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**Exhibition of a Rhinoceros: Iconography and Collecting in  
Eighteenth Century Venice**

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### Abstract

This paper examines the painting titled *The Exhibition of a Rhinoceros* (1751) by the Venetian artist Pietro Longhi and its context within the art patronage of the Venetian patrician Giovanni Grimani ai Servi. Study of the decline of Venice's political power during the eighteenth century, the lineage of rhinoceros imagery begun by the famous Renaissance German artist, Albrecht Dürer, and Italian collecting practices of naturalia influenced by the sixteenth century natural scientist, Ulisse Aldrovandi, were factors in the development of the thesis. Previously, many art historians have interpreted *The Exhibition of a Rhinoceros* as representing the "spectacle" of Venetian Carnival. This paper argues that the artist, Longhi, used compositional strategies to place himself within an artistic lineage tied to Dürer, and examines how *The Exhibition of a Rhinoceros* was meant to elevate the status of the collector, Grimani.

## Exhibition of a Rhinoceros: Iconography and Collecting in Eighteenth Century Venice

A painting of a rhinoceros (Fig. 1), now in the Ca' Rezzonico Museum in Venice, can serve as an example of the interests of the noble class of collectors in eighteenth century Venice. The Venetian patrician Giovanni Grimani ai Servi commissioned Pietro Longhi for the painting, which combines both art and nature in a focused view documenting the exhibition of a rhinoceros at Carnival. The image, which has come to be called *The Exhibition of a Rhinoceros*, depicts the Indian rhinoceros named Clara who came to Venice in 1751 as part of the Dutch captain, Douwemout Van der Meer's tour throughout Europe exhibiting the rhinoceros. Her appearance in Europe, organized by her owner, stirred up excitement because Europeans had only seen a handful of the species since 1513, when a rhinoceros was brought to Lisbon, Portugal.<sup>1</sup> The German artist, Albrecht Dürer, made this previous event famous with his pen and ink drawing of a rhinoceros, which was turned into a woodcut (Fig. 2) for mass production. Durer's image became a prototype upon which all other rhinoceros imagery in Europe would be based well into the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Longhi's portrait of Clara was based in part on Dürer's prototype. Depicting a rhinoceros

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<sup>1</sup> The King of Portugal, Manuel I, bought the rhinoceros and intended to send it to Pope Leo X as a gift. However, the rhinoceros died en route to Rome in a shipwreck off the coast of Italy.

<sup>2</sup> T.H. Clarke *The Rhinoceros from Dürer to Stubbs, 1515-1799: An Aspect of the Exotic*. Sotheby's, 1988.

linked Longhi in the lineage of such imagery begun by Dürer, yet Longhi's choices in his painting make claims about both the artist and the collector that are different from the sixteenth century context of Dürer's Rhinoceros. Because of the stylistic elements of *The Exhibition of a Rhinoceros* and the practices of the collector, the painting acts as a stand in for an animal specimen. The painting both documents the event of a rhinoceros in Carnival as well as the interest in exotic naturalia, therefore the portrait allows the promotion of Grimani as a collector of both art and natural objects. The continued representation of rhinoceroses in art and decor, and Grimani's commission of *The Exhibition of a Rhinoceros* are results of a change in historical collecting practices. The growing trend and cultural acceptance of natural history and specimen collecting combined with the traditions of art collecting resulted in works such as *The Exhibition of a Rhinoceros*. In this paper I will examine Grimani's commission of this painting as an example of collecting trends and the desire of patricians to elevate their status during Venice's declining power in the eighteenth century as well as analyze Longhi's references to Dürer's print, which indicate his desire to place himself within the notable artistic lineage of Albrecht Dürer.

Venice's Declining Power in the Eighteenth Century and The Grand Tour

By the turn of the eighteenth century, Venice struggled to maintain its land holdings and military power. Portugal and the rise of the East India Company in the Netherlands took over the majority of Venice's trade and out maneuvered the city-state with newer and larger ships that could hold more cargo and travel faster.<sup>3</sup> Along with the loss of trade, Venice lost many of its land holdings in various wars at the end of the seventeenth century and by 1718 the hopes of reclaiming territories ended due to the Treaty of Passarowitz, a pact signed concluding the Austro-Turkish and Venetian-Turkish wars. The treaty forced Venice to give the Morea back to the Ottoman Empire and stop all gains on Dalmatia, firmly ending any further wars against the Ottoman Empire or possibility for future land gains. Forced into peace, Venice soon declared that it would take a determined neutrality against the wars and disputes happening across Europe, which it maintained from 1718-1797.

