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Nicole Starbuck

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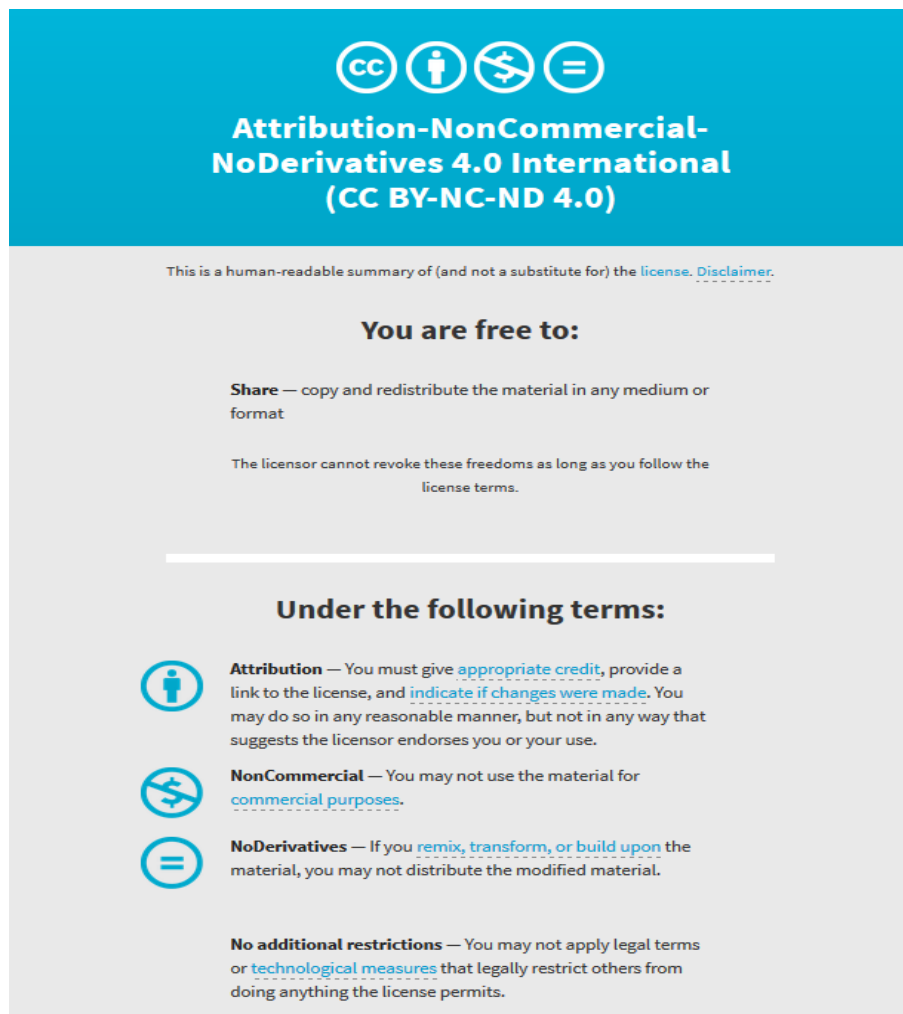
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Colonial vision: French voyager-artists, Aboriginal subjects and the British Colony at Port Jackson

Nicole Starbuck, The University of Adelaide

Charles-Alexandre Lesueur and Nicolas-Martin Petit arrived at Sydney Town in mid-winter 1802, the first French artists to visit Britain's colony at Port Jackson.¹ Two seasons lay ahead of them, providing respite after a gruelling exploration of Australia's south coast, and, more importantly, providing the young men with an invaluable opportunity. Lesueur and Petit were members of the Baudin expedition, which — prepared by the Institut National and sponsored by the First Consul at the close of the French Revolution — was the first scientific expedition to carry official anthropological instructions. It was thus with the varied advice of philosophers, humanists and comparative anatomists that Baudin's artists entered upon their most prolonged cross-cultural encounter of the voyage and, still more importantly, upon their only opportunity to observe Aboriginal Australians experiencing colonisation. The outcomes of this encounter were significant: Lesueur and Petit produced a rich body of portraits, ethnographic landscapes and settlement scenes depicting the Aboriginal people of Port Jackson. A number of these

¹ Chapters in this volume by Jean Fornasiero, John West-Sooby and Jane Southwood also explore artworks that Petit and Lesueur produced during the Baudin expedition.

illustrations were published in the *Voyage de découvertes, Atlas Historique*, in 1807, and more again in the second edition of the volume in 1824.² Intended to feed studies of human nature in France, these visual records also represent how Petit and Lesueur viewed the humanity of Port Jackson's Aborigines and intimate how they felt about the matter of colonisation.

