599).<sup>18</sup> This woodcut (Figure 4) portrays a room crammed with curiosities, with a crocodile skin suspended from its ceiling, with visitors looking on in amazed wonder. Gigi Bon too, in a tribute gesture to Imperato, has a crocodile skin hanging in the centre of her studio’s main ceiling.<sup>19</sup>

It has been convincingly argued that published woodcuts and engravings such as those in Ferrante Imperato’s monumental work in and of themselves belong to the tradition of the *Wunderkammer* as they too were produced for “both instruction and delight.”<sup>20</sup> In one such illustration, contained in the compendious collection of engravings compiled by the botanist, microscopist and physician, Nehemiah Grew in his 1681 descriptive catalogue of the rarities in the collection of the Royal Society held at Gresham College, London, is depicted a fragment of the skin of a rhinoceros buttock.<sup>21</sup> This



engraving accompanied textual descriptions of further *rhinocerotidae* specimens in the Society's collection namely: the skin of a young rhinoceros; a piece of a great rhinoceros skin "tanned" and "wonderful hard, and thick, about  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch; exceeding that of any Land Animal which I have seen"; the horn of a rhinoceros once in the possession of the Duke of Holstein "almost a yard long"; a further two horns of almost the same size, one of which was given by Sir Robert Southwell when ambassador to the Prince Elector of Brandenburg;<sup>22</sup> a further smaller horn, and also a portion of the tail of a great rhino.<sup>23</sup> These fragments of rhino parts and their noted provenances indicate that the strange and exotic rhinoceros was firmly embedded in gifting diplomacy and in cabinets of curiosities by the seventeenth century.

It is also no coincidence that both Calceolari and Imperato were apothecaries. Their high-end trade in medicaments derived from plants, animals, and minerals, depended not only on sourcing these goods, but in verifying their legitimacy of origin to their clientele. The display of these curiosities served as evidence of the apothecaries' wide trading networks and access to the exotic, designed to inspire trust in what was for purchase. Mineralised *calcoli*, or stones, called bezoars, believed to come from the intestinal tracts of rhinoceroses, were hailed by Francesco Redi (1626–1698) and Hans Sloane (1660–1753), amongst others, as efficacious in drawing out poisons from the body.<sup>24</sup> Sloane also credited other parts of the rhinoceros with medicinal properties, noting in his catalogue of specimens:

Shavings of a rhinoceros horn for a counter poison.  
Rhinoceros's hyde [...] the Blood is used to fortify the heart & in all Contagious diseases causing the Sweat very plentifully Stops the flux of the Belly and purifies the Blood & stops Bleding. Of the Horn are made Cups against the bad air in time of Contagion. The teeth are used for the tooth ache applying it against the aching tooth.<sup>25</sup>

Nehemiah Grew's catalogue referred to earlier noted that not only a rhinoceros's horn, but also its "teeth, claws, flesh, skin, blood, yea dung and piss are much esteemed and used against poison." These alleged properties of healing were still being touted a century later when Clara went on tour. The publicity text accompanying a woodcut of Clara, sold in Regensburg, Germany, in 1747 declared that "the animal secretes some potion, which has cured many people from the falling sickness."<sup>26</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, when William Camden came to devise a Coat of Arms for the Society of Apothecaries in 1617, he surmounted the crest with a rhino derived from Dürer's famous representation of an Indian rhinoceros and the motto "*Opiferque per orbem dicor*" (I am called all over the world the Bringer of Aid).<sup>27</sup>

The idea of the reproduced image of exotic curiosities as a curiosity in itself has been convincingly developed by Alexa Torchynowycz in relation to Pietro Longhi's two representations of Clara's Venetian

**Figure 5**

Gigi Bon, *Ulisse [Ulysses]*, lost-wax bronze casting fused with ostrich egg, 16 x 33 x 16, 2017. Photo Catherine Kovesi.

visit of 1751 painted first at the behest of Giovanni Grimani (now in the Museo di Ca' Rezzonico) and then of Girolamo Mocenigo (now in the National Gallery in London).<sup>28</sup> As she argues, the former painting:

marks Grimani as a collector both of art and nature. The painting depicts an exotic animal that Grimani could marvel at for its strangeness, but the artist's decisions in rendering the rhinoceros make it more artistic rather than scientific. The combination of art and naturalism allow Grimani to claim himself both as a collector of art and as a collector of the exotic.<sup>29</sup>

Bon plays with the idea of the *Wunderkammer* in repeated artistic rhino renderings of some of the most famous of the early *kammern* and these prints themselves likewise become objects of wonder. In these works, Bon's rhino becomes both object and subject, viewer and viewed; and the prints' display within her own *kammer* of *mirabilia* reinforces this dizzying effect of reflected realities. In all her depictions, one rhino features in particular, a baby rhino, swaddled in an ostrich egg whom she calls Ulysses<sup>30</sup> and also MiraRhino<sup>31</sup>—or the rhino who admires (Figure 5).

