Pachyderm

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The Dutch rhinoceros Clara in Paris: visits of 1752 and 1753

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Submission date: 28 May 2026 | **Accepted date**: 2 July 2026

Abstract

Besides the widely publicized exhibition of Clara, the female Greater one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*), in Paris in 1749 by her owner, Douwe Mout, she was again reported in the French capital in 1752 and 1753. The visit in 1752 is embedded in a letter by the German anatomist Johann Friedrich Meckel Sr, who wrote on 20 August 1752 that he had compared Clara's teeth with a fossilized mammal tooth, excavated at the start of 1751 in the German Harz Mountains and subsequently studied by Samuel Christian Hollman in Göttingen. The adventurer Giacomo Casanova recalled that he went to see a rhinoceros at the Foire St. Germain, the famous annual fair in Paris. His recollection is undated, and it is only now that the available evidence places the event within his first stay in Paris from June 1750 to August 1752. The following year, there were notices in a local newspaper on 12 and 14 February 1753 publicizing Clara's visit to the Foire St. Germain. This is substantiated by the text of a broadsheet, undated, but giving her age as 15 years, indicating that it dates to 1753. A diary kept by the Dutch physician Wouter van Doeveren, includes an account of a visit to see the rhinoceros at the Foire on 24 February 1753.

Additional Keywords: animal exhibition, Herzberg fossils, Dutch rhinoceros

Résumé

Outre son exposition au public à Paris en 1749, largement médiatisée et organisée par son propriétaire Douwe Mout, Clara, le spécimen de rhinocéros indien femelle, a de nouveau été signalée dans la capitale française en 1752 et 1753. Sa visite de 1752 est immortalisée dans une lettre rédigée le 20 août 1752 par l'anatomiste allemand Johann Friedrich Meckel (dit l'Ancien), dans laquelle il compare les dents de Clara avec le fossile d'une dent de mammifère, mise au jour au début de l'année 1751 dans le massif allemand du Harz et étudiée par Samuel Christian Hollman à Göttingen. L'aventurier Giacomo Casanova se rappelle également s'être rendu à la Foire Saint-Germain, célèbre événement annuel à Paris, pour voir un rhinocéros. Ce souvenir n'est pas daté, et ce n'est qu'aujourd'hui que les éléments disponibles permettent de situer l'événement pendant son premier séjour à Paris, de juin 1750 à août 1752. L'année suivante, des annonces publiées dans le journal local des 12 et 14 février 1753 font état de la présence de Clara à la Foire Saint-Germain, un épisode corroboré par un texte paru dans un journal sérieux, non daté, mais qui indique que l'animal est âgé de quinze ans, ce qui permet de remonter la publication à l'année 1753. D'autre part, un

carnet de notes appartenant au médecin néerlandais Wouter van Doeveren comprend le récit d'une visite à la Foire afin de voir le rhinocéros le 24 février 1753.

Mots-clés supplémentaires: exposition d'animal, fossiles d'Herzberg, rhinocéros néerlandais

Introduction

Clara, the female Dutch rhinoceros, with her owner Douwe Mout van der Meer, toured extensively through Europe from her arrival in the Netherlands in 1741 to her presumed death in London in 1758. It is well known that she arrived in Versailles on 9 January 1749 and proceeded to Paris on 19 January 1749. She was then exhibited at the reputable Foire St. Germain and left Paris at the end of April or early May 1749. In Paris, she was examined by scientists, immortalized by artists, and absorbed into popular culture, to a greater extent than in any of the other major capitals such as Berlin, Vienna, Zurich or Rome. She featured in books by Ladvocat (1749) and the Count of Buffon (1764), the latter including a careful description with measurements by his assistant Louis Jean-Marie Daubenton (1716–1800). There were drawings and paintings by Jean-Baptiste Oudry (1686–1755), which were copied by Jacques de Sève (fl. 1742–1788), and the broadsheets sold by Étienne Charpentier (1707–1792) as a souvenir (Rookmaaker and Monson 2000). Ladies and gents donned fashionable coiffures *à la rhinocéros*. Not without reason, have historians highlighted the rhinomania that swept through Paris in the winter and spring of 1749 (Ridley 2004: 135). Despite this apparent success, presumably lucrative for Douwe Mout, the rhinoceros was only exhibited for four months. Clara and Douwe Mout then embarked on a six-month journey southwards towards Marseilles, on the way to Italy, from which few records survive, possibly because Douwe Mout had obtained a royal passport allowing free movement in France (Van der Ham 2022: 107, note 91).

