

The wine-o rhino: the rhinoceros with an alcohol problem

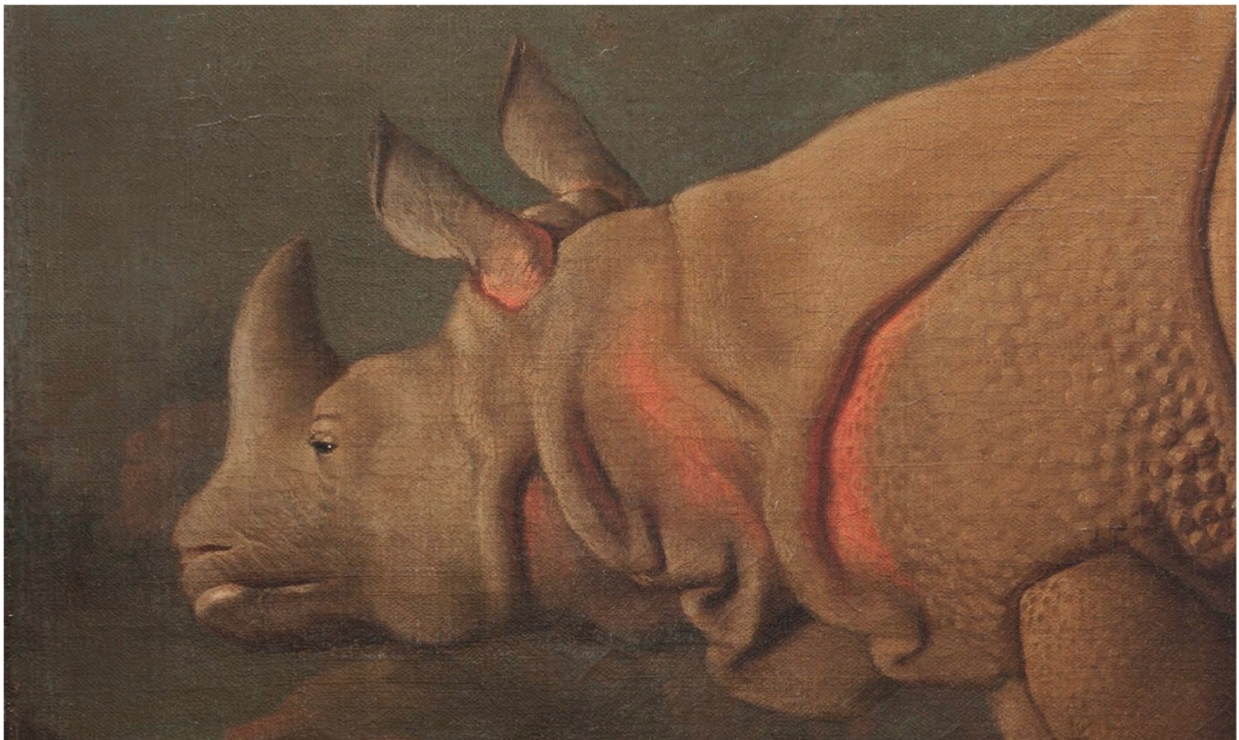
The sight of a live rhinoceros in 18th century London was extraordinary.

Christopher Plumb tells the tragic, drunken story of Gilbert Pidcock's rhinoceros.

Christopher Plumb

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[https://www.theguardian.com/science/animal-magic/2015/jun/30/wine-drinking-rhino-rhinoceros-london-menagerie\[05/02/2016 15:03:06\]](https://www.theguardian.com/science/animal-magic/2015/jun/30/wine-drinking-rhino-rhinoceros-london-menagerie[05/02/2016 15:03:06])



George Stubbs' portrait of Gilbert Pidcock's rhinoceros, an Indian rhino in 18th-century Britain that took to the bottle, then the road
Photograph: Royal College of Surgeons, London

Name: Gilbert Pidcock's rhinoceros

Species: *Rhinoceros unicornis*

Dates: ca. 1788-1793

Claim to fame: One of the few living rhinoceros exhibited in 18 -century Britain

Where now: The skin and horn were sold at auction in 1810. Current whereabouts unknown

Gilbert Pidcock's rhinoceros was an obedient animal with a penchant for sweet red wine. It could guzzle vast quantities (three or four bottles in a sitting). Which may explain how, in October 1792, the rhino stumbled and dislocated its right front leg. "There is ... a grave suspicion that it was while laboring under the effects of intoxication that Rhinoceros Indicus came to grief," wrote one commentator following the accident.

