



About those rhinos

Citation

Ambler, Louise Todd. 1973. About those rhinos. Harvard Library Bulletin XXI (3), July 1973: 271-276.

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About Those Rhinos

Louise Todd Ambler

FOLLOW the parade of pelicans near the northeast end of Divinity Avenue and you will find yourself in the courtyard of the Biological Laboratories, facing two enormous bronze Indian rhinoceroses. Above, the frieze of pelicans has turned the corner, and continues as relief portrayals of animals representing the fauna of four of the earth's zoogeographic regions. These sculptures, together with the three bronze doors of the main entrance, embellish the workaday brick and glass structure completed in 1931 as a research center for all fields of biological investigation.

The Laboratories were designed by Coolidge, Shepley, Bulfinch and Abbott, the architectural firm to which Harvard has turned so often for more than a century. Apparently a scheme for sculptural decoration developed during the planning, and Dr. Thomas Barbour, Director of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, recommended to Harold Coolidge and Henry R. Shepley that they consider for the commission a young sculptor whose representations of animals had already won acclaim and awards, Katharine Ward Lane.

Miss Lane recalls that Mr. Shepley disliked the idea of a woman practicing sculpture on his building. When he first drove her out to see the Laboratories he said, "I suppose you think yourself too distinguished to carve in brick," but Miss Lane assured him she was delighted by the unique opportunity.¹

The sculptor, daughter of Emma Gildersleeve and Gardiner Martin Lane, was born in Boston on 22 February 1899. Her grandfather, Basil L. Gildersleeve, an eminent philologist, considered higher education for women unnecessary: neither his very capable daughter nor granddaughter attended college. But Katharine did study sculpture at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and with Charles Grafly and Brenda Putnam. She particularly admired the work of

¹ Katharine Lane Weems to Louise Todd Ambler, 30 October 1970 (Fogg Art Museum).

Anna Hyatt Huntington, her somewhat older colleague and teacher, who had grown up in a distinguished academic family in Cambridge.

While learning the technique of her craft from other sculptors, Katherine Lane was sketching her chosen subject matter at the zoo. One of her earliest works, *Black African Rhinoceros*, was cast in 1921. *Pigmy African Elephant* earned her a bronze medal at the Philadelphia Sesqui-Centennial Exposition in 1926: the first of many awards won both in the United States and France.

After a very long courtship, she married F. Carrington Weems in 1947. They had no children of their own, but enjoyed an extended family of godchildren and cousins. Among these is an author who reports that the demands of her work have never made Cousin Katharine selfish of her time: she is always ready to give pleasure to others, and her sense of humor carries her through everything.

No doubt it carried her through the designs for the animals carved into the attic story of a seemingly endless facade. For at the Harvard Biological Laboratories she had to devise a decorative scheme and relief technique which would be appropriate not only to the large scale and the five-story distance from the spectator, but to the whole range of daylight conditions. While working on this problem she visited the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, where she was attracted by three grey limestone slabs from the ante-vault of a Later Han period tomb, each incised with registers depicting scenes of filial piety, and splendid processions of horses.² The proud gaits of these horses must indeed have caught the eye of this experienced observer of animals' attitudes, but she also realized that the method by which they were delineated could be adapted to the frieze proposed for the Biological Laboratories.

The Han reliefs, although actually flat, appear at first to be counter-sunk, for the outlines are not made with the usual V cut but with a broad incision that is $\sqrt{\quad}$ -shaped in section. This carving, although delicate compared with the brick engravings it inspired, is not miniaturistic, and reads well from a distance of several feet. When enlarged to the wide cuts appropriate to the brick wall, it resulted in an incision that is actually two lines, one much broader than the other, and which, being at different oblique angles to the plane of the wall, both reflect

² Museum of Fine Arts accession numbers 14.413-415; gift of Dr. D. W. Ross and Messrs. G. M. Lane, Alexander Cochrane and G. R. White. G. M. Lane was, of course, Katharine Lane's father, but she had not known of these sculptures before her fruitful trip to the Museum.