The reason for this relates to the earliest rhinoceros to arrive in western Europe since Roman times. This was an unfortunate beast referred to as Ganda by its Portuguese viewers (a name which derives from the Hindi word for rhinoceros गैंडा—pronounced *gāinda*), but which was actually christened Ulysses by the sailors of the merchant ship *Nossa Senhora da Ajuda* who brought this animal to Lisbon

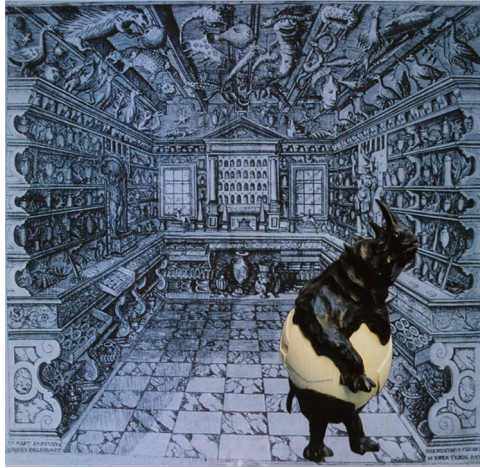


**Figure 6**

Gigi Bon, *Ultima Mirabilia*, mixed media on canvas, 2020. Photo Mark Smith.

from Goa. Ulysses/Ganda was a supreme diplomatic gift, or more accurately a re-gift, soon to be re-gifted again, with disastrous consequences for the hapless rhinoceros itself. Muzaffar Shah II, sultan of Gujarat from 1511–1526, first gifted this Indian rhinoceros to the Portuguese governor of Goa, Alfonso de Albuquerque. Alfonso in turn decided to make of this beast a magnificent gift to his overlord, King Manuel I of Portugal. And so, together with a cargo of spices, Ulysses/Ganda set sail for Portugal and, after 120 days of travel, arrived on 20 May 1515 at the port of Lisbon to wonder and acclaim. Once the animal's initial exoticism and attraction had worn off, King Manuel decided to re-gift it to the newly inaugurated Pope Leo X de' Medici.<sup>32</sup> In December 1515, Ulysses was tethered once again to the deck of a ship with a gilt iron chain and collared with velvet covered in carnations and roses, and dispatched for Rome.<sup>33</sup> But, before the ship could reach its final berth, it was shipwrecked and, being tethered to the deck, Ulysses/Ganda drowned off the coast of Genoa.<sup>34</sup> Despite this short-lived sojourn in Europe, Ulysses/Ganda has continued to have the most adventurous of afterlives. Ulysses' reputation led to the most famous, if gloriously inaccurate, depiction of a rhinoceros in modern times, the woodcut with explanatory text by Albrecht Dürer of 1515, which has become canonical in western art.<sup>35</sup>

Gigi Bon is also permanently intrigued by Ulysses, but depicts this “first-born” of European rhinoceroses quite differently from Dürer. Her Ulysses is sometimes depicted obliquely “in utero” in a large egg of the extinct ponderous Madagascan *Aepyornis* (elephant bird), or as a newly hatched youngling wearing his ostrich eggshell as a kind of swaddling or diaper.<sup>36</sup> Never successfully shedding his shell, an emergent ingénue, Bon's Ulysses goes on his own marvellous Grand Tour of European collections of the exotic: resplendent as an egg held in Bon's own bronze hand, he takes centre stage in Athanasius Kircher's Museo at the Collegio Romano,<sup>37</sup> his horn peeks out shyly



**Figure 7**

Gigi Bon, *MiraRhino in Mirabilia*, mixed media on canvas, 135x159cm.  
Photo Mark Smith.

from a large shell in Ferdinando Cospi's Museo in Bologna;<sup>38</sup> he joins the visitors in Ferrante's "museo" (Figure 6), and, in her work *MiraRhino in Mirabilia* (Figure 7) Ulysses stands happily observing the museum of Francesco Calceolari.

