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An artist in the making: The early drawings of Charles-Alexandre Lesueur during the Baudin expedition to Australia

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The link between scientific discovery and empire building was never more evident than in the latter decades of the eighteenth century. During that time, as Mary Louise Pratt has noted, the 'international scientific expedition' became 'one of Europe's proudest and most conspicuous instruments of expansion'.¹ For Pratt, this period coincided with the emergence of a new version of Europe's 'planetary consciousness' — one which was characterised by 'the construction of global-scale meaning through the descriptive apparatuses of natural history'.²

Empirical observations of the natural world were indeed indispensable to the European Enlightenment ambition of obtaining a complete and taxonomic knowledge of the globe — and thereby gaining mastery over it. At this time, too, there was a growing realisation that the visual could play just as valuable a part in that process as the verbal. Accordingly, by the end of the eighteenth century, it had become common

1 M.L. Pratt, *Imperial eyes: Travel writing and transculturation*, 2nd edn (London and New York, Routledge, 2008), p. 23.

2 Pratt, p. 15.

practice for professional artists to be included on scientific expeditions. Their role was to keep a pictorial record of the places visited, the peoples encountered and the specimens of flora and fauna that were collected or otherwise examined. The natural history drawings, ethnographic portraits, coastal profiles and landscapes that they produced, together with the various maps and hydrographic charts that the officers and geographers compiled, formed a rich store of iconographic material that became just as important to the imperial project as the discursive observations to be found in the logbooks and journals that their fellow travellers kept.³

This development had profound implications, for both the sciences and the arts. As Bernard Smith has argued, progress in the arts not only paralleled scientific progress but also assisted it by providing scientists with ever more accurate and reliable visual material for analysis. Conversely, the increase in scientific knowledge of the world constituted an 'enduring challenge to the supremacy of neo-classical values in art and thought'.⁴ The artist was henceforth required to depict nature accurately, not enhance or idealise it as the Renaissance had programmatically set out to do. The visual imagery that scientific travellers compiled had to conform to a new ideal

3 Confirmation of this is provided by the report on Nicolas Baudin's Australian voyage (1800-04) presented to the French government by the Institut Impérial, an extract of which was published in François Péron's official account of the expedition, the *Voyage de découvertes aux Terres australes*, vol. 1 (Paris, Imprimerie Impériale, 1807), pp. i-xv. In it, the authors, Pierre-Simon Laplace, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, Charles Pierre Claret de Fleurieu, Bernard Germain de Lacépède and Georges Cuvier, note that 'une description, quelque complète qu'elle puisse être, ne sauroit jamais donner une assez juste idée de ces formes singulières, qui n'ont pas de terme précis de comparaison dans des objets antérieurement connus. Des figures correctes peuvent suppléer seules à l'imperfection du discours' (p. v).

4 B. Smith, *European vision and the South Pacific*, 2nd edn (Sydney, Harper & Row, 1985), p. 1. The year 1768 is the starting point for Smith: in that year, the Royal Academy was established in London and the Royal Society simultaneously undertook the promotion of James Cook's first voyage to the South Seas. Smith observes that 'it was the empirical approach of the Society and not the neo-classical approach of the Academy which flourished under the impact of the new knowledge won from the Pacific' (p. 1). Smith's thesis has been immensely influential, though it is worth noting that the various connections he established have been challenged in more recent times. According to William Eisler, for example, 'Bernard Smith's integration of the histories of scientific and ethnographic illustration, evolutionary thought, and Australian art in one vast progress appears somewhat forced. I prefer to see these strands as running parallel to each other, intersecting at various points'. See W. Eisler, *The furthest shore: Images of Terra Australis from the Middle Ages to Captain Cook* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 4-5. Eisler further argues in his study that the 'association of art, science, exploration, and the "typical" landscape' was a product of the Renaissance, not of the Enlightenment, as Smith had maintained (p. 5).

of objectivity, as illusory as we now understand that ambition to have been.⁵ The pursuit of scientific knowledge thus influenced the development of artistic practices as much as art served and impacted upon science. And, in keeping with Pratt's thesis, in neither case were the consequences — or the motivations — entirely altruistic or innocent. Indeed, as Sarah Thomas has observed, the intrinsic link that had developed between 'the historically determined conventions of art and science ... formed a key role in the colonial enterprise'.⁶ Reliable and precise verbal and visual information was essential to a Europe 'obsessed with the idea that the natural world could be classified under the one global system of nomenclature' — an obsession underpinned by ideological assumptions and heavily motivated by political aspirations.⁷

Natural history drawings were thus both a symptom and an instrument of this greater project. In order to contribute to it, they had to be as accurate as possible and include details that would be useful for the purposes of analysis and classification. Ethnographic portraits likewise had to convey information relating both to the morphology of the subjects and to their social and cultural practices. And if the artists were called upon to draw coastal profiles of the shores surveyed, these had to be sufficiently detailed to serve the very practical purpose of assisting future navigators in identifying their exact location. The need for precision and verisimilitude did

5 In *Imagining the Pacific: In the wake of the Cook voyages* (Carlton, Melbourne University Press, 1992), Bernard Smith rightly points out that 'it would be profoundly misleading to assume that this increased use of art for the conveyance of relevant scientific information operated as a direct, unilinear process by which error and illusion were cast off and the *truth* progressively revealed — though that certainly was the way the scientific optimists of the day chose to regard it. Naturalism, like idealism, is a conceptualising enterprise. In moving from the ideal theories of the academies towards the empirical standpoint of science, artists did not thereby achieve an unvarnished truthfulness of the eye; they exchanged one conceptual master for another' (p. 39, emphasis in the original).

6 S. Thomas, "'Beautiful to the eye or interesting to science": The conundrum of natural-history art', in S. Thomas (ed.), *The encounter, 1802: Art of the Flinders and Baudin voyages* (Adelaide, Art Gallery of South Australia, 2002), p. 36.