Beginning in the seventeenth century, Venice focused on fashioning itself as a desirable city to visit. At this time, wealthy travelers from France, Germany and especially England developed a travel itinerary through Italy that is known as the Grand Tour. The Grand Tour and the idea of tourism resulted from changing attitudes toward education. Traveling was now considered an appropriate part of education and 'real-world' experience combined with a formal university education was desired for the elite and wealthy merchant class. A tourist of the

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<sup>3</sup> John Julius Norwich, *A History of Venice*. Vintage Books, 1982.

Grand Tour had a set course which included Turin, Milan, Florence, Rome, Padua, and of course, Venice. Among the primary reason of education, travelers also went on the nearly year-long tour to seek out historical sites, experience the entertainments and the arts within each city, and eat foods different from their own country.<sup>4</sup> Venice, however, offered different sights for tourists. The city did not have ancient ruins like Rome and its University was in Padua. Its government was unique, yet it was difficult for travelers to gain entrance to meetings amongst the noble class. Venetian patricians remained private and removed from foreign travelers and yet the city depended on the income from the Grand Tour. Therefore Venice developed sensual sights. Travelers could participate in Venice's many celebrations including Carnival, the Sensa, St. Mark's Day, and Corpus Christi. Included in the celebrations, activities such as gambling at the ridotti and consorting with prostitutes were easily available to travelers. Because access to the noble class was nearly impossible, travelers increasingly turned to pleasurable entertainments in Venice.

The Lineage of Rhinoceros Imagery in Europe from Dürer's Rhinoceros to the Eighteenth Century

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<sup>4</sup> Robert C. Davis, and Garry Marvin. *Venice, the Tourist Maze: A Cultural Critique of the World's Most Touristed City*. University of California Press, 2004.

The Dutch captain, Douwemout van der Meer, first brought Clara to Holland in 1741. The resulting tour of Europe, organized by Van der Meer, lasted nearly twenty years (1741-1758).<sup>5</sup> With stops in Paris, London, Rome, and Berlin, Clara arrived in Venice in 1751. Artists documented Clara throughout her tour in both commissioned work and study sketches as well as an array of decorative items including clocks, jewelry, and clothing.

The great interest in the rhinoceros can be traced back to Roman antiquity. One of the earliest accounts of a rhinoceros was written by Pliny the Elder, an author and philosopher of the first century A.D., in his *Naturalis Historia*. Pliny wrote that the rhinoceros was the enemy of the elephant, and that the two would engage in battle. This depiction of the rhinoceros as an aggressive animal interested the public and soon there was a demand to see the rhinoceros and its legendary strength. However, after the collapse of the Roman Empire the rhinoceros was not seen again in Europe. The animal was consigned to myth and thought to be extinct. Interest in the exotic was bolstered through the reading and translation of Pliny during the Italian Renaissance, which once again led to a demand to view the rhinoceros first hand. In 1513 the first rhinoceros since antiquity was brought to Europe. The Portuguese brought an Indian rhinoceros to Lisbon where it soon gained fame throughout Europe. This is the very rhinoceros that inspired Albrecht Dürer's woodcut *The Rhinoceros* made in 1515. Dürer

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<sup>5</sup> Glynis Ridley, *Clara's Grand Tour: Travels with a Rhinoceros in Eighteenth-Century Europe*. Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005.



never saw the animal, which resulted in obvious anatomical faults in the image, yet The Rhinoceros became the standard for which artists would continue to depict the rhinoceros for centuries. In the original pen and ink drawing, Dürer included an inscription which was transferred to the woodcut with slight changes. The inscription states how the rhinoceros was brought to Portugal, a physical description and a story of the rhinoceros' disposition which is taken directly from Pliny's Natural History.<sup>6</sup>

In the year of 1513 upon the I Day of May there was brought to our King of Lisbon such a living Beast from the East-Indies that is called Rhinocerate: Therefore an account of its Wonderfulness I though myself obliged to send you the Representation of it. It hath the Colour of a Toad and is close covered with thick scales in size like an Elephant but lower, and is the Elephant's deadly Enemy; it hath on the fore part of its Nose a strong sharp Horn, and, when this Beast comes near the Elephant to fight with him, he always first whets his Horn upon the Stones; and runs at the Elephant with his Head between his fore Legs; then rips up the Elephant where he hath the thinnest Skin, and so gores him: The Elephant is terribly afraid of the Rhinocerate; for he gores him always, where-ever he meets an Elephant; for he is well armed, and is very alert and nimble. This Beast is called Rhinocero, in Greek and Latin; but, in Indian, Gomda.

