

Dürer's Rhino: Five
Centuries of an Elusive
Representation

丢勒的犀牛：一个长达
五个世纪的晦涩表达

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ABSTRACT

2015 marks the 500th anniversary of Albrecht Dürer's woodcut of 'Ganda', an Indian rhino that arrived at Manuel I's Ribeira Palace, Lisbon in May 1515. While Dürer never saw the animal himself, his fantastical image based on a rough sketch and description became the enduring representation of the rhinoceros for more than 300 years. The passage of the rhino between India, Portugal and Italy marked a diplomatic transaction between statesmen of the time, yet in paper terms a 'diplomatic transcription' is the attempt to reproduce a source document as closely as possible. While this is typically limited to historical documents, the international dispersal of Dürer's image became an exercise in this etymological form of the word for centuries to come. The inscription at the top of the 1515 print contains the words "abconderfet" – meaning an accurate copy of an absent original – a copy that bears witness. This paper points to the implications of this term for this printed image, both historically and for the contemporary world. It will address why, in the age of post-print, this particular narrative of print history still has currency.

摘要

2015 年标志着阿尔布雷希特·丢勒的木刻作品 *Ganda* 诞生的五百周年——这是一只于 1515 年 5 月到达曼努尔一世位于里斯本的里贝拉宫的印度犀牛。丢勒本人并未见过这只犀牛，但基于粗略的素描稿及口述、经由想象创作的图画却在其后三百多年成为不朽的犀牛的代表之作。犀牛本身对政治家而言是当时印度、葡萄牙和意大利之间外交事务的沟通传达，然而当犀牛被重现于纸面上时，“外交事务”就成为一种尽可能接近原物的复制品。然而这种典型仅限于历史记载，分散在世界各地的丢勒的作品成为几个世纪以来这个词语的语源形式的实践。这幅在 1515 年印制的作品上方有“abconderfet”字样，意为：对未曾见过之物的精确描摹——在画面上还附上了犀牛目击者的名字。本文指出此词对这张版画作品在历史和当代世界的含义。本文说明了在后印刷时代，尤其是印刷史叙事仍保有一席之地原因。

（翻译：赵尔卓）

1. PAPER

Rhinoceroses are territorial creatures. They rely on olfactory communication and have pedal scent glands that, during their peregrinations, express a thick secretion as they lay claim to their terrain. The pedal glands were first identified by Sir Richard Owen in 1849 upon dissecting a *Rhinoceros unicornis*, purchased in 1834 for the Zoological Society of London. He identified 'a small compact yellow glandular body attached to the thyroid at the point where the vein emerged' (Cave, 1962: 686). It is this gland that would have besmirched the wooden lining of a ship in 1515 as a single Indian rhino tried to interpret its surroundings. And it is this layering of oil on a wooden surface as a means of sense-making that introduces the rhino not only as the subject of one of the most famous natural history images of all time, but as its object as well. It is at once the image, the support, matrix and the print.

As the well-known narrative goes, when in 1514 Afonso de Albuquerque, governor of Portuguese India, sought permission from Sultan Muzafar II to build a fort on an island near Diu, this was denied. However, in the process diplomatic gifts were exchanged, including an Indian Rhinoceros. In January 1515 the *Nossa Senhora da Ajuda*, set sail from Goa for Lisbon, laden with a cargo of spices and a single ceratomorph in the hull. This two-ton pachyderm serving as both cargo and ballast sailed for 120 days below deck, surviving on rice and rocking and shifting its weight with every lilt and turn of the ship. In the blind dark, beneath the surface of the water, it rounded the Horn of Africa on a southerly course to the Cape of Good Hope. As it neared the Cape, had it been able to peer through a crack in the tar-lined wooden deck of the carrack in which it was tethered, it may have seen clouds racing down the face of a flat-topped mountain, *Taboa da caba* – 'Table of the Cape' – named by Portuguese admiral, Antonia da Saldanha in 1503, or *Hoeri 'kwaggo* as it was named by the first Khoi inhabitants in the area. If its poor eyesight allowed, it may have seen pre-colonial strandlopers traversing the empty shoreline, gathering molluscs and crustaceae. It is highly likely that it would have encountered the effects of the South-Easter, fiercely rocking the ship and tearing through its sails. Had it passed fifteen years previously, it may have encountered the sunken corpse of Bartholomew Dias – the first European to sail around southern most tip of Africa in 1488 – lost at sea on a second voyage around the Cape. This rhinoceros, commonly known as Ganda, was a measure of power and ownership. Traversing the globe from India, around the Cape to Portugal, the route of the rhino measured the limits of control by the European nation – the passage of the rhino actualising the extent of the map.

