



Clara: A Brief Biography

In a culture awash in instant and global access to information and images, it's difficult to imagine the impact that a female Indian rhinoceros could have had on 18th-century Europe. But during her 17 years touring the continent, everyone wanted to make her acquaintance. Miss Clara, as the hefty quadruped would affectionately come to be known, was the Age of Enlightenment's equivalent of a modern day rock star.

In 1738, Jan Albert Sichtermann, a director of the Dutch East India Company adopted a one-month-old female rhino from the Assam region of India. She spent her first two years at his family's estate near present-day Calcutta. Although quite tame—she was allowed to roam throughout the house and would often amuse dinner guests with her table skills—she would soon grow too large to be in the house without causing damage.

Dutch sea captain Douwemout Van der Meer of the Dutch East India Company acquired the young rhino when she was about three years old. After a seven-month sea voyage around Africa, Van der Meer and his rhino arrived in the Dutch port of Rotterdam in July of 1741. She was stabled and pastured in Leiden and Amsterdam and exhibited in the Netherlands for several years before she made her first trip abroad to Hamburg, Germany in 1744. Known as the "Dutch" Rhino, she acquired her nickname "Miss Clara" four years later when she visited the German town of Würzburg in August 1748.

Caring for a growing rhino on the road—at the age of eight she weighed nearly 5,000 lbs. — was not an easy undertaking, writes Glynis Ridley in her 2005 book, *Clara's Grand Tour: Travels with a Rhinoceros in Eighteenth-Century Europe*. Ridley was the first to document such details about the herbivore, whose typical daily diet would be 60 pounds of hay, 20 pounds of bread, and 14 buckets of water. During her sea voyage from India, she also became partial to orange peels, beer, and tobacco smoke. Clara's skin required special moisturizers as well and, it is thought that, Van der Meer might have used fish oil to keep her comfortable.

When over-land travel was necessary, Clara rode in a custom built carriage, which required six pairs of oxen or 20 horses to draw it.

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Between 1744 and her unexpected death in 1758, Clara traveled extensively throughout continental Europe. From 1746–1748, she toured the German states, the Holy Roman Empire, and the Swiss cantons, stopping in Hanover, Berlin, Breslau, Vienna, Munich, Regensburg, Freiberg, Dresden, Leipzig, Kassel, Frankfurt-am-Main, Mannheim, Bern, Zurich, Basel, Strasbourg, Stuttgart, Augsburg, Nuremberg, Würzburg, and Ansbach. She visited the Italian peninsula from 1749–1751 and went to London on three occasions, in 1751–1752, again in 1756, and a last time, dying there without fanfare, in 1758.

By the time Jean-Baptiste Oudry painted her portrait at the Saint-Germain fair in Paris in 1749, Clara was quite accustomed to attention and adoration from all classes of society. In addition to making public appearances, Clara was a highly sought-after guest of European society. She had private audiences with King Frederick II of Prussia in Berlin; Francis I and Empress Maria-Theresa in Vienna; King Louis XV in Versailles; Augustus III, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland; and Frederick II, Landgrave of Hesse.

As savvy as any modern-day marketer, Van der Meer commissioned souvenirs to be sold to patrons with varying budgets, including woodcuts, engravings, commemorative prints and medals. He was no doubt pleased when the passion for all things rhino- and Clara-related erupted during her stays in Paris and Versailles in the winter and spring of 1749. Interior design elements and luxury goods of the day, including Meissen porcelain, clocks and music boxes, sported her plump likeness. Courtiers carried rhino snuffboxes. Fashionable coiffures, dresses and ribbons that season were '*à la rhinoceros*.' Even horses weren't immune: harnesses outfitted with feathers and ribbons (suggesting the rhino horn and tail, respectively) were a must.

Clara, however, was destined to be more than a mere fashion accessory. Prior to her arrival, a rhinoceros had not been seen in Europe since 1579. Most Europeans considered the rhino a mythical creature, much like the fabled unicorn. For those who understood that the rhino did exist, the image they would have been familiar with would have been a woodcut print by German artist Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), which portrays the rhino with an armor-like hide, reptilian scales on its legs, and an extra horn protruding from between its shoulders.

Clara's tours throughout Europe not only fixed the rhinoceros firmly in reality, but also provided scientists, or natural philosophers, as they were known, with an accurate model of the species. Clara appears in two seminal publishing projects of the Enlightenment period, Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon's 36-volume *Histoire Naturelle*, and the 17-volume *Encyclopédie* by Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert.

Clara captivated many more than actually saw her in person, thanks to a generation of artists, scientists, philosophers and writers who sought to describe her in detail through their respective mediums.

"She was a gentle giant whose larger-than-life presence fascinated and delighted all, from the learned doctors of 'natural philosophy' to the common citizenry," said Charissa Bremer-David, associate curator of sculpture and decorative arts, the J. Paul Getty Museum, who organized the "Clara-mania" section of the *Oudry's Painted Menagerie* exhibition (on view at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Center, from May 1 – September 2, 2007). "Her imprint on contemporary culture was recorded through the numerous painted portraits, life drawings, engraved profiles, ceramic and metal sculptures, prose and scientific reports. Yet, for all her familiarity in visual and printed forms, she remained a living wonder in the Age of Enlightenment."

She continues to inspire interest today.