In the latter, Ulysses invites the viewer into this space as if into his own studio *mirabilia*, which is in fact a faithful rendering of the drawing by Giovanni Battista Bertoni, engraved by Girolamo Viscardi, of the *Musaeum Calceolarii*.<sup>39</sup> Bon's Ulysses declares: "Admire, O viewer, the *Mirabilia* through the eyes of their guardian who lives with them, he too a marvel, a curious custodian who arouses curiosity. One within Everything, Unique in the Cosmos." Bon's Ulysses is perhaps most emblematic of the paradoxes that lie at the core of Venice and the Rhino. Childlike in his wonder and wandering, he has a dual personality at once both fragile and eternal: as fragile as the ostrich egg which comprises his rotund body, and as eternal as the incorruptible bronze from which he is cast. As a lost-wax sculpture he is also unique.<sup>40</sup>

Whilst Bon's artistic practice is profoundly informed by this deep history of the rhinoceros and the *Wunderkammer*/museum/apothecary, she is also insistent that her atelier is not to be understood only as a studio *mirabilia*, a place of passive viewing. It is, perhaps most importantly, a living, working studio in the tradition of Renaissance artists and artisans into which the public is also invited. With its workbench heaving with wax models in various stages of preparation, (Figure 8) Bon's studio is an active space of creation. Bon's specialty is the production of hybrid works, usually involving a core bronze sculpture produced using the lost-wax technique (Figure 9).



**Figure 8**

Gigi Bon's worktable in her *Studio Mirabilia*. Photo Mark Smith.



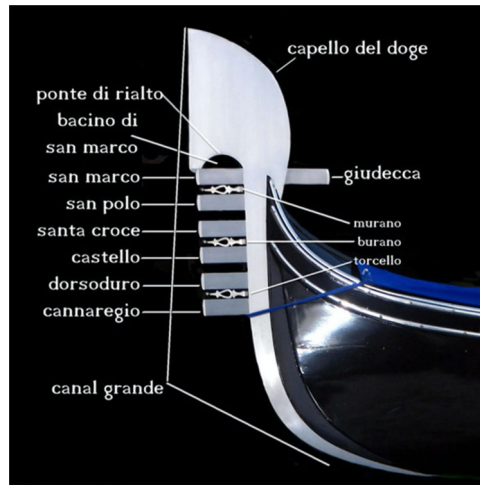
**Figure 9**

Gigi Bon at work in her *Studio Mirabilia*. Photo Mark Smith.

Because in this technique the original wax model is melted in the process of production in the foundry, each Gigi Bon sculptural creation is a unique piece—non-replicable. In his famous essay translated into English as *The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin posited that the value of something as “art” was inseparable from its original, unique context in time and space:

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. ... The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity. ... that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.<sup>41</sup>



**Figure 10**

Anatomy of the *Ferro di prua* of a gondola. Photo and graphics by Gunther H.G. Geick. Reproduced with permission.

As my earlier research, published in this journal and elsewhere, has argued, luxury has a long history, which is neither salubrious, elite, exclusive, or admirable, and which finds itself historically in opposition to a more exalted ancient concept—that of Magnificence. *Luxus* was used by ancient Romans to denote a concept of consumption that was above all driven by excess and lust for the more (and which indeed degenerated into the medieval word *luxuria*—or lust). The luxurious spender in this envisioning was always aspirational, constantly playing a dangerous game of catch-up, using mere wealth to feign status. The magnificent consumer, by contrast, spent for the public good as part of paying due honour to the society he/she served and represented. Their “magnificent” expenditure, however large, was justified by its public-serving aspect and was, indeed, expected of those in positions of power.<sup>42</sup> In this historical context of consumption, Bon’s art works are more properly seen as items of magnificence not merely for the discerning collector but, in their entirety and careful assemblage in her *Mirabilia*, as a gift to her city. They are the original which others have repeatedly sought to emulate. Bon is aware of the gloss that Venice and Italy more broadly provides to such imitators, but has her own riposte:

They all come to Italy to create publicity for themselves ... because here almost anything becomes a more beautiful version of itself, but we carry on and we will resist like the last Rhinos. (*Vengono tutti in Italia a farsi pubblicità ... perché qui qualsiasi cosa diventa più bella ma noi andiamo avanti e resistiamo come gli ultimi Rhini*).