Clara, it may be said, is more famous today than she ever was in her lifetime. There is an ever-growing body of literature documenting her life—largely quoted in the online 'History of Clara' on the Rhino Resource Center (Rookmaaker 2026). There are still major gaps in our knowledge of her daily itinerary. This is particularly true for much of 1749, and again for 1752, 1753, 1756, 1757 and 1758. We have only glimpses of her travels during these years, while further information will doubtless be added. When not travelling, the rhinoceros might have been stabled in a field called the Wilmckebreek owned by Douwe Mout on the northern side of Amsterdam.

On the occasion of a grand exhibition dedicated to Clara in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (30 September 2022 to 15 January 2023), the curator Gijs van der Ham carefully explored the history, science and art connected with Clara (Van der Ham 2022). He discovered an advertisement for the exhibition of Clara in Paris in 1753, which is detailed later in this paper. Another visit to the French capital in 1752 has hitherto escaped notice, even though it seems to fit well with a well-known passage written by the adventurer Giacomo Casanova. The evidence from 1752 is hidden in academic treatises published in Latin and old German script, and requires careful reading. Special attention was paid to the evidence contained in these papers to ensure correct interpretation of the chronological sequence. The conclusion must be that there was a rhinoceros in Paris in 1752, and again in 1753 (Table 1).

Table 1. Known itinerary of the Dutch Rhinoceros Clara in the years 1752 and 1753. Details and sources can be found on the Rhino Resource Center (Rookmaaker 2026).

Date	Place, Country
1752	
23 March	Gent, Belgium
March–April	Lille, France
August	Paris, France –details this paper
1753	
February	Paris, France –details this paper
September	Bonn, Germany
October	Aachen, Germany
25 October	Cologne, Germany
1 December	Zons, Germany

Rhinoceros in Paris in 1752

Meckel and his examination of the teeth in August 1752

At the start of 1751, large fossilized animal bones were discovered for the first time by farmers near Düna in the Harz Mountains, between Herzberg and Osterode, roughly 40 km north-east of Göttingen, Germany (Vladi 1979). The find was reported to the Oberamtmann, Justus Henrich Nanne (1690–1774), who agreed with the general opinion that these bones were large enough to belong to elephants. He wrote on 18 February 1751 to Samuel Christian Hollman (1696–1787), professor at the University of Göttingen, best known for his philosophical works. This was followed on 5 June 1751 by a shipment of 29 bones and teeth (Hollman 1753b: 215–216). At the same time, a set of 14 bones was presented to the German mineralogist Franz Ernst Brückmann (1697–1753) in Braunschweig (Brückmann 1751). It has since been established that these remains belonged to the woolly rhinoceros, *Coelodonta antiquitatis* (Blumenbach, 1799).

