

The Black Rhino

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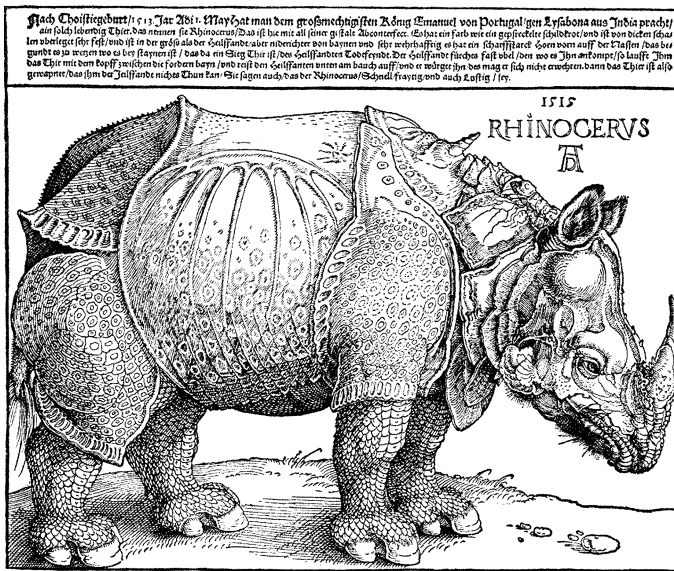


Fig. 1 Albrecht Dürer Rhinoceros Woodcut, 1515

She

was a behemoth, trudging listlessly across the horizon.

The deep gash between the thick, scarred skin of her ribs oozed as she strained to move forward. In the confusion following her injury she separated from the group, at first thrashing aimlessly; then, heaving slowly, she settled into a rhythmic gait and traipsed for miles seeking refuge.

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Finding none, the black rhino lumbered onward for hours in the stifling heat of the African morn. When the sun finally peaked in the cobalt-blue sky, she stopped, unable to go further.

With a final, awful shudder she groaned loudly and plunged downward. Powerless to move on the hardpan floor, she lay quietly, waiting.

He

had tracked her for years, but unsuccessfully.

So, when word came from a village to the south that the black rhino had been seen, he assembled his team and traveled quickly. They were a small but efficient lot: one tracker, two butchers, and a partner with European business contacts.

On the journey southward, they planned. If this turned out to be *the black rhino*, the one they had hunted for years, they would need to move swiftly and secretly, before the tribal elders and government authorities were notified and had time to respond.

Though not responsible for—nor having witnessed—the life-threatening wound inflicted upon her, they would track and kill the black rhino. She was theirs. She could be taken. He would be rich.

They

were the tribal elders, keepers of stories; guardians of traditions.

News of her fate came to them quickly, but they feared it was too late: *he* was on the move, along with his team.

Two of the poachers—his tracker and one of the butchers—came from this village, trained by these very elders.

“How could this be?” they asked. *“Had these young men no regard for the sacred? Had they not listened to the stories told by their fathers, and their father’s fathers, late at night around this very fire?”*

“He is lost,” they concluded, *“in his own greed. He has traded the essential for the ornamental.”*

It

was his lucky day.

When he spotted her from a distance, she was still alive, lying quietly on the hardpan floor. He cautioned the team not to be hasty, for everything he did was reckoned with extreme precision. Such precautions, he told them, ensured maximum profit later.

Stealth was key. Were authorities watching? Had she fallen inside or outside the preserve?

When certain that no one was paying attention, the team moved in.

He

and his men butchered her where she had fallen, their precision tools tearing mercilessly through her tough skin as she writhed and gurgled under the angry African sun.

As they cut and pulled, each thought only of what his small portion would bring: a bridal dowry; a child’s education; socio-cultural capital in a society where “things” equaled “status.”

In their pursuit of a small and fleeting fortune, none considered how the death of this one rhino—or the hundreds that would follow—would affect the village, the region, the country, the world.

Then again, none cared: their thirst for profit was unquenchable.

She

died, hideously.

In a matter of minutes, her once proud silhouette—a noble icon of a dwindling population—was reduced to pieces, her choice parts divided and packed quickly. What could not be sold as a trophy would be left behind for other scavengers.

As they pulled away from the remnants of her shattered body, news of her terrible fate arrived at a French science station down the coast. “*We must notify the African authorities immediately,*” they said. “*And the international press!*”

He

basked in the media attention and international acclaim, but disliked immensely the occasional labels of ‘poacher’ and ‘profiteer’ thrown at him by the press.

