

A CULTURAL HISTORY OF OBJECTS IN THE RENAISSANCE

Edited by James Symonds



BLOOMSBURY

Copyrighted material

This Renaissance is more than a lucrative brand, however. Its attraction rests not only on the beauty and creativity of its artworks, but also on an imagined cultural connection to the present. This perceived connection has meant that the Renaissance has become a particularly enduring trope. Hence, we may happily imagine the heroic geniuses Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci in the sunbathed piazzas of late sixteenth-century Florence as *people like us*, the only difference being their period clothing.

The statue was also a religious statement, being a materialization of an Old Testament hero, framed in a genre that created a link to, but arguably surpassed, the craftsmanship of the classical past. But David's muscular physique also embodied Florence's civic pride. He was a homegrown local hero and reflected the city's growing mercantile wealth and desire for art. All of these qualities, along with the stubborn local marble from which the statue was hewn, were essentially local to the northern Italian urban culture that commissioned the work.

Moving on to our next case study, it is important to remember that whereas some Renaissance objects were homegrown and were intended to celebrate the power of patricians and their localities, other objects stand out for their exoticism and unfamiliarity. An investment in local art signaled wealth and taste and bolstered the power of Renaissance oligarchs. The possession of fine art and architecture served to muffle criticism and to naturalize the power of elites. The collection of natural curiosities, on the other hand, demonstrated rationality and the power to assemble and domesticize or otherwise exercise control over the natural world.

WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE: NATURE, COLLECTING, AND THE EXPANSION OF GLOBAL TRADE

On May 20, 1515, an Indian rhinoceros was manhandled out of the hold of a Portuguese carrack and raised its head to sniff the air in Lisbon's Belém harbor. The rhinoceros was the first of its kind to be seen alive in Europe for 1,200 years, and it was a gift from Muzaffar Shah II, Sultan of Gujarat, to Alfonso de Albuquerque, the governor of Portuguese India in Goa. On his arrival home, Alfonso de Albuquerque presented the beast, which came to be known as Ulysse, to the Portuguese king, Don Manuel I (1495–1521). The sheer exoticism of this beast intrigued everyone who saw it, as it was paraded around the streets of the Ajuda National Palace. In the spirit of gift exchange, the young king made plans for this prestige item to be passed on up the line, as a diplomatic gift to the Medici Pope Leo X. But Ulysse never made it to Rome, as he was drowned when the ship that was transporting him foundered in rough seas off the coast of Liguria (Smith and Findlen 2013: 1–3).

A representation of the unfortunate Ulysse is known to us from Albrecht Dürer's 1515 pen sketch and woodcut entitled *The Rhinoceros* (Figure 0.2). Although Dürer never actually saw Ulysse, he was able to visualize the creature from a drawing and notes, now lost, that had been sent to the merchants of Nuremberg by Valentin Ferdinand, a German printer who lived in Lisbon. Dürer accurately depicted the Indian rhinoceros's single horn and pointed mouth, and the wart-like bumps that cover the rear and shoulders of this species. His imagination added other less precise details, however; the bird-like scales on the legs, the small, narwhal-like horn protruding from the back of the neck, and the elephant's tail. Further artistic improvisation can be seen on the rhinoceros's armored plates. Dürer was living next to the Schmeidegasse armorer's quarters in Nuremberg in 1515, and it has been suggested that the patterning on the rhinoceros's plates may incorporate designs for armor that he was also working on at the time (Clarke 1986: 20).

Thanks to the use of the printing press, Dürer's image of the rhinoceros was widely circulated in Northern Europe. In the thirteen years between 1515