It has long been clear that the way these artists looked at Aboriginal people in the Colony led to depictions that are exceptional in the context of early colonial art. Most earlier paintings and drawings of local Aboriginal people had been produced by ex-convict Thomas Watling and the 'Port Jackson Painter'. They convey little about Aboriginal life and any hint of the artists' empathy for their subjects is less evident than the sense of the Aborigines' alterity. The French depictions reflect a more open and penetrating view. Bernard Smith highlights Lesueur's 'typical' rather than picturesque or neoclassical form of landscape art as well as the great degree of detail his scenes provide about Aboriginal life; Rhys Jones declares that Petit's is one of the best series of portraits produced of Aboriginal people; and Ian MacLean describes the drawings overall as 'sympathetic studies ... which showed a proud, dignified and stoic people'.³ The dissimilarities between the roles and circumstances of the voyager-artists and ex-convicts explain these differences to a degree⁴; however, it would be naïve to assume that the Frenchmen's scientific gaze was completely open, or that their emotional detachment from the colonial project was absolute. Through their drawings, Lesueur and Petit chose to provide a very particular view of Aboriginal life at Port Jackson — that is, of a life unaffected by European contact.

2 C.-A. Lesueur and N.-M. Petit, *Voyage de découvertes aux Terres australes: Exécuté par ordre de sa Majesté L'Empereur et Roi, sur les corvettes le Géographe, le Naturaliste; et la goëlette le Casuarina, pendant les années 1800, 1801, 1802, et 1804: Atlas historique* (Paris, Imprimerie Impériale, 1807) and 2nd edn (Paris, Arthus Bertrand, 1824).

3 B. Smith, *European vision and the South Pacific, 1768-1850* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 147-8, and R. Jones, 'Images of Natural Man', in J. Bonnemains, E. Forsyth and B. Smith (eds), *Baudin in Australian waters* (Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 63; I. MacLean, 'Under Saturn: Melancholy and the colonial imagination', in N. Thomas and D. Losche (eds), *Double vision: Art histories and colonial histories in the Pacific* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 144.

4 G. Dutton, *White on black: The Australian Aborigine portrayed in art* (South Melbourne, Macmillan, 1974), pp. 18-19.

This selectivity demands further consideration. It may fall within the broader 'great Australian silence' concerning the country's Indigenous history.⁵ Yet it is notable that this 'silence' is more complete in the 1802 drawings of Lesueur and Petit than it had been in those of Juan Ravanet⁶, who visited Port Jackson with the Malaspina expedition in 1793, and especially of colonial artists from the 1810s and French voyager-artists of the 1820s.⁷ On the point of timing, Geoffrey Dutton argues that the effects of colonisation on Port Jackson's Aborigines had become so clear by the 1820s that artists came to draw them more or less as they saw them.⁸ Yet the effects of colonisation were already quite clear in 1802. Conflict over the dispossession had come to a head that year when rebel leader Pemulwuy was executed, alcohol and tobacco had entered Aboriginal life, and some Aboriginal women had become involved in prostitution.⁹ Nicolas Baudin himself observed that the Eora had already learned to fear European weapons.¹⁰ More persuasive is Ron Radford and Jane Hylton's argument that at this time Aborigines were deemed a threat to the success of the Colony.¹¹

5 Dutton, p. 13.

6 J. Ravenet, Preliminary sketch of a Botany Bay scene and 'Reception of the Officers at Botany Bay', in R.J. King (ed.), *The secret history of the convict colony: Alexandro Malaspina's report on the British settlement of New South Wales* (Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1990), pp. 71, 142.

7 See, for example, A. Earle, *Natives of N.S. Wales as seen in the streets of Sydney*, 1830, reproduced in R. Radford and J. Hylton, *Australian colonial art: 1800-1900* (Adelaide, Art Gallery Board of South Australia, 1995), p. 37; and A. Earle, *View from the Sydney Hotel, c. 1825*, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an6065557> (accessed 13 June 2013). See also M. Rosenthal, 'The penitentiary as paradise', in *Double vision: Art histories and colonial histories in the Pacific* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 106; and A. Pellion, 'N^{lle} Hollande: Port-Jackson. Sauvages des Montagnes-Bleues', plate 66; 'N^{lle} Hollande: Port-Jackson. Sauvages des environs de la Rivière Nepean', plate 100; 'N^{lle} Hollande: Port-Jackson. Sauvages des Montagnes-Bleues', plate 101; and J. Arago, 'N^{lle} Hollande: Port-Jackson. Sauvages des environs de Sydney', plate 105, in J. Arago and A. Pellion, *Voyage autour du monde: Atlas historique* (Paris, Pillet Aîné, 1825).