Five hundred years ago, Albrecht Dürer produced his famous woodcut of the rhino. The imagined narrative that introduces this paper is significant in this context, as this print is characteristic of a Northern Renaissance attitude: one that perceived the value of images as providing primary observation and evidence, while recognising the merits of both imagination and lived experience in image making.

The narrative of Ganda the rhino is equally one of surface and depth, of territories and conquest, borders and passage. Believed to be the most amphibious of all rhino species, the Indian rhino may have been better adjusted to its long sea journey than others. It arrived in Lisbon on 20

- 1 The Indian rhinoceros has a single horn, while the African rhinoceros has two.
- 2 It reads in translation: On the first of May in the year 1513 AD [sic], the powerful King of Portugal, Manuel of Lisbon, brought such a living animal from India, called the rhinoceros. This is an accurate representation. It is the colour of a speckled tortoise, and is almost entirely covered with thick scales. It is the size of an elephant but has shorter legs and is almost invulnerable. It has a strong pointed horn on the tip of its nose, which it sharpens on stones. It is the mortal enemy of the elephant. The elephant is afraid of the rhinoceros, for, when they meet, the rhinoceros charges with its head between its front legs and rips open the elephant's stomach, against which the elephant is unable to defend itself. The rhinoceros is so well-armed that the elephant cannot harm it. It is said that the rhinoceros is fast, impetuous and cunning. (Dackerman, 2011: 165)

May 1515, the first of two aquatic voyages. In the first the animal was housed beneath the deck, hidden and weighty, while on the second – as a gift from Emmanuel I to Pope Leo X in Rome – it was strapped above the deck: a triumphal prow head. Its body is said to have washed ashore in January 1516 when, trapped by its chains as the boat sank near Porto Venere, it was unable to keep its head above water. Moving between oceans, through depths and layers of visibility, the rhinoceros emerges as an image. Just as the interruption of the surface is necessary for a relief print to become manifest – the submerged incisions holding agency and meaning, so too was Ganda consigned to aquatic depths only to emerge later as an image circulated throughout the world.

The passage of the image of Ganda is an extension of the rhino's journey. From the initial transportation of a sketch and description that made its way from Lisbon to Nuremberg, and interpreted by Dürer into one of the most familiar and widely published images of the natural world, to the multiple reinterpretations of his image, it is possible to say, in the words of T.H. Clarke that “in the European imagination the Ganda of Cambaia is still deambulating” (1986: 20). Dürer's print became the authoritative representation and was reproduced throughout Europe – some canonical examples being Conrad Gesner's 1551 *Historia Animalium* (Switzerland) and Edward Topsell's 1607 *The History of Four-footed Beasts* (England). Far removed from the initial political diplomacy of the rhino as a living gift, diplomatic exchange was further manifest through its currency and mobility as an image. A ‘diplomatic transcription’ is the attempt to reproduce a source document as closely as possible, and while this is typically limited to historical documents, the international dispersal of Dürer's image became an exercise in this etymological form of the word for centuries to come.

That his image became so ubiquitous and as such cited as a kind of typical specimen is ironic, given its fanciful nature. Scholars agree that it is unlikely that Dürer ever saw the creature, and that his initial drawing was based on a sketch and description by an unknown Nuremberg artist. A rhino had not been encountered in Europe since the 4th century, and during this interim it had gained status as an imaginary beast – an image of invention. Associated with the unicorn of medieval bestiaries, it was interpreted as a symbol of sin and ferocity: a beast that could only be lured into submission by virgins, and yet able to be overcome by the power of the divine and thereby changed. Dürer's fantastical interpretation reinforced these perceptions, with its second dorsal horn¹ and exaggerated *plicae* of the skin, the enduring image of the animal as transformative – between armoury and beast, between reality and invention – was established. As Susan Dackerman writes of Dürer's engraving “the image embodies and enacts the pervasive tension between nascent developments in empirical investigation of subjects from nature and the emergence of artistic practices that articulate the nature of representation itself” (2011: 165) – the print as positioned between invention and observation.

Dackerman (2011: 170) writes of Dürer's print as a ‘fantastical index’ – an oxymoron that suggests order and control as well as inviting the imagination. Without direct inspection the print relied on skill and technique, and as much as it was an image of a rhino it was also self-reflexively concerned with the nature of print. The embossed surface of the printed paper is

akin to textured rhino hide; the rhino's body is constructed from a series of plates, interrupted by deep fissures in the surface, thus evoking the wooden engraved matrix; the horn is a type of burin, a tool of incision, of marking, of implied violence to the surface. The composition of the print too is a constant reminder of its construction. The frame tightly crops the rhino's form and the shallow perspective is enclosed by this constricted format. The scale of the animal is enhanced by its proximity to the frame – a window and measure of control and distance. Ropes and chains are ubiquitous in future representations based on Dürer's print – tethered and tamed by print conventions the rhino is both a prisoner and sacrifice, celebratory and commemorative: a transitional animal, moving between states – water and land, knowledge and ingenuity.