From the animal's first appearance in Europe in 1513 until Clara's tour in the eighteenth century, only a handful of rhinoceroses made it to Europe and even less survived to make any tours across Europe. One appeared in Madrid (1579), two were brought to London (1684 and 1739) and then Clara was brought to Holland in 1741.<sup>7</sup> The rhinoceros remained a highly exotic and mythic creature because so few Europeans ever saw a live one. Therefore, with every city on the

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<sup>6</sup>Translation of German from original ink drawing into English. Clarke, *Dürer to Stubbs*.

<sup>7</sup> Clarke, *Dürer to Stubbs*.

tour, Clara became more famous and her visits were highly anticipated events. Van der Meer advertised his rhinoceros with posters (Fig. 3) in every city he stopped in, which was a tactic that had not been used for the exhibitions of rhinoceroses in the past. Van der Meer's advertisement of Clara can be directly linked to Dürer's woodcut. The image views Clara from the side with her head facing the right as is the same position of Dürer's rhinoceros. She has cloven toes as in the Dürer woodcut and even her skin is segmented to look like armor in nearly the exact positioning as Dürer created over two hundred years earlier. The longevity of Dürer's image is due to its large volume of circulation. The Dürer print ran in 1515, 1540 and 1550 with two issues in Holland from the original block in the late sixteenth century. Thousands of images were made during these runs and thousands more were created from copied blocks into the eighteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Van der Meer parlayed the popularity of Dürer's woodcut into the advertisement for Clara. An inscription, similar to Dürer's original ink drawing, accompanied the posters, in which Van der Meer includes Pliny's description of the rhinoceros' battle with the elephant. Not only did these posters promise an exotic animal, they promised a live version of Dürer's woodcut and an animal of antiquity.

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<sup>8</sup> Clarke, *Dürer to Stubbs*.

## The Early Development of Collecting Naturalia in Italy: Ulisse Aldrovandi

Ulisse Aldrovandi, an early Italian naturalist from Bologna, created one of the first botanical gardens in Europe and was highly influential in the collecting practices of Grimani and other Venetian and Italian collectors. These collectors followed Aldrovandi's cataloguing examples which were detailed in Aldrovandi's many books on natural history and were easily accessible in Venice. In 1572, Aldrovandi encountered a "most fearsome dragon unlike any reptile he'd seen"<sup>9</sup> in Italy. He created an image of the fabled beast (Fig. 4) and distributed it amongst nobility and high ranking clergy including Pope Gregory XIII. Although it is not clear if Aldrovandi ever possessed the physical dragon in his collection, his experience and his ownership is expressed in the distribution of the dragon's image. With every person that saw the drawing, Aldrovandi's legitimacy as a naturalist grew. Though the dragon was never proven to be real, Aldrovandi's reputation of having seen and documented the dragon was absolute. Along with the distribution of the image came the distribution of knowledge and the beginnings of an interest in the oddities of nature.

With the Pope's approval of his sighting, Aldrovandi opened the way for curiosity to be considered a worthwhile practice. The scientific study of nature and its subsequent collecting of specimens found its place in the collections of

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<sup>9</sup> Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy*, Berkeley, 1996.

nobility in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century with the development of menageries and early natural history museums. By the eighteenth century, most nobility reserved part of their private collections to natural objects. With the development of a new type of collecting came a regiment of what someone should collect and how the collector should be. These new naturalists kept their collections in private rooms or studiolo. Most kept small botanical specimen or engravings and maps and very few studiolo resembled the extreme cabinets of curiosities in which entire rooms contained stuffed specimens mounted on walls. The collector catalogued each specimen in his collection and his choices in collecting showed the collector's interest in nature. This interest is described as a healthy wonderment and most collector's preferred to wonder at their collections rather than make scientific inquiries into anatomy or physiology. As a collector of natural objects, Grimani could organize a collection that would represent an ordered world, a nature that could be made intelligible by the collector's mind and his practice.<sup>10</sup> Also, the act of turning a natural object (a rhinoceros) into a painted image allowed the collector to maintain the object over a long period of time, thus adding value to the image created.<sup>11</sup>

