



# Luxury's Fragile Frontier: The Rhinoceros and Venice: An Introduction to a Special Edition

**Catherine Kovesi**

Amongst the trinkets available for sale in the shop of the Basilica di San Marco, the most important religious edifice of the city of Venice, is a small fridge magnet depicting a rhinoceros in mosaic. This Venetian mosaic is arguably the first known representation of a rhinoceros in Western Europe since the fourth century. Whether or not the mass touristic hordes to whom such trinkets are marketed have seen or even managed to find this mosaic hidden within the Basilica on the floor near a side chapel, this magnet embodies the core themes of this special issue of *Luxury: History, Culture, Consumption*. I feel a sense of deep gratitude and privilege that Jonathan Faiers was persuaded of the timeliness of an initially unlikely pairing of themes in this, his last issue as editor of the journal he founded, and a journal which is uniquely

positioned to interrogate the fragility of two archetypal “objects” of consumption.

The rhinoceros, seemingly alien to a densely populated European city such as Venice, is not only embedded in the history of its sacred centre but also shares its present predicaments. The oldest mammal still walking the earth after 50 million years and the world’s longest-lasting republic of some 1000 years (697–1797)<sup>1</sup> are linked in their iconic talismanic status in the world’s collective imagination. Both the rhino and Venice are improbable—the one an ungainly, armoured evolutionary marvel; the other a fantastical man-made creation sitting atop a muddy water world. Yet both the rhino and Venice have become victims of their desirability and objectification as luxury “objects,” and both are under threat from overconsumption by an ever-expanding luxury clientele lusting after trophies—whether a prized rhino horn or an insignificant fridge magnet—that indicate their owners have come and consumed.

Indeed, the horn of the rhino, made of intrinsically worthless keratin, has become one of the world’s most costly luxury objects; an unlikely symbol of status and prestige in a primarily Asian and specifically Vietnamese market. Though its consumption is popularly associated with its use in Chinese medicine practices, it is instead the very recent branding of rhino horn as a status symbol—used to seal business deals or even to feed in its powdered form to the young infants of an emergent moneyed elite—that accounts for its recent surge in consumption. Before the disruption of COVID-19, every eight hours a rhinoceros was killed to satisfy this new demand, and many species of rhinoceros, such as the Western Black and the Northern White, are now extinct in the wild,<sup>2</sup> whilst others, such as the Sumatran rhino, have numbers fewer than 100.<sup>3</sup> And, before the lockdowns of COVID-19, the city of Venice was overwhelmed in increasing numbers each year by a mass tourist market with an average of 60,000 tourists every single day descending on a city with a population, as of August 2020, of only 51,696.<sup>4</sup> The effects of low-cost airlines, diversified budget accommodation, including Airbnb, and cruise tourism have posed critical challenges to the delicately balanced architectural infrastructure, eco systems, and social framework of the lagoon and of the city.<sup>5</sup> In 2019 according to Statista, 1.6 million cruise passengers alone disembarked in Venice—tourists who do not stay in the city itself, but who require an infrastructure to support their daily descent, and whose ships (some 600 in 2019) cause immense damage to the fragile foundations of the city’s buildings as well as polluting its waters and air.<sup>6</sup> The voices of locals, with their “No Grandi Navi” (No Cruise Ships) or their “Venezia è il mio futuro” (Venice is My Future) protests, are increasingly drowned out by competing demands for tourist dollars.<sup>7</sup>

It was a chance encounter with a remarkable Venetian artist, Gigi Bon, that first led me into the world of the rhino in Venice. I stumbled across her *Studio d’Arte “Mirabilia”* whilst wandering through the city

