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The pull of the pachyderm

A rhino called Clara is the serene superstar of this perfectly curated show exploring Europe's love affair with exotic animals over three centuries

Rachel Cooke

Miss Clara and the Celebrity Beast in Art, 1500-1860
Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham; until 27 February

In 1741, a retired Dutch sea captain called Douwe Mout van der Meer brought to Rotterdam from India the first live rhinoceros to be seen in mainland Europe since 1579. He named this marvellous beast Clara, and for the next 17 years the two of them toured the continent ceaselessly; a modern map of their travels, all coloured arrows and sinuous lines, brings to mind a page from the back of an in-flight magazine. But for Van der Meer, such wanderings were worth the trouble (it took eight horses to pull Clara's enclosure). His rhino was soon famous. For the pleasure of her company – in spite of her diet of hay, bread, orange peel and the occasional draught of beer, her temperament was ever placid – people were willing to pay the equivalent of half a day's wages for a skilled tradesman.

That armour-plated skin! The single horn that made her look, in the eyes of the public, just a little like a unicorn! And Clara's appearance wasn't only a hit with the crowds; artists loved her too, preserving her for posterity in marble, bronze and porcelain, in pencil, chalk and oil – and thanks to this, she's about to enjoy a moment all over again. Since 1942, the Barber Institute of Fine Arts in Birmingham has owned a diminutive bronze of this extraordinary pachyderm (*A Rhinoceros, called Miss Clara,* c1750, after Peter-Anton von Verschaffelt), and it's around this adorable sculpture – stubby, but determinedly proud – that the gallery has built its latest exhibition, one that features not only many artistic representations of Van der Meer's rhinoceros, but depictions, too, of several other celebrity beasts, among them elephants called Hansken, Jumbo and Chunee; a hippopotamus who was known as Obaysch; and a nameless zebra from Ethiopia whose owner liked to boast of how its exquisite stripes produced "the effect of a little horse in masquerade". The result, a veritable menagerie of a show, is just about perfect. Curated by the Barber's head of collections, Robert Wenley, this is the best small exhibition I've seen in years: a single-room display that fills the visitor with wonderment at every turn.

The earliest depictions of Clara date from 1749, and comprise, somewhat bizarrely, a pair of anatomical engravings, made by Jan Wandelaar for Professor Bernhard Siegfried Albinus's treatise *Tabulae Sceleti et Musculorum Corporis Humani*, in which she appears next to a human skeleton; apparently, the "rareness" of the animal was felt by Albinus to be, in context, an "agreeable" ornament. But if she's rather pushed out of the picture here – chewing the cud serenely, Clara is oblivious to the rattling bones close by – henceforth, she's always centre stage. Johann Elias Ridinger, an artist from Augsburg in Germany, made six drawings of her when she visited the city on 12 June 1748, and now you can see her "personality" – or one of them – begin to emerge.

In one, she lies on her side, seemingly about to fall asleep – in a vignette of her head on the same sheet, she appears to be yawning – while in a later engraving by the same artist (c1750), she's depicted as an old crone, her eyes rheumy, her skin wizened; all she needs to complete the look is a bonnet. Both images make for something of a contrast to *Study for the "Dutch" Rhinoceros* by Jean-Baptiste Oudry (c1749), in which, though her ears are up and her face friendly, she looks battle-ready, a breast-plate of skin slung about her middle; and even more so to Pietro Longhi's oil, *The Exhibition of a Rhinoceros at Venice* (c1751), in which her appearance is almost

velvety, the sable folds of her hide loose and luxuriant.

In Longhi's painting, a small crowd looks on, marking a minor shift in the exhibition's tone. Skeletons apart, humans have not intruded until this point, and now the mind turns reluctantly to questions of freedom and captivity. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, Europeans knew next to nothing about how to keep the exotic creatures they prized. Even the habitats of these animals were impossible for most people to imagine: if rhinos are pictured in a landscape at all in this exhibition, it's always fantastical, a hotch-potch of palm trees and dock leaves.

But this didn't stop the menagerie-keepers, of course. George Cruikshank's *Destruction of the Furious Elephant at Exeter 'Change, 1826* depicts the sad demise of Chunee, an Asian elephant who went "mad", threatening to break out of his pen at Edward Cross's menagerie in the Strand, where he'd been resident since 1814 (he met his end at the hands of a firing squad, an outrage that sent "elephant-struck" London half-mad with grief). Later known as Polito's Royal Menagerie, this collection of animals, a camel and several kangaroos among them, inhabited the top floors of a shopping arcade – and it was very famous indeed, even if it did display a "hippopotamus" that was actually a tapir. Visiting it in 1813, Lord Byron recorded in his diary that "the Ursine sloth hath the very voice and manner of my valet" and that the pre-madness Chunee behaved so well, he wanted him for his butler.

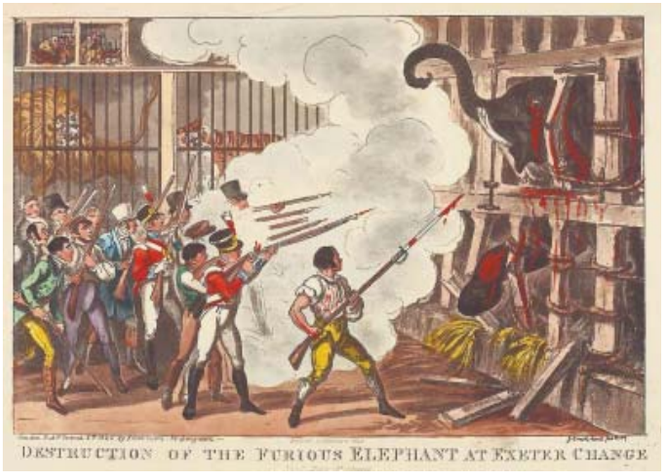
Rudolph Ackermann's aquatint of the Exeter 'Change menagerie from 1812 is one of the most fascinating things in the gallery, the animals displayed as if in a department store, the fashionably dressed visitors gazing at them hungrily, as if they might be for sale. It's horribly sad, of course: the creatures have no room to move. The sense of enclosure is crushing. (It's a relief, as you move on, to read of the move away from amateur menageries and sideshows; of the pressure, not least from the public, that led to the establishment of the Zoological Society of London.) Yet here, too, is curiosity and excitement, the sense of a wide world yet to be discovered. You feel almost envious of the crowd's goggled-eyed fascination.

But perhaps there's no need for envy. I must admit that in the grip of this quietly amazing exhibition, I was a child again. It's just so delightful. Joseph Wolf's watercolour (c1850/51) of Obaysch, an Egyptian hippopotamus that caused a sensation when he arrived in London, thousands flocking to see him at the zoological gardens, isn't by any stretch the finest work of art in this show (that accolade might go to Rembrandt's 1638 etching of Adam and Eve, in which an elephant stands for goodness in the face of the trickster serpent). But it was the one I felt most powerfully drawn to, the animal made to look so sleek, with a face as kindly as an old parson's. On the train home, eating an indifferent sandwich, I read of what Charles Dickens called Obaysch's "unctuous appetite for dates, his jog-trot manner of going", and was filled with what I can only describe as sheer joy. What a world, that (still, just about) has such creatures in it.

Laura Cumming is away

> *You feel almost envious of the crowd's goggled-eyed fascination*

BELOW Polito's Menagerie, c1811-14 as represented in Staffordshire pottery. *© The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent*



ABOVE
The sad demise of Chunee the elephant, as depicted by George Cruickshank in 1826.

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A Rhinoceros, called Miss Clara, c1750-60, attributed to Peter-Anton von Verschaffelt.

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