7 Thomas, p. 18. Simon Ryan's study on the nineteenth-century land explorers of Australia and the ideological conception of space which they helped construct, and which led to their mythologisation, makes the same claims regarding the ultimate motives of the business of discovery. In *The cartographic eye: How explorers saw Australia* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), he asserts: 'The imperial endeavour encourages the construction of space as a universal, measurable and divisible entity, for this is a self-legitimising view of the world. If it were admitted that different cultures produced different spaces, then negotiating these would be difficult, if not impossible. Constructing a monolithic space, on the other hand, allows imperialism to hierarchise the use of space to its own advantage' (p. 4).

not, however, preclude artistry or subjectivity, and the best illustrators achieved the kind of fusion of art and science that led Bernard Smith to describe one of the most celebrated among them — the artist on board Matthew Flinders's *Investigator* expedition, Ferdinand Bauer — as 'the Leonardo of natural history illustration'.⁸ As Smith explains, although Bauer 'laboured with infinite care upon detail he never lost sight of a plant as a unified whole, so that he avoided both the dryness of science and the sweetness of sentiment'.⁹ The best natural history drawing thus combines craftsmanship and scientific accuracy with a deep aesthetic sense.

While he was certainly not of the calibre of a Bauer when he left his home town of Le Havre in October 1800 on an ambitious state-sponsored voyage of discovery to the 'Terres Australes', Charles-Alexandre Lesueur was clearly talented enough to have attracted the eye of the expedition's commander, Nicolas Baudin. The French government had appointed three established artists to the expedition, but Baudin also required illustrators for the personal journal of the voyage that he was planning to compile, presumably with a view to publication. He therefore engaged Lesueur and another inexperienced but equally promising artist, Nicolas-Martin Petit, for this purpose. They were appointed officially as 'assistant gunners', but everyone on board understood that their role was in reality to work in a quasi-private capacity for the commander.¹⁰ Lesueur and Petit must have had a taste for adventure to sign up for such a long and potentially perilous voyage to a little-known destination. According to Jacqueline Bonnemains, there was even an element of risk regarding the role they would play in this mission: 'To enlist as an assistant gunner, simply accepting the commandant's word that they would be exempted from seamen's duties and employed as illustrators to be paid from his private account, may well appear to be an act of pure madness'.¹¹

8 B. Smith, 'The intellectual and artistic framework of Pacific exploration in the eighteenth century', in W. Eisler and B. Smith (eds), *Terra Australis: The furthest shore* (Sydney, International Cultural Corporation of Australia, 1988), p. 126. See also Smith, *Imagining the Pacific*, p. 48.

9 Smith, *European vision and the South Pacific*, p. 190.

10 Lesueur makes this clear in a letter addressed to his father aimed at reassuring him about his role: 'N'ayez nulle inquiétude sur mon sort. Jusqu'à présent je suis bien avec le Capitaine Baudin qui doit m'employer moi et d'autres de mes camarades utilement et sans être obligé à la manœuvre du bâtiment. Notre partie sera plutôt le dessin'. See C.-A. Lesueur, Letter to his father, Jean-Baptiste, dated 2 Fructidor Year VIII [20 August 1800], (Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Le Havre, Collection Lesueur, n° 63004).

11 J. Bonnemains, 'The artists of the Baudin expedition: Charles-Alexandre Lesueur and Nicolas-Martin Petit', in S. Thomas (ed.), *The encounter, 1802: Art of the Flinders and Baudin voyages* (Adelaide, Art Gallery of South Australia, 2002), p. 128.

Baudin, too, was taking a calculated gamble in employing two such young and untried artists to illustrate his personal journal, despite the obvious talent they each had. In the event, however, his decision would prove to be an inspired one, as both Lesueur and Petit would go on to produce an impressive number of accomplished drawings, many of which have now become emblematic of the expedition. Lesueur in particular would benefit from this formative experience, eventually carving out a successful career as both an artist and a naturalist.¹²

Commentary on Lesueur's life and work has understandably focused on his collaboration with the zoologist François Péron and on the more accomplished illustrations he produced as a result of that partnership, both during his visit to Australia and after his return to France. His rise to prominence once the Baudin expedition left Mauritius, for example, has been well documented. During the stopover in Port Louis on the journey out, the three official artists who had been appointed by the government to accompany Baudin — the landscape painter Jacques Milbert, the draughtsman Louis Lebrun and the genre artist Michel Garnier — decided to abandon the expedition, ostensibly for reasons of ill health, though this appears to have been merely a pretext.¹³ Their departure, in any event, created a void that allowed Lesueur and Petit to be promoted to the status of official artists for the expedition as it set out from Port Louis bound for New Holland.¹⁴ For Lesueur, who

12 Petit's career was tragically cut short when, on 21 October 1804, he succumbed to a gangrenous wound sustained in a fall in a Paris street just seven months after the expedition's return to France.

13 That was certainly the way their decision was interpreted in France, as the irony-laden report in the *Magasin encyclopédique* indicates: 'Quelques-uns des dessinateurs partis avec l'expédition du capitaine Baudin, ont trouvé si agréable le séjour de l'Île-de-France, où l'expédition a relâché, qu'ils y ont borné le voyage autour du Monde qu'ils avoient d'abord entrepris. L'état florissant de la Colonie, les richesses dont jouissent en général les habitants, ont mis ces artistes dans le cas d'y exercer avec fruits leurs talents, et avec d'autant plus d'avantages, que l'éloignement de l'Europe, privant cette île de la présence des hommes qui cultivent les arts, ils n'ont point eu de concurrence à craindre. Il paroît que ces diverses considérations se sont réunies pour leur faire gagner beaucoup d'argent en peu de temps. L'un d'eux a déjà, du fruit de son travail, acquis une maison, des terres, des nègres, etc'. *Magasin encyclopédique*, VII^e année, VI (1801), p. 77.