Though naturalism gained momentum in the eighteenth century, Venetian patricians, as well as other collectors and nobility, still commissioned and

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<sup>10</sup> Eric Baratay and Elisabeth Hardoui-Fugier. *Zoo: A History of Zoological Gardens in the West*. Reaktion, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Francis Haskell. *Patrons and Painters: A Study in the Relations between Italian Art and Society in the Age of the Baroque*. Yale University Press, 1980.

collected art. In the eighteenth century, the collecting of painted images was a near requirement of all patricians. As a result of Venice's declining power, the Church commissioned less work and more artists turned to private collectors for commissions.<sup>12</sup> Also, the increase in foreigners due to the Grand Tour changed the way work was exhibited. Many collections were strictly private and only accessible to the collector and other noble Venetian families. Foreigners were required to be explicitly invited to view a patricians collection and many works in churches and other public spaces were off limits to travelers as well.<sup>13</sup> Another change in commissions was the subject matter of paintings. Genre scenes became increasingly popular in collections because of the perception that genre artists, including Pietro Longhi, rendered true to life scenes of the Venetian nobility.<sup>14</sup>

### Pietro Longhi and The Exhibition of a Rhinoceros: Interpretations and Iconography

Pietro Longhi became a popular artist amongst the Venetian nobles during the eighteenth century. He is primarily known for his genre scenes or scenes of Venetians and their pleasures. Families of nobility, such as Barbarigo, Sagredo,

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<sup>12</sup> Haskell, *Patrons and Painters*.

<sup>13</sup> Davis and Marvin. *Venice, the Tourist Maze*.

<sup>14</sup> Jane Martineau, and Andrew Robison. *The Glory of Venice: art in the eighteenth century*. Yale University Press, 1994.

Mocenigo, and Ruzini, flocked to Longhi. His patrons considered his paintings to be true to life and to accurately capture the life of contemporary Venetians. With the decline of Venice's political power, genre took on new significance in the collections of the Venetian noble class.<sup>15</sup> Giovanni Grimani, of the family branch called 'ai Servi' sought out Longhi's specific style when he commissioned *The Exhibition of a Rhinoceros*. Longhi even 'attached' a proclamation of his documentation of Clara at Carnival with an inscription painted in trompe l'oeil which states, "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." Longhi made a second painting nearly identical to Grimani's for Girolamo Mocenigo, now in the National Gallery in London.

Many interpretations have been made concerning Pietro Longhi and his work. As of late, art historians believe that *The Exhibition of a Rhinoceros* contrasts the exotic Clara, who is docile and simple in the painting, with the depravity of Carnival behavior, shown in the masked figures viewing Clara.<sup>16</sup> The figures both view and are being viewed by the spectator and only Clara remains unmoved by either action. Glynis Ridley argues that the painting is a comment on the way which men and women display themselves to be looked at. Also, that Clara's captivity is a reflection of the social captivity of the woman seen at the

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<sup>15</sup> Philip L. Sohm. "Pietro Longhi and Carlo Goldoni: Relations between Painting and Theater." *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 1982.

<sup>16</sup> Howard Jacobsen. "A Masque of Venice." *Modern Painters*, Vol. 7, 1994.

center of the painting. The woman is un-masked and looks out at the viewer, yet she is mute, like Clara.<sup>17</sup>

These recent interpretations suggest Longhi's work, long considered to be simple, straightforward representations of everyday life, to be layered with meaning. I believe *The Exhibition of a Rhinoceros* was Longhi's way of inserting himself within the lineage of imagery created by Dürer over two hundred years earlier. Longhi's portrait of Clara is presented as a true, documentary likeness (it even includes a pile of dung), which is carefully rendered and contains intricate details of costume, yet Longhi did not make his painting a scientific exploration of animal anatomy, which could be found in many natural history books being printed at the time. Instead, Longhi focused on creating a more artistic version. He fixes some obvious anatomical faults in the woodcut, but the simplicity rendered to Clara specifically makes the image a painting and not an exploration of the animal's anatomical form. Also, the trompe l'oeil proclamation is in keeping with the tradition of Dürer's woodcut inscription. Clara is in the same stance as the Dürer image and she maintains the segmentation of her body which begun with Dürer and was continued in subsequent rhinoceros imagery. Longhi echos Dürer's prototype of a rhinoceros and the similarities tie Longhi as an artist to Dürer.