and was immediately intrigued and entranced by her singular vision of Venice as Rhino and vice versa. An uncanny concatenation of further encounters with a British-born Australian wildlife warrior (Lynn Johnson), a Taiwanese artist (Shih Li-Jen), and a Canadian poet (Ronna Bloom), convinced me of the importance of both this city and this mammal in an urgent globalized discourse on luxury consumption and the fragility of the consumed. All were persuaded to join forces from the global east and west, north and south, in an exhibition, "Rhinoceros: Luxury's Fragile Frontier," held in one of luxury's first emporia, the city of Venice, at the Magazzino Gallery, Palazzo Polignac, in November to December 2018.<sup>8</sup> A series of artworks by Gigi Bon and Shih Li-Jen were displayed against a backdrop of a video installation by Lynn Johnson outlining her innovative demand-reduction campaigns for rhino horn consumption in Vietnam. As focal points of reflection, poems were commissioned from Ronna Bloom and displayed on large posters at strategic points in the exhibition space. The latter's own fairly recent encounters with the city of Venice, and subsequently with a greater one-horned Indian rhino named Ashakiran (Ray of Hope) in the Toronto zoo, inspired this remarkable series of poems, two of which are reproduced here.<sup>9</sup>

To launch the exhibition, a special symposium was held, "Beauty and the Beast: Venice and the Rhino," which enabled us to draw together a group of historians, poets, art curators, and environmentalists, to contextualise the long history of rhinos in Venice within a framework of luxury consumption and fragility.<sup>10</sup> A selection of these presentations in expanded form, together with new material, has been brought together for this special issue. Collectively, the articles explore the paradoxical magnificence and fragility of both Venice and of the Rhinoceros. They reveal the history of the construction of rhino horn as a unique object of desire in ancient China (Jackie Dickenson) as well as in Western Europe, and the historical, symbolical as well as prophylactical links made between the unicorn and the rhino (Bruno Martinho and Catherine Kovesi); they elucidate the tale of Clara, an eighteenth-century Indian rhino displayed in the city of Venice (Glynis Ridley), and her afterlife in artistic and ceramic reproductions (Sophie Bostock); and the artistic rhino oeuvres of both Gigi Bon (Catherine Kovesi) and Shih Li-Jen (Jackie Dickenson) as they relate to the city of Venice. Two of Ronna Bloom's original five poems, as well as the personal narrative of journalist and travel and destination consultant, Allison Zurfluh, who has intimate knowledge of the lagoon, provide moments of pause and reflection.

Sustainable/eco tourism has become as much a buzz phrase as sustainable fashion. In the drive to exploit tourist income, many tour operators are now touting trips into the fragile, delicately balanced world of the Venetian lagoon and its islands and islets as an "eco" alternative. The highly personal article by Zurfluh highlights the realities of this push into underexplored lagoon worlds and its catastrophic effects on a delicate eco system established over a

millennium of careful husbandry by lagoon-dwellers. In a similar fashion, Lynn Johnson reinforces the urgent need for a revisioning of luxury consumption in relation to rhino horn and offers a new paradigm of consumption derived from ancient conceptions of “magnificence” as opposed to “luxury”. Both the rhino and the city of Venice force us to interrogate what might happen when consumption is uncoupled from ethical constraints and to explore sustainable consumption beyond mere greenwashing.

Modern tourism arguably began with the Grand Tour that became a fashionable part of a young gentleman’s education in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and of which Venice was an essential destination. Glynis Ridley’s expansive work on the “Grand Tour” of Clara the Rhinoceros in the eighteenth century<sup>11</sup> and her article on Clara for this issue is also echoed in the repeated interrogations by several of this issue’s authors of the same key rhino protagonists who arrived in early modern Europe. My own opening article on Gigi Bon, as well as those of Sophie Bostock and of Jackie Dickenson, analyse the iconic representations (in text and image) of these “European” rhinos from a series of different angles—each article self-contained in its own right, but together forming a more comprehensive understanding, or a kind of Grand Tour narrative, of the ways in which the rhino has interacted with the city of Venice. Dickenson’s final article on Shih Li-Jen, whose exhibition together with a monumental sculpture of a rhino, were displayed in Venice during the Biennale Arte 2017, and subsequently in Bassano del Grappa from 2018, brings the themes of this issue back full circle. Shih Li-Jen’s refrain of the rhino as representative of “the endless circle of life” applies not just to the rhino, but to the endless inventiveness of an insatiable luxury market and the role of the Biennale Arte, and contemporary art more broadly, in the discourses, perceptions and promotion of luxury objects.