14 Their promotion is recorded in Baudin's *Journal de mer* in an entry dated 7 Floréal Year IX [27 April 1801], the day after the expedition's departure from Mauritius: 'je fis remplacer sur le Géographe par les citoyens Petit et Lesueur les places qu'y occupaient inutilement M^{rs} Milbert et Garnier. On jugera d'après les travaux de ces deux jeunes gens si le choix que j'en ai fait était bon ou mauvais'. N. Baudin, *Journal de mer*, vol. 2 (Archives Nationales de France, série Marine 5JJ37), p. 76.

had begun to show some talent for natural history drawing, this meant working more closely with the scientists after the stopover in Mauritius, and in particular with the zoologist François Péron, whose own status had improved radically following the desertion of several of his more senior colleagues during their stay on the island. As Lesueur's biographers have rightly observed, Péron would have a decisive influence on Lesueur's evolution as a natural history illustrator. Jacqueline Bonnemains, in pointing to the 'rôle immense de François Péron dans la carrière de Charles-Alexandre Lesueur', explains: 'C'est lui, en effet, qui le forma à l'étude zoologique lui permettant ainsi d'y faire valoir tout son talent artistique'.¹⁵ This collaboration with Péron was not only instrumental in making Lesueur a better natural history artist; it also developed in him an enduring taste for natural history itself. As Bonnemains notes:

Leur collaboration est des plus efficaces, l'un dessinant avec précision et talent ce que l'autre décrit et détermine. Mais, très vite, Lesueur devient plus qu'un artiste. Les rangs des naturalistes s'éclaircissent: le scorbut, la dysenterie, les fièvres s'installent, soit en mer, soit au cours des escales et sont fatals à beaucoup. C'est alors que Lesueur, avec son ami Péron, récolte, observe, prépare et naturalise les animaux marins ou terrestres de ces lointaines régions.¹⁶

Lesueur's scientific activities and the drawings he produced later in his career, both during the twenty-two years he spent in the United States (1815-37), where he mixed and worked with such luminaries as the philanthropic geologist William Maclure and the utopian socialist Robert Owen, and in the last decade of his life back in Le Havre (1837-46), where he was eventually appointed the founding director of the newly created Museum of Natural History in 1846, have likewise been well documented.¹⁷

15 J. Bonnemains, *Les Artistes du 'Voyage de découvertes aux Terres australes' (1800-1804): Charles-Alexandre Lesueur et Nicolas-Martin Petit* (Le Havre, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle du Havre, 1989), p. 15. (Extrait du Bulletin trimestriel de la Société géologique de Normandie et des Amis du Muséum du Havre, 76: 1 [1989].)

16 Bonnemains, *Les Artistes du 'Voyage de découvertes aux Terres australes'*, p. 20.

17 This period of his life was indeed an early subject of interest for commentators. See, for example, Ernest-Théodore Hamy's 1904 study, *Les Voyages du naturaliste Ch. Alex. Lesueur dans l'Amérique du Nord (1815-1837)*, numéro spécial du *Journal de la Société des Américanistes de Paris*, 5: 1 (1904) (translated into English and published in 1968 by Kent State University Press). See also A. Loir, *Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, Artiste et savant français en Amérique de 1816 à 1839* [sic] (Le Havre, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, 1920); R. Rinsma, *Alexandre Lesueur*, vol. 1, *Un explorateur et artiste français au pays de Thomas Jefferson* (Le Havre, Éditions du Havre de Grâce, 2007); and the illustrated study produced by J.M. Elliott and J. Thompson Johansen, *Charles-Alexandre Lesueur: Premier naturalist and artist* (New

Commentators have paid less attention, however, to the drawings Lesueur made during the early part of the Baudin expedition, and in particular during the long journey out from Le Havre to Mauritius (the last port of call before heading for 'New Holland').¹⁸ For Lesueur, these months spent at sea provided a perfect opportunity to practise his craft, and the drawings he produced in this time — before he developed his close collaboration with François Péron — provide us with valuable insights into the style and personality of the more accomplished natural history artist who was later to emerge. More specifically, a study of these early drawings will serve to highlight some of the characteristics of Lesueur's style and of the particular aesthetic he was developing at the very beginning of what we might describe as his 'professional' career. Comparisons with his later work — the more orthodox scientific illustrations he would go on to complete, as well as the sketches of people and places he would continue to draw throughout his life — will further allow us to determine the extent to which the stylistic and aesthetic features exhibited in his early drawings might be seen as enduring and defining characteristics of his œuvre. Finally, a consideration of these early drawings will also provide us with a better understanding of the place that drawing occupied for him, both during the expedition and in his life more generally.

One of the unfortunate consequences of neglecting these early sketches and drawings and focusing instead on the artwork that Lesueur produced during his time in Australia and beyond is that the importance of his early training and development as an artist is often overlooked. It is almost to imply that, until he began to work in close collaboration with the scientists on the expedition, he had not begun to develop his own aesthetic, his own way of seeing the world. There is admittedly little documentary evidence to help us identify what his early influences might have been. We do know, thanks to the efforts of his biographers, most notably Jacqueline Bonnemains, that his early training was most likely in the field of hydrography and

Harmony, s.n., 1999). On his life and work in Le Havre, see Ph. Manneville and S. Barot, 'Charles-Alexandre Lesueur et Le Havre', in A. Dommergues and M. Nedeljkovic (eds), *Les Français et l'Australie: Voyages de découvertes et missions scientifiques de 1756 à nos jours* (Paris, Université Paris X Nanterre, 1989), pp. 99-105.

18 One notable exception is Jean Fornasiero's account of the circumstances in which Lesueur and Petit produced their work on board the ship during the early part of the voyage: 'Charles-Alexandre Lesueur: An art of the littoral', in J. Fornasiero and V. Thwaites (eds), *Littoral* (Adelaide, s.n., 2010), pp. 12-19.

naval draughtsmanship.¹⁹ Born in 1778 into a lower-middle-class family from Le Havre, where his father worked at the Admiralty, as his grandfather had also done, the young Charles-Alexandre attended the local College and then in all likelihood went, with his cousins, to the School of Hydrography. This is where midshipmen were trained in the basic skills of that art, but the School also offered free classes in draughtsmanship and applied graphic techniques. Lesueur's early training was thus of a technical nature and would have developed in him a sense of precision and a keen eye for detail. We can assume, from the fact that Baudin hired him, that Lesueur had already demonstrated some talent for this kind of drawing, and perhaps also for artistic drawing more generally. The young twenty-two-year-old artist therefore had at least one of the qualities required to become an accomplished natural history artist: a meticulous attention to detail.

But technical ability alone does not make a great artist. Precision and accuracy will produce perfectly acceptable maps and charts, but they are not in and of themselves sufficient when it comes to drawing animate objects. Contemplation of another living object — a plant, an animal or, particularly, another human being — always induces in us a mix of responses which are a sign that we are interacting with that object: that we are investing it with meaning, engaging with it on our own personal terms. The paradox of good natural history art is that, at the same time as it purports to provide an objectively accurate depiction of the object under study which satisfies our intellectual requirements, it also expresses the artist's subjective vision and produces in the viewer a subtle but sure emotional response.