The *Königliche Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften* (Royal Society of Sciences) in Göttingen held its first meeting on 23 April 1751, under the chairmanship of the physiologist Albrecht von Haller (1708–1777). Hollman was among the founder members. He delivered two lectures at the Society about his studies of the Herzberg animals, on 8 January 1752 and 1 July 1752, both published a year later in Latin, with three engraved plates (Hollman 1753a; 1753b; 1753c; summaries in Hollman 1752a; 1752b; 1776). Considering the large size of some of these bones, Hollman was initially convinced that they belonged to a kind of elephant, but he remained open to alternative explanations. As he mentioned in his lecture in January 1752, he missed the opportunity to compare the dental material with the teeth of a living rhinoceros, which had been shown in the town. This, of course, was Clara, whose presence in Göttingen was confirmed for October 1751 (Kleineke 2016: 56; Van der Ham 2022: 184). He had bought one of the copper engravings depicting Clara, dated May 1747, stating her age as 8½ years (Fig. 1). The text on this broadsheet included measurements of Clara taken in May 1747 in Leipzig, reporting a total length of 12 *Schuh* and a height of 5 *Schuh* 7 *Zoll*. The 'Schuh' and 'Zoll' were the usual measures of length, translated as 'Feet' and 'Inch', but the exact lengths were not uniform across Europe. It is best to agree with Hollman that these were meant as Rhynland feet measuring 31.4 cm, divided into 12 inches of 2.616 cm. For some reason, Hollman was at pains to convert these into English feet, all of which leads to the conclusion that the size of the rhinoceros given on the engraving equated to a length of 376 cm, and a shoulder height of 175 cm. This is very similar to the 370.8 cm and 175.6 cm measurements recorded for a large female killed in Cooch Behar in 1890 (Rookmaaker 2020). It may be noted here that the measurements (in Parisian *pieds* equalling 32.4 cm) taken two years later in Paris in 1749 by Daubenton (1764: 202) were considerably smaller: length 10 feet or 324 cm, height 5 feet or 162 cm. Perhaps the differences are due to methodological differences (e.g. measuring around the curve or in straight vertical line), as it is certain that only one animal was involved.

Continuing his examination of the large bones, Hollman became aware that they belonged to an animal of lesser height than an elephant, but similar in size to a rhinoceros. He showed the specimens to Johann Friedrich Meckel, the Elder (1724–1774), professor of anatomy in Berlin, who had stopped at Göttingen at the start of a journey around Europe. He gave him one of the teeth (Fig. 2, number 11) with the request that he compare it with those of the living rhinoceros in case he crossed her path (Hollman 1753c: 266 note). In the same footnote, which Hollman must have added during the printing process, he was happy to report that Meckel had indeed made the comparison, concluding that the fossil tooth and Clara's tooth were highly similar. This is best confirmed by the actual letter sent by Meckel.

Meckel directed his letter to Albrecht von Haller, dated Paris, 20 August 1752. The last page was meant for Hollman. The Latin text found its way in an edition of Haller's correspondence printed in 1774 (Meckel 1752a). More recently, the original letter was transcribed and edited in digital format (Meckel 1752b). The Latin text on the last (4th) page of the letter is as follows, with my English translation:

> Parisiis die 20. Augusti 1752.
> Tui Veneranda Praeceptoris / Studiosissimum ac
> Nominis / Tui perpetuam Cultorem / J.F. Meckel

Plurimum de me Dnum. Professorem Hollmannum salutes rogo, cui laetus annunties, me vidisse hic Rhinocerotem, comparasse dentem molarem quem mihi dedit simillimus est, et non nisi magnitudine differt, anteriores aeque magni, sed posteriores molares maiores sunt. Simillimi certe Maiores Dnus. Hollmannus apud se habet. XXVIII sunt huiusmodi dentium molarium brevium et lata corona donatorum in superiori et inferiori maxilla, et 4. incisivi latissimi, simillimi illi quem secum habet. 2 superiori, 2 inferiori maxillae insident, a se invicem duorum vel 3. pollicum distantia seiuncti. Distantia eorum a molaribus 3. pollicum est. Exprimere figuram cera impossibile est, nam periculosum est immittere ori manus, conterit enim omnia inter dentes posita, neque depingi possunt, quia nimis retrorsum reconditi dentes nonnisi aliqua momenta temporis videri possunt, dum os aperit, ad panem capiendum. Sed certissimus de similitudine dentium esse potest, centies enim inspexi.

