

Exploring the Artistic Development Stage of Dürer's Prints: Taking Rhinoceros as an Example

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Abstract. Albrecht Dürer is an important artist in the German Renaissance. Born in Nuremberg, Germany in 1471, he showed a great artistic talent in his childhood. Throughout his life, he devoted himself to helping Germany get rid of the shackles of Gothic art, thus leading Germany towards humanism. Albrecht Dürer created many works, including woodcut, print, and other aspects, reflecting his deep study of anatomy and perspective. Of his many works of art, "Rhinoceros" may not be the most perfect or influential, but its background makes it hard to lose interest. When it was created in 1515, the painter Dürer himself had never even seen the Indian rhino before, but it was based on the manuscripts and imagination of others. Although the woodcut "Rhinoceros" is far from the modern rhinoceros, the work shocked society and overturned the perception at that time. In conclusion, Albrecht Dürer's contributions were instrumental in the advancement of the German Renaissance, promoting a shift towards humanism and more realistic representations in art. His works not only reflect his deep understanding of human anatomy and perspective but also his innovative spirit and ability to influence public perception through art. The legacy of Dürer's artistic achievements continues to be recognized for their impact on the evolution of Western art.

Keywords: Albrecht Dürer; Rhinoceros; Woodcut.

1. Introduction

Although the Renaissance was mainly conducted in Italy, this new artistic trend also crossed the Alps to Germany. Dürer was one of the first German artists to come in touch with them. In his life, he created more than 300 prints, which were diverse and rich in content. In the face of such a large volume of prints, this paper chose to use Dürer's *Rhino* to carry out the research [1].

This paper is mainly divided into three major parts. The first part of the article is mainly the introduction of relevant information about Dürer's *Rhino* works, including the work's creation background. The second part of the article is mainly to sort out several other rhino schemas of the same period of the Renaissance, a more three-dimensional and macro impression of the European rhinoceros in the Renaissance. In the last part of the article, Dürer's study of the relationship between science and art is the context, and his theoretical work in his later years, *The Four Books of Human Proportion*.

2. The Background and Analysis of the Print of "Rhinoceros"

As early as the 15th century, the Portuguese began to explore the world. The famous navigator da Gama first landed in India in 1498 and established a colony in Kolkata to facilitate subsequent expansion [1]. Over the years that followed, the region had several governors, and its influence expanded to Southeast Asia and the Arabian Sea.

The fourth governor, Afonso de Albuquerque, had sent envoys to the Sultan of Gujarat to discuss the use of an island. Although no agreement was reached in the end, the two countries gave gifts to each other out of friendship. The Sultanate gave Portugal a live Indian rhinoceros as a gift, so the governor Albuquerque shipped the rhinoceros back home. The Europeans, since the fall of Rome, had never seen a living rhino.

In early 1515, the governor put the rhinos on ships to Europe. The rhino was recorded as weighing 1.5 tons, so transporting it was not an easy job. To keep it safe, the ship was equipped with countless rice and its breeder.

The voyage ended on May 20 of that year, spending only a while in a few places to save time. When the ship docked in Lisbon, the inhabitants of the city went to see the mysterious beast of the East. Among the crowd, there was a printer named Valentin Fernandez. He produced the first rhino sketch in Europe at the time (Figure 1). From the present perspective, the sketch is very simple, but it vividly depicts the characteristics of the Indian rhino, which may help the painting of the subsequent wooden "Rhinoceros" by Dürer.

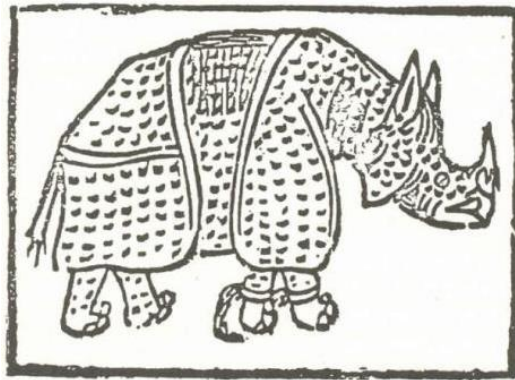


Figure 1. Valentin Fernandez's Manuscript 1515 [2]

In addition to the sketch exploding at the time, the rhino also caused a huge sensation. The Portuguese king even decided to give the rhinos to the Pope in exchange for the support of the Holy See. However, it was this move that brought the rhinoceros a tragic outcome. It came to Portugal from India and crossed the Indian and Atlantic oceans, only to lose its life in the Mediterranean. The ship carrying it came into a storm while leaving the port of Las Paca, causing the whole ship to sink into the sea. Although the rhino can swim, in the face of the chain in the boat, it is powerless and finally dies in the sea [3].