Some might argue that, even in his later drawings, Lesueur sometimes struggled to find that delicate balance between the intellectual and the emotional: that he did not always avoid the excesses of both. We can see from his early drawings, in any case, that his gaze already had a strongly personal dimension that competed with his primarily technical training. There is a whimsy, for example, in his choice of subjects. One particularly compelling set of images is the series of cloud drawings that Lesueur made, most notably when he crossed the Equator.²⁰

19 For more detail on Lesueur's early life and training, see Bonnemains, *Les Artistes du Voyage de découvertes aux Terres australes*, pp. 17-18. The brief outline presented here is based on that biographical study.

20 For obvious practical reasons, only a selection of Lesueur's drawings can be reproduced here. The most complete catalogue of his work is to be found in the illustrated biography produced by G. Baglione and C. Crémère, *Charles-Alexandre Lesueur: Peintre voyageur, un trésor oublié* (Paris, Éditions de Conti, 2009).



Figure 3.1: Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, Sketches of clouds made on board the *Géographe* at or near the Equator. Le Havre, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Collection Lesueur, n° 13002-13007.

These drawings, which Lesueur did not intend for public display, demonstrate a keen eye and a sound level of technical skill. The fact that they correspond to different moments of the day, and that he drew most of them at or near the symbolic latitude of the Equator, might suggest an emerging scientific curiosity about natural phenomena. It is nevertheless hard to imagine that these drawings would have served any particular scientific purpose, beyond the anecdotal recording of the state of the sky at that latitude and at the given time of day and year. What dominates in these drawings is the fascination of the artist with light, shape and form, especially when we view them as a set. This keen interest in shape and form would remain a feature of Lesueur's work, as demonstrated by his later illustrations of jellyfish and starfish, for example, or by his depictions of the cliffs around Le Havre. We can therefore see it as constituting one of the enduring and defining aspects of his aesthetic.

The cloud drawings also point to Lesueur's willingness —and ability — to take on technical challenges. Clouds are a particularly difficult subject for any artist, not just because of their mobile nature but also because they test the artist's skill in depicting volume, perspective and nuances of shade and light. As no less an artist than John Constable observed in 1821, at a time when his own obsession with skies had led him to focus almost exclusively on sky and cloud studies, the 'difficulty [of skies] in painting is very great, both as to composition and execution'.²¹ These technical challenges — the elusive and changing shape of the subject, the difficulty of depicting nuances of colour and of portraying specific details in accurate perspective and proportion — are not limited to clouds. They are in fact very similar to the challenges Lesueur confronted when he came to draw the jellyfish caught by Péron and the other scientists during the Baudin expedition. It is true that his execution of such illustrations improved over time, but the technical ability and the methodical patience exhibited in Lesueur's later, more accomplished, zoological illustrations are already in evidence in his early cloud drawings.

Finally, the cloud sketches point to yet another constant in Lesueur's work, and that is his emotional engagement with his subject, which complements the intellectual demands of objective observation. Constable, who understood the vital role clouds play in expressing the mood of a scene, considered the sky to be the 'key note' of

21 Letter from Constable to his friend John Fisher dated 23 October 1821, reproduced in J.E. Thornes, *John Constable's skies: A fusion of art and science* (Edgbaston, University of Birmingham Press, 1999), p. 57.

any landscape and 'the chief "Organ of sentiment"'.²² Lesueur's cloud drawings may not have the evocative power of a Constable sky, but they nevertheless convey a strong sense of emotion — the aesthetic emotion of the artist, no doubt, but also the emotional response created in him by the particular circumstances in which he found himself: on a ship in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean in unfamiliar latitudes and in atmospheric conditions that he was experiencing for the first time. There is a sense of moment here, most notably in the cloud drawings from the Equator. Crossing the line was a significant event for any maritime traveller, let alone a young man engaged in his first sea voyage. It is therefore entirely plausible that Lesueur was using these drawings as a means both to record his personal milestone and to express something of his emotional response to that moment.

The numerous sketches Lesueur made during the passage from Le Havre to Mauritius of sailors and others going about their business on board the ship represent another important group of early drawings. Perhaps in one sense Lesueur was simply rehearsing his art, as a musician practises scales, or as his Normandy compatriot Eugène Boudin would later hone his skills through endlessly painting cows. The comparison is not entirely factitious if we consider the unfinished quality of many of Boudin's cow paintings: at a certain point, the artist must have felt that he had sufficiently 'warmed up' to move on to new and more challenging subjects. In Lesueur's case, however, these sketches also constitute a kind of diary of his voyage.

These sketches have an intimate and whimsical quality that is reminiscent of his cloud drawings. Lesueur spent several months in close and confined contact with the men he depicts here, and sketching them was perhaps a way of expressing his personal connection with the routine work they had to undertake around him and with some of the more idiosyncratic forms of behaviour they displayed.²³ The inclusion of the odd accessory, in sketches that are generally short on such detail, also gives us the sense of a strongly personalised perception of his travelling companions and of ship-board life: the cannon, the cup and carafe, the duck in its cage, the sailor's bell, for example (Figures 3.6 and 3.7). The character that may be lacking in their facial expressions is nevertheless suggested in other ways — by their pose, for example, or by the lived-in quality of the clothes they are wearing. In aesthetic terms, these rapidly drawn sketches that are 'pris sur le vif' have the unfinished quality characteristic of

22 See Thornes, p. 57.

23 For other examples, see Baglione and Crémère, pp. 37 and 39.



Figure 3.2: Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, Portrait possibly of Nicolas Baudin. Le Havre, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Collection Lesueur, n° 13019.



Figure 3.3: Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, *Voilier sur le Géographe*. Le Havre, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Collection Lesueur, n° 13025.



Figure 3.4: Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, *Lesueur sur le Géographe*. Le Havre, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Collection Lesueur, n° 13032.



Figure 3.5: Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, *Leschenot sur le Géographe*. Le Havre, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Collection Lesueur, n° 13033. Théodore Leschenault was one of the botanists on the expedition.



Figure 3.6: Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, *Sur le Géographe*. Le Havre, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Collection Lesueur, n° 13012.



Figure 3.7: Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, *Sur le pont du Géographe*. Le Havre, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Collection Lesueur, n° 13016 verso.

this kind of drawing, yet they are highly evocative and capture a certain essence of the person or activity depicted.