“*I am,*” he proclaimed, “*a skilled hunter and a clever businessman. Regard me,*” he ambitiously suggested, “*as a man of science!*”

His head was barely visible amid the news cameras and portable studio lights. “*Who among my critics knows more about the black rhino than me?*” he arrogantly boasted. “*No one! My highly specialized and expertly-trained team has more knowledge of our target than all the African scientists and international conservationists put together!*”

He leaned forward as a microphone was thrust to his lips. His right index finger rocketed skyward: “*These savage smear campaigns and unwarranted criticisms conducted by so-called professionals—who are subsidized, I might add, with government funds—are nothing more than ‘sour grapes.’ They’re just jealous because I got to her before they did.*”

Questions arose concerning legal repercussions in certain African countries, all of which he brushed aside with a calculated ease. “*These ‘conservation-minded elitists’ have neither the funding nor the resources to track and capture these beasts, let alone carry on a sustained court battle!*”

Besides,” he asserted, “*I have done nothing illegal!*”

It was clear that the journalists shouting their questions and scribbling their notes were soon more interested in his personal story than about the fate of the black rhino. *I have them in the palm of my hand,* he thought to himself as he smiled for the cameras.

And he did.

“Why?”

asked the elder who rose to speak.

“*Why did you do this?*” he asked the man. “*For money? There are other ways to make money,*” he advised, sternly. “*For excitement?*” he continued. “*Can you not find some other way to distract yourself? This thing you have done cannot be undone. This is not something that you may or can put back. You cannot make this right. You can only stop.*”

The elder paused amid the whir-and-click of the cameras and looked around at the blank faces peering vacantly at him.

“She was a thing of wonder,” he declared, his voice trembling, “a powerful symbol of my tribal past. In my village, my father told her story; and his father before him, and his father. Now she is gone, her body cut into pieces and divided as trophies for men who live far away. Men who know nothing of my country,” he said. “Men who care nothing for our stories.”

He paused, lowering his head as if collecting his thoughts.

Then, in the midst of a silent room, he stretched out his arm and pointed his finger at the man. *“Men like you who—without their money—are nothing.*

How can you be something when you no longer have a soul?”

He

glared back at the elder but said nothing. *This is the 21st century*, he thought to himself, smugly. *You are nothing but the residue of a by-gone era, a naïve idealist out of step with the modern world. Market shares and quarterly profit reports will always trump your drive to protect these ‘symbols of the past.’* He steeled his eyes and nodded gently, smirking as he deliberated silently: *I am the portent of things to come, old man. I am your terrible future.*

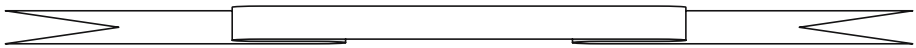
And he, like the tribal elder who now stared intently back at him, knew well that all of the giants would soon disappear.

His only concern was whether he would make a profit when they did.

It

is true, thought the elder, as he read the contempt in the man’s eyes: *unless we act now, the future of giants is bleak, indeed.*

And who are we, really, he reasoned quietly, *if we cannot protect our giants?*



If

this were a story about an African mammal, then there are things you should know:

The rhino’s horn has been and continues to be highly valued in the Far East for a host of medicinal concoctions, and in North Yemen for ceremonial dagger handles. Ounce for ounce, it is worth more on the retail market than gold.

Because of this high demand, poachers have steadily supplied the black market with horns, such that the Black Rhino (*Diceros bicornis*) of eastern and central Africa is endangered.

Moreover, on 7 July 2006, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) announced that one of four subspecies, the West African Black Rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis longipes*), was tentatively declared extinct.

But

this isn't a cautionary yarn about the large, savannah-roaming herbivore, *Diceros bicornis*.

It is an imaginary tale of *El Rinoceronte Negro—the Black Rhino*—a seventeenth-century Portuguese galleon that tumbles to the seafloor after tearing herself open on a West African reef.

The abyss into which she sinks is not deep enough to hide her from those high-tech cultural terrorists that we casually—often quaintly—refer to as “treasure hunters.” Armed with corporate sponsorship and teams of “specialists,” they will cut her into marketable portions and sell her piece by piece to the highest bidder, leaving most of her carcass to rot on the seafloor.

It's time to act: heritage, on the brink of extinction, is now for sale.

We must no longer tolerate the privatized conspicuous consumption of our legacy. Proprietary exclusion from these collective cultural and natural resources must end.

These depredations will never be made right; they cannot be undone. They may only be stopped—now.

The black rhino is still out there, somewhere.

And so is *he*, waiting.



For more information on the black rhino, consult:

http://www.news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/07/0707_040707_rhinos.html

<http://www.american.edu/TED/rhinoblk.htm>

<http://www.pulseplanet.com/archive/Nov00/2282.html>

If you wish to know more about the threat to world heritage posed by treasure hunters, contact the following organizations:

The American Institute of Archaeology (AIA): <http://www.archaeological.org/>

The Institute of Nautical Archaeology (INA): <http://www.ina.tamu.edu/>

The Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA): <http://www.sha.org/>

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO): <http://www.unesco.org/>