Bon’s sculptural works incorporate elements of the precious, the rare, the fantastical and the whimsical, and nearly all play with





**Figure 11**

Gigi Bon, *Orseolo*, lost-wax fused bronze casting, 2019. Photo Mark Smith.



**Figure 12**

Gigi Bon, *Bellezza, Sagezza, Fortezza*, lost-wax bronze casting, 2019. Photo Catherine Kovesi.

themes of self, Venice, and the rhinoceros. Amongst her rhino conceits is one relating to the ceremonial headdress of the Doge of Venice, constitutional symbol of the city's commitment to republican values, which is unique among rulers' headwear in being called a "corno" or horn. This provides an obvious invitation from Bon to her rhinos to don a dogal corno in lieu of their own horns. In Bon's hands the doge and rhino become fused. Others are transformed into the *ferro di prua* of a gondola, itself a symbolic representation of the city's entire geography—surmounted by a stylised doge's corno, it curves into the Grand Canal, and indicates the city's six geographical

subdivisions (*sestieri*), three lagoon islands, the island of the Giudecca, the bay (*bacino*) of Saint Mark, and the Rialto bridge (Figure 10).

These horn/prows transform her rhinos not simply into representations of the city itself, but into navigators guided by a Venetian symbol of directionality. It is the rhino who steers us on a different journey; one whose path both leads to, and is, Venice. One of the most congested gondola stations in the city is that of the Bacino Orseolo where the endlessly bobbing *ferri* inspired Bon's own rhino *Orseolo* (Figure 11).

In other variants, her rhino takes on a supportive role, bearing on its back the campanile, or bell tower, of Piazza San Marco, or in the work *Bellezza, Sagezza, Forza*, contains within its body the beauty of the Basilica (*bellezza*), the wisdom of Saint Mark (*sagezza*), and the rhino's strength to carry on (*forza*) (Figure 12).

In these iterations the rhino functions as the fundament of the city. Tiziano Scarpa writes suggestively that "Venice is a Fish."<sup>43</sup> But once you enter Gigi Bon's world it becomes increasingly difficult not to see and agree instead that, incongruously and improbably, the Rhinoceros is Venice and that Venice is, indeed, a surprisingly graceful Rhinoceros.

Rarity and incorruptibility are core principles for Bon's practice. Her sculptures have inclusions of shells, corals, geodes, crystals, fossils, ostrich and elephant bird eggs, and other *naturalia*, and are often embossed in sheets of gold beaten by hand by Europe's last gold beater, the Venetian Mario Berta Battiloro. In recent years she has acquired an exquisite and now unobtainable supply of a Chinese silk from the Zhejiang 浙江省 Province of Eastern China, woven in a textile atelier in Como into a fabric of luscious tactility. Known for centuries for its exceptional silk production, this particular region of Zhejiang's mulberry fields were reappropriated for another industry and, though its silk production was relocated, the final product was never the same. Its silk had lost its *terroir*. In a satisfying symmetry with Marco Polo's journeyings along the fabled silk roads and his encounters with rhinos, Bon has produced a series of substantial limited-edition printed panels on this lost silk with hand-rolled hems, including *MiraRhino in Mirabilia*, *Carosello Rhino* and *Angeli Rhino* (Figure 13).<sup>44</sup>

Another repeated motif in Bon's work is that of the measurement of time, with its close links to the passage of time, *memento mori*, and the movements of the celestial heavens. She is particularly drawn to the Torre dell'Orologio, the monumental clock tower on Piazza San Marco adjacent to the Basilica completed at the end of the fifteenth century and which shows not only the hour, but the phases of the moon and the movement of the signs of the zodiac. Atop this tower two monumental figures strike the hours. Probably representing shepherds, or even giants, Venetians popularly refer to these two figures as "*I Mori*"—the Moors—as the patina of their



**Figure 13**

Gigi Bon, *Carosello Rhino*, silk panel, 135x205cm. Photo Mark Smith.

bronze has darkened with age. Below the “*Mori*” is a winged lion of Saint Mark and, down one level again, is the Virgin Mary—the two potent protectors of the city (Figures 14 and 15).