Paris, 20 August 1752. To your revered teacher / a most devoted admirer / and a lifelong worshipper of your name. J.F. Meckel [To Haller]
I send my best regards to Mr Professor Hollmann, to whom I am pleased to report that I have seen here a Rhinoceros, and have compared the molar tooth, which he gave me, which is very similar, and differs only in size, the anterior molars being equally large, but the posterior molars being larger. Indeed, they are very similar to the larger ones kept by Professor Hollmann. There are 28 of these molar teeth, short and with a wide crown in the upper and lower jaws, and four very broad incisors, very similar to those which he has with him. Two are located in the upper jaw, two in the lower jaw, separated from each other by two or three inches. The distance from the molars is three inches. It is impossible to take an imprint in wax, for it is dangerous to put one's hands in the mouth, for the animal crushes everything placed between its teeth, nor can they be depicted, because the teeth, hidden too far back, can only be seen for a few moments, while the animal opens his mouth to take bread. But I can be very certain of the similarity of the teeth, for I have looked at them a hundred times. [end of page]

Considering the place and date of this letter, Meckel must have seen Clara in Paris in the first weeks of August 1752. It is unlikely that much time had passed between his examination and the composition of the letter. There can be no doubt about the date (20 August 1752). The bones in Herzberg were only discovered in early 1751, Clara was in Göttingen in October 1751, and Hollman's lectures were delivered in January and July 1752. However, Clara's presence in Paris in mid-summer (August) is unexpected, as the Foire St. Germain only operated from 3 February to Easter (in any given year).

Meckel's examination of the teeth continued to fascinate early palaeontologists. Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840), using the 1774 printed edition of Meckel's letter, discussed the morphology of rhinoceros teeth in a letter dated 2 January 1784 to Johann Heinrich Merck (1741–1791) (Blumenbach 1784). Merck (1784: 4), in turn, recalled that Meckel had compared the teeth of the 'Rhinocéros de Versailles', which was actually the name commonly used for the animal which lived in the Ménagerie of Versailles from 1770 to 1793 (Rookmaaker 1983; Pequignot 2013). This episode of the rhinoceros in Paris in 1752 was subsequently cited by Georges Cuvier (1806: 20; 1834: 86).

The visit by Casanova

Giacomo Casanova (1725–1798), the Italian adventurer and traveller, wrote his *Mémoires* (in French) towards the end of his life. There is an episode where he visits the exhibition of the living rhinoceros at the Foire St. Germain in Paris—inevitably accompanied by three ladies. This section is available in his original manuscript in two near-identical versions (Casanova 1797; 2013: 35r). It will suffice here to quote a careful English translation (Casanova 1968, vol. 3: 164).

Casanova had dinner in the house of Marie Lenieps, Lady Mary Lambert (1717–1762), the wife of the English banker John Lambert, 3rd Baronet (1728–1799), who lived in the Rue de Bourbon of Saint-Germain.

Figure 1. Large copper engraving with text in four languages, advertising Clara, the Dutch Rhinoceros. It provides the measurements taken in May 1747, in the Dutch text. (Private collection.)

Figure 2. Engraved plate illustrating the paper on Herzberg fossils by Hollman in the *Commentarii Societatis Regiae Scientiarum Gottingensis* for 1752, pl. III (Hollman 1753c). Figure 11 on this plate was the tooth compared with that of Clara.

After dinner, the conversation turns to the rhinoceros, which was being shown at the fair at Saint-Germain for 24 sous a head. 'Let us go see it, let us go see it!' We get into a carriage, stop at the fair, and take several turns through the walks, looking for the one in which the rhinoceros was. I was the only man, I had a lady on either arm, the intelligent Marquise was preceding us. At the end of the walk where we had been told the animal was, its master was sitting at the gate to take their money from people who wished to go in. It is true that he was dressed in African costume, enormously fat, and looked like a monster; but the Marquise ought at least to have recognised that he was a man. Not a bit of it. 'Are you the rhinoceros, Monsieur?' 'Step in, Madame, step in.' She sees us choking with laughter, and, seeing the real rhinoceros, she feels obliged to apologize to the African, assuring him that she had never in her life seen a rhinoceros and so he must not be offended if she had made a mistake.