Some two years earlier, in 1790, the rhinoceros had reached Britain. It was a present from Asaf-Ud-Daula (the Nawab of the Indian city of Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh) to Henry Dundas (President of the Board of Commissioners for the Affairs of India).

Rather than “have the trouble of keeping it”, however, Dundas looked to sell. With live rhinos a distinct rarity in 18th-century London, the last one (Clara) seen in 1758, Dundas obtained £700 for the beast, which eventually came into the possession of Gilbert Pidcock, a menagerist with premises at the Exeter Exchange on the Strand and also a touring menagerie.

Whenever the young male rhinoceros wanted food, he would cry like a calf. When spectators approached with fruit or other choice tidbits he would cry out in eager anticipation.

His diet consisted of clover, biscuits and greens – in addition to the wine. The anatomist John Hunter took an interest and commissioned George Stubbs to paint the rhino’s portrait.



Rhinoceros, 1790, George Stubbs (1724-1806), commissioned by John Hunter, oil on canvas Photograph: Royal College of Surgeons, London

Some eight or nine months after the rhinoceros injured its leg, Queen Charlotte summoned Pidcock to bring the animal to the Queen’s Lodge at Windsor for the princesses to view it. The rhinoceros was drawn on a “machine” – presumably a cumbersome wooden caravan contraption – the “appearance of which highly gratified them and the King”.

Pidcock went on to show off the rhino at that year’s Ascot Races, before journeying on towards Portsmouth. But around 150 km shy of the destination, the animal died from inflammation to its injured leg. By the time the caravan rolled into Portsmouth the body had begun to decompose. The stench was apparently so bad that the city’s mayor ordered that the rhino be buried on Southsea Common.

Pidcock complied but was back two weeks later under the cover of darkness to exhume his rhino and preserve its remains.

This was not a pleasant task: according to the Reverend Thomas Smith in his 1806 work *The Naturalist's Cabinet*, "the stench was so insufferable that it was with the most utmost difficulty the persons employed could proceed in their operations." The odour of rotting rhinoceros was "plainly perceptible" from over half a mile away.

Those visitors promenading along the seafront would have found the air particularly bracing or rather, stomach churning.

With London's Bartholomew Fair fast approaching, Pidcock was eager to hurry things along.

If he couldn't exhibit a live rhino, a dead one would have to suffice. On the 6 September 1793 at 8 pm, nineteen-year-old student Robert Jameson (reading medicine, botany and natural history at Edinburgh University) visited Pidcock's pitch at the fair in London.

The rhino, he noted, "had died a short time before I came to London which loss I much regretted".

He, like other visitors, had to make do with the rhinoceros skin stuffed by the London taxidermist Thomas Hall, and the sight of a live bison and polar bear.

The now-stuffed rhinoceros returned to the Exeter Exchange on the Strand, where it went on show, eventually joined by another living rhinoceros in 1799.

This second "docile and tame" rhinoceros lived for about a year in Pidcock's menagerie before he sold it to a highly esteemed client; the Holy Roman Emperor Francis II acquired it for £1000.

Unfortunately for the Emperor, he never set eyes upon his rhinoceros.

It died of breathing problems two months after Pidcock had sold it to him but before it had been shipped to Vienna.

The Emperor's loss was Pidcock's gain; the menagerist so very narrowly avoided having a second rhinoceros die whilst on his books.

Tale ends

After Gilbert Pidcock's death, the contents of his menagerie were sold at auction on 20 March 1810.

The rhino's skin went for a paltry 5 shillings, suggesting that the 17-year-old preserved skin was in a less-than-perfect condition. The rhino's horn fetched one pound and two shillings.

The whereabouts of the rhinoceros' skin and horn and their eventual fate are, unfortunately, unknown. Sold as different lots, perhaps they shared very different fates.

Christopher Plumb is a historian and the author of "The Georgian Menagerie: Exotic Animals in Eighteenth-Century", published today by I.B.Tauris.

If you know where the remains of Pidcock's rhino might be please leave a comment or send a message to @WayOfThePanda.

If there is a zoological specimen with a great story that you would like to see profiled, please contact Henry Nicholls @WayOfThePanda.