At the top of the 1515 print is inscribed in German a description of the rhino based on a text by Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis Historia* (AD 23–79).² It includes the word *abconderfet* – as taken from the Latin imago *contrafacta*, meaning 'an accurate copy of an absent original' – a copy that bears witness (Dackerman, 2011: 167). As Dürer never saw his subject, and while this term usually refers to a drawing, in this instance the rhino itself is the absent source. Thus in the production and reproduction of this print, a chain of images were produced as imago *contrafacta*, witnesses to an unseen form.

In relation to this term, Peter Parshall (1993: 555) writes of how the Renaissance distinction evident in curiosity cabinets between *artificia* and *naturalia* is indicative of an attitude that distinguished nature from human manufacture, and how this translated visually into a division between invention and objective recording. *Contrafactum* was introduced as term that expressed an image as a bearer of fact – a "class of representation that came to be determined by function ... for images reporting specific events, and for portrayals of both natural and preternatural phenomena" (ibid: 556). The term was associated with that of *counterfeit* which, contrary to the contemporary understanding of the word, stood as a legitimate, genuine copy of a prototype – a proxy of sorts. This concept was most prevalent in Germany (*abconterfeit*) and was commonly associated with portraiture – the image as a surrogate for the sitter. Dürer, in his notes, frequently used the term to denote 'portrayal', yet it also means to make an image 'after' or to produce a replica (ibid: 561).³ While he does not claim to have seen the rhino himself, his use of terminology in the inscription is somewhat ambiguous. Text often accompanied the image to give empirical evidence of the context on which the image was made: the image is testimony to an event – the print a witness of history. In Dürer's print the term claims reliable and direct witness as to the veracity of the creature's appearance (absent), yet at the same time the word can be used to denote a faithful copy: a copy either of a reproduction or of an experience.

During this period, images were increasingly used as evidence to test investigations and speculation. Prints in this context became increasingly powerful – evidence and verification of 'fact' and a meeting point between the imaginary and science. The world was mediated by the authors of imago *contrafacta*, who transmitted and promoted an understanding of new knowledge through prints. The reproduction of this image and its spread over 300 years

3 of his initial rhinoceros drawing he wrote to a friend "Because it is such a wondrous thing, I had to send you a portrayal (abconterfeit) made after it." (Parshall, 1993: 561)

4 This rhino was sent from Calcutta as a gift to Louis XV and arrived in France in 1770. Its skeleton and skin now form part of the collection in the Muséum National d' Histoire Naturelle (Cave, 1962: 687).

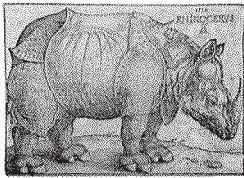


Figure 1: Albrecht Dürer. 1515

become in itself evidentiary – its validity and veracity as an extant rendering growing through sheer numbers, and marking the point in art history at which the interrelationship between objective rendering and imaginative imaging were severed.

However, Dürer's decorative exterior of rhino could only ever be a secondary witness to the close-at-hand experience of interior observation. In 1793 Vicq d'Azyr performed the first ever dissection of an Indian rhino on one sourced from the Royal Menagerie in Versailles.⁴ This act shifted the received image of the rhino. Prior to its dissection the rhino was veiled behind Dürer's printed veneer and the popularity of this representation endured, whereas after 1793 its iconic form was ruptured by internal investigation, giving way to a visceral, three-dimensional entity.

At the inauguration of the Roman Colosseum in 81AD by Emperor Titus 9000 animals were slaughtered, including 30 elephants and a rhinoceros (Jennison, 1937). After the fall of Rome, the rhino escaped captivity for 1200 years, yet the gift of Ganda was both the start of many diplomatic animal exchanges and the reintroduction of the containment of the rhino. Since 1515, there have been over 400 rhinos recorded in captivity, 260 of them captured Rhinoceros unicornis (Rookmaker, 1998: 33). In 2015, 500 years after the print of Ganda was made, rhino poaching threatens the future existence of the physical rhino. With only 3,300 Indian rhinos remaining and the African black rhino population at 5,050, the notion of image as testament or witness becomes all the more poignant. It is possible that in the foreseeable future Dürer's rhino will be no more fantastical than the many tourist snapshots taken in game parks today. These digital renderings will, in the true sense of abconderfet bear witness to an absent original, and be evidence of something that, other than in museum collections, is no longer.

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