This episode was subsequently depicted in a print by Ferdinand Schroeder (1818–1857) for the *Fliegende Blätter* of 1855 (Fig. 3). Casanova's joke about the 'master' is no longer acceptable and might well have been invented, because no such guard is mentioned in other accounts of Clara's journeys. Once Clara's journeys became better known, commentators were quick to point out that Casanova could not have seen the rhinoceros in 1749, or in 1753, because he was in Paris from June 1750 to August 1752 and again in 1757 (Masters 1969: 81, 86). There have been two theories. One is that Casanova realised that he had

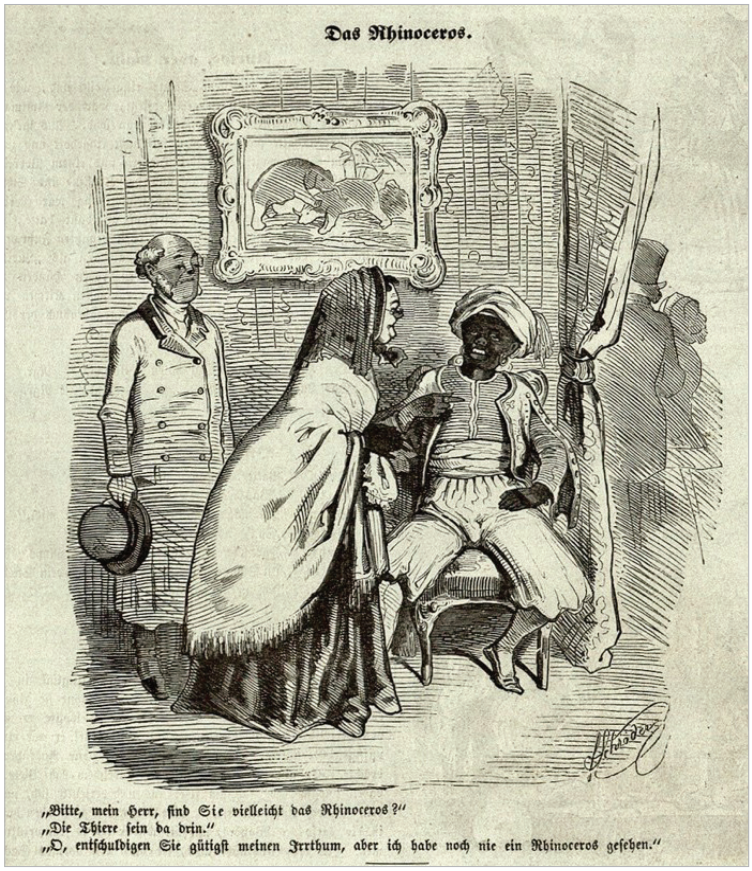

Fig. 3. Satirical print by Ferdinand Schroeder (1818–1857) for the *Fliegende Blätter* of 1855, showing Casanova visiting Clara in Paris, with the text from his diary (English translation): "Please, Sir, are you perhaps the rhinoceros?" "The animals are in there." "Oh, please excuse my mistake, but I have never seen a rhinoceros."

missed a thrilling event in Paris and therefore recalled the scene in Venice depicted on the well-known painting by Pietro Longhi (with the same number of people) and transfigured it to Paris, where rhinomania still lingered (Selvatico 1997; Watzlawick 2001). Another possibility is that the rhinoceros had died and was then exhibited as a mounted specimen (Capon 1913: 69 note). This was apparently corroborated in a literary epistle by the novelist Charles de Fieux de Mouhy (1701–1784), referring to the dead animal (Mouhy 1750).

During Casanova's stay in Paris, the Foire St. Germain operated twice, in the early months of 1751 and 1752. In view of the evidence from Meckel's examination in August 1752 (this paper, above), it now appears likely that the passage in the life of Casanova should be dated between February and April 1752.

Rhinoceros in Paris in 1753

The exhibition of Clara in the French capital at the start of 1753 was first highlighted by Van der Ham (2022: 115, 119). It should be noted that the whereabouts of Clara are largely unknown between her stay in Paris in August 1752 (above) and a series of recollections from cities in western Germany starting in September 1753 (Table 1).