Longhi's desire to be linked with Dürer can be attributed to Longhi's "failure" as a history painter. Originally, Longhi trained as a history painter, but

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<sup>17</sup> Ridley, *Clara's Grand Tour*

he was soon recommended to Giuseppe Maria Crespi, a Bolognese artist who was known for his genre scenes.<sup>18</sup> Longhi followed in painting scenes of the everyday lives of Venetian nobility. This demotion from history to genre painting was seen as a result of Longhi's lack of skill for rendering large scale figures and thus was considered a failed history painter.<sup>19</sup> The Exhibition of a Rhinoceros can be seen as Longhi's attempt to increase his reputation as an artist due to the painting's obvious reference to Dürer. Longhi quoted the well known and well regarded Dürer through the use of rhinoceros imagery, then Longhi rendered the painting in such a way that it could be considered more "artistic" than Dürer's. Longhi made specific decisions, such as correcting the rhinoceros' form and placing the figures in a pyramidal composition, which increased the artistic status of the artist.

Not only does The Exhibition of a Rhinoceros make claims about the artist, it also marks Grimani as a collector of both 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. Longhi's portrait of Clara could fit into both categories. It was a work done by a well known Venetian artist and it documented an exotic animal directly from nature.

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<sup>18</sup> Haskell, *Patrons and Painters*.

<sup>19</sup> Sohm, "Pietro Longhi and Carlo Goldoni."