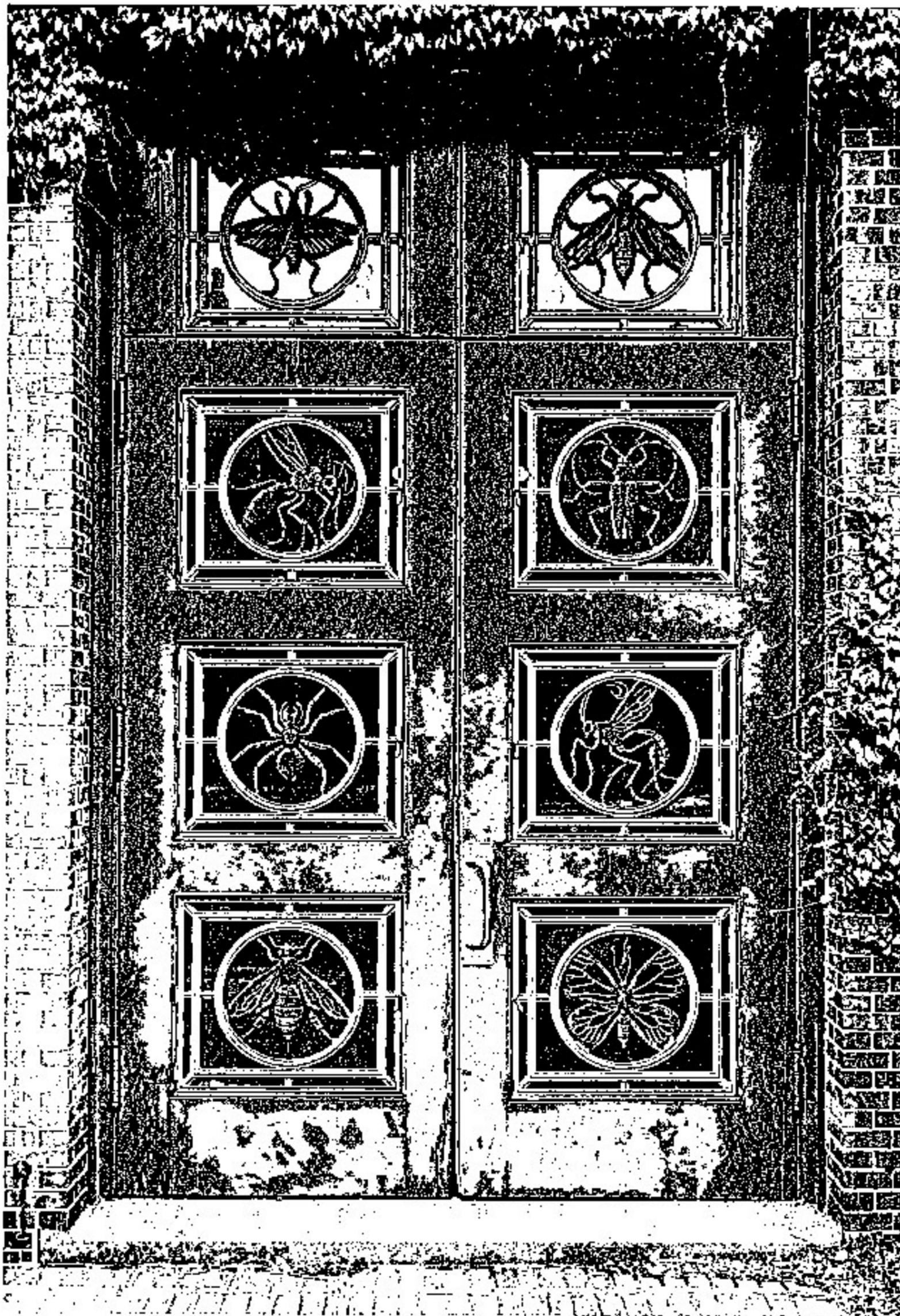


PLATE I

Rick Stafford