Advertisement for the rhinoceros in February 1753

The exhibition of a rhinoceros was advertised on 12 and 14 February 1753 in the *Annonces*, *Affiches et Avis Divers*, among the shows at the Foire St. Germain (Douwe Mout 1753a; 1753b):

> Un Rhinocéros âgé de 15. ans. A la quatrième traverse
>
> *A rhinoceros aged 15 years, in the fourth passage.*

The announcement is absent from all other issues of this local magazine.

The age given is important. In 1749, it was widely reported that Clara was 11 years old. The age of 15 years, as she would have been in 1753, also appears in the text of a French broadsheet. This was seen by Cartailhac (1900) in the Bibliothèque Mazarine, Paris, but recent enquiries have not been able to locate it. Fortunately, however, he copied the text:

> Avis au public. Il est arrivé un rhinocéros vivant, qui fut pris en Asie, éloignée d'ici de quatre milles lieues, Pays du Grand Mogol, dans la province d'Assem; il a présentement 15 ans, et croît jusqu'à l'âge de 25 ans; par conséquent il n'est qu'un Veau, et des animaux de cette sorte vivent 150 à 200 ans. Il est le maître de l'Éléphant. Sa nourriture journalière est de 60 à 70 livres de foin et 20 à 25 livres de pain, sa boisson est de 14 seaux d'eau. Il est fort brun et n'a pas de poil. Sa peau a deux pouces d'épaisseur, et représente un Habit, Manteau et Culotte de matelot, laquelle peau se reploye l'une sur l'autre, de façon qu'on y pourroit cacher la main, de sorte qu'un tailleur ne le pourroit mieux ajuster à son corps; son poids est entre cinq et six mille £.
> On peut voir ce rhinocéros depuis huit heures du matin jusqu'à dix heures du soir.
> Il loge dans la quatrième Traverse, Foire Saint-Germain, dans la loge de M. Alexandre Fayancier.
> On prendra aux premières Places 12 sols par personne; aux secondes 6 sols.
> Celui qui le fait voir vend une médaille pour 20 sols où se trouve le portrait du rhinocéros.
>
> *Notice to the public. A living rhinoceros has arrived, captured in Asia, 4,000 leagues from here, in the land of the Great Mogul, in the province of Assem; it is currently 15 years old and will grow to the age of 25; therefore, it is only a calf, and animals of this kind live 150 to 200 years. It is the master of the elephant. Its daily food intake is 60 to 70 pounds of hay and 20 to 25 pounds of bread, and its drink is 14 buckets of water. It is very brown and has no hair. Its hide is two inches thick and resembles a sailor's overcoat and breeches, which hide folds over itself so that one could hide one's hand in it, so that a tailor could not fit it better to his body; Its weight is between five and six thousand pounds.*
> *This rhinoceros can be seen from 8:00 am until 10:00 pm.*
> *It is located in the fourth aisle, at the Saint-Germain Fair, in the booth of Mr. Alexandre Fayancier. Tickets for the front seats are 12 sols*

per person; for the second, 6 sols.
The person showing the rhinoceros sells a medal bearing its portrait for 20 sols.

Most of this text appears in many broadsheets and advertisements related to Clara's journey. The age of 15 years is noteworthy. Here, the rhinoceros was (apparently) not shown by one of her Dutch owners, but by a trader identified as 'Mr Alexandre Fayancier', where 'fayancier' is a term usually referring to artisans who produced or sold pottery or ceramics.

The visit by Wouter van Doeveren

A young Wouter van Doeveren (1730–1783), later a professor at the Universities of Groningen and Leiden, went to Paris to learn from leading medical practitioners from 7 September 1752 to 12 June 1753, keeping a travel diary, which was recently transcribed (Van Heiningen 2014). Together with some of his fellow students, probably including Jan Tak (1730–1797), he went to the Foire St. Germain (Fig. 4) on 24 February 1753:

Wij saagen daar de Rhinoceros die in Holland, en bijna door geheel Europa vertoond is, en door Hollanders geleid wierd, deselve weegd omtrend 6000 pond, wij sagen desselvs tanden, die seer ver agter in de mond staan, en saagen met verwondering dessels kleine oogen: men toonde ons een hoorn, die hem voorleede jaar te Romen was afgevallen hoewel hij nu wederom van een andere voorzien was bijna soo groot als de voorige.