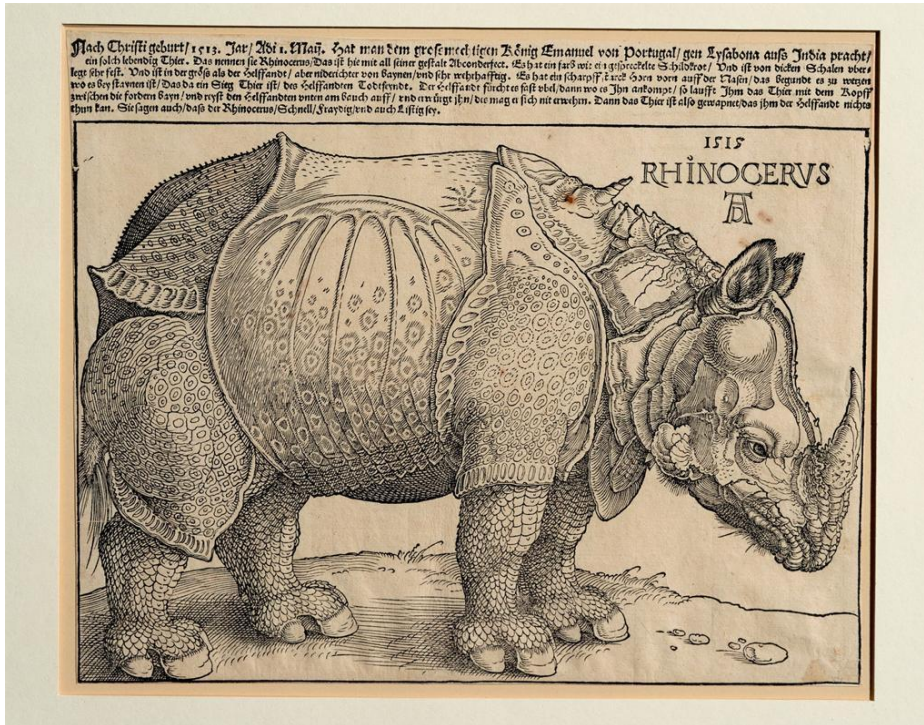
## Conclusion

Pietro Longhi's painting *The Exhibition of a Rhinoceros* references Albrecht Dürer's woodcut of a rhinoceros. Longhi, as a genre artist, wanted to insert himself in a lineage of artists that included Dürer. Longhi depicted the rhinoceros in the same stance as the Dürer woodcut. He attempted to make adjustments to the image and render the animal more natural by correcting some of the anatomical faults seen in Dürer's image, yet Longhi's painting was commissioned as an art piece and not a scientific representation. The decline of Venice's power furthered the hostility between the Venetian noble class and the foreign travelers in the city, therefore influencing the collecting practices of the patricians. Private commissions increased and the collecting of naturalia became a common practice amongst the nobility. Giovanni Grimani commissioned the painting as a way to both collect art and nature, which resulted in elevating his status amongst the Venetian nobility. *The Exhibition of a Rhinoceros* shows the combination of collecting both art and nature, and the artistic lineage of rhinoceros imagery from Albrecht Dürer to Pietro Longhi.

## Images with Captions



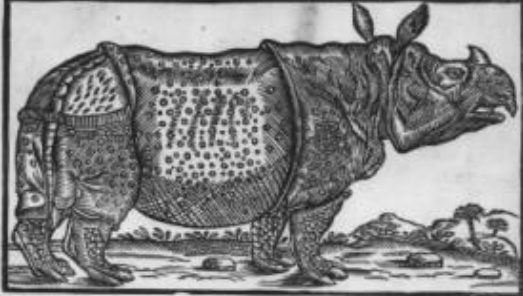
1 Pietro Longhi, Exhibition of a Rhinoceros, 1751, oil on canvas, 24 in. x 18.5 in. Ca' Rezzonico, Venice



2 Albrecht Dürer, Rhinoceros, 1515, woodcut on paper, 10 in. x 12.5 in.

British Museum, England

**RHINOCEROT.**



**DE PAR LE ROY,**  
ET MONSIEUR  
LE LIEUTENANT GENERAL DE POLICE.  
**MESSIEURS ET DAMES,**

VOUS êtes avertis qu'il est arrivé depuis peu dans cette Ville un Animal nommé RHINOCEROT, Animal qu'on a cru apocryphe jusqu'à présent. Ce Mammifère fut pris au Congo, dans la Province d'Alles, qui appartient au Grand Mogol, en 1763, par son Capitaine Marinier, lequel Capitaine le fit transporter de Bengale par mer en Hollande. Il n'avait que trois ans quand il fut pris, & sa taille étoit alors de 14 pieds 7 pouces de hauteur, & 12 pieds de longueur, & sa grosseur, il est devenu depuis ce temps-là beaucoup plus grand & plus gros. Ce rhinoceros est de couleur four noir: il n'a point de poil comme l'Eléphant, & ses oreilles sont petites, & au bout de la queue où ses yeux sont fort fins, il a une corne placée sur le nez, laquelle corne lui sert à se défendre contre son ennemi quelque qu'il est l'Eléphant; il court avec une légèreté extraordinaire; il fait sauter, de 12 toises à 15 toises, les yeux comme un Canard, sa tête se meut un peu pointant au-devant; ses oreilles ressemblent à celles d'un Aigle; ses yeux sont extraordinairement petits pour sa taille qui est énorme; il feroit que la peau fût couverte de coquilles, s'il n'y avoit point de corne sur le nez quand l'Animal se remue: ses bois qu'on dit de 2 pouces, ses pieds sont quarrés & fort gros; il a deux griffes. Cet Animal, comme il est dit ci-dessus, est le même que l'Eléphant, quand il se rencontre, il est infatigable qu'il se le batte; le Rhinoceros se met dedans le ventre de l'Eléphant, de lui raffiner sa corne dans le ventre, jusqu'à ce que l'Eléphant se couche à la douleur, & laisse tomber, & dévot son ennemi par le propre poids de son corps. Pour le nourriture, il mange 60 livres de foin, & 10 livres de pain par jour: il boit 14 fois par jour, & de la liqueur; il a des poils à son nez, dans le Pays de Wurtemberg, le 4 May 1768, il étoit si petit. Il a été parvenu à sa taille, & est mort en 1768, & est arrivé à Paris par le même vaisseau, comme une autre Colombe, parce qu'il n'est qu'un mois quand quelques Indes l'ont amené avec des autres; il a été ramené à Paris de l'Inde. A dix ans ce Rhinoceros courroit dans les Appartemens, comme pourroit faire un chien, & il étoit assés domestiqué des Singes, & on le voyoit avec le faire voir, & se laisser caresser par tout le monde. Il fera aussi se mouvoir un chariot, & que le chariot, sans courir, il fait quelquefois d'un à deux, quand les rhinoceros font marcher à mesure jusqu'à un chariot pour le tirer: il sert de la cuisine sans aucune difficulté. Cet Animal a été vu dans toutes les Cours d'Allemagne, où il a été parvenu de tous les souverains des Cours étrangères.