8 Dutton, p. 25.

9 G. Karskens, *The Colony: A history of early Sydney* (Crows Nest, NSW, Allen and Unwin, 2009), pp. 386-447.

10 N. Baudin to P.G. King, Elephant Bay, King Island, 3 nivose an XI [24 December 1802], in F.M. Bladen (ed.), *Historical records of New South Wales*, vol. 5 (Sydney, Government Printer, 1896) [hereafter *HRNSW*], p. 826, and N. Baudin to A.-L. de Jussieu, Port Jackson, 20 brumaire an X [11 November 1802], Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle [hereafter *MNHN*], ms2082, pièce no. 5.

11 Radford and Hylton, p. 32.

Still, the British themselves surely felt more direct sense of threat than the French visitors. Perhaps attention should be paid not merely to the timing of this encounter or to the artists' circumstances in the Colony, but also to the artists' nationality. Though the 'silence' is also in the work of English voyager-artist, William Westall, whose stay in Sydney with the Flinders expedition coincided with Petit's and Lesueur's, it seems more deliberate in the work of the latter: the Frenchmen produced a larger and more varied corpus of ethnographic drawings than Westall and the separation of European and Indigenous worlds is consistent throughout.

Evidently, something about this turn-of-the-century moment — not simply in the history of the Colony, but also for Petit and Lesueur as Frenchmen — influenced this body of work. Lesueur's and Petit's drawings must be viewed against the backdrop of political and ideological change in turn-of-the-century France. When the Baudin expedition set sail from Le Havre in October 1800, France was emerging from revolution: Liberty, equality and fraternity had in theory been granted to the French people, slavery in the colonies had been abolished and the new Republic had been proclaimed *une et indivisible*. Both the government and the Institut National had set to work consolidating the revolution's reforms and one crucial element of this task was investigating how well the Republic's democratic principles were actually suited to the 'laws of nature'.¹² Out of this spirit of inquiry emerged the Société des Observateurs de l'Homme. Its aim was eventually to establish a Muséum de l'Homme, but more broadly to gather comprehensive observations of humanity by drawing on the disciplines of anatomy, physiology, medicine and hygiene.¹³ It was the Société that provided two strikingly different papers to guide the voyagers' work in this field: a treatise composed by Joseph-Marie Degérando, which posed research questions about 'savage' culture, and a set of directions for the collection and drawing of anatomical specimens from comparative anatomist Georges Cuvier.¹⁴ In both Degérando's

12 See M. Staum, *Minerva's message: Stabilizing the French Revolution* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996); C. Blanckaert, '1800 — Le moment "naturaliste" des sciences de l'homme', *Revue d'Histoire des Sciences Humaines*, 3 (2000), pp. 117-60; and N. Starbuck, *Baudin, Napoleon and the exploration of Australia* (London, Pickering and Chatto, 2013), pp. 17, 83-4.

13 L.F. Jauffret, 'Introduction aux mémoires de la société des Observateurs de l'Homme, 1800', in J. Copans and J. Jamin (eds), *Aux Origines de l'anthropologie française: Les Mémoires de la Société des Observateurs de l'Homme en l'an VIII* (Le Sycamore, Paris, 1978), pp. 71-85.

14 J.M. Degérando, 'Consirations sur les diverses méthodes à suivre dans l'observation des peuples sauvages, 1800', and G. Cuvier, 'Note instructive sur les recherches à faire relativement

treatise and the foundational writings of the Société des Observateurs a desire to renew faith in the 'greatness of Man' is evident.¹⁵ Recent violence and upheaval had affected morale, and revolutionary principles had emotionally and politically tied the concept of human equality to the French national identity.¹⁶ As Carol E. Harrison points out, naturalists looked for equality¹⁷, even as the establishment of democratic government accelerated the transition from the concept of encyclopaedic knowledge to disciplinary specialisation and, along with it, the move toward a 'science of Man'.¹⁸

The colonial scene at Port Jackson profoundly challenged such investment in civilisation and such tension between humanistic and scientific observation of humanity. The expedition's written accounts all reflect disappointment not merely that the Aborigines had failed to satisfy the ideal of 'natural man', but, above all, that they had failed to 'progress'.¹⁹ Correspondingly, the descriptions and evaluations they provide are relatively derogatory. The illustrations imply that the artists felt the same

aux différences anatomiques des diverses races d'hommes, 1800', in Copans and Jamin, pp. 127-69, 171-85.