It is premature to make a detailed commentary on the complexity of the tourist market in a COVID-plagued world and its effects on the city of Venice and on the hunting of rhinos. Whilst the world marvelled at a Venice unexpectedly freed from its 60,000 daily visitors during lockdown early in 2020, and the images of its canals in which sediment unclouded from motorboats could settle and reveal clear waters and their marine occupants, the eerie emptiness of the city in those months highlighted also the fragility of over-dependence of the city on a mono tourism economy. Whilst no Venetian supported over-tourism, the devastation of *no* tourists has brought about other anxieties. And, whilst some have pointed to a decline in rhino poaching figures as airplane travel has disrupted the transfer of goods, others point to an increase in poaching due to the lack of tourists and their income in assisting in the surveillance of wildlife areas in South Africa—the world’s largest habitat of rhinos in the wild.<sup>12</sup> What is for sure is that for engaged readers of an academic journal

interrogating luxury, its history, culture and consumption, there is perhaps no more timely pairing of themes than the rhinoceros and Venice.

## Notes

1. Though Venice as a city was legendarily founded on 25 March 421, its first Doge, Paolo Lucio Anafesto, was not elected until 697CE and hence the Republic dates from this latter year.
2. The Western Black was declared extinct by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in 2011. As of March 2018, there are two Northern White rhinoceroses left in the wild—both female—and so the species is functionally extinct in the wild.
3. Formerly existing in the wild in Malaysia, the Sumatran rhino was declared extinct in that country in November 2019 and now only exists in Indonesia where the World Wildlife Fund estimates figures from 80 to as low as 30. Its notoriously reclusive habits make precise calculations from sightings difficult.
4. The city's population and its daily variation is displayed on an electronic counter linked to the city's Registry office in the window of the Farmacia Morelli in Campo San Bortolomio.
5. Calculating total tourist numbers is difficult and varies depending on whether you calculate "arrivals" or "presences," tourists who stay (and in what kind of accommodation) and day trippers. Bertocchi et al. estimate the number of day trippers at some 22 million people. Their analysis of Tourist Carrying Capacity is one of the more sophisticated to date. See Dario Bertocchi, Nicola Camatti, Silvio Giove and Jan van der Borg, "Venice and Overtourism: Simulating Sustainable Development Scenarios through a Tourism Carrying Capacity," *Sustainability* 12, no. 2 (January 2020): 512; doi: 10.3390/su12020512.
6. Statista, 7 September 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/944494/number-of-cruise-passengers-in-the-venezia-port-in-italy/>
7. "No Grandi Navi" was founded by Tommaso Cacciari in 2016. <http://www.nograndinavi.it>. "Venezia è il mio futuro" was a "flash mob" initiative beginning on 2 July 2016 organised by several agencies including Fondo Ambiente Italiano (FAI), Gruppo 25 Aprile, Italia Nostra, Masegni & Nizioletti Onlus, and l'Altra Venezia. Large hand-written banners made of sheets (or *nizioletti* in Venetian dialect) declaring "Venezia è il mio futuro," were hung from balconies in response to the words of Venetian mayor Luigi Brugnaro, a resident of Mestre on the adjacent mainland: "il futuro di questo Comune non è Venezia, è Mestre, dove c'è la gente che vive" declared in a speech to open the 15th Biennale Architettura, on 27 May, 2016 ("the future of this Comune is not Venice, it is Mestre, where people live."). See, amongst many others, the blog commentary of Michele Catozzi, "#VeneziaMioFuturo: la città merita rispetto," <https://www.michelecatozzi.it/2016/07/14/veneziamiofuturo-la-citta-merita-rispetto/>
8. <https://www.emporium.org.au/exhibition>.
9. For the full series of poems, see the exhibition catalogue, Kovesi, *Rhinoceros: Luxury's Fragile Frontier*. Two of the poems, *Between Fur and Skin*, and *The Night the Rhinos Came* were republished by *Canthius* 6 (2019) [and also online: <http://www.canthius.com/feed-1/2019/12/8/two-poems-by-ronna-bloom>].
10. <https://www.emporium.org.au/symposium>.
11. Ridley, *Clara's Grand Tour*.
12. Roth, "Poachers Kill More Rhinos."

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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