Throughout the long lockdown induced by the COVID-19 virus in early 2020, Bon felt incapable of artistic production. But her first work, once lockdown eased a little, was a mixed media work titled “Il Mondo Novo”—The New World (Figure 16a and b).

This work plays with the famous celestial map, or *Planisphaeri coeleste*, produced in 1670 by the Dutch cartographer Frederik de Wit (c.1629–1706) and overlays it with zodiacal rhinos who seem quite at home with the mythological creatures which populate the ancients’ heavens depicted by De Wit: Pegasus, Sirius, Cetus and others. In its left hand corner she has also overlaid the image with an ominous *memento mori*. However its naming derives from another work located in the city of Venice, the famous fresco later called *Il Mondo Novo* (1791) by Giandomenico Tiepolo, formerly in his family’s country villa, but now relocated to the Ca’ Rezzonico museum in Venice.<sup>45</sup> Painted at the height of Venice’s attraction as an obligatory stop on the Grand Tour circuit, this enigmatic painting depicts a host of characters gathered with their backs to the viewer whilst a figure with a wand points to something in the centre of the grouping that is invisible to us. These characters are mesmerised by a kind of



**Figure 14**

Gigi Bon with *Tempo*, mixed media on canvas, May 2019. Photo Mark Smith.



**Figure 15**

Gigi Bon, *Rhino orologio*, Lost-wax fused bronze with ship's clock, 53x26x18 cm, 2019. Moors' heads frame this clockface in playful reference to *I Mori*. Photo Mark Smith.

magical lantern side show, called “Mondo Novo,” popular in the period and which showed illuminated images of faraway places. Oblivious to the wonders of the real world around them, these viewers are looking at a mechanically reproduced “new world,” rather than the inimitable original which stands before them. As Bon expresses it:

The painting seems a metaphor—both clear and bitter—of our times. But, above all, a representation of a population, of a humanity deaf and unknowing, unaware of the storms that will loom at the end of a century ... just as in our times all have ignored the signs of imminent catastrophe. I, naturally, think of the extermination of a mythical and magical animal such as the rhinoceros through the vanity of a few, and of the destruction of my beloved Venice with the passage of large cruise ships for the sake of a few tossed coins given to the few. ... And, in the end, with this virus that has enforcedly blockaded everyone, we have been able to comprehend our fragility and that we have gone, really “beyond the beyond”.



**Figure 16a**

Gigi Bon, *Mondo Novo*, mixed media on canvas, 2020. Photo Mark Smith.



**Figure 16b**

Gigi Bon, *Mondo Novo*, detail.

This new work of Bon's is full of referential motifs found in much of her work—instruments that measure the fleetingness of Time, and other *memento mori*. However, across her depiction of the ancient map of the “new world” traverses her signature “gondola Rhino” who, with his ferro/horn indicates the correct path to follow. As 2020 has progressed, so Bon's muse has returned in full force. Her latest work consists of two monumental hourglasses, one with an enormous shell in lieu of a glass and supported by two bronze sculptural renderings of Bon's own hands, and the other with a substantial Murano-blown glass balanced on gold leaf balls, in turn balanced on



**Figure 17**

Gigi Bon, *Excalibur*, lost-wax fused bronze and shell, 62 x 22 cm, 2020. Photo Mark Smith.

the lion of Saint Mark and her rhinos. Bon has named the former work *Excalibur*—the legendary sword of King Arthur which, in Sir Thomas Malory’s fifteenth-century account, is handed to the courageous King by the Lady of the Lake. Gigi Bon, the self-styled Lady of the Lagoon, with her hands gripped around this giant shell, warns us that time is running out for Venice and the rhinoceros, but also reminds us that, with the flick of a hand, the hourglass can be re-set by those with the courage to do so (Figures 17 and 18).

The collective *oeuvre* of Gigi Bon carefully curated in her *Studio d’Arte “Mirabilia”* serves the public-facing function required of ancient Roman Magnificence. Her life’s work reminds the city of its strange and ancient origins and of its fragility. All aspects of the rhino in Venice are connected in deep ways to the city’s status as the world’s greatest emporium of goods, a trading locale, *from which* merchants such as Rustico da Torcello and Bon da Malamocco set out to Alexandria, or Marco Polo to China, or *to which* Clara was brought to tour through the city. Venice was the first great emporium of the modern world and remains indelibly connected to global trading networks—for good and for ill. From the eyrie with which I began, from Bon’s living room window, you look directly at the famous Bridge of Sighs—*Il Ponte dei Sospiri*. In a sorrowing tribute, Bon





**Figure 18**

Gigi Bon, *Carosello rhino*, lost-wax fused bronze and 23 carat gold leaf, and hand-blown glass with golden sand, 42 x 14 cm, 2020. Photo Mark Smith.



