

## Beastly creations

Martin Kemp

**The Rhinoceros from Dürer to Stubbs, 1515-1799.** By T. H. Clarke. *Sotheby's Publications/Philip Wilson, Russell Chambers, Covent Garden, London WC2E 8AA, UK: 1986. Pp. 219. £29.50.*

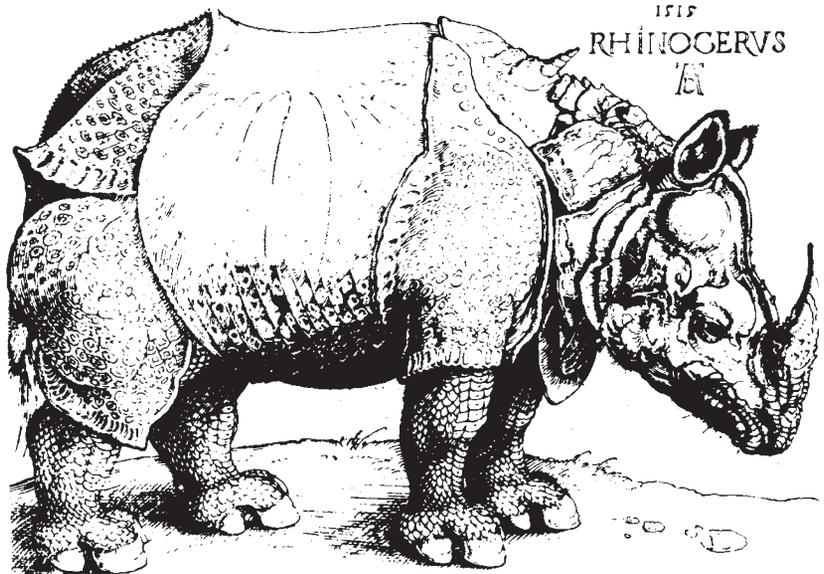
RHINOCEROTICA rules. We might expect an obsessional study of images of a single exotic animal over three centuries to be rich with informative detail. We would not necessarily expect it to be fun. T. H. Clarke's book is both.

The author does not attempt to rival the scholarly detail of L. C. Rookmaaker's *Bibliography of the Rhinoceros* (A.A. Balkema, Rotterdam; 1983). Rather, he has provided a lively compendium of artistic images, ranging from soberly naturalistic records to elaborate fantasies in all kinds of media — painting, sculpture, drawing, engraving, embroideries, tapestry, pottery, porcelain, glass, furniture, and arms and armour. The text is written with a nice wit that only occasionally becomes tiresome.

The rhinoceros is unusually well suited for such a study. It was a rare enough sight for European observers to be the subject of wonder and even fantasy, yet there are enough documented instances of rhinos on European tours to provide a series of identifiable animals from which the great majority of the images sprang. Clarke discusses eight peripatetic visitors between 1515 and the 1790s. In addition to the host of craftsmen who took advantage of the rhinomania occasioned by exhibition of the animals by showmen, a number of accomplished artists were involved. To mention only Albrecht Dürer, Hans Burgkmair, Pietro Longhi, Jean-Baptiste Oudry and George Stubbs will give some idea of the quality and the geographical range.

The involvement of considerable artistic talents in naturalistic illustration has obvious advantages. What is not so readily recognized is that their sheer skill brings dangers as well as benefits. The kind of artistry developed during the Renaissance revolution in representation — and so vividly manifested in Dürer's art — could be used to endow an image of fantasy with a sense of "naturalistic" credibility to match that of a representation taken from life. A skilful artist can make a dragon look as credible as a rhinoceros for someone who has seen neither.

This kind of potency in "fantastic naturalism" explains the immense hold of Dürer's engraving, which, as Clarke indicates, was based on secondary visual and written sources. Dürer's transformation of the leathery rhinoceros into a fearsome piece of late-mediaeval siege machinery



Dürer's rhino, 1515 — "a fearsome piece of late mediaeval siege machinery"

resulted in an image of such power that it remained truer to the emotional response evoked by the animal than the more naturalistic versions. Clarke provides an abundant body of visual evidence to show that naturalistic illustration is a double-edged weapon, though he does not grapple head-on with this fascinating question.

The greatest strength of the book is the remarkable range of media, particularly from the applied arts, that is illustrated and discussed with authority. Its two most obvious weaknesses relate to the history of natural history on one hand, and iconographic art history on the other. Historians of natural history will be

disappointed that the great succession of zoological encyclopaedias is so little exploited, while art historians might reasonably have expected a fuller discussion of the emblematic and symbolic meaning, including the sexual connotations of the "horn". These are not separate matters; for the encyclopaedist, nature was full of meaning, just as meaning for the emblematicist was regularly borne in a natural vehicle. Clarke's approach largely excludes such issues, but it does permit a wide measure of visual delight. □

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## Nervous activity

D. Regan

**Evoked Potentials.** Edited by Roger Q. Cracco and Ivan Bodis-Wollner. *Alan R. Liss/Wiley: 1986. Pp. 551. \$96, £70.*

OUR knowledge of the cellular and neuropharmacological organization of the brains of experimental animals has advanced enormously over the past decade. How this new knowledge can be used to deepen our understanding of human vision, hearing and motor control, and how it can help to prevent and alleviate visual, hearing and spinal cord disorders, is an immediately challenging problem. It is unfortunate that many of the important advances in neuroscience have been achieved through techniques that, for ethical reasons, can seldom be used in man. A major role of evoked potential recording is to bridge the gap between the human brain and the results from cellular-level experiments on animals.

The term "evoked potential" (EP) covers the electrical responses of the entire peripheral and central nervous system, including peripheral nerve action potentials, spinal cord responses to stimulation of peripheral nerves, the responses of the auditory brainstem, midbrain and cerebral cortex to sounds, the responses of somatosensory brainstem and cerebral cortex to tactile stimulation of the skin, and the responses of the retina and visual cortex to light. The term also covers the electrical activities of the brain associated with the evaluation of the meaning of a stimulus, such as a spoken word, rather than with the physical nature of the stimulus. In this book the "evoked potential" takes on an even wider meaning: Williamson and Kaufman describe how the magnetic responses,  $10^7$  weaker than the Earth's field, that are produced from neurones in the depths of the brain can be clearly picked up by a quantum interference device placed near the head, and the location of the neurones defined to within a few millimetres!

Evoked potentials can be recorded