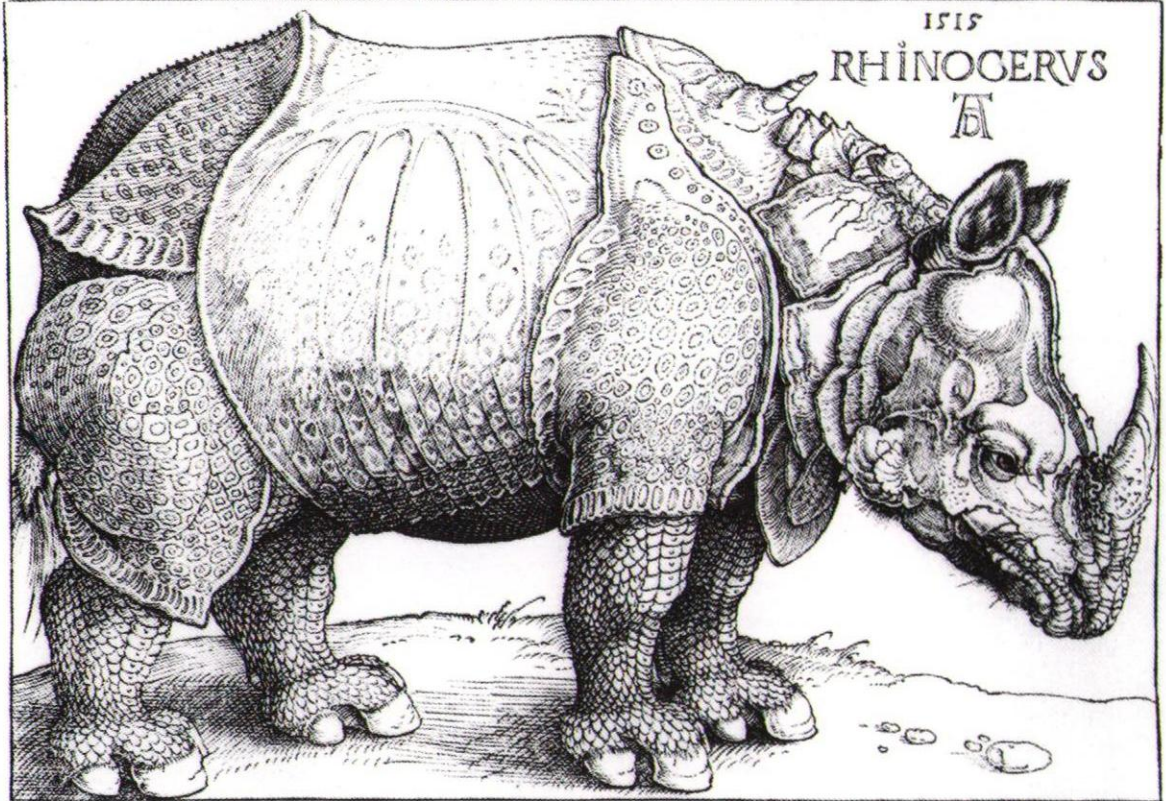


Albrecht Dürer's Rhinoceros

by Kees Rookmaaker

Nach Christus gepurt 1513. Jar. 20. i. May. Hat man den großmichtigen Kunig von Portugall Ein amell gen Lyfasona pacht auf India/ ein sollich lebendig Thier. Das nomen sie Rhinoceros. Das ist hie mit aller furer gestalt Absonderlic. Es hat ein fard wie ein gepuckte Schildkroet. Und ist es dickon Schalot vberlegt fast fust. Und ist in der groß als der Schfande Afer nidermachten von paynen und fast wehaffig. Es hat ein schuiffstark Horn vom auff der nafen/ Das begynde es also zu wagen wo es bey steynen ist. Das dorig Thier ist des Schfungs todt fende. Der Schfande funder es fast vber/ Dann wo es In antumb/ so laufft In das Thier mit dem kopff zwischen dyc fenden payn und triff den Schfande vnden am pauch auff vñ crengt In des mag er sich nit eruen. Dann das Thier ist also gewapent/ das In der Schfande nichts kan thun. Sie sagen auch das der Rhinoceros Schnell/ Starck und Luffig sey.