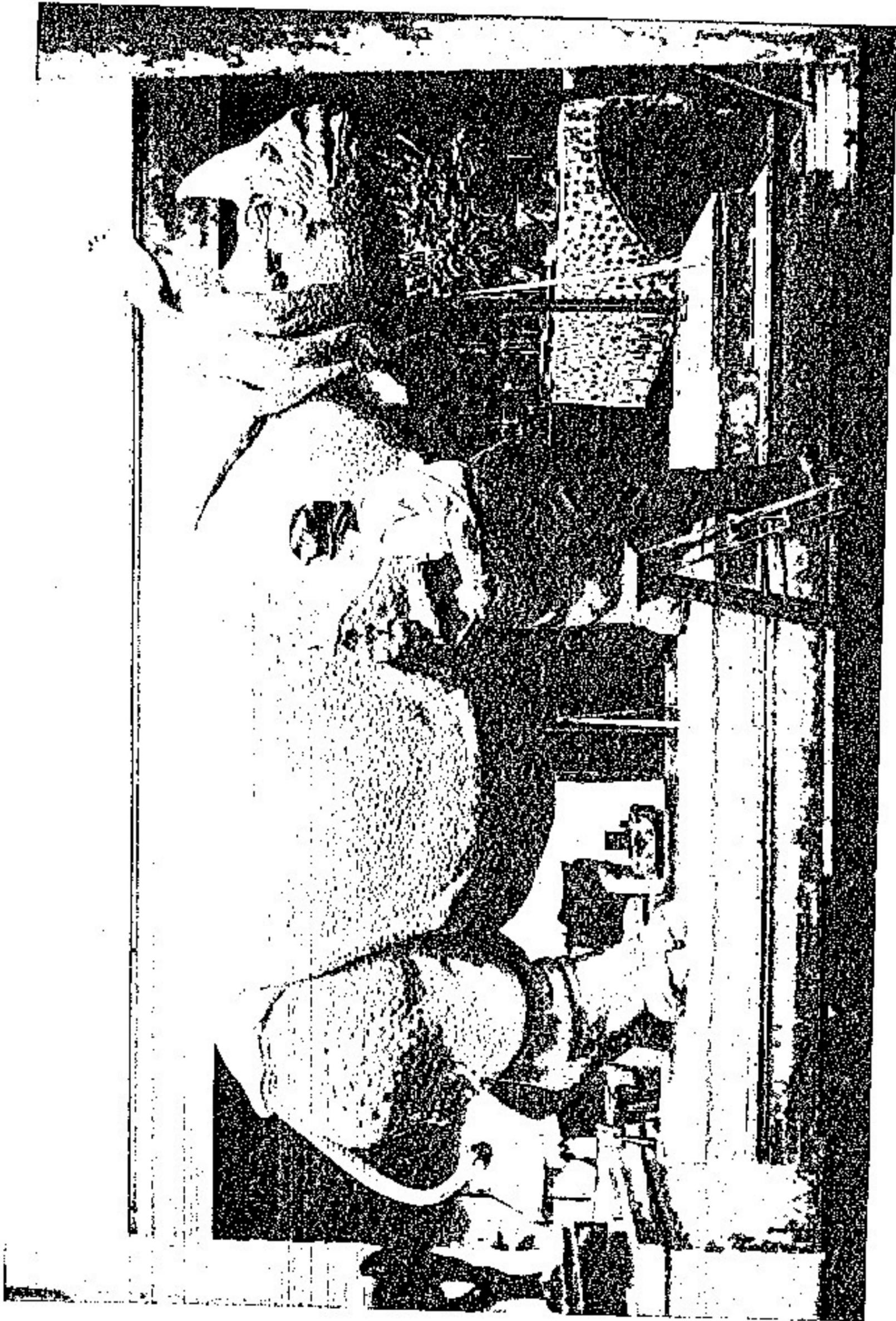


PLATE II
(*Harvard University Archives*)