This would remain a feature of many of Lesueur's later pencil sketches — during his boat trips down the Ohio and the Mississippi, for example, when he sketched people likewise going about their work.²⁴ There is even a kinship in this respect with some of the pencil and watercolour sketches depicting the places he visited, whether it be Sydney Town, Philadelphia, New Harmony, New Orleans or Le Havre.²⁵ In most cases, Lesueur did not intend to use such sketches as a basis for final, more finished, pieces of work, and they were therefore not a means of working out ideas. He was simply recording what he saw and compiling a kind of visual diary of the people he met and the places he visited.

The drawings we have examined thus far are of a very personal nature — that is to say, they are of subjects that Lesueur chose and that reflect his own particular interests and experiences. He was, however, hired to illustrate the commander's personal journal, and that involved drawing subjects of natural history at Baudin's request. Lesueur completed many such drawings during the outward journey, primarily of fish and other marine animals — a choice no doubt dictated by the circumstances, though it should be noted that marine life, particularly the smaller and more unusual animals, held a particular fascination for the commander. The specimens Lesueur and Petit drew were pulled up from the sea during the voyage using a net that the zoologists René Maugé and Stanislas Levillain had specially designed for this purpose, and it was Baudin who decided which specimen he wanted drawn for his journal. It is possible that Maugé and Levillain also had some input into the illustrations; Levillain's notebooks, for example, contain zoological descriptions that, as Jean Fornasiero has pointed out, 'are clearly linked to Lesueur's paintings of some of these very animals'.²⁶ However, the relative lack of scientific detail they provide suggests either that the input of Levillain and Maugé was not as detailed or as technical as Péron's would later prove to be, or else that the visual and textual records were compiled more or less separately or perhaps sequentially

24 See Baglione and Crémère, pp. 296-9.

25 In addition to the images reproduced here, see Baglione and Crémère, pp. 56-7 (Île de France), 79 and 93 (Kupang), 123 (Port Jackson), 156 (Cape Town), 194-215 and 220-2 (various locations in France), 230-3, 248-9 and 331-7 (Le Havre), 270-5 (northeast United States), 279-84 (Philadelphia), 286-9 (New Harmony), and 345-9 (the Cap de la Hève near Le Havre).

26 Fornasiero, p. 16.



Figure 3.8: Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, Sketch drawn during the sojourn in Port Jackson. Le Havre, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Collection Lesueur, n° 16076.



Figure 3.9: Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, *New Harmony*, Indiana. Le Havre, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Collection Lesueur, n° 41151.



Figure 3.10: Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, 'The French market at New Orleans', Louisiana. Le Havre, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Collection Lesueur, n° 44090.



Figure 3.11: Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, 'Le Havre and its beach'. Le Havre, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Collection Lesueur, n° 36001.

— that is to say that the artists were not necessarily always working under the direct supervision of the zoologists when they made them.

Despite their scientific shortcomings, however, these drawings made quite an impression on anyone who cared to go and look at them (Baudin was perfectly happy to have his illustrated log put on display for all to see). The zoologist Bory de Saint-Vincent, who travelled on Baudin's consort ship, the *Naturaliste*, was most taken by these illustrations when he had the chance to look at them during the stopover in Mauritius:

En attendant qu'il nous fût permis d'aller à terre, je parcourus avec admiration le journal du commandant: c'était un immense volume cartonné, étalé sur une table dans son appartement, et auquel il paraissait qu'on pouvait toucher sans indiscrétion, car Riedley [Riedlé] et Maugé le feuilletaient sans façon, et en faisaient les honneurs aux étrangers. Ce journal renfermait une multitude de figures de mollusques, de poissons, ou d'autres objets d'histoire naturelle, peints avec une perfection et une vérité dont rien n'approche. Je regrettai que ces dessins n'eussent pas été dirigés par un naturaliste; ils auraient pu par-là devenir complets; mais il n'y avait nuls détails anatomiques; le peintre n'avait pas toujours représenté l'animal par le côté qui offrait ses caractères; et comme aucune description linnéenne si l'on peut s'exprimer ainsi, n'accompagnait ces figures, elles n'auront pas, si elles sont jamais gravées, le mérite qu'elles eussent dû avoir, sur-tout pour les zoologistes des contrées éloignées de la mer, qui ne prendront pas toujours par elles une idée exacte de ce qu'elles représentent. Pour moi qui venais de voir les objets représentés, et qui avais eu en même tems la prétention de les peindre avec vérité, je fus surpris et confus en parcourant ces chefs-d'œuvre, et je me hâtai de m'informer quel était l'auteur d'un si bel ouvrage, afin de lui témoigner la satisfaction que j'en éprouvais; on me présenta un jeune homme d'un air très-modeste, et qui, par un noble zèle, s'était embarqué comme novice-timonier, quoique digne d'entrer dans une expédition scientifique d'une manière bien plus utile aux progrès des arts; on avait découvert son talent à bord, et le commandant l'avait employé. On m'a dit depuis que la justice qu'on lui devait, lui ayant été rendue, ses appointemens avaient été assimilés à ceux des chefs dans chaque partie, et il méritait bien un pareil encouragement. Je suis bien fâché d'avoir oublié le nom de cet habile jeune homme, duquel l'expédition doit tirer une de ses plus grandes ressources.²⁷

27 J.-B.G.M. Bory de Saint-Vincent, *Voyage dans les quatre principales îles des mers d'Afrique, fait par ordre du gouvernement, pendant les années neuf et dix de la République (1801 et 1802), avec l'histoire de la traversée du capitaine Baudin jusqu'au Port-Louis de l'île Maurice*, vol. 1 (Paris, Buisson, 1804), pp. 161-2.