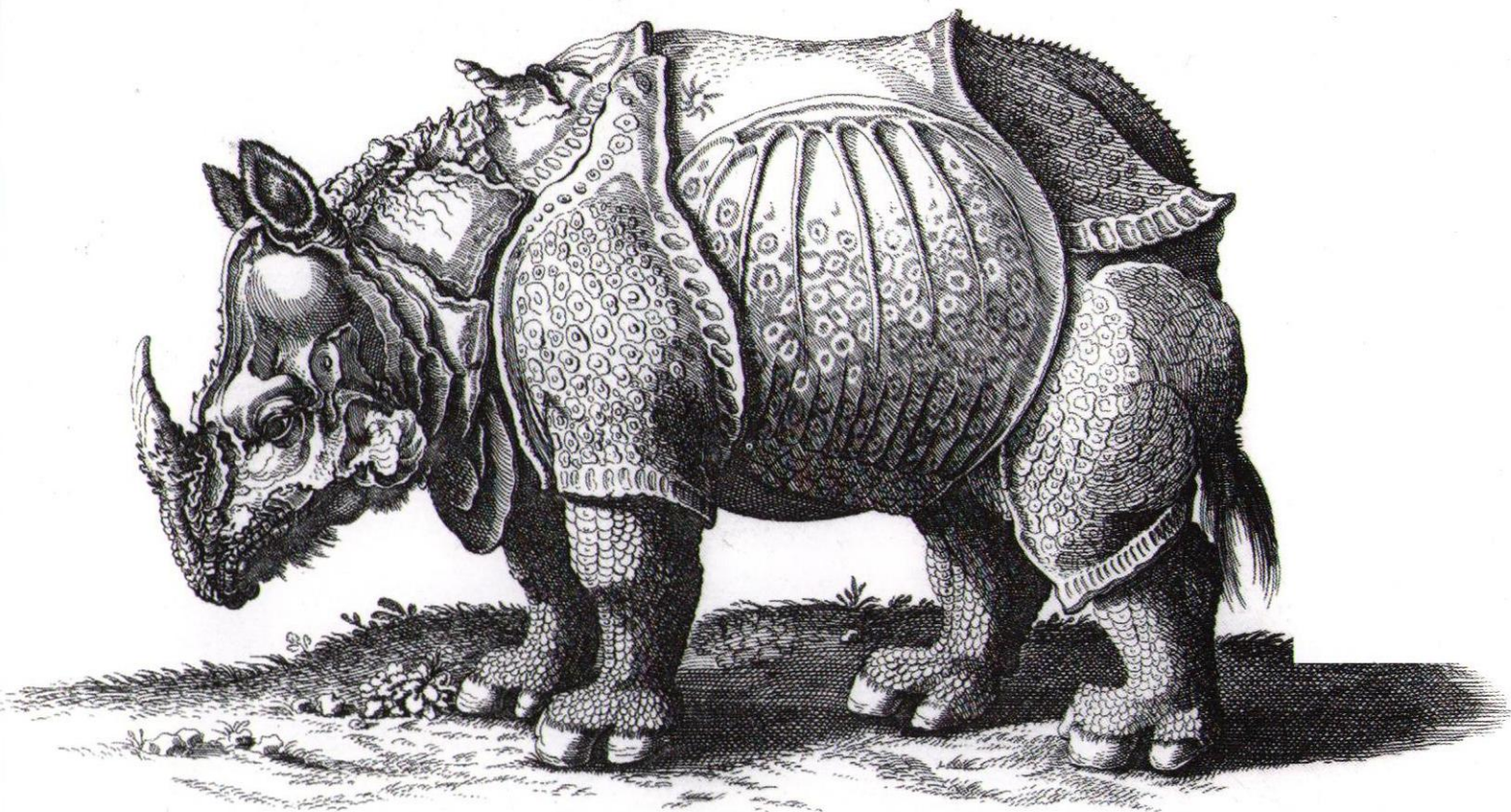


Albrecht Dürer's woodcut of 1515

On the 20th of May in the year 1515, a ship arrived in the harbour of Lisbon, Portugal carrying a ganda donated by a ruler in the East Indian state of Gujarat to the Portuguese King, Emanuel I. This was the first rhinoceros to arrive in Europe since Roman days. The King's advisors delved in their classics to know more about this armour-plated monster. They easily found a passage in the Natural History by Pliny which states that the rhinoceros prepares himself for his fight with the elephant by filing its horn on rocks, and during the encounter tries to hit the elephant's belly because it is softer. As Emanuel had a stable full of elephants, he could not help but be tempted to try to see how his rhinoceros would stand up against an elephant. The duel was arranged on the third of June, 1515. The rhinoceros, kept on a chain

by an Indian keeper, was hidden behind a carpet. A young elephant was introduced into the arena by his mahout. When the carpet was removed, the elephant panicked, forced his way through a window and ran back to his stable. The crowd must have been disappointed by this rather too sudden climax.

The arrival of this new kind of animal quickly spread through Europe. On 13 July 1515, Giovanni Penni published a pamphlet in Rome about the rhinoceros, including a rather rough illustration of the animal. Around the same time, a German trader who was in