15 Jauffret, pp. 76-7, 85.

16 M.-N. Bourguet, 'Race et folklore: L'Image officielle de la France en 1800', *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 31: 4 (July-August 1976), p. 812.

17 C.E. Harrison, 'Replotting the ethnographic romance: Revolutionary Frenchmen in the Pacific, 1769-1804', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 21:1 (January 2012), p. 40. See also: Bourguet, pp. 811-12, 815, 817; Staum, p. 160; Blanckaert, p. 135.

18 See Bourguet, pp. 802-23; D. Outram, 'New spaces in natural history', in N. Jardine, J.A. Secord and E.C. Spary, *Cultures of natural history* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 249-65; Blanckaert, pp. 117-60; J.-L. Chappey, *La Société des Observateurs de l'Homme: Des Anthropologues au temps de Bonaparte* (Paris, Société des Études Robspierristes, 2002), pp. 225-380; C.E. Harrison, 'Projections of the revolutionary nation: French expeditions in the Pacific, 1791-1803', *Osiris*, 24 (2009), pp. 33-52.

19 For a discussion of this perspective, see N. Starbuck, 'Neither savage nor civilized: The Aborigines of colonial Port Jackson, through French eyes, 1802', in A. Cook, N. Curthoys and S. Konishi (eds), *Representing humanity in the age of Enlightenment* (London, Pickering and Chatto, 2013). On this type of challenge to European notions of society, considered in a broader context of Pacific exploration, see H. Guest, *Empire, barbarism and civilisation: Captain Cook, William Hodges and the return to the Pacific* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 6. For examples of the Frenchmen's point of view, see T. Leschenault, 'Account of the vegetation of New Holland and Van Diemen's Land', in F. Péron [L. Freycinet], *Voyage of discovery to the Southern Lands*, vol. 3, *Dissertations on various subjects*, trans. C. Cornell (Adelaide, The Friends of the State Library of South Australia, 2007), p. 107; Baudin to King, in *HRNSW*, vol. 4, p. 826, and P.B. Milius, *Récit du voyage aux Terres australes*, ed. J. Bonnemains and P. Hauguel (Le Havre, Société havraise d'études diverses, Muséum d'histoire naturelle du Havre, 1987), p. 48.

sense of disappointment, but also promise a more nuanced reflection of contemporary French views of humanity. As Bronwen Douglas explains, images typically comprise more information than textual descriptions; in particular, they capture emotional responses that words fail to express accurately.²⁰ Lesueur's and Petit's illustrations can therefore be expected to have fleshed out and deepened the expedition's portrayal of humanity in the face of colonisation.

Lesueur's settlement views

The artists, along with the other scientific staff and Baudin himself, lodged in Sydney for the duration of their sojourn, so they no doubt encountered Aboriginal people not only on occasional inland excursions but on a daily basis in town. As explained, neither Lesueur nor Petit chose to draw this scene directly. However, Lesueur, who specialised in landscape drawing, did represent the encounter in his two 'Views' of Sydney, published in the *Voyage de découvertes, Atlas historique*, 1807.

The first one is described in its caption as a 'vue d'une partie de la ville de Sydney ... et de l'entrée du Port Jackson' (Figure 2.1). The dominant feature of the scene is not Sydney Town, but the harbour: calm water stretches across the foreground and enticingly away into the distance toward Sydney Heads. Upon the water are a number of vessels: canoes and dinghies to the foreground, sailing ships behind. One ship, pointing away toward Bennelong Point and the French tents erected there, provides the focal point; presumably, it belongs to the expedition. Before it, however, forming an extension of that focus, is a group of smaller vessels: sailors fishing in a canoe dragging a line of buoys, a dinghy piled with firewood and carrying three men — more sailors — and, in the centre and most to the foreground of the scene, two Aborigines in a fishing canoe, identifiable by the fire burning at its centre. Colonial buildings and gardens cling to the edge of Sydney Cove and occupy only a small part of the scene, as though secondary to this maritime setting. On the northern point of the cove, behind a stone fort at the water's edge, are three Aboriginal men: they look out at the harbour with their backs to the settlement. The final feature of this scene is the sky. It presents a distinctly delineated set of cumulous clouds that sit low and

²⁰ B. Douglas, 'Art as ethno-historical text: Science, representation and Indigenous presence in eighteenth and nineteenth-century oceanic voyage literature', in Thomas and Losche, p. 66. See also Smith, p. 139, and Dutton, p. 13.