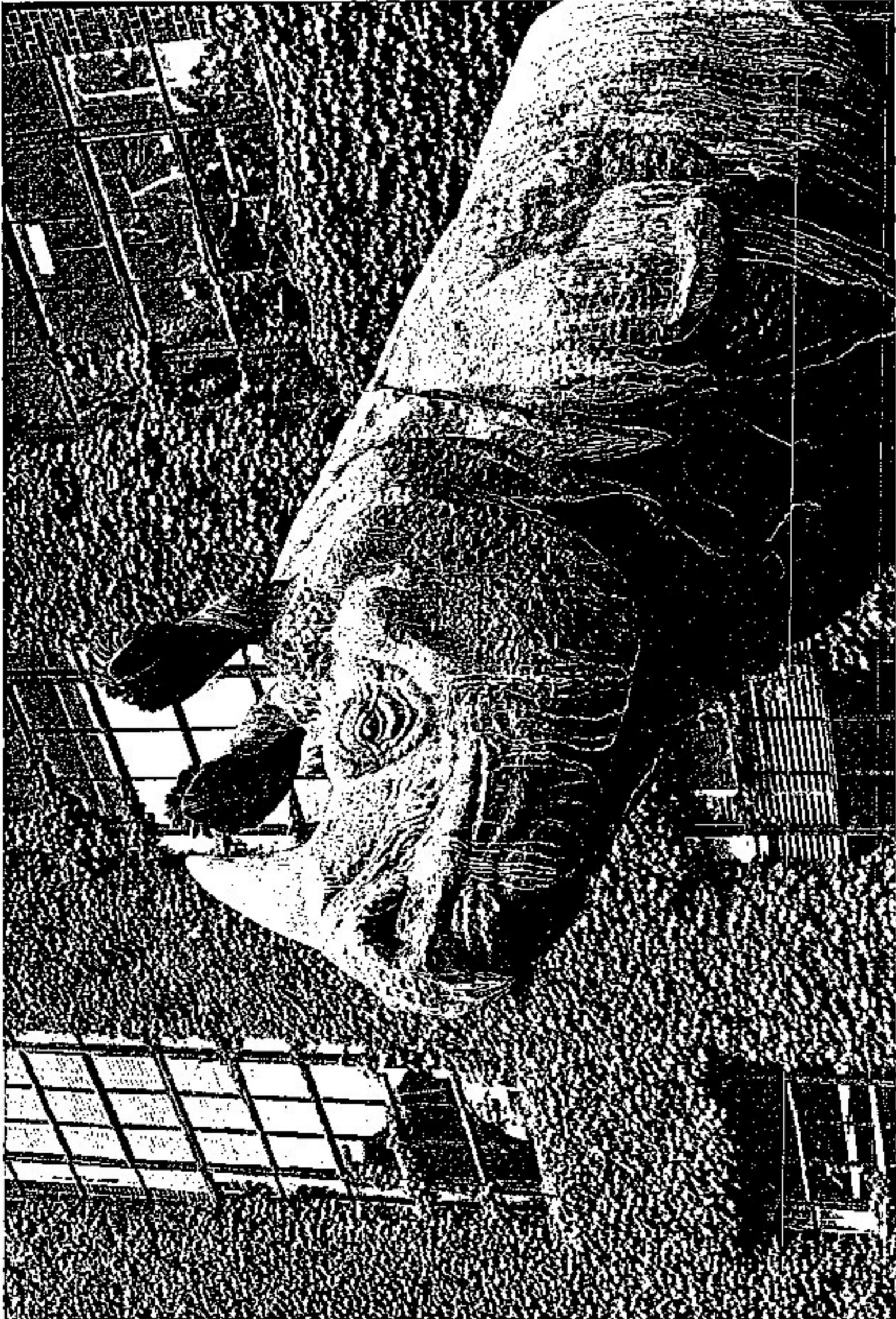


PLATE III

Rick Stafford

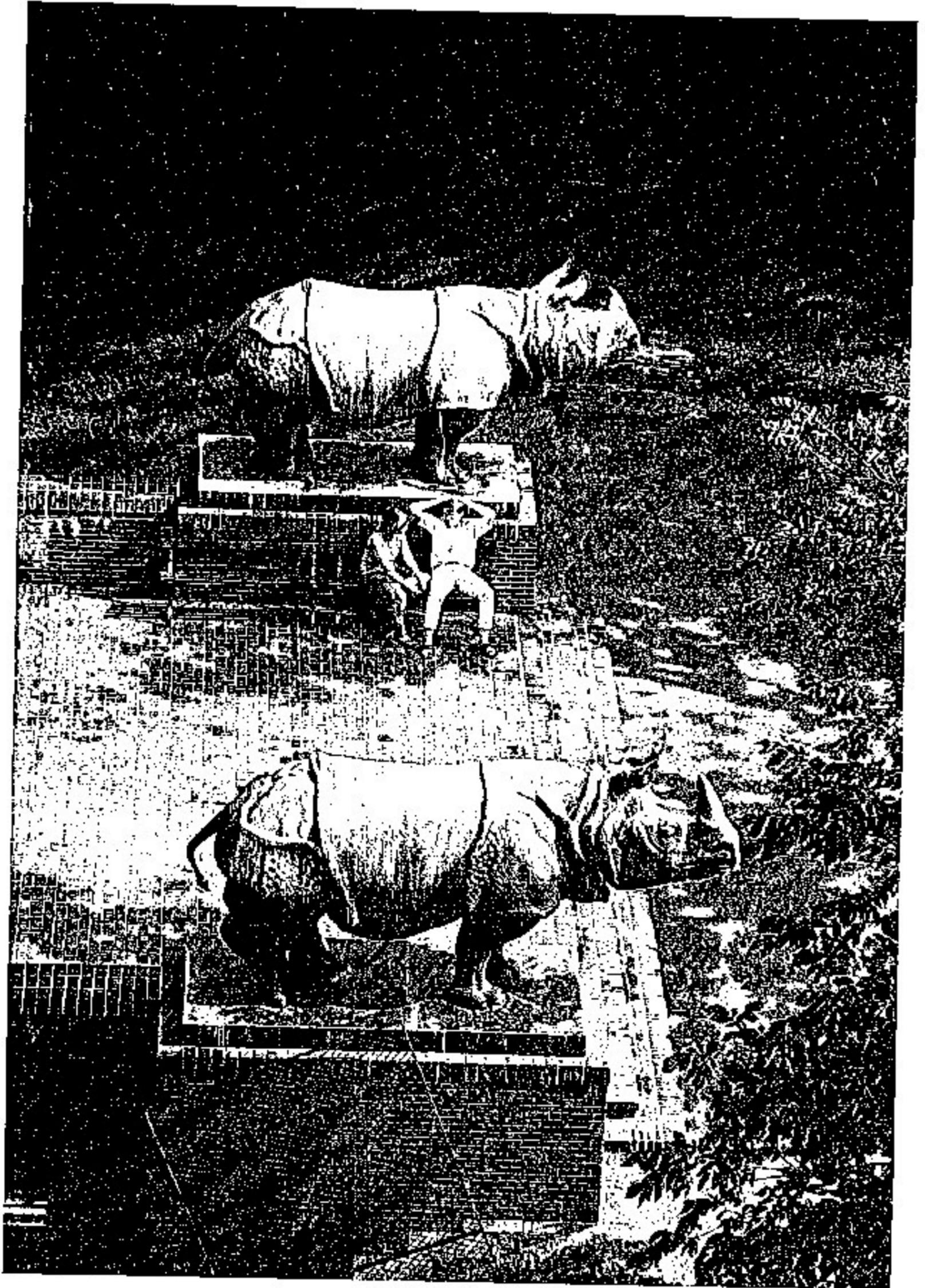


PLATE IV

Rick Stafford

light and cast shadows with sufficient variety to enliven what might otherwise be static representations.