Lisbon at the time, Valentin Ferdinand of Moravia, wrote about the rhinoceros in a letter back home. It is believed that he included a sketch of the creature with his letter, although this sketch has not been found. However, two German artists depicted the rhi-

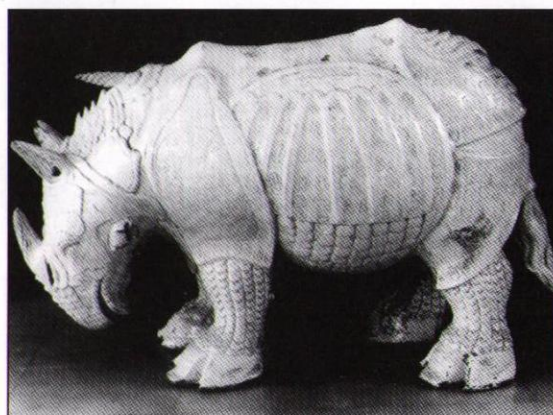


*Dürer's rhinoceros copied in J. Johnston,
Historiae Naturalis, 1653*

rhinoceros in the year 1515, Hans Burgkmair and Albrecht Dürer. The original drawing by Dürer is known (in the British Museum in London), as well as a very similar woodcut. The rhinoceros shown in this woodcut by Dürer is grotesquely removed from the real thing, with its exaggerated scales and ribcage, and the unexpected horn on the shoulders. It is not impossible that the animal actually had such a growth on its shoulders, as the same occurred in several specimens which have been kept in zoological gardens in this century, but whether it was twisted as Dürer imagined, is a mute point.

Dürer's rendering of the rhinoceros ever since permeated the zoological literature. At least until the end of the eighteenth century it proved always the most popular choice when any text about the rhinoceros had to be illustrated. A few other drawings and engravings were made during those three hundred years, but all faded away quickly, while Dürer's rhinoceros remained. The animal was seen in books, on tapestries, in ceramics, on tiles, actually in about every form of art imaginable.