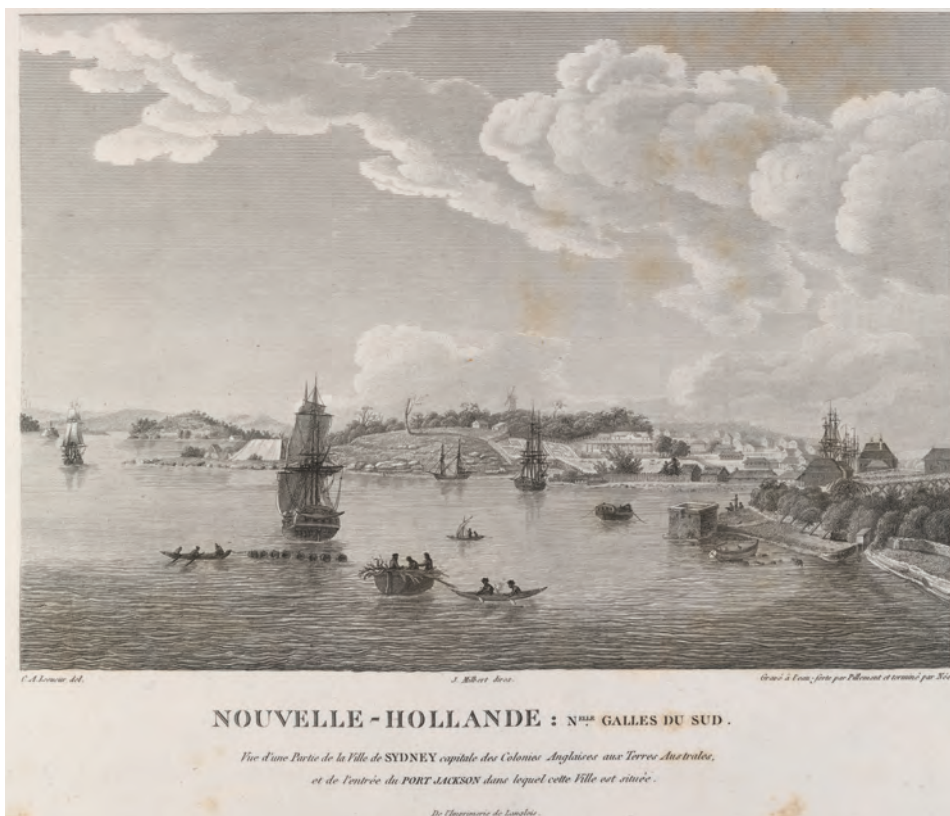


Figure 2.1: V. Pillement (after C.-A. Lesueur), 'Nouvelle-Holland, Nouvelle-Galles du Sud, vue d'une partie de la ville de Sydney, capitale des colonies anglaises aux terres australes, et de l'entrée du Port Jackson dans lequel cette ville est située'. Engraving in C.-A. Lesueur and N.-M. Petit, *Voyage de découvertes aux Terres australes, Atlas historique* (Paris, Imprimerie de l'Anglois, 1807), National Library of Australia, an7568617, Plate 37.

deep over Sydney Town and rise higher, allowing more light, as they extend across the harbour and away toward the ocean.

If, in its composition, Lesueur's 'View' from the harbour seems to associate the expedition more intimately with the sea and the Aboriginal inhabitants of Port Jackson than with the colonists or the Colony itself, then his subsequent 'View' does so yet more distinctly (Figure 2.2). This panoramic view takes in Sydney Cove, with Bennelong Point laid out across the foreground, Sydney Town sweeping around the water's edge to the northern point of the Cove opposite, and the still water, scattered with sailing ships and canoes, opening out on the right-hand side. The curve of the



Figure 2.2: V. Pillement (after C.-A. Lesueur), 'Nouvelle-Hollande, Nouvelle-Galles du Sud, vue de la partie meridionale de la ville de Sydney, capitale des colonies anglaises aux terres australes et l'embouchure de la riviere Parramatta 1803'. Engraving in C.-A. Lesueur and N.-M. Petit, *Voyage de découvertes aux Terres australes, Atlas historique* (Paris, Imprimerie de l'Anglois, 1807), National Library of Australia, an7568621, Plate 18.