The initial sketches for the animals underwent many transformations before their realization in brick. Enlarged, corrected, and enlarged again, Miss Lane then carved the animals at one third their final size on enormous slabs of plasticine. These carvings were cast in plaster, and the casts sent to the shop of John Loeser, who enlarged them to the desired size and prepared stencils of them. These stencils were positioned on the Laboratory walls, and the outlines of the animals drawn in chalk.³ During the winter of 1931-32 Miss Lane spent many chilly mornings supervising the skilled workmen whose expert carving gave final form to her ambitious scheme.⁴

At the same time, she was planning the design of the three bronze entrance doors, which, she writes,

represent the Sea, the Land and the Air as seen under the microscope or the magnifying glass. I was anxious to have all the designs for the three doors of equal strength, so the eye would not center on any single point of interest but see the doors as one. Professor Oakes Ames was the man I was to see for the Land door and I had a very amazing thing happen when I brought my drawings to show him and spread them on the floor. He studied them carefully for quite a while and said "I am very glad to see you have represented the evolution of plant life and I would not change the position of any of the panels as the progression is about right." I knew *nothing* of the evolution of plant life and had *never even thought* of it. It left me speechless and I never told him of my surprise.⁵

A pamphlet issued by the Biology Department indeed assures the reader that

the right door represents THE EARTH, the subjects here being botanical, showing the rise of higher or flowering plants from the lower or non-flowering ones. All of them are represented as highly magnified.⁶

From the mushrooms and common seaweed at the bottom of the door the ascent is through grass and sedge to the leaves and female flowers of the ginkgo or maidenhair tree at the top.

³ *The Art Digest*, VI: 1 (1 Oct. 1931), 16.

⁴ Ingham, Travis. *Makes Her Way to Top as Sculptress*, reprinted from the *Boston Sunday Herald* in *The Breeze* (Manchester, Mass.), Feb. 1932, p. 10 (Harvard University Archives).

⁵ Katharine Lane Weems to Louise Todd Ambler, 30 October 1970.

⁶ *Description of the Work of Miss Katharine W. Lane at the Biological Laboratories* (pamphlet, Harvard University Archives).

The insects and spider adorning the center door symbolize the air [Plate I]. Invertebrate marine life, which exhibits an especially happy adaptability to the circular frames, represents the sea.

The third stage of the sculptural project was the subject of an interesting exchange of letters between Miss Lane and Dr. Barbour. This correspondence, preserved in the University Archives, begins with a letter from Miss Lane to Dr. Barbour, dated 25 January 1933.

"You told me," she wrote, "that you wanted nothing prehistoric but certainly some *unusual* animal *not often seen*." She had tried sable antelopes, but they were not sufficiently massive for the eleven-foot-long pedestals; bulls were massive enough, but domestic animals were not wanted. Then she discussed with a friend the possibility of rhinoceroses, and watched his motion pictures of these beasts.

It occurred to me that here was an animal so prehistoric looking and strange that it certainly would be different. I studied the different types of rhinos and found that while the Black African variety had a more handsome head and horn, the Indian "Unicornis" had him lashed to the mast when it came to size and armour-plated hide. The latter is very rare and I believe there are only five in captivity . . . My idea is to show him in an attitude of suspicion, about to charge -- I am starting a small scale model now.⁷

Dr. Barbour replied by return mail:

You will probably be surprised to learn, but what I tell you is absolutely true, and that is that exactly the same idea occurred to me. . . . I think the Indian Rhinoceros is *the* absolutely ideal animal for the purpose . . . Get some good photographs or sketches because of course these animals might both die [the two in the United States]. It is generally believed that there are only about two hundred of them alive in the wild state.⁸

The one Miss Lane recorded in bronze was the handsome female admired by visitors to the Bronx Zoo (the New York Zoological Park), where Miss Lane made her early sketches. It is the subject of both sculptures, which were modelled separately. "In fact," writes Mrs. Weems, "I made eight rhinos before they were finished, two of six inches before a model of the building, a study of two feet, two of

⁷ Katharine W. Lane to Thomas Barbour, 25 January 1933 (Harvard University Archives).