The skilful young man with the modest demeanour whose work Bory admired is most likely to have been Lesueur, rather than his more worldly Parisian colleague, Petit, who had trained under Jacques-Louis David and who appears to have had a 'caractère plein d'entrain', as Jacqueline Bonnemains has noted.²⁸

Establishing the authorship of the illustrations in Baudin's personal journal is nevertheless a difficult matter to resolve, given that they were unsigned and there is little evidence to help us determine their attribution with absolute certainty. We know from the commander's comments that Petit was responsible for at least some of these drawings²⁹, but Bory's remarks indicate that whoever responded to his inquiry considered they were primarily the work of one man. It is important to note that, as Bory himself makes clear, he had to rely on others for information regarding this artistic work. He had travelled in Baudin's consort ship, the *Naturaliste*, and had therefore only become aware of it on the expedition's arrival in Mauritius. A further degree of circumspection is warranted given the two factual errors Bory makes in his account of this episode. As already noted, Lesueur, like Petit, was engaged as an 'aide-canonni er', not as a 'timonier', and his talent was not discovered during the course of the voyage but had already been identified by Baudin before the departure from Le Havre, which is when the commander hired both of the young artists.³⁰

Interestingly, Fran ois P eron, in a draft letter to the Professors at the Museum praising their work, states that one (Petit) devoted himself to coastal views and ethnographic drawings whereas the other (Lesueur) focused on natural history. This, however, is something of a simplification and provides only a guide as to the division of labour between them. As Jacqueline Bonnemains reminds us, while P eron is largely justified in his description of their respective duties,

28 Bonnemains, *Les Artistes du 'Voyage de d couvertes aux Terres australes'*, p. 44. Her characterisation is based on Fran ois P eron's anecdote regarding Petit's interactions with the Tasmanian Aborigines.

29 Baudin writes: 'Les dessins colori s qui se trouvent dans mon journal, ex cut s par les citoyens Martin Petit et Lesueur ne laissent rien   d sirer pour la r gularit  et l'exactitude'. See J. Bonnemains (ed.), *Mon voyage aux Terres Australes: Journal personnel du commandant Baudin illustr  par Lesueur et Petit* (Paris, Imprimerie Nationale, 2000), p. 137.

30 It is also possible that Bory was deliberately misrepresenting the situation in order to deprive Baudin of his due credit for hiring these two artists. On Bory's key role in the campaign to undermine Baudin's reputation, see J. Fornasiero and J. West-Sooby, 'Doing it by the book: Breaking the reputation of Nicolas Baudin', in J. Fornasiero and C. Mrowa-Hopkins (eds), *Explorations and encounters in French* (Adelaide, University of Adelaide Press, 2010), pp. 142-6.

in practice their work was not as clearly separated ... There will therefore always remain some doubt about the attribution of the unsigned drawings to one or other of these two artists, although their different styles allow certain conclusions to be drawn.³¹

A thorough stylistic analysis would indeed be useful in attempting to identify the authorship of the various illustrations that figured in Baudin's personal journal. While that kind of detailed analysis is beyond the scope of our discussion here, it is nevertheless instructive to consider a sample of these early natural history drawings, as they display certain characteristics that can be seen to have a kinship with Lesueur's later zoological work — even if it remains a moot point for the time being whether this kinship constitutes evidence of Lesueur's authorship or, alternatively, is the sign of an aesthetic that he and Petit jointly explored and developed.³²

The natural history drawings that made the commander's journal such an object of admiration were certainly, as Bory laments, deficient in terms of scientific detail. They are nevertheless remarkable for their expressivity and the emotional response they suggest on the part of the artist. These are not the drawings of a cold and indifferent observer. Some of the fish paintings, for example, give us a keen sense of the artist's engagement with his subject.³³ The fish have something of a startled look, perhaps reflecting the response of the artist to such unusual specimens of marine life. This would remain a feature of many of his later fish illustrations — his drawings of the Moorish idol (*Zanclus canescens*), for example, or of the red lionfish (*Pterois volitans*).³⁴ Interestingly, one of the defining traits of Lesueur's later drawings of Australian mammals would likewise be their anthropomorphic

31 J. Bonnemains, 'The artists of the Baudin expedition', in J. Bonnemains, E. Forsyth and B. Smith (eds), *Baudin in Australian waters: The artwork of the French voyage of discovery to the southern lands 1800-1804* (Melbourne, Oxford University Press in association with the Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1988), p. 17.

32 In a new book by the current custodians of the Lesueur Collection and their collaborators the authors state that, when Lesueur was named official artist for the expedition after the sojourn in Mauritius, Petit was his 'assistant'. This suggests that Baudin saw Lesueur as having the more senior status of the two and perhaps adds some weight to the argument that he was primarily responsible for the drawings in the commander's journal — and for the aesthetic features they exhibit. See G. Baglione, C. Crémière, J. Goy and S. Schmitt, *Lesueur: Méduses* (Paris, Éditions de Conti, 2014), p. 10.

33 For other examples, see Baglione and Crémière, pp. 184-7.

34 See Bonnemains, Forsyth and Smith (eds), pp. 257 and 254-5, respectively.

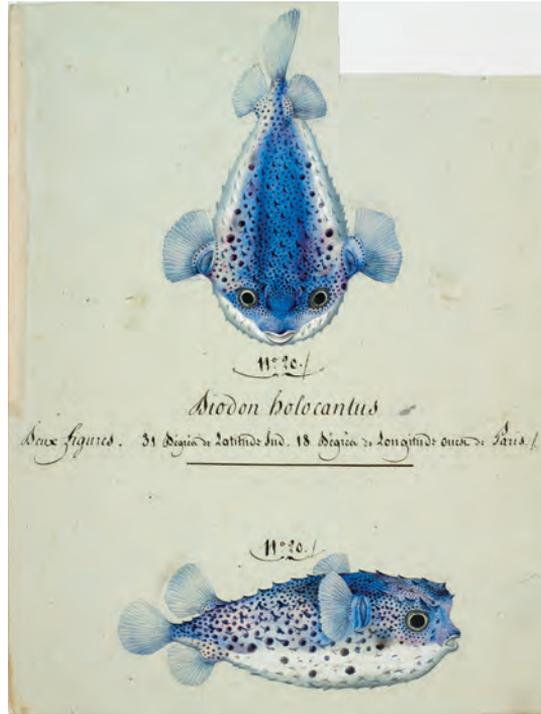


Figure 3.12: Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, 'Long-spine porcupine fish. *Diodon holocanthus* (Linnaeus, 1758)'. Le Havre, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Collection Lesueur, n° 76712.



Figure 3.13: Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, 'Ocean sunfish larva'. Le Havre, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Collection Lesueur, n° 76415.

qualities.³⁵ As Susan Hunt has observed, drawings such as these derive much of their visual potency from 'their status as exploration art, since something of the sheer excitement of discovery seems to permeate Lesueur's pictures'.³⁶

The drawings of the more unusual marine animals, such as the medusae, the starfish and the zoophytes, likewise communicate the surprise and excitement of the artist, as well as the fascination and wonderment they produced in him.