cove combined with dark lines and shades draw attention to an ethnographic scene in the left foreground corner. Here are three Aboriginal men beneath a large tree: one, on hands and knees, blows on a small fire, another crouches alongside, while the other walks towards them with a spear in his hand, looking backward over his shoulder. All three are depicted naked, muscular, with tight curly hair, and separated from the rest of the image by a border of large rocks and hillocks. The expedition's tents, surrounded by voyagers tending to their tasks, are located just beyond this border and in the centre of the drawing. However, visitors and Aboriginal inhabitants are not entirely apart, for just across from the tents, by the water, there is another trio of Aboriginal men. A solid fence separates them all from Sydney and, immediately behind it, a row of trees so thick and tall it obscures the southernmost section of the town. Altogether, this 'View' — which features a clear sky as well as a balance between that sky, the sea and the land, and also between the spaces inhabited by colonists, visitors and Aborigines — suggests a more sanguine attitude about the Colony than that represented in the previous scene; and yet the dividing line between the colonial space and the shared space of the visitors and Aboriginal people is given greater emphasis.

This demarcation distinguishes the visual representations of the encounter from the written accounts. In their journals, letters and ethnographies, the Frenchmen describe Port Jackson's Aboriginal people with scarce mention of the circumstances in which they made their observations. They also show less interest in the Aborigines, on the whole, than in the settlers and colonial officials.²¹ By contrast, Lesueur's 'Views' distance the voyagers from the Colony's newcomers and place them near the Aboriginal inhabitants: both groups are marginal to the colonial space.

This angle also bears an interesting comparison to similar scenes by contemporary British artists. It is widely accepted that these artists composed peaceful settlement scenes to promote the successful transplantation of British society to New South Wales.²² They omit any signs of cross-cultural conflict, like Lesueur, but they also pay closer attention to the details of the colonial settlement: for instance, the buildings and bridges, gardens and farms, fences and roads.²³ During his own sojourn in 1802, William Westall concentrated on natural scenes, but he did produce one drawing that is comparable to Lesueur's 'Views': in its foreground is an Aboriginal man in a canoe, alongside a European-style vessel; yet the focal point is Government House (Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3: William Westall, 'Sydney, Government House', 1802. National Library of Australia, an4549391. To view this image, see <http://nla.gov.au/nla-pic-an4549391>.

John Eyre's 'Settlement Views', completed in 1806 and 1808, are more similar in their composition to Lesueur's, particularly the 'View' from Bennelong Point.²⁴ Aboriginal subjects, presented in the foreground, focus on a campfire or the task of fishing, while others look away from Sydney Town; their spears are held at ease. Yet Eyre's 1806 subjects are otherwise very different from Lesueur's: oddly black-coloured and dwarf-like, they are caricatures, contemplating the scene of European order and industry

21 Starbuck, *Baudin, Napoleon and the exploration of Australia*, pp. 81-99.

22 See, for example, Rosenthal, p. 117.

23 See, for example, J. Eyre, 'View of Sydney from the west side of the Cove', c. 1806, plate 10, and 'East View of Sydney', c. 1808, plate 11, in J. Gleeson, *Colonial painters, 1788-1880* (Melbourne, Lansdowne Press, 1971).

24 See, for example, J. Eyre, 'View of Sydney from the west side of the Cove', c. 1806, plate 10, and 'East View of Sydney', c. 1808, plate 11, in J. Gleeson, *Colonial painters, 1788-1880* (Melbourne, Lansdowne Press, 1971).

before them.²⁵ In this painting, Eyre clearly privileged the constructions and industry of the settlers. In 1808, he painted the settlement further into the background and depicted his Aboriginal subjects more delicately, if imprecisely; yet, once more, he gave an impression of incongruity: huddled round a campfire on a neat lawn, by the busy harbour's edge, the Aborigines appear distinctly out of place.²⁶

By comparison to these British works, Lesueur's 'Views', with their focus on the sea and their foregrounding of a voyager-Aboriginal space, are more like depictions of encounter than traditional colonial scenes. Rather than starkly contrasting his Aboriginal subjects against the European settlement, Lesueur allows the Aboriginal people to blend into the composition of the harbour view, while in the Bennelong Point 'View' he presents them in a 'state of nature', and with meticulous detail grants them a sense of nobility. This comforting portrayal represents a notable continuity in Lesueur's ethnographic gaze from the Tasmanian encounters, which produced detailed and accurate sketches of Aboriginal groups, huts and burial sites, to this rather different colonial contact (Figures 2.4 and 2.5). While British artists added Aboriginal subjects to their studies of the colonial settlement, Lesueur drew the Aborigines and his expedition against a colonial backdrop.