Although the rhino died, the story about it did not disappear but intensified. Various legends and paintings related to rhinos spread across the streets of Europe and were also spread to Germany. Of course, Germany certainly had not seen the rhino's appearance. However, with other people's rhino sketches and his imagination of the animal, he eventually painted the "Rhinoceros".

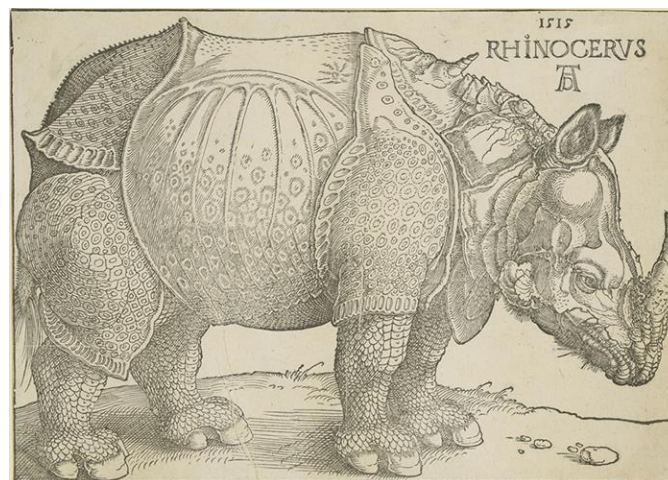


Figure 2. Dürer's prints of "Rhinoceros" 1515 [4]

When first see this woodcut (Figure 2), one will find that it is very different from the real Indian rhinoceros. Thrown's rhino covered with vortex pattern "clothes", but so thick "clothes" its shape is more like a rhino wearing an "armor" rather than animal real skin, its legs also long and scales, this

is obviously not the characteristics of the mammals, jaw depicting beard does not seem to belong to the rhino, even its ears also some strange, looks like donkey ears. In addition, the most famous irrationality is the horn on the neck of the rhino in the painting. The real rhinoceros neck has no horn, so it becomes the biggest "laughing stock" of this woodcut. So much so that the extra horn was even named "horn of Dürer" [3]. In contrast, although there is a real "error" in the image depiction, it can not be said to be "full of loopholes". Compared with the pictures of the Indian rhinoceros, they do have a similar "armor" -like appearance, with their legs covered with rough bumps, only the neck horns and beard do not exist. In Renaissance Europe, people had no chance to know the real rhino, so although there were some "Rhinos", this exquisite and powerful painting still left an indelible impression on people's minds.



Figure 3. Picture of an Indian Rhino [3]

The main part of the picture is filled with a rhino, which stands in the center of the picture, with its head tilted to the right, and has four thick thighs and highly representative rhino horns. Dürer cleverly adds borders around the picture, putting the rhinoceros' body into a barely available "confined space". In this "confined space," the rhino horn is close to the edge, its tail slightly beyond the frame. It is this extremely full and even overflowing composition that highlights the size of the rhinoceros. It seems that this giant will rush out of the picture at any time, giving the audience a sense of fierce and danger [4].

In the existing reviews of Dürer's "Rhinoceros", few include it as one of his best works. Some of the controversy is also limited to the authenticity of the rhino image or no image [5]. However, after carefully analyzing the painting, it is a successful work of Dürer. He is not a real realistic painter. Except for a few works as realistic as The Hare and other sketches, almost all of his works are expressionist techniques, which clearly see the expressive force that Dürer subjectively gives to his works. It is true that Dürer's techniques are skilled and exquisite. His meticulous lines and his extremely serious attitude make his works be beautifully expressed and presented, very exquisite but not realistic [6]. So, then, the similarity of Dürer's "Rhinoceros" in some details does not seem to surprise too much and even criticize. The so-called "unlike" is precisely full of imagination. Dürer injects his artistic imagination into his works, and as learners, can continue to extend imagination from his paintings.

3. The Difference and Contrast between Dürer's Wooden "Rhinoceros" and Other Versions

Thanks to the growing woodcut printing technology of the Renaissance, Dürer was able to print "Rhinoceros" in large quantities, sold more than 5,000 copies in his life, and was even copied in the next three centuries [7]. But Dürer was not the only artist who painted the rhino in 1515 (Figure4). Hans Burgkmair also made a woodcut engraving of the rhino, which is regarded by many as a more accurate description of the rhino [5].

