



A LONELY RHINO

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In 1750, the German author Christoph Gottlieb Richter published a book with a conversation between two animals. This in itself was not very remarkable, as it was his thirtieth publication of such dialogues in which “human mistakes and vices” were discussed. What set this particular book apart was that the two debating animals were both at the forefront of public attention in Germany. One of them was a locust, representing the innumerable swarms that had devastated crops across large parts of the country. The other was a female rhinoceros from India – the only one of her kind living in continental Europe. Recently displayed in many German towns, she caused a sensation wherever she went. Nobody had ever seen a rhinoceros before.

Although the book – *Gespräch zwischen einem Nasshorn und einer Heuschrecke* – aims foremost to satirise human behaviour, it also directly references the experience of this rhinoceros. “I have to allow myself to be looked upon almost the whole day,” she tells the locust, “which is a burden to me, although deep down it is also laughable.” People constantly gawk at her, touch her and view her as a beast of wonder. She is considered strange, weird and, in some eyes, monstrous. Yet she returns their gaze, observing her observers; she comments on the people who comment on her. In the book, she is portrayed as a victim of human ignorance and arrogance, forced to live in an alien environment far from where she was born. But she also sees through humans who fail to truly see her.

We know a considerable amount about this Indian rhino, who was exhibited in numerous European countries for seventeen years, from 1741 until her death in 1758. She had been given a name, Clara, although this name does not appear in Richter’s book, nor is it mentioned that she was a female. Her owner was the Dutchman Douwe Mout, who brought her

by ship from Bengal to Holland in July 1741, when she was very young.

Clara had been captured as a young calf during a hunt in which her mother was killed. Shortly thereafter, an Indian prince presented her to Jan Albert Sichterman, the highest officer of the main trading post of the Dutch East India Company in Bengal. Exchanging precious objects and animals was essential to maintaining successful trading in the region. From that point on, Clara would always be surrounded by humans. Never again would she meet another rhino.

Clara was not the first rhino to be brought to Europe from India, however. A rhinoceros had arrived in Lisbon in 1515 and was depicted by Dürer in a print that became iconic. Another rhino arrived in 1581. By the summer of 1741, when Clara arrived in Amsterdam, three other rhinos had already been shipped to England. Only three years old at her time of arrival, and therefore still not fully grown, she was soon advertised in Dutch newspapers as an animal “the like of which has never been seen here before.”

It was immediately clear what Douwe Mout had planned for Clara: her uniqueness was destined to make her a public spectacle. Her debut was at an inn in the village of Nieuwendam, and some weeks later she stood in a tent at the annual Amsterdam Fair. This public life defined her existence. For the next four years she was shown in towns in and around the Netherlands, always in cities accessible by boat. By the time Clara reached adulthood at seven years old, she weighed nearly 2 500 kilograms and measured over 3.5 metres in length. Douwe Mout placed her in a robust, specially constructed wooden cart that required at least eight horses to pull. Travelling at about 25 kilometres a day, he embarked on a European tour with Clara that lasted nearly thirteen years, although she occasionally

enjoyed a rest in a meadow near Amsterdam. Over the years, she became famous in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, France, Italy, Poland, Denmark and, finally, England, where her life ended in April 1758 in a tent next to The Horse and Groom Inn in Lambeth, near London.

Mout knew how to exploit her appeal, how to attract crowds. As Clara told the locust, “It is true that my boss has to pay a lot for me, but I am also very lucrative to him, because there are enough curious people who for money wish to see me.” The more you paid, the closer you could get. With some extra coins, you could even touch her, as some pictures show, and feed her treats such as oranges and carrots. According to the posters that announced her arrival in town, her daily meal consisted of 30 kilograms of hay, 10 kilograms of bread and 14 buckets of water.

Clara became a phenomenon, a must-see for everyone from common people and tradesmen to city officials and princes. Most of the time, she did nothing extraordinary; people simply watched her eat, drink, relieve herself, make noises, listen, sleep and occasionally display anger or aggression, or run and swim. King Frederick the Great of Prussia awarded Mout no less than 18 golden ducats in Berlin for the pleasure of visiting her, Empress Maria Theresia of Austria ennobled him in Vienna and King Louis XV granted him permission to exhibit Clara throughout France. Her presence alone was impressive enough to make her tour a resounding commercial success.

In her first year in the Netherlands, she was portrayed in Leiden by both Petrus Camper and Jan Wandelaar. Later artists captured her as a unique creature with distinctive characteristics

in Augsburg, Venice, Copenhagen and elsewhere. Her massive form was immortalised in a life-size picture by Jean-Baptiste Oudry and in a marble statue by Pieter-Antoon Verschaffelt. Scientists, both professional and amateur, described her in detail: they measured her, examined her mouth, counted her teeth, discussed her and published their findings in Frankfurt an der Oder, Zürich, Paris and Danzig.

Europeans finally came to understand what an Indian rhinoceros really looked like, correcting the misconceptions spread by Dürer’s famous but inaccurate 1515 print. From

then on, Clara became *the* rhinoceros – the archetype for her species. When her image appeared on clocks, in porcelain statues or in scientific illustrations, it was no longer just Clara herself being depicted but the rhino as a universal concept. The same is true of the use of her image in groundbreaking publications such as the *Encyclopédie* by Diderot and d’Alembert and the *Histoire naturelle* by Buffon, both published in Paris in the 1760s, some years after her death.

Clara had become, in a way, immortal. Yet her own life had been lonely, unnatural and tragic. Taken from her home, she was exploited for human curiosity, entertainment and learning. And if we are to believe Christoph Gottlieb Richter, she herself understood this fate all too well.



Jean-Baptiste Oudry. Clara the rhinoceros. 1749, Paris. Staatliches Museum Schwerin



Exhibition detail. A painting of a pixelised close-up of Clara's eye from Oudry's 1749 work.
Photograph: Fritha Langerman



Exhibition detail.
A collection of luggage labels
detailing Clara's travels.

- 1740 – Calcutta (departure)
- 1741 – Rotterdam
- 1741 – Amsterdam
- 1743 – Antwerp
- 1743 – Brussels
- 1744 – Hamburg
- 1746 – Hanover
- 1746 – Berlin
- 1746 – Frankfurt
- 1746 – Breslau
- 1746 – Vienna
- 1747 – Dresden
- 1747 – Leipzig
- 1747 – Mannheim
- 1747 – Strasbourg
- 1748 – Bern
- 1748 – Zurich
- 1748 – Stuttgart
- 1748 – Nuremberg
- 1748 – Mannheim
- 1748 – Würzburg
- 1748 – Leiden
- 1748 – Rheims
- 1749 – Versailles
- 1749 – Paris
- 1749 – Marseilles
- 1750 – Rome
- 1750 – Naples
- 1750 – Bologna
- 1750 – Milan
- 1751 – Venice
- 1751 – Vienna
- 1752 – Ghent
- 1752 – Lille
- 1754 – Warsaw
- 1754 – Krakow
- 1754 – Danzig
- 1754 – Breslau
- 1755 – Copenhagen
- 1758 – London (death)