We saw there the Rhinoceros which has been shown in Holland, and almost throughout all Europe, and is guided by Dutchmen, it weighs about 6000 pounds, we saw its teeth, which are set very far back in the mouth, and we saw with amazement its small eyes: they showed us a horn which had fallen off it last year in Rome, although it was now provided with another one almost as large as the former one.

Here, Clara's owners were again the usual (unnamed) Dutchmen. Clara had lost her horn in or near Rome in June 1750—i.e. not 'last year'—but the specimen was still shown during her tour.

Fig. 4. Plan of the Foire St. Germain in Paris. The site was destroyed by fire in 1767.
https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b530727947/f13.item.zoom

Clara in France: some thoughts

The excitement surrounding Clara's first visit to Paris in the early months of 1749 stands in strange contrast to the almost complete silence about her whereabouts for the rest of that year, when she travelled southwards towards Marseilles. There are again large gaps in our reconstruction of her itinerary in 1752 and 1753, although this might just be a coincidence. Of course, it is not impossible that her owner, Douwe Mout, kept her in Holland on his property near Amsterdam for much of those years. The notice of Clara in Paris for August 1752 is unusual, as the Foire St. Germain did not operate during the summer, but Meckel did not reveal the actual locality in town where he examined the animal's teeth.

There is no evidence at all, but maybe Clara was kept on a private estate in France during the missing months in 1752–1753? It is known that at the height of the rhinomania, King Louis XV (1710–1774) wanted to buy her for his menagerie, and he wasn't the only sovereign who made such an attempt. Apparently, Douwe Mout wanted either 50,000 écus, as reported by Charles Philippe d'Albert, Duc de Luynes (1862: 287) or even 100,000 écus according to Edmond-Jean-François Barbier (1857: 356; refer to Loisel 1912, vol. 2: 279). However much that translates into in today's money, there is no doubt that this was a king's ransom, beyond a price that could be agreed upon by the royal household. Douwe Mout tried again in September 1753 to sell Clara to Kurfürst Clemens-August von Bayern (1700–1761) in Bonn, but nothing more is recorded (Douwe Mout 1753c). If the rhinoceros that died in London in 1758 was in fact Clara, Douwe Mout must have agreed to a sale to a new owner who took her over for exhibition in England (Van der Ham 2022: 121). It was always reported that the life expectancy of a rhinoceros exceeded one century, and how long could Douwe Mout continue to make the tough journeys around Europe with a justifiable profit?

Maybe, one wonders, maybe there were further negotiations with the French monarch or another aristocrat leading to an agreement that Douwe Mout could 'park' his rhinoceros in an unknown private enclosure, when no other travels were planned. Maybe the idea of a sale, or even a temporary lease, appealed to him, as well as to one of the French noblemen whose large houses with large parks needed curious inhabitants to be discussed at the dinner table.

These deliberations aside, it is now known that the rhinoceros Clara was seen in Paris in February 1752 at the Foire St. Germain, in August 1752 at an unspecified Parisian locality, and in February 1753, once again at the Foire St. Germain.

Acknowledgments

Gijs van der Ham, who curated the definitive exhibition on Clara at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam in 2022, commented on an early draft of this paper. I am thankful to him and to others who have contributed to the life and times surrounding the Dutch rhinoceros, including Tim Clarke, Jim Monson and Annemarie Jordan Gschwend. Cécile Bouet helped with my enquiry at the Bibliothèque Mazarine in Paris. The work of the Rhino Resource Center is sponsored by the International Rhino Foundation, SOS Rhino, Save the Rhino International and the Rhino Recovery Fund.

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