Figure 2.4: C.-L. Fortier (after C.-A. Lesueur), 'Terre de Diemen, navigation, vue de la côte orientale de l'Île Schouten'. Engraving in the *Atlas of the Voyage de découvertes aux terres australes* (Paris, Imprimerie de l'Anglois, 1807), National Library of Australia, an7573651. To view this image, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an7573651>.

Figure 2.5: V. Pillement (after C.-A. Lesueur), 'Terre de Diemen, Île Maria, tombeaux des naturels'. Engraving in the *Atlas of the Voyage de découvertes aux terres australes* (Paris, Imprimerie de l'Anglois, 1807), National Library of Australia, an7573653. To view this image, see <http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an7573653>.

Lesueur's typical landscapes

Aside from the sketches of purportedly public sexual intercourse, which lack any visual context and were not published, Lesueur's ethnographic scenes from Port Jackson fit

25 Eyre, 'View of Sydney from the West Side of the Cove', c. 1806, plate 10, in Gleeson, *Colonial painters, 1788-1880*.

26 Eyre, 'East View of Sydney', c. 1808, plate 11, in Gleeson, *Colonial painters, 1788-1880*.



Figure 2.6: A. Delvaux (after C.-A. Lesueur), 'Grottes, chasse et pêche des sauvages du port Jackson, à la Nouvelle-Holland'. Engraving in the *Atlas of the Voyage de découvertes aux terres australes*, 2nd edn (Paris, Arthus Bertrand, 1824), National Library of Australia, an7569797, Plate 31.

the genre of 'typical landscapes' as defined by Smith: they are clearly intended to present the Aboriginal people of Port Jackson in their 'appropriate environmental situation'.²⁷ Two engravings, 'Grottes, chasse et pêche des sauvages du Port-Jackson' and 'Navigation', provide apt examples.

With 'Navigation', Lesueur addresses a particular theme: the construction and use of Aboriginal canoes (Figure 2.6). 'Grottes, chasse et peches' is a broader ethnographic study: it shows men, women and children in canoes on the water as well as on the shores fishing, tending campfires, hunting and gathering food (Figure 2.7). The figures are drawn in the same style as in the 'Views' of Sydney: where they are close enough to the foreground, we can see their muscular forms and facial profiles. Both drawings also show trees and birdlife in great detail; indeed, their function within the nascent discipline of anthropology and the fields of natural history is obvious. However, their romantic influence is clear as well, in their representation of the natural world as a

²⁷ Smith, pp. 147-8.



Figure 2.7: C.-L. Forestier (after C.-A. Lesueur), 'Navigation'. Engraving in the *Atlas of the Voyage de découvertes aux terres australes*, 2nd edn (Paris, Arthus Bertrand, 1824), National Library of Australia, an7573675, Plate 34.

place of fertility, abundance and harmony: flocks of birds feature in 'Navigation', a mother carries an infant upon her shoulders in 'Grottes, chasse et pêche', and, overall, this latter drawing is focused on the gathering and preparation of fresh food.

These images contrast with the word-pictures sketched by many of Lesueur's fellow-voyagers. Baudin, Leschenault, Milius and Péron all suggest that the Aborigines led a rather bleak existence.²⁸ Leschenault and Péron, in particular, blamed the 'lack

28 Baudin to King, *HRNSW*, vol. 5, p. 826; Baudin to de Jussieu, MNHN, ms2082, pièce no. 5; Leschenault, pp. 97-109; Milius, p. 48; F. Péron, 'Conférence adressée à "Messieurs les Professeurs" décrivant les aborigènes et leur moeurs près de Port Jackson', n.d., Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Le Havre, Collection Lesueur [hereafter MHN, CL], dossier 09 032; F. Péron [L. Freycinet], *Voyage of discovery to the Southern Lands*, vol. 1, 2nd edn, trans. C. Cornell (Adelaide, Friends of the State Library of South Australia, 2006), pp. 301, 302, 311, 313 and

of food, its poor quality, and the labour needed to obtain it', for the Aborigines' apparently 'miserable' and 'vegetating' state.²⁹ Yet, the Frenchmen generally praised Port Jackson's environment for its fertile soil, variety of flora and healthy climate. Clearly, then, the key differentiating factor between these written accounts and Lesueur's landscapes was not the way each observer evaluated the environment but the lens through which they viewed the Aboriginal people. Most of the writings engage with the Aborigines' perceived lack of 'improvement' despite ongoing contact with British society³⁰, and the sense of distaste they reveal is marked — even more so than that which had emerged in the voyagers' accounts by the end of the Tasmanian encounters.³¹ This is interesting because at that time the Frenchmen's notion of the 'noble savage' had been unsettled by signs of hostility and perceived ingratitude while, by all accounts, the subsequent Port Jackson stay was entirely free of French-Aboriginal discord. Evidently, it was more the apparent failure to embrace colonisation than the nature of the encounter itself that influenced the view of most of the voyagers.

