



Woodcut with 6 1/2 lines of Dutch letterpress text above, plate crack extending through all four legs. Paper watermarked with a large single-headed eagle. Trimmed to neatline at foot.

## “PROBABLY NO ANIMAL PICTURE HAS EXERTED SUCH A PROFOUND INFLUENCE ON THE ARTS” (CLARKE)

### Rhinocervs

#### Author

DÜRER, Albrecht

#### Publication date

1515 [but c.1620].

#### Publisher

Hendrick Hondius].

#### Publication place

[den Haag,

#### Physical description

Woodcut with 6 1/2 lines of Dutch letterpress text above, plate crack extending through all four legs. Paper watermarked with a large single-headed eagle. Trimmed to neatline at foot.

#### Dimensions

345 by 407mm. (13.5 by 16 inches);Framed: 450x 500mm. (18 by 20 inches).

#### Notes

A fine example of Albrecht Dürer's iconic depiction of King Manuel I's rhinoceros.

The inscription above the image reads:

"After Christ's birth, the year 1513 [sic], on May 1, this animal was brought alive to the great and mighty King Emmanuel at Lisbon in Portugal from India. They call it Rhinoceros. It is here shown in full stature. Its colour is that of a freckled toad and a hard, thick shell covers it. It is of the same size as an elephant, but has shorter legs, and is well capable of defending itself. On the tip of its nose is a sharp strong horn that it hones wherever it finds a stone. This animal is the deadly enemy of the elephant. The elephant is afraid of it because upon meeting it charges with its head between the elephant's legs, tears apart his belly, and chokes him while he cannot defend himself. It is also so well armoured that the elephant cannot harm it. They say that the Rhinoceros is fast, cunning, and daring." (translated from the German text on the first edition in TIB).

On 20 May 1515, an Indian rhinoceros arrived in Lisbon from the Far East. In early 1514, Alfonso de Albuquerque, governor of Portuguese India, sent ambassadors to Sultan Muzafar II, ruler of Cambay (modern Gujarat), to seek permission to build a fort on the island of Diu. The mission returned without an agreement, but diplomatic gifts were exchanged, including the rhinoceros. Albuquerque decided to forward the gift, known by its Gujarati name of 'ganda', and its Indian keeper, named Ocem, to King Manuel I of Portugal. It sailed on the *Nossa Senhora da Ajuda*, which left Goa in January 1515. After a relatively fast voyage of 120 days, the rhinoceros was finally unloaded in Portugal, near the site where the Manueline Belém Tower was under construction. The tower was later decorated with gargoyles shaped as rhinoceros heads under its corbels.

The exotic animal was housed in King Manuel's menagerie at the Ribeira Palace in Lisbon. On Trinity Sunday, 3 June, Manuel arranged a fight between the rhinoceros and a young elephant from his collection, to test the account by Pliny the Elder that the elephant and the rhinoceros are bitter enemies. The rhinoceros advanced slowly and deliberately towards its foe; the elephant, unaccustomed to the noisy crowd that turned out to witness the spectacle, fled the field in panic before a single blow was struck.

Manuel eventually decided to give the rhinoceros as a gift to the Medici Pope, Leo X. The King was keen to curry favour with the Pope, to maintain the papal grants of exclusive possession to the new lands that his naval forces had been exploring in the Far East since Vasco da Gama discovered the sea route to India around Africa in 1498. Together with other precious gifts of silver plate and spices, the rhinoceros, with its new collar of green velvet decorated with flowers, embarked in December 1515 for the voyage from the Tagus to Rome. The vessel passed near Marseille in early 1516 and was viewed by King Francis I of France. After resuming its journey, the ship was wrecked in a sudden storm off the coast of Liguria. The unfortunate beast was chained to the deck and so unable to swim to safety. There are mixed reports as to whether its body was ever recovered.

A rhinoceros had not been seen in Europe since Roman times and its description had been occasionally conflated in bestiaries with the "monoceros" (unicorn), so the arrival of a living example created a sensation. In the context of the Renaissance, it was a rediscovered piece of classical antiquity, like a statue or an inscription. Scholars and the curious examined the animal, and letters describing the fantastic creature were sent to correspondents throughout Europe. One of these letters, of unknown authorship, was sent from Lisbon to Nuremberg at around the same time, enclosing a sketch by an unknown artist. Dürer, who was acquainted with the Portuguese community of the factory at Antwerp, saw the second letter and sketch in Nuremberg. Without ever seeing the rhinoceros himself, Dürer made two pen and ink drawings, and then a woodcut was carved from the second drawing.

Dürer's woodcut is not an accurate representation of a rhinoceros. He depicts an animal with hard plates that cover its body like sheets of armour, with a gorget at the throat, a solid-looking breastplate, and rivets along the seams; he also places a small twisted horn on its back, and gives it

scaly legs and saw-like rear quarters. Despite its anatomical inaccuracies, the image remained very popular, and was taken as the standard representation of the animal until the late eighteenth century. Dürer may have anticipated this and deliberately chosen to create a woodcut, rather than a more refined and detailed engraving, as this was cheaper to produce and more copies could be printed. Images derived from it were included in naturalist texts, including Sebastian Münster's 'Cosmographie' (1544), Conrad Gessner's 'Historiae Animalium' (1551), Edward Topsell's 'Histoire of Foure-footed Beastes' (1607) and many others. Despite the fact that the Medici never received their gift, a rhinoceros that was clearly based on Dürer's woodcut was chosen by Alessandro de' Medici as his emblem in June 1536.

The legacy of Dürer's image has endured. Indeed, versions of it appeared in print in school textbooks in Germany as a faithful image of the rhinoceros as late as 1930 and, in German, the Indian rhinoceros is still called the Panzernashorn, or "armoured rhinoceros".

### **Bibliography**

TIB 241 (state 6 of 8); Clarke, T. H., 'The Rhinoceros from Dürer to Stubbs: 1515-1799'. London: Sotheby's Publications, 1986.

### **Provenance**

### **Price:**

### **Inventory reference:** 1627