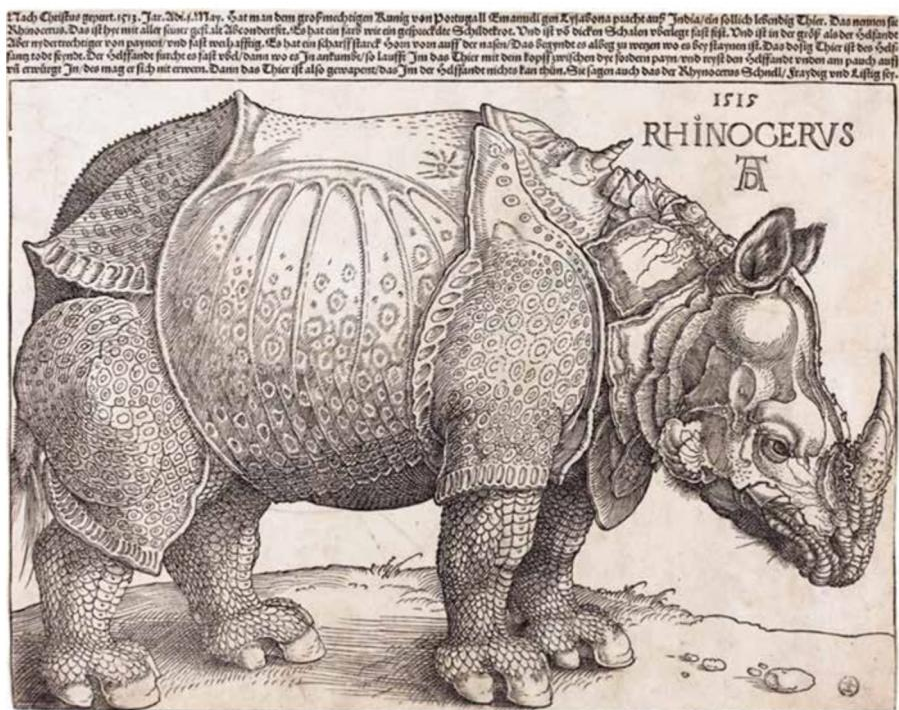


FIGURE 0.2 Albrecht Dürer, *The Rhinoceros*, 1515. © The National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

and Dürer's early death at the age of fifty-seven in 1528, it has been estimated that as many as 5,000 prints of the image were sold. The image promoted a sense of wonder in the mysteries of the East and fabulous beasts. And as with Michelangelo's David, the image of Dürer's rhinoceros has percolated through time and has been copied and reinvented by artists ranging from sixteenth-century German and Italian printmakers, to the Danish tapestry weavers of Kronborg Castle and the twentieth-century surrealist Salvador Dali, who produced his homage, the cast bronze *Rhinocéros Cosmique*, in 1956.

Dürer's rhinoceros, timeless and bold, is a fine example of how new conceptions of the natural world emerged from the interplay of commerce and patronage and the "intersection between patronage and commerce" (Smith and Findlen 2013: 4). The growing interest in the accurate firsthand observation and representation of nature that occurred in late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries led to an upsurge in artistic and artisan production. This thirst for knowledge and experience elevated gifted individuals such as Dürer, who could provide a "true portrait" of nature, to a high social status.

Elites have amassed collections of prestige objects to bolster their status throughout history and continue to do so. But in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the desire to accumulate and order nature led to the emergence of highly distinctive collections of objects. In northern Italy, the Medici's and others assembled curiosities along with paintings in specially constructed *museo* or *galleria* (Koeppel and Maria Gusti 2008). From the middle of the sixteenth century, a new form of display emerged in Central Europe; the *Kunst-und-Wunderkammer*, or cabinet of art and wonder. This form of collecting originated among the wealthy merchants of the Bavarian imperial city of Augsburg and the Fugger family, who made use of their widespread trading contacts both north and south of the Alps to acquire curiosities (Meadow 2002).

The *Kunstkammer* was conceived as an encyclopedic collection of all kinds of objects that contained and exhibited universal knowledge. The objects and exotic specimens that were displayed, many of which were obtained for the first time through New World encounters, belonged to two major categories: natural objects (*naturalia*) and manmade objects (*arteficialia* or *artefacta*). The category of manmade objects often included a subcategory of mechanical and navigational instruments (*scientifica*). Taken together, the assembled *Kunststück*, which in modern German translates as "a trick" or "sleight of hand," and "*Kunstkammern*" provided a panoptic vision of the natural and manmade world. Such deeply meditated themes demonstrated the power of the owner, their ability to dominate and master nature, and their just place within divine providence.

In its modern usage, the term "cabinet" describes a wooden cupboard with shelves or fitted drawers for storing or displaying items. The cabinetmakers of sixteenth-century Augsburg produced pine and gilded metal cabinets, but also