

The first painting of a Javan rhinoceros in Europe

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Abstract

The Dutch painter Philips Angel (1616-1683) was born in Middelburg, the Netherlands, worked some time in Haarlem, but spent most of his time in his native city (Bol, 1949). He made a water-colour of the Javan one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros sondaicus* Desmarest, 1822). Since the painting is so lifelike, it appears to have been drawn from a living specimen. Therefore, it could represent the first specimen of this rare species that ever reached Europe alive. The water-colour, now in a private collection, is signed but not dated by the painter. The painting must have been made between the years 1630, around which time the career of Angel began, and 1658, when a woodcut of the water-colour was printed. The water-colour was published by Müllenmeister (1978), but until now there has been no reference to it in the zoological literature dealing with the rhinoceroses in Europe. Nothing could be found in archives in the Netherlands concerning the origin and ultimate fate of that specimen of rhino.

In a recent publication, Müllenmeister (1978) discussed a number of animal illustrations by Dutch artists, mainly preserved in private collections. Among these he illustrated a water-colour of a rhinoceros by Philips Angel from Middelburg. It clearly shows a specimen of the Javan rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros sondaicus* Desmarest, 1822) judging from the specific arrangement of the folds in the shoulder region. Next to the rhinoceros the artist depicted two large pollard willows (Fig. 1). The landscape in the background does not give reason to believe that the rhinoceros was drawn in Asia. The water-colour is signed by the artist, but not dated. On its reverse there is a short text, in a handwriting which certainly did not belong to Angel (J. Bol, in litt., 1984): "Rensceroos, is door

een konstig tekenaar naer het leven afgemaelt, heeft de hoogte en grote van eenen middelbaaren olyphant" [translated: "Rhinoceros, drawn after life by a good artist, has the height and size of an average elephant"] (Müllenmeister, 1978, verified from the original in a Dutch private collection by F. F. J. M. Pieters and L. C. Rookmaaker, in litt., 1984).

Philips Angel was born in 1616 in the town of Middelburg in the province of Zeeland (Bol, 1949). He worked for some time in Haarlem, but he returned to Middelburg at the time of his marriage in 1642 and died there in 1683. Philips Angel never left Holland, certainly never traveled to Asia, although there was a contemporary namesake who did.

The art historian J. Bol (in litt., 1984) could not give any indication about the date of this water-colour. A stylistic comparison with other works by the artist is impossible as Angel left only one water-colour and no drawings or sketches.

However, it is certain that this water-colour of the Javan rhinoceros was drawn before 1658, because an almost identical woodcut of the same animal was published in a posthumous book by Jacob Bontius "Historiae Naturalis et Medicae Indiae Orientalis", edited by Gulielmus Piso and printed in Amsterdam in 1658 (Fig. 2). It is safe to assume that the woodcut was made after this water-colour. In a footnote to the text by Bontius, Piso did not actually mention Angel as the artist responsible for this picture which he obtained in Amsterdam, but he suggested that it was "in Indiis depictam" ("drawn in India"; Piso in