The rhinoceros itself did not remain long in Lisbon. King Emanuel decided that it would make a marvellous present to the Pope in Rome,



*Rhinoceros in Meissen
porcelain, ca 1731-1734*



*Sinceny faience table
top, ca 1750*

Continued on page 10

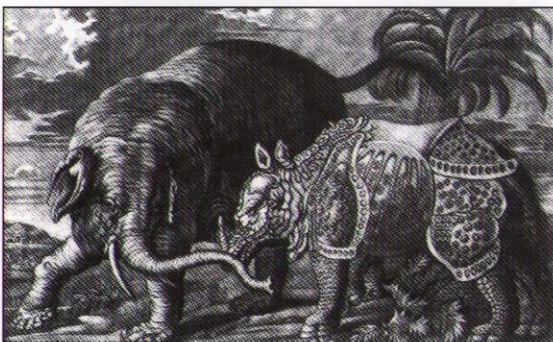
Detail drawing of a
Venetian green lacquer
bureau-cabinet



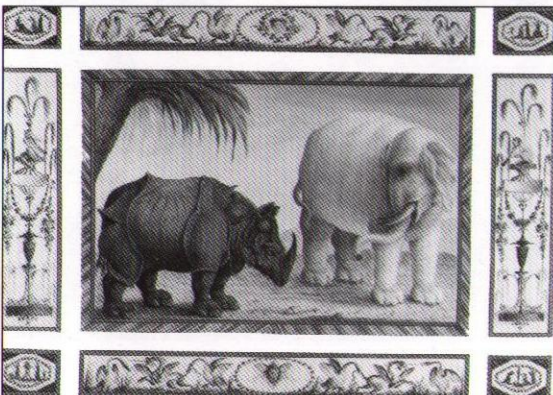
Ambroise Paré, from
Discourse de la
Mumie, 1582



Mezzotint by
P. van den Berge



Dürer's rhinoceros
in furniture



Continued from page 9

as this gift of an elephant the previous year, had caused an uproar of gratitude in the Italian capital. The rhinoceros, dressed up and laden with other precious gifts, left Portugal on a ship by the end of December 1515, and was seen the next month by the French monarch and his wife in the city of Marseilles. Continuing its journey, it was caught in a heavy storm off the North Italian coast. The ship sank with all its treasures, but it is rumoured that the rhinoceros, though chained, either swam ashore, or it drowned and washed ashore. Rumours have it that its skin was recovered, preserved and sent to Rome stuffed with hay. We might never know if this latter part of the story was based on reality. The corridors of the Vatican have been searched, without success, but then again, the specimen might have rotted away or was perhaps stored in a totally inaccessible place. Or Pope Leo X might have given it to another friend. The disappearance of this rhinoceros from Lisbon is a pity, because we may never know if the hornlet on the shoulders was real, and also because the animal later became the type of the Great Indian rhinoceros, *Rhinoceros unicornis* Linnaeus, 1758.

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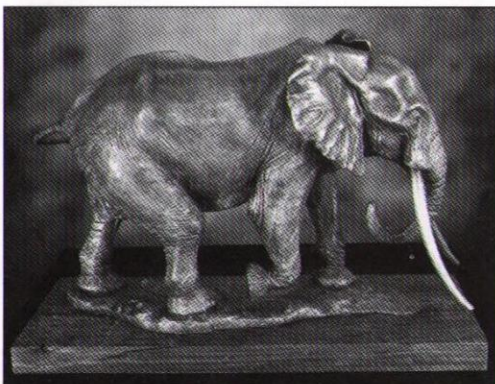
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Cover Story: "Mafunyane"

Alan Ainslie, South African wildlife painter and sculptor, was born in Port Elizabeth and grew up on a farm near Graaff-Reinet in the Eastern Cape. His works rank amongst the finest in the world and today, his sculptures, paintings and drawings grace the homes of art collectors world-wide. Committed to the conservation of wildlife in South Africa and elsewhere in the world, Ainslie has donated part of the proceeds from his work to numerous wildlife organisations, including REF.

Details on the raffle of this magnificent bronze of Mafunyane can be obtained through www.ref.org.za or tel: 453-9829