⁸ Thomas Barbour to Katharine W. Lane, 26 January 1933 (Harvard University Archives). The 1966 census of *Rhinoceros unicornis* published by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, 1110 Morges, Switzerland, counted a population of 740 individuals in India and Nepal, 39 in captivity elsewhere.

four feet and two twelve feet or over. We named them for queens — Bessie, who gave me no end of trouble, and Victoria of calm disposition.”⁹

The two animals are about six feet high, over thirteen feet long from horn to tail, and weigh about three tons each. Among the largest bronze sculptures cast in this century, they caused difficulties of comparable proportions. In addition to the technical problems one would expect, a most unlikely complication developed: Bessie’s rear end was lost in transit: one can imagine the ensuing telephone conversations among the sculptor, the shipper, and the insurance agent.

The plaster casts from which the final bronzes were taken were the work of the Caproni Galleries in Boston.¹⁰ Bessie was cast at the Kunst Foundry. As Mr. Kunst died a short time later, Victoria was cast at the Roman Bronze Works. Miss Lane feared that having come from different foundries they would develop different patinas, “which would have been disastrous.” But “they are now turning a beautiful shade of green and some day may be the colour of the statue of George Washington in the Public Garden. That would make me happy indeed.”¹¹

On Friday night, 24 April 1937, Bessie and Victoria made the trip from New York to Cambridge by truck, and on Saturday they were placed on their pedestals.¹² Then, on 12 May, in the presence of the sculptor and other distinguished guests, and the staffs and Visiting Committees to the Museum of Comparative Zoology and the Division of Biology, the two great beasts were unveiled.¹³ Shortly thereafter they were welcomed by the students, who painted their toenails red — which bit of mischief might be said to have underscored one reason Dr. Barbour and Miss Lane were so enthusiastic in their choice of the Indian rhinoceros: its primitive three-toed foot.

Since then, the rhinos have been bedecked with Jack-o’-lanterns, Christmas wreaths, and other seasonal regalia. Objects of the admiration and the curiosity of passersby, they constitute, with the bronze doors behind them and the frieze above, a sculptural assemblage that is rare, if not unique, in the history of collegiate architecture. Cer-

⁹ Katharine Lane Weems to Louise Todd Ambler, 30 October 1970.

¹⁰ Katharine Lane Weems to W. P. Bailey, 3 June 1949 (Fogg Art Museum).

¹¹ Katharine Lane Weems to Louise Todd Ambler, 30 October 1970.

¹² University News Service Release, 25 April 1937 (Fogg Art Museum).

¹³ University News Service Release, 11 May 1937 (Fogg Art Museum).

tainly such an array of animal sculpture is more common to zoological parks, which generally permit less unified grouping, and where the washing-out effect of strong daylight on relief carving is not often so successfully handled.

The complex is indeed unique in Mrs. Weems's *œuvre*, but many of her smaller sculptures may be seen in the Boston area. There is a bronze bear prowling the second floor of Harvard's Spec Club, and a dog at the Lotta Fountain on Boston's Esplanade. An elegantly displayed selection is at the Museum of Science. Here, a ponderous bear made in 1933 while the Harvard rhinos were in progress, a cock about to release a piercing crow (1940), a puffy pelican, a drawing of sleepy bears, are among the many animals attesting the artist's ability to sum up in a bronze plane or pencil line a gesture or attitude. And in her studio is continuing evidence of her keen eye and skilled hand.

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