**Figure 19**

Gigi Bon with her *Rhino Letterato*. Photo Mark Smith.

created “SospirRhino,” the Rhino of Sighs, whose body becomes the bridge and whose single, large and tragic tear, contains the sighs of Bon and her iconic city.

For Gigi Bon, the fate of the rhinoceros and Venice, and perhaps that of her own as an artist, continue to be entwined; they are all unique, fragile, and vulnerable. “I feel myself to be a strange animal in process of extinction. ... If we cannot save the rhinoceros or Venice,” she asks, “what can we save?” (Figure 19)

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes

1. “Mi sento un rinoceronte, animale schivo e solitario, perché mi piace pensare di nascondermi dentro la sua splendida incredibile armatura, *pulcherrimum monstrum*, animale che suscita meraviglia e incanto, fossile vivente ... per restare fuori dal quotidiano, in qualche modo protetta, dal fardello della ‘pesantezza del vivere’ ... .” Cited in Zugni-Tauro, “Antiche camere delle meraviglie,” 33. Translation by author.
2. See for instance the collection of essays in Bon, *Veni Etiam*, especially the title essay of the same name by Martina Mazzotta, 11–17.
3. Perry, *Sacred Plunder*.
4. Polo/Rustichello da Pisa, *Le Divisament Dou Monde*, Book 3, Chapter 9. Translation from Franco-Venetian by Yule, in Cordier, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, vol. 2, 398.
5. The last Malaysian Sumatran rhino died in November 2019. The only remaining populations are in Indonesia where, as of 2019, the World Wildlife Fund estimated there were fewer than 80 of them alive. <https://www.worldwildlife.org/species/sumatran-rhino> (viewed 20 September 2020). The Sumatran rhino has, however, two horns, not a “uni” horn. It is possible that Polo was describing instead the Javan rhino (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*), which has only one horn, but Polo did not go to Java and the Javan rhino is not hairy.
6. An Indian rhinoceros is portrayed in the mosaic floor of the Villa Romana del Casale (Fourth century CE) near Piazza Armerina in Sicily, excavated in the late 1800s.
7. Hahnloser, *Il Tesoro di San Marco*, 89-90, and also Pluskowski, “Narwhals or Unicorns?,” 303.
8. For the entire procession see Sanuto, *I diarii*, vol. 13, cols 130–4. The reference to the ‘lioncorni’ is in col. 132. See also Perocco, “History of the Treasury,” 66, and Gallo, *Il Tesoro di San Marco*, 43–44.
9. Lusitanus, *In Dioscoridis di Materia Medica*, 206.
10. Possot, *Le Voyage de la Terre Sainte*, 90.
11. Sansovino, *Venetia Citta Nobilissima*, lib. 2, 38v.
12. Walter, “Un ritratto sconosciuto della ‘Signorina Clara’.” For a detailed discussion of Clara’s tour of Europe see Ridley, *Clara’s Grand Tour*. This author currently has in preparation a more detailed article on Marco Polo’s rhinoceros in Venice.
13. There has been a Foire at Saint Germaine from 1176. For detail of the various exotica on display from 1595 to 1791, see the documents in Campardon, *Les spectacles de la Foire*.
14. Casanova, *Memorie di Casanova*, 204–205. See also Bremer-David, “Animal Lovers are Informed,” 102.

