



Ronna Bloom

### **The night the rhinos came**

The night the rhinos came we had nowhere else to look.  
They were not accusatory, but trotted towards us like big dogs.  
One turned her face left to show us her profile,  
batted one eye at ours and fluttered there. To watch  
a three-thousand-pound animal flutter is something else.

The children shrieked: He's looking at me!  
For size is often male,  
and scares or flatters us with its attention.  
But she has nothing to do with that.  
And trots away.

If this were a dance, we might bow and leave her.  
But someone among us is dreaming  
power, will buy a rifle,  
run out and begin the killing,  
is already having nightmares, planning  
their illustrious future.

It's still possible to love  
how small we are  
in the face of her face.

## Between fur and skin

In the National Gallery buffalo stood with their coats  
thrown over their shoulders like ladies at a tea.

In another room camels. Came upon them unexpectedly  
between paintings and ideas tied with string. Kept saying

camel, camel. Wounds  
enlarged a thousand times to show the scars.  
Art that plunged me into small dark rooms  
with film scores and moving pictures.

But the animals were insistent. A goat smiled in a Chagall.  
A million taxidermied birds posed or flew across the centuries.  
And those standing buffalo, camels made of fake fur,  
burlap, wire, and consciousness.

At a talk in another country, a woman begged the gathered  
look out for those few creatures left  
with one horn, monstrous, wrinkled, fragile,  
killed by the pound for the pound.

Another said, why  
should I give money to creatures I care nothing about?  
And it was us talking from the bottom of our burnt-out souls  
saying, who will care for us?

The question hovered  
and in the room burst out a shame, a pride and baldness  
pointing skyward, downward, straight ahead, behind, in all directions  
silently saying, this is us, all this.

George Mottershead opened the Chester Zoo in England in 1931, the first 'zoo without bars.' In 1953 their first black female rhinoceros arrived at the zoo and died the same year. The coronation of Queen Elizabeth II was on 2 June 1953. In 1961 a stamp was issued in the British Protectorate of North Borneo that featured the Queen's head and a rhinoceros. Self-governance was granted to this region in 1963. Chester Zoo bred three calves between 'Roger,' the first rhino bred in a British zoo (Bristol), and 'Susie,' who both arrived between 1959 and 1960. In 1999 the zoo started a rhino breeding campaign that also supported animals in Tanzania and Kenya. In 1960 a stamp was issued in the British Protectorates of Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania that featured the Queen's head and a rhinoceros. These countries gained independence in 1962, 1963 and 1961 respectively.



Stamps, film and photographs showing the entangled connections between the British colonies and rhinoceros.

Photograph of black rhinos in Chester Zoo, 1961: Christopher Brack



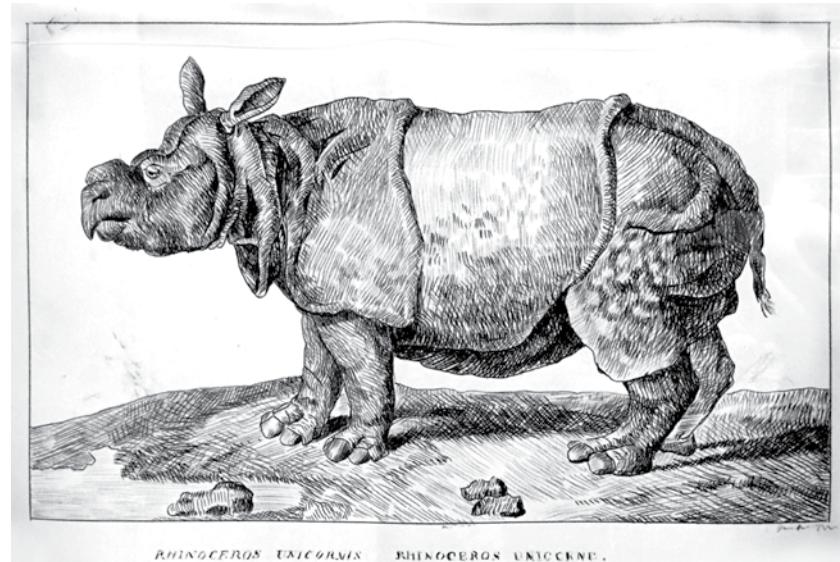
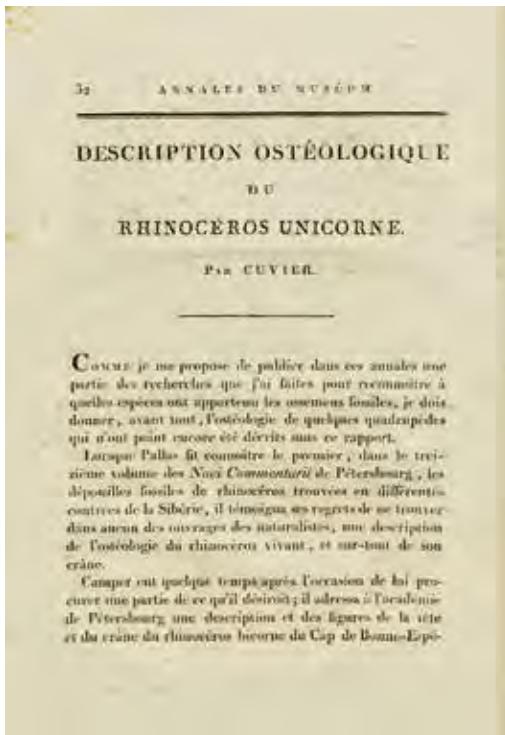


The Versailles rhinoceros' was a gift from the French governor of West Bengal to Louis XV. He was set on board ship in December 1769 and arrived in Versailles in September 1770, where he remained for 20 years. The cost of transportation was equivalent to more than four years' salary for a ship's captain. He was studied by many, including George Cuvier, Petrus Campus and Comte de Buffon. When the monarchy fell and the Tuilleries Palace was stormed in 1792, the menagerie in Versailles was destroyed as a symbol of royal tyranny. The rhino survived for another year, but its death is controversial. It is thought that he drowned in his pond, but more likely, was hacked to death by a revolutionary in 1793. The body was sent to the new natural history museum in Paris, where it was dissected by Félix Vicq d'Azyr and first director of the museum, Louis-Jean-Marie Daubenton. It was then taxidermied, with its skin stretched over an oak frame, and its skeleton preserved separately. Both the skin and skeleton remain on display at the Muséum Nationale d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris.

Exhibition detail. Wallpaper design derived from that in Marie Antoinette's bedroom chamber and reimagined with images from the French Revolution and of the Versailles rhino.

The pond at Versailles.  
Photograph: Fritha Langerman, 2018





George Cuvier's publication from the *Annales du Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle* (Paris) in which he describes the osteology of the Indian rhinoceros, 1804.

Exhibition detail. Drawing based on an engraving of the taxidermied 'Versailles rhino' by Simon-Charles Miger from a painting by Nicolas Maréchal. Published by George Cuvier in *La Ménagerie du Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle*, 1801.

Versailles rhinoceros skeleton on display at the Galerie de Paléontologie et d'Anatomie comparée, Paris.



Photograph: Fritha Langerman