

## **Miss Clara and the Celebrity Beast in Art, 1500-1860**

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Long before the advent of Grumpy Cat, Dolly the Sheep, Lassie or even the world-famous racehorse Seabiscuit, there was Miss Clara, a female Indian rhinoceros who achieved an unprecedented level of fame during the 18<sup>TH</sup> century.

This autumn, she is once again in the spotlight as the 'leading lady' in the latest of the Barber Institute of Fine Art's acclaimed object in-focus series of exhibitions.



*Miss Clara and the Celebrity Beast in Art, 1500-1860* is the UK's first ever show devoted to Clara and other well-known pachyderms – the word used for very large thick-skinned mammals - in a period spanning three centuries. The display also considers the emergence of menageries and zoos, and the significance of the capture and captivity of these big beasts within wider discussions of colonialism and empire.

It will be the first ever major loan exhibition devoted to Clara, and the first in the UK.

The starting point for the show is the eponymous bronze, *A Rhinoceros, called Miss Clara*, one of the most-loved objects in the Barber's collection. This small sculpture (just 46.5cm long by 24cm high) is believed to be a 'portrait' of a real rhino - weighing in at around 5,000 lbs/2268 kgs when mature - which had been brought to Rotterdam in 1741 from Bengal by an enterprising retired Dutch East India Company Sea captain, Douwe Mout van der Meer.

For the first time ever the Barber bronze will be shown alongside the only other cast of this model (Victoria and Albert Museum), a unique marble version of the same size (Bowes Museum), and a unique larger marble version from the Rothschild Family Trust. This last itself weighs in at over half a tonne, has never been displayed publicly before, and is here attributed for the first time to the Electoral court sculptor at Mannheim, Peter-Anton von Verschaffelt (1710-1793). The two bronzes depend on Verschaffelt's model, while the smaller marble appears to have been carved by his pupil, and fellow native of Ghent, Augustin Portois (1753-1826).

Upon disembarking from van der Meer's ship, the *Knappenhof*, Clara was immediately exhibited to fascinated bystanders and soon commenced an extensive tour of Europe, travelling in a special wooden carriage drawn by eight horses, while her skin was kept moist with fish oil.

The huge public interest in 'Miss Clara' was greatly inspired by the fact that she was the first rhinoceros to be seen on mainland Europe since 1579. 'Tame as a lamb', she was feted in many of the continent's major cities, Brussels and Berlin, Vienna and Venice, Paris and Rome. Subsequent lucrative (for her keeper) travels took her to Prague, Warsaw and Copenhagen before a visit to London, where she died in 1758.

At each destination, Clara was viewed by kings, queens, courtiers and commoners. In fact, anyone who could afford to gladly paid a fee to see her. She even spent time in Louis XV's royal menagerie and had a vessel in the French Royal Navy named after her. Clara was simultaneously exploited and adored as a celebrity; a contradictory phenomenon we tend to think of as contemporary. Moreover, just as we are fascinated by and seek to emulate high-profile individuals in the public gaze, so Clara's fame generated an entire industry of memorabilia, from luxury souvenirs such as clocks and paintings to medals, cheap popular posters and prints and even hairstyles.

The Barber Institute takes an in-depth look at these themes, seeking to assess and place Clara in the wider context of animal celebrity. Besides the other sculptures, the show features ceramics, coins, paintings, prints and drawings by major artists such as Dürer, Rembrandt, Hollar, Longhi and Oudry, recording the large exotic pachyderms that so enthralled European audiences. These individual rhinoceroses, elephants, and hippopotamuses shared Clara's fate of being usually separated from their fellow beasts, taken from their original habitat, and displayed as exotic wonders until their deaths. The artworks they inspired provide an unusual and fascinating lens through which to consider how human attitudes to animals reveal societal assumptions in an age of European exploration, colonisation and commercialisation.

Other celebrity beasts sharing the spotlight with Clara include the elephants Hanno, Hansken, Jumbo and tragic Chuneo, an India elephant brought to Regency London in 1811. He was trained to take a coin and then return it, using his trunk. Lord Byron saw Chuneo perform in Exeter and wrote: *"The elephant took and gave me my money again — took off my hat — opened a door — trunked a whip — and behaved so well, that I wish he was my butler."* Unfortunately, Chuneo's life came to a gruesome end in a hail of bullets in 1826, after running amok whilst being exercised along The Strand and accidentally killing one of his keepers.

Renowned depictions of rhinos were also made by such famous artists as Dürer and Stubbs, while in the 1850s, Obaysch, the first hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibius*) to be seen in Europe since Roman times became a star at ZSL London Zoo. Like Chi-Chi, the giant panda and Guy the Gorilla – both later residents at London Zoo in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century – Obaysch was a sensation, attracting huge numbers of visitors to the Zoo and in turn generating the Victorian craze for 'hippomania'. In the Barber exhibition, visitors will see him represented in a charming watercolour by Joseph Wolf and a small sculpture made by Joseph Gawen, traditionally said to have been made from 'Nile mud'.

Exhibition Curator Robert Wenley says: *"Acclaimed as one of the finest of all European 'old master' animal bronzes, the Barber's sculpture of Miss Clara will be seen for the first time in the ideal context of its most closely related other versions, together with a wonderful range of paintings, drawings, prints and works of art featuring this much-loved rhinoceros, and similarly celebrated historical pachyderms. New attributions will be tested and affirmed, and Miss Clara's celebrity revisited and reassessed. While we are now rightly concerned about the plight of these magnificent beasts in their depleted native habitats, we are better placed than ever to appreciate the huge impact of Miss Clara and other behemoths on their rare appearances in early modern Europe."*

The Barber Institute's Director, Nicola Kalinsky, says: *"Miss Clara and the Celebrity Beast in Art promises to be both a visually stunning exhibition, but is also a poignant and timely exploration of humankind's complex but often damaging relationship with the animal kingdom."*

The show will be accompanied by a richly illustrated full-colour paperback catalogue published by Paul Holberton Publishing.

## **NOTES FOR EDITORS**

**The Barber Institute of Fine Arts** is the art gallery, principal art collection and original concert hall for the University of Birmingham. It was founded in 1932 *'for the study and encouragement of art and music'* by Lady Barber, who stipulated the acquisition of works *'of that standard of quality required by the National Gallery and the Wallace Collection'*. Housed in Birmingham's most significant Art Deco building, designed by Robert Atkinson, the Barber Institute is home to a National Designated Collection, acquired and owned by the Henry Barber Trust and with holdings that now include some 160 paintings, dating from the early Renaissance through to the late 20th century, more than 800 works on paper, as well as sculpture, decorative arts and one of the most important caches of Roman, Byzantine and Medieval coins in the world. The collection features key works by Botticelli, Bellini, Rubens, Gainsborough, Reynolds, Turner, Whistler, Rossetti, Monet, Manet, Degas, Renoir, Rodin, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Bellows, Magritte and Auerbach. More at [www.barber.org.uk](http://www.barber.org.uk), on Twitter @BarberInstitute, Instagram @barberinstitute and Facebook 'The Barber Institute of Fine Arts'

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*A Rhinoceros, called Miss Clara*, probably German, 1760s © The Henry Barber Trust, the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham

**FOR MORE INFORMATION, INTERVIEWS AND IMAGES**

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