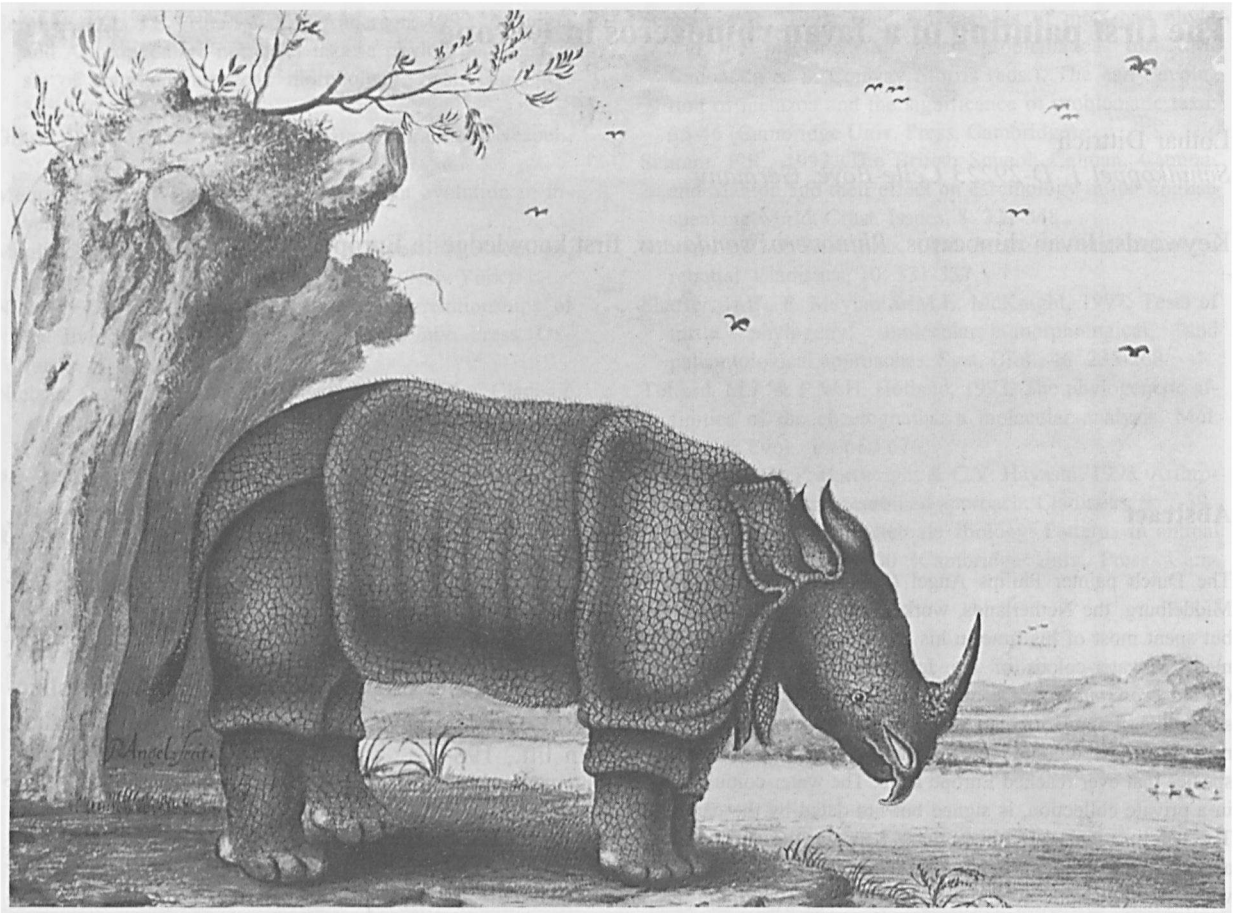


Fig. 1. Water-colour (18.3 × 23.9 cm) of a Javan rhinoceros by Philips Angel (1616–1683) of Middelburg, in a private collection in Holland.

Bontius, 1658: 52). Presumably he did not know either the original of the woodcut published in the book or its artist.

The rhinoceros depicted in Angel's water-colour is not mentioned in the zoological literature dealing with the rhinoceroses seen in Europe (Noll, 1873; Gowers, 1952; Sody, 1959; Reynolds, 1960; Kourist, 1970; Rookmaaker, 1973; and Clarke, 1986). Investigations in Dutch archives, for instance in the archives of the city of Middelburg, where various animals were exhibited in the townhall after 1660 (Engel, 1939), have not yet produced any evidence about the importation or exhibition of a Javan rhinoceros in Holland in the years between 1630, when Philips Angel started to paint, and 1658, when the woodcut of the animal appeared in the book by Jacob Bontius.

Houtzager (1979) found evidence that on 13 October 1662 the Theatrum Anatomicum in Delft received a mounted rhinoceros as a gift from the local representatives of the East India Company. Its specific identity is not recorded. The specimen was first exhibited in Delft for five years, after which it was lent out to two businessmen from Amsterdam for show on local fairs.

In 1672, Holger Jacobaeus saw a mounted rhinoceros on a ship in Amsterdam (Maar, 1910: 27). No further evidence has come to light.

We cannot decide, therefore, if the specimens in Delft and Amsterdam were in fact one and the same, if one or two specimens of the rhinoceros were imported in Holland during that period of the 17th century, if one or two rhinoceroses died on the way to Holland or maybe that one or both animals actually were alive on arrival to be

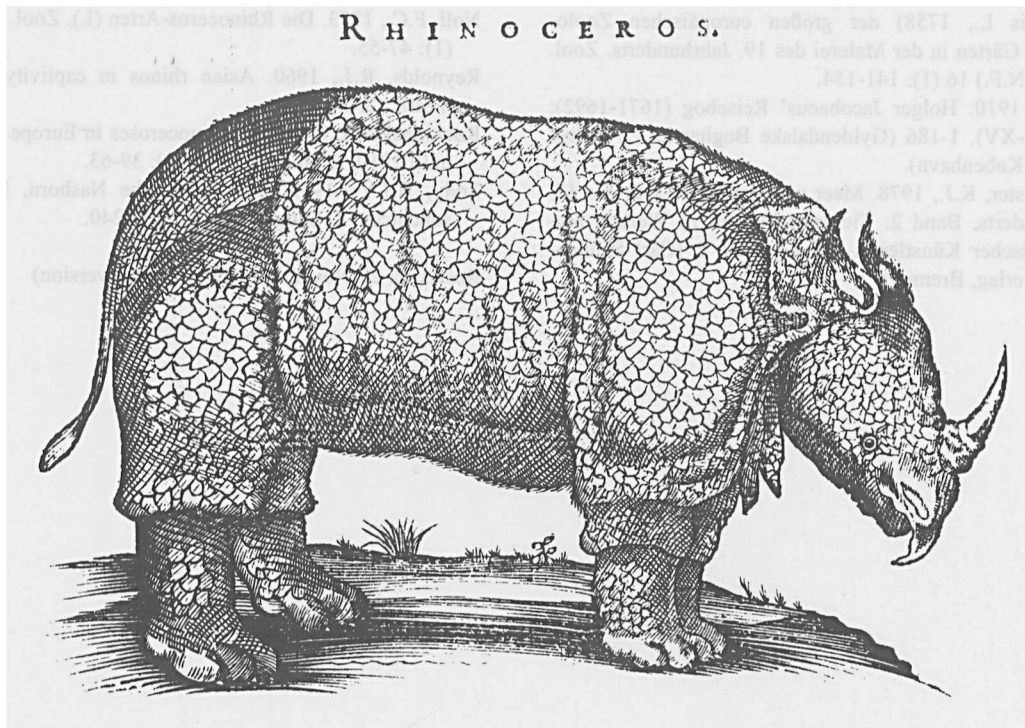


Fig. 2. Woodcut after the water-colour shown in Fig. 1, published in Bontius (1658: 51) and reproduced in its original size.

mounted after their death. As it is not known to which species of rhinoceros these mounted specimens belonged, it cannot be decided if the rhinoceros depicted in the water-colour by Angel, unknown from other sources, in fact died soon after the artist saw it, was mounted and later was exhibited in Delft and possibly in Amsterdam.

Thus, we publish here the oldest known illustration of a *Rhinoceros sondaicus*, painted by Philips Angel somewhere between 1630 and 1658, which probably represents the first specimen of a Javan rhinoceros that ever reached Europe alive (Fig. 1).

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