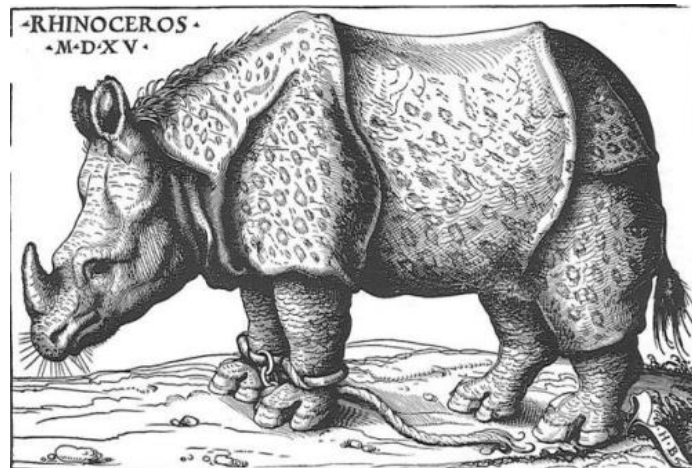


Figure 4. Hans Burgkmair's Rhino [8]

This print survived in the collection of the Albertina Museum in Vienna. But it is strange that while both artists also portray the rhinos, they get very different results. For example, the rhino, not as thick as "armor" as Dürer, is more like the solid skin of a mammal. The most famous "horn of Dürer" was also removed by the painter and turned into a mane like that on a horse. In terms of the whole picture, compared with Dürer's extremely full composition, Hans's composition is more comfortable. The whole image of the rhino is also made docile. It is worth noting that Hans's picture has an element that has not appear in Dürer's Rhino, and that is vines. The vines tightly wrapped the rhinoceros's two front legs, as if the chain that once took the rhinoceros's life, in a metaphor for the maritime disaster from Spain to Lisbon in 1515.

Despite the differences in detail between Hans' version and Dürer's prints of "Rhinoceros", comparing the same creation time and similar composition makes one reflect on whether their inspiration came from the sketch from Lisbon [6].

Similarly, in 1988, Ingrid Rowland discovered a picture of the rhino in the Vatican Library (Figure 5), also written in 1515. The drawing was pasted in a manuscript. The following year, Hermann Walter published Rowland's findings in an attempt to recreate the artist's image. Walter guessed that Dürer had first drawn the original rhinoceros sketch, but the sketch was lost. He later produced his most famous woodcut "The Rhino", and the Vatican painting was inspired by the lost sketch of Dürer. Of course, Dürer probably created more than one picture of the rhinoceros. At first glance, the Vatican "rhino" is one of many copies inspired by Dürer. However, more detailed studies show that some of the painting elements used in the Vatican drawings do not appear in Dürer's version of the rhino, but interestingly, these elements appear in the Hans version of the rhino

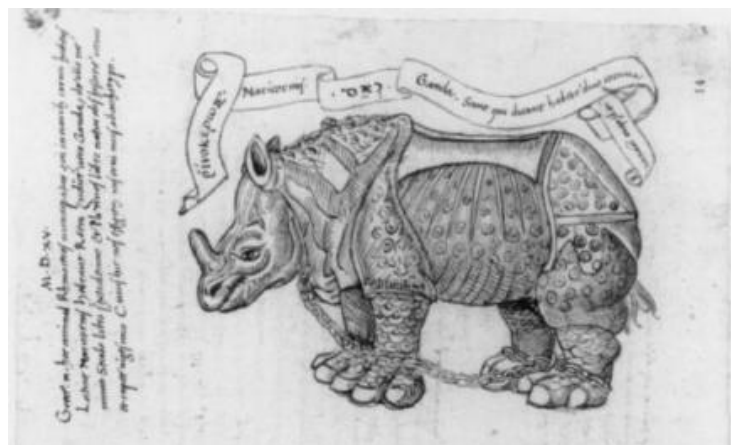


Figure 5. Vatican Anonymous Print [9]

The sides of this painting are all vertical compositions. The upper half of the text is in Latin M.D.XV. For the date, the bottom four lines are probably the notes of the picture. Because the rhino main

painting is more suitable for horizontal composition, the rhino is rotated 90 degrees clockwise than the text annotation. Rhino above the top has a bent five ribbon back and forth, and in different areas in the ribbon in different languages, the first language is the three languages of the rhino vocabulary. Then it is the name of the rhino "Ganda" and a line of Latin: Sunt qui dicant habite duo comua. The last part of the curved ribbon is from the biblical Psalm 28 It is one of the few passages about unicorns.

