

NONE TOUGHER

Rhinoceroses are rarely anthropomorphized making this American magazine advertisement from the 1950s an unusual specimen. Armstrong, a rubber and tire company, found the tough exterior of rhinoceroses the prime comparison for its most durable automobile tires, dubbed "Rhino-Flex."

Text by Kelly Enright

This ad for Armstrong tires depicts a burly, brash rhinoceros slouching somewhat tauntingly, hat askew, and cigar in hand. He looks like a Hollywood gangster. "Really," the rhinoceros seems to say, "you're going to question *my* toughness?"

The slogan "None Tougher" appears as the headline of the ad, intended to sell durable tires to American consumers. Armstrong's advertising strategy meshes a presumed toughness of rhinoceros skin with an imagined toughness of rhinoceros personality. Yet the imagined "personality" of this rhinoceros has more to do with a stereotype of a car salesman or auto mechanic than of actual rhinoceroses. He is made human through bipedalism, clothes-wearing, and cigar-smoking. This is, in fact, a very human version of toughness; it says nothing about the natural traits of rhinoceroses that might make them good examples of robustness.

Armstrong's advertisement is selling both nature and artifice. First, the product itself, Rhino-Flex tires, are constructed from rubber. Rubber is a natural product, though it is likely that Armstrong also used artificial ingredients available at the time, perhaps even artificial rubber. While they make no claims to the tires' composition, they use a second natural product as a sales pitch: rhinoceros skin. The tires are not made from rhino skin nor, as far as we can tell, do they directly

mimic (as today's biomimicry might) its construction. The comparison is presumptuous. Yet Armstrong's illustrator makes the point. Look at the tires lined in a neat row of increasingly deep, rugged traction. Then move your eye to the right hip of the rhinoceros. His skin is pocked and wrinkled and has warts that visually resembles the most rugged of the tires (the one at far right). Here is the image of rhino toughness the consumer is meant to buy—figuratively and literally.

While this gangster rhino appears as a character in several ads, Armstrong's logo for Rhino-Flex tires is the smaller rhinoceros seen on the top of the tire rack. Represented here is a comparatively younger, more jubilant member of the species. It is engaged in a carefree jaunt, its tail bouncing in the breeze, its mouth turned slightly upwards in a smile. This rhino, known as "Tuffy," appeared printed on several marketing products such as ashtrays, paperweights, and patches, and despite its name hardly conveys toughness. The fiction of the ad creates a world in which a rhino salesman uses another rhino image to sell tires. Tuffy is a rhinoceros representation within a world of personified rhinoceroses. Is the larger one the real rhino? Or is the logo?

And which is really selling the tires? While the tough rhino glares at the viewer, Tuffy, smiles. From toughy to Tuffy, the admen cover all their bases. They convey the durability of Rhino-

"NONE TOUGHER!"

UNCONDITIONALLY
GUARANTEED!

Smart motorists demand tough tires these days. And Armstrong tires are so tough they're *unconditionally guaranteed for 18 months against all road hazards!* Exclusive Rhino-Flex construction—plus 38 years' experience in building better passenger, truck and tractor tires—makes this amazing guarantee possible. See your nearby dealer displaying the famous Armstrong "Tuffy." Armstrong Rubber Company, West Haven 16, Conn., Norwalk, Conn., Natchez, Miss., Des Moines, Iowa, 605 Market Street, San Francisco, Calif. Export Division: 20 East 50th St., New York 22, N. Y.



ARMSTRONG *Rhino-Flex* TIRES

Keith Ward

Armstrong Rhino-Flex Tires, 1953

Flex tires and employ a charismatic image of an animal to ensure likeability.

So where is the animal in this animal ad? Why not just depict a real rhino looking as if he were about to charge the viewer? Would that not convey toughness? Perhaps Armstrong could not commit to a realistic rhinoceros representation because it would be too real. The destruction of rhinoceros habitat, in part for rubber plantations,

decreased rhino numbers throughout the twentieth century.^[i] Thus, Armstrong had to separate product from its place of origin. The rhino image, perhaps unwittingly, is both tribute and façade. By not showing anything resembling a real rhino, consumers disassociate product and place. Yet the product itself is a tribute to the genius of nature, wanting to replicate the skin of a rhino as industrial product.

Referring to real rhinos might have also forced Armstrong to confront the actual vulnerability of the species. Rhinoceroses may have tough skin and confrontational attitudes (though their charges are usually bluffs), but they are increasingly unable to survive in the wild. They are extremely susceptible to environmental changes, breed slowly, and despite legal protections suffer from excessive poaching. What is most striking about this advertisement is that it promises traits--longevity, durability--that rhinos, in fact, do not possess. The irony is further evident in the ad's subtitle: "unconditionally guaranteed!" What can a vulnerable animal guarantee? The ad is ripe with denial about the destructive relationship between nature and technology.

Notes

[i] Dinerstein, Eric 2003. *The Return of the Unicorns: The Natural History and Conservation of the Greater One-Horned Rhinoceros*. New York: Columbia University Press and Martin, Esmond and Chryssee Bradley 1981. *Run Rhino Run*. London: Chatto & Windus.

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