Quand on se dit Rhinoceros le trouve dans un troupeau de Bêtes sauvages, qui profitent de la fait d'elles-mêmes à quelques heures, les Rhinoceros commencent à battre les pierres, & que les autres Bêtes sauvages ont en apparence. Le Cerce de ce Mammifère est fort difficile des Indes qui est fort rare, comme toutes les Bêtes de venant, contre l'opinion de autres malades: les dents, les griffes, la chair & les os, ainsi que la peau de son nez, sont très utiles pour le corps humain: N'est-on en état d'appréhender, parce que beaucoup de personnes s'en font un grand usage. Les Indes ont la coutume de ceux qui le possèdent, pour une forte de récompense.

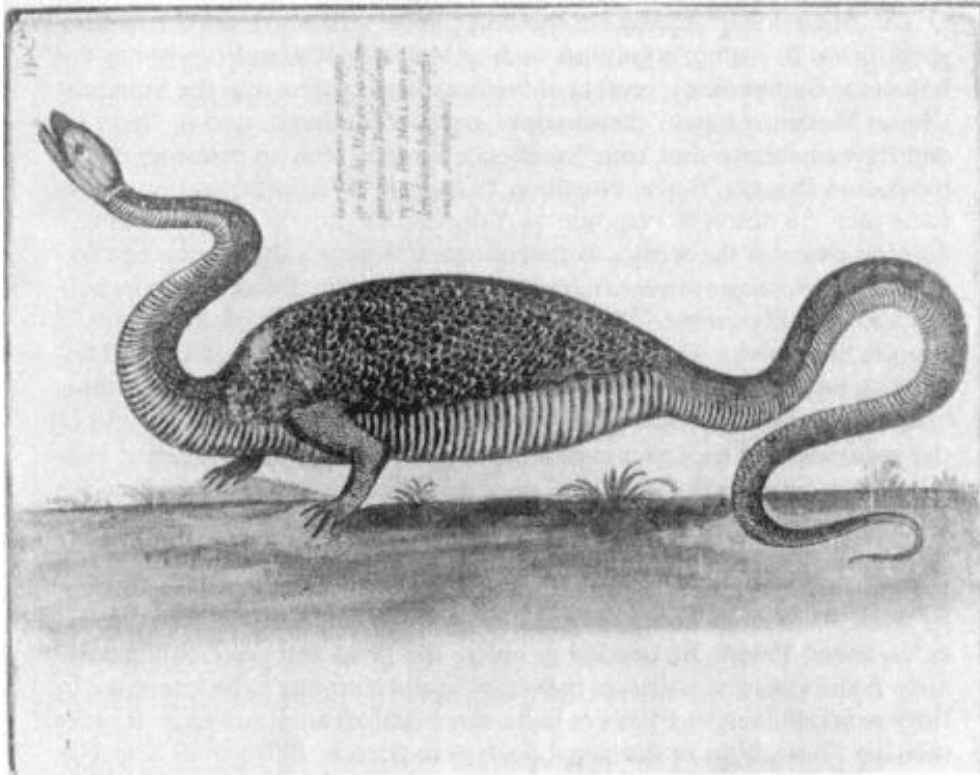
*De la rue de la Harpe de Tournay, Calde des de l'Opéra Comique, Rue des Quatre-Vents.*

On montrera cet Animal depuis dix heures du matin jusqu'à huit heures du soir.

Les premiers Places font de 3 sols, les secondes de 2 sols, & les troisièmes de 1 sol.

Paris l'Empire & Affiliés. A Paris le 27 Janvier 1793, BEAUFREY.

3 Rhinocerot, 1749, woodcut on paper, 9.2 in. x 13.6 in. Paris, Private collection



4 Ulisse Aldrovandi, The Dragon of 1572, from Aldrovandi, *Tavole di animali*, Biblioteca Universitaria, Bologna, IV, fig. 130

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