The fact that Lesueur could execute such drawings at all is something of an exploit. As Baudin notes in commenting on the 'lézard de mer' (Figure 3.15): 'Le dessin que j'en donne n'a pas été facile à faire parce que ce petit animal change si subitement



Figure 3.14: Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, "'Lézard de mer". *Glaucus atlanticus* (Forster, 1800)'. Le Havre, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Collection Lesueur, n° 65750 (ventral view).

35 See, for example, his depiction of the elephant seals on King Island (published in the 1807 *Atlas* for volume 1 of Péron's *Voyage de découvertes aux Terres australes*), or his portrait of a 'family' of wombats (also published in the 1807 *Atlas*).

36 S. Hunt, 'Paris Le Havre Sydney', in S. Hunt and P. Carter (eds), *Terre Napoléon: Australia through French eyes 1800-1804* (Sydney, Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales in association with Hordern House, 1999), p. 9.

de forme qu'il est presque impossible d'en saisir une'.³⁷ Baudin is confident in the quality of the drawing — 'on a apporté la plus grande attention à faire connaître les caractères qui lui sont particuliers' — but decides nevertheless to preserve the actual specimen of this and other similarly unusual animals in anticipation of the incredulity of the scientists and others back in France: 'comme on aura peine à croire qu'il puisse exister dans les mers des animaux vivants d'une forme aussi bizarre et extraordinaire que ceux que nous y avons rencontrés, j'ai conservé dans l'esprit-de-vin la part des originaux qui nous ont servi de modèles'.³⁸

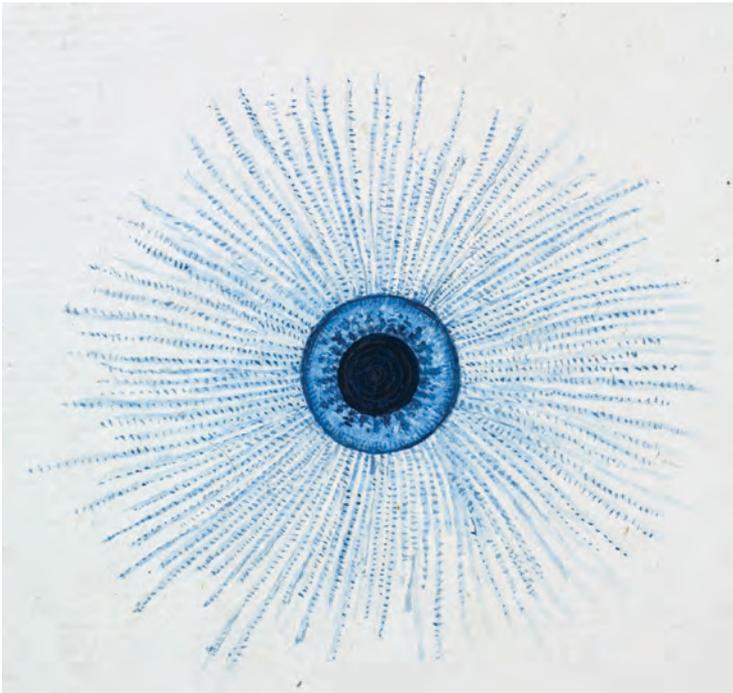


Figure 3.15: 'Blue button jellyfish. *Porpita porpita* (Linnaeus, 1758)'. Le Havre, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Collection Lesueur, n° 14028.³⁹

37 Bonnemains (ed.), p. 136.

38 Bonnemains (ed.), pp. 136 and 137.

39 Commenting on these early illustrations of jellyfish, Jacqueline Bonnemains notes: 'Ces dessins assez malhabiles furent les premiers réalisés pendant l'expédition pour ce groupe si fragile des méduses. Rien à voir avec la finesse des observations notées sur les vélins que Lesueur peignit par la suite'. Bonnemains (ed.), plate VII.

There is indeed an unfamiliar and alien quality to these animals that has both drawn the artist in and forced him to take his distance from them. And this counter-response of detachment may be one reason why, in aesthetic terms, these illustrations take on an almost abstract quality. The artist, having been drawn in by the alluring features of these animals, has then found himself compelled by questions of form. This fascination with form, above and beyond any scientific considerations, was a feature of Lesueur's drawings of clouds and would remain a key element of his later work — his drawings of starfish (Figure 3.16) or sea squirts (Figure 3.17), for example, or the various composite drawings in which he carefully grouped specimens of the same animal in order to create a more general collective shape (Figure 3.18).⁴⁰ In these composite illustrations in particular, but also in the series of drawings he devoted to starfish and jellyfish, the emphasis on form and composition is such that it distracts the viewer from seeing the specimens depicted as animals. They begin to lose their status as living creatures and instead become abstractions that fascinate us more for their shape and the way the artist has arranged them than for their zoological properties. This is as true of the early drawings (Figure 3.15, for example) as for Lesueur's later work, and is thus a key element of his aesthetic.

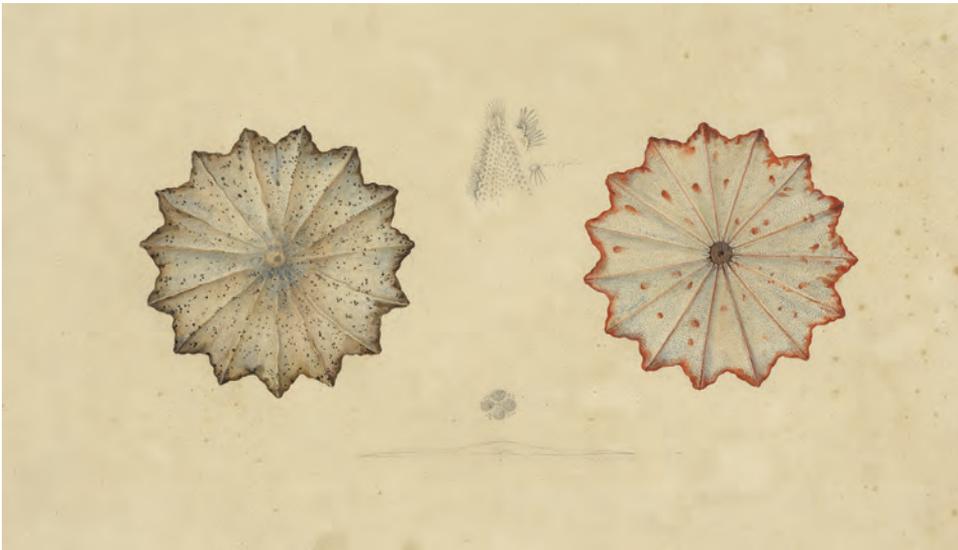


Figure 3.16: Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, '*Anseropoda rosacea* (Lamarck, 1816)'. Le Havre, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Collection Lesueur, n° 74035.