15. Ceruto, et al, *Musaeum Franc. Calceolarum iun. Veronensis*. See also Zugni-Tauro, 31–33.
16. Haskins, “Science at the Court.”
17. See, amongst many others, Findlen, *Possessing Nature*; Impey and MacGregor, eds., *The Origins of Museums*; DaCosta Kaufmann, *The Mastery of Nature*, 174–94; Benedict, *Curiosity*.
18. Imperato, *Dell'istoria natvrale*.
19. Bon's crocodile also consciously recalls the stuffed specimen hanging from the ceiling in the votive church of Santa Maria delle Grazie, in the Comune of Grazie near Mantova.
20. Silver, “Cultures and Curiosity,” 244. See also Parshall, “Art and Curiosity in Northern Europe”; Peters, “The Desire to Know the Secrets of the World,” 593–610; Swann, *Curiosities and Texts*; Evans and Marr, eds., *Curiosity and Wonder*.
21. Grew, *Musaeum Regalis Societatis*. I am grateful to Evelyn Welch for first alerting me to this engraving.
22. Sir Robert Southwell (1635–1702) was President of the Royal Society from 1690.
23. Grew, *Musaeum Regalis Societatis*, 29–31.
24. Hanson, “Representing the Rhinoceros,” 551–53.
25. Clutton-Brock, “Vertebrate Collections,” 88. The entries come from catalogue 25, “Fishes, Birds, Quadrupeds,” MSS, SLO, now in the Natural History Museum, London, and cited in Hanson, “Representing the Rhinoceros,” 564, n. 32.
26. Quoted in Rookmaaker and Monson, “Woodcuts and Engravings,” 318.
27. Hanson, “Representing the Rhinoceros,” 555.
28. Pietro Longhi, “Vero Ritratto di un Rinocerotto condotto in Venetia l'anno 1751 fatto per mano di Pietro Longhi per Commissione del N. O. Giovanni Grimani dei Servi; Patrisio Veneto,” oil on canvas, 62x50cm, Museo di Ca' Rezzonico, Venice, and Pietro Longhi, “Exhibition of a Rhinoceros at Venice,” probably 1751, oil on canvas, 60.4x47cm, National Gallery London.
29. Torchynowycz, “Exhibition of a Rhinoceros,” 12–15.
30. See, for instance, Gigi Bon, *Ulisse* [Ulysses], lost-wax bronze casting fused with ostrich egg, 16x33x16cm, 2017 and its description in Kovesi, ed., *Rhinoceros*, 34–35.
31. Gigi Bon, *MiraRhino in Mirabilia*, mixed media on canvas, 135 x 159, 2017, illustrated in Kovesi, ed., *Rhinoceros*, 36–37.
32. For the descriptions of Ganda made in Lisbon, see Clarke, *The Rhinoceros from Dürer to Stubbs*, 16–27.
33. Ridley, *Clara's Grand Tour*, 86.
34. Although its carcass eventually came to shore and was apparently stuffed so that at least its dead body could be sent to the pope, there is no record of any taxidermied rhino specimen in the papal or other collections of the period.
35. For the longevity and influence of Dürer's image see Clarke, *The Rhinoceros from Dürer to Stubbs*, Chapter 1; Cole, “The History of Albrecht Dürer's Rhinoceros,” 337–56; Leitch, “Dürer's *Rhinoceros* Underway,” 241–55; and Bubenik, *Reframing Albrecht Dürer*,” 100–103.
36. Gigi Bon, *Ulisse*, lost-wax bronze casting fused with ostrich egg, 16x33x16cm.
37. Gigi Bon, *Veni Etiam*, 29. For the print of the Museo, see the frontispiece to Giorgio de Sepibus, *Romani Collegii Societatis Jesu Musaeum celeberrimum*.
38. Gigi Bon, *Veni Etiam*, 36–37. For the original print by Giuseppe Maria Mitelli of Cospì's museo, see Legati, *Museo Cospiano annesso a quello del famoso Ulisse Aldrovandi*.
39. Ceruto, et al, *Musaeum Franc. Calceolarum iun. Veronensis* The original engraving is held in the Archivio del Museo Civico di Storia Naturale di

- Verona. It was also used as the frontispiece engraving of Benedicto Ceruto, Francesco *Musaeum Franc. Calceolari iun. Veronensis*.
40. Kovesi, ed., *Rhinoceros*, 34.
  41. Benjamin's original 1935 essay *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* was first published in French translation in 1936, modified by Benjamin in 1939 and translated into English and introduced to an English-speaking audience in Arendt, "Reflections," 65–156, 220–21.
  42. Kovesi, "What is Luxury?" 25–40. See also, Kovesi, "Luxus," 3–20.
  43. Scarpa, *Venice is a Fish*.
  44. 135x205cm. Limited edition, 2017. See Kovesi, ed., *Rhinoceros*, 42–46.
  45. For the naming of this fresco and its subject see Spieth, "Giandomenico Tiepolo's 'Il Mondo Nuovo.'"

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