When comparing the Vatican picture with Dürer's, will find that in Dürer's version, the rhino is even more robust and dangerous. The belly is fuller, the head is larger, and the iconic rhino horn is shaped perfectly and looks very aggressive. In the anonymous artist's paintings, the round, blunt horns, bloated limbs, and a less plump body all seem to explain that the rhino is a very docile animal. It is worth noting that the text on the side of the Vatican rhino picture explicitly mentions the extra second horn, but in fact, do not find this element in the position of the "rhino horn" in the picture. Based on these differences, may assume that the painter from the Vatican may not have seen Dürer's version of the rhino or finished the work before he made it.

Nevertheless, if one compares the Vatican's rhinos to Hans's version can feel their close connection. In Hans' version of the rhino, the vine that circles the front leg of the rhinoceros turns into a chain in this work, even not only around the rhinoceros's limbs but also around the neck. In the overall depiction of the rhinoceros, both use a lot of more mild curves, so that they treat the ribbons the same. The difference is that the Vatican version of the ribbon has a complex bending process and records key information on each bend, while the Hans version of the ribbon is placed in the humble lower right corner and has only a Hans Burgkmair abbreviation" HB".

Although the close relationship between the three versions has not been determined, what is known is that similar elements exist in the three versions of the rhinoceros diagram. Although each artist has chosen a different way to interpret the rhino, the comparative study of these similarities and differences does not make it possible that this simple pen painting is the initiator of these famous prints, rather than the imitator.



Figure 6. Rhinoceros Clara [10]

These different editions of rhino prints influenced generations of Renaissance Europeans and only began to be replaced by more realistic drawings and paintings until the late eighteenth century. One of the most famous is the oil on canvas "*Rhinoceros Clara*" (Figure 6) painted by the French painter Jean-Baptiste Oudry in 1749. Although there are still a large number of different rhino maps published in the later period, someone once said: " There is no animal picture portrait like Rhinoceros of Dürer." [7].

4. The Enlightenment Significance of Dürer and His Works to Renaissance Science

For the study of Dürer's "Rhinceros", in addition to exploring his artistic creation, one also needs to consider his social background and his life experience comprehensively [11]. Through a careful review of many documents and historical materials about Dürer, conducted a detailed reading and analysis, and gradually had a clearer understanding of Durer himself and his works.

As a great artist, Dürer has left more than 250 woodcut prints, more than 100 etchings, more than 70 oil paintings, more than 1,000 sketches, and three published books.[8] These works show the world Dürer's unique perspective and imagination but also become the most outstanding artworks of the European Renaissance representative [9].

Throughout Dürer's life, the author has roughly divided it into two stages. The first stage is the metamorphosis from goldsmith to artist [12]. 1471 Dürer was born into a family of goldsmiths in Nuremberg. He studied artistic skills in his hometown's studio and began an apprenticeship. After nearly 20 years of painstaking study, he decided to leave Germany for a study tour. After being influenced by Renaissance art in different regions, Dürer completed many famous works during this period and gradually became a mature artist. The second stage was the transformation from an artist to a humanist scholar. In 1507, Dürer returned to Germany set up his studio, and began to study art theory together with scholars and scientists and devote himself to the movement of the Renaissance spirit [10]. Meanwhile, Dürer was also an outstanding scholar and theorist. His book, *Four Books of Human Body Scale*, was the theoretical achievement of his study of painting in his later years. These works not only aroused great repercussions in the art world at that time but also still had an important influence on later artists and theorists [11]. Through the study of Dürer's works in his later years, one can better understand his ideas and academic achievements, thus better understanding his artistic creation, and give a new perspective on watching Rhinceros.

5. Conclusion

This analysis of Dürer's "*Rhinceros*" and the research on Dürer's life and his theoretical works, not only managed to have a deeper understanding of the production process of woodcut printmaking in the Renaissance. At the same time, reading about Dürer's research on the relationship between artistic creation and science and technology also has new thoughts and insights on how traditional printmaking technology is combined with today's new science and technology. Dürer's research results feel more deeply about the connection between science and art. This new perception of the relationship between art and science and technology also inspires how to better coordinate the two in future art research, and deeply understand the integration of science and art.

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