⁴⁰ See Baglione and Crémère for similar composite images of frogs (p. 356), butterflies (p. 366), praying mantises (p. 367), starfish (p. 370), salps (p. 374) and lizards (p. 382).



Figure 3.17: Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, 'Sea squirts. *Polycarpa* sp., *Pyura* sp. and *Polycarpa aurata clavata* (Hartmeyer, 1919)'. Le Havre, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Collection Lesueur, n° 75020.

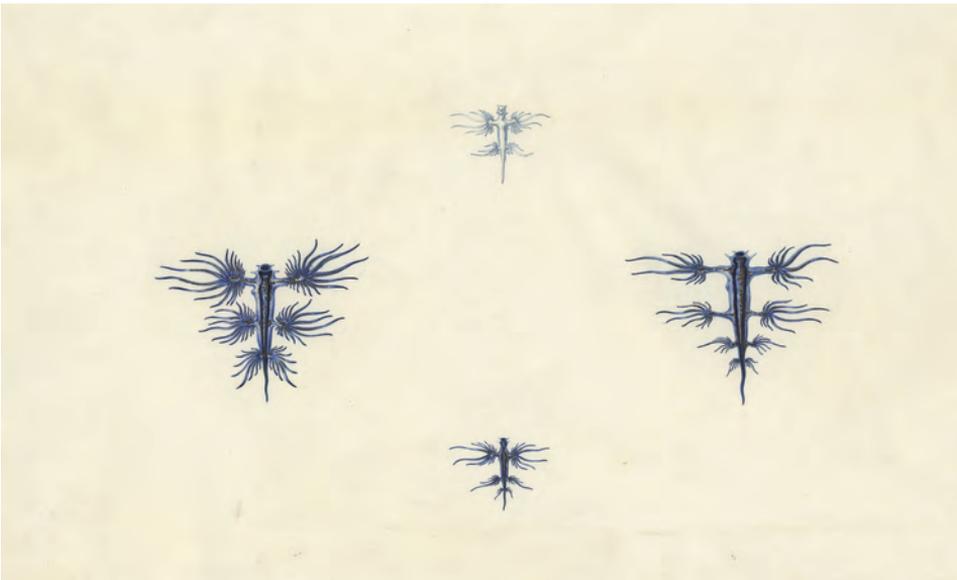


Figure 3.18: Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, 'Four views of *Glaucus atlanticus* (Forster, 1800)'. Le Havre, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Collection Lesueur, n° 72019.

We have already noted that, as the journey progressed, and especially once the expedition reached Australian waters, Lesueur came to work more and more closely with the scientists, and in particular with the zoologist François Péron. This close association with Péron, which soon evolved into an enduring friendship, led Lesueur to take a different path from that followed by his fellow artist, Petit, both in terms of the subject matter in which each would specialise and with respect to the particular aesthetic each would develop. Lesueur's zoological drawings naturally became more 'professional', in the sense that he learned how best to depict his subjects for scientific analysis.⁴¹ Through his art, he would therefore contribute in no small way to the scientific success of an expedition which, in Martin Terry's colourful expression, was 'the zenith of France's sense of *omnium gatherum*'.⁴²

Nevertheless, Lesueur's subsequent drawings retained many of the features we have identified in his early sketches as well as in many of the unattributed illustrations included in Baudin's personal journal: the warm and intimate rapport with the subject, a kind of whimsical gaze, the expression of emotion and subjectivity, a tendency towards anthropomorphism, and a fascination with shape and form that gives many of the drawings a certain abstract quality. In contrast to the posed and almost serene sophistication of Ferdinand Bauer's natural history drawings, Lesueur's finished illustrations have a 'dynamic vivacity' which for Martin Terry 'owes much to the even earlier traditions of Dürer and Hoffmann' — traditions which, ironically, Lesueur may have become more aware of thanks to his meetings with the Austrian Bauer in Sydney in 1802.⁴³ That spontaneous and dynamic style is, as we have seen, also evident in Lesueur's early and less finished pieces, and is likewise a feature of the various zoological illustrations in Baudin's journal, many of which he painted.

41 See, for example, his later paintings of jellyfish depicting different views, including cross-sections (Baglione and Crémière, pp. 99 and 124), or his drawing of a platypus skeleton (p. 116).

42 M. Terry, 'Terre Napoléon', in W. Eisler and B. Smith (eds), *Terra Australis: The furthest shore* (Sydney, International Cultural Corporation of Australia, 1988), p. 156. As Terry adds: 'An almost obsessive quality is present in the rigour of its [France's] confiscatory and classificatory impulses'.

43 Terry, p. 155. Susan Hunt goes so far as to suggest that Lesueur's drawings of Australia's exotic animals and birds, for all the 'extraordinary precision and painstaking skill' they display, are nevertheless quite distinct from the work of other natural history artists because of their 'bizarre violence' (p. 12).

What this suggests is that, in reality, Lesueur's way of seeing never changed: his skill as an artist undoubtedly improved, but his aesthetic remained constant. When he was not simply sketching in order to keep a kind of personal diary of the places he visited and the scenes he witnessed, Lesueur learned to discipline his art for scientific purposes; but he remained, throughout, true to his personal style. Indeed, as some of his later sketches demonstrate, he was not afraid to return to a more spontaneous and raw expression of it when the mood struck.⁴⁴ Perhaps, then, this enduring attachment to his own particular aesthetic, as expressed in the various stages of his evolution, was his way of telling us that, despite the respect he had for science, and despite all the learning he himself had acquired, he was first and foremost an artist.

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⁴⁴ See, for example, Baglione and Crémère, pp. 348-9.

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