Lesueur, by contrast, depicted the Aborigines of Port Jackson much as he had the Tasmanians and, moreover, he avoided the issue of 'progress' in his writing as well. In an unpublished manuscript, he carefully describes the fishing practices of Port Jackson's Aboriginal people: where by the water's edge or in their canoes the Aborigines typically position themselves for fishing, the spears, lines and shells they use, and how they use them.³² His point of view is not entirely objective because it is selective, but, having chosen his subject, he certainly describes it in an impartial way. This disciplined outlook would seem to have been his starting point as he turned to the representation of Aboriginal life through landscape.

Moreover, he determinedly maintained this outlook as he shifted his gaze from inland settings to the shoreline and waters of Sydney Cove. Lesueur's 'Views' take in

Chapter XX, 'Experiments on the physical strength of the native peoples of Van Diemen's Land and New Holland the inhabitants of Timor', pp. 351-85.

29 Péron, *Voyage of discovery*, vol. 1, pp. 366-7, and Leschenault, pp. 107.

30 Starbuck, *Baudin, Napoleon and the exploration of Australia*, pp. 81-99.

31 See, for example N. Baudin, 'Des naturels que nous trouvions et de leur conduite envers nous', in Copans and Jamin, pp. 205-17; and Péron, *Voyage of discovery*, vol. 1, pp. 353-4, 359, 364-9.

32 C.-A. Lesueur, 'Pêche des aborigènes du Port Jackson', trans. J. Bonnemains, MHN, CL, dossier 09 031.

the township of Sydney without engaging with its associated issues of dispossession or civilisation: he depicts the Aborigines on its fringe as untouched by European society, whilst at the same time neither contrasting them against it nor portraying them as if they are in awe of it. Indeed, they appear just like the subjects of the 'typical landscapes'. Ultimately, Lesueur framed the Aborigines of Port Jackson within the paradigm of encounter rather than colonialism. This frame considerably facilitated his task, for it enabled him to respect the requirements of natural history illustration, to avoid problematising contemporary belief in civilisation and to uphold faith in the 'noble savage' and the 'greatness of man'.

Petit's portraits

Nicolas-Martin Petit took as much care as Lesueur to dissociate his Aboriginal subjects from the colonial setting; nonetheless, there are significant points of comparison between the portraits he produced at Port Jackson and the scenes they would accompany in the *Voyage de découvertes*. Lesueur achieved a degree of empathy by carefully recalling the details of Aboriginal bodies and manners — details he had observed during the long course of the sojourn and assimilated with the memory of previous observations as well as pre-existing beliefs about humanity. His subjects are not individuals but particular representations of Port Jackson's Aboriginal people. Given the nature of portraiture, we can assume that Petit, for his own part, sketched what was immediately before him, one individual at a time. The portraiture process would have involved direct, one-on-one exchange, extended over a period of time. It must have been an intimate exchange, which naturally produced a degree of familiarity. For Petit, however, this would not have been a familiarity gained solely during the portraiture sessions, but a deepened understanding of individuals he had undoubtedly come to know through casual contact and through his British hosts during these five months in port.³³ Petit's subjects were individuals who lived in and around Sydney; they are identified by name in the portraits' captions and some of them were also participants in the comparative strength experiments carried out by the expedition's self-styled 'observer of man', François Péron.³⁴ Their portraits

33 Margaret Sankey highlights that the British colonists mediated the French voyagers' view of the Aborigines of Port Jackson. See 'The Aborigines of Port Jackson, as seen by the Baudin expedition', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 41: 2 (2004), p. 125.

34 M. Sankey, 'The Baudin expedition in Port Jackson, 1802: Cultural encounters and enlightenment politics', *Explorations*, 31 (December 2001), p. 20 and 'The Aborigines of Port

therefore reflect less sentimentality on the part of the artist and a more profound, more direct, empathy than do the scenes Lesueur sketched.³⁵

They are also remarkably realistic, which was no doubt due not only to Petit's familiarity with his subjects, and to his openness to a common humanity, but also to his 'scientific' purpose. As for their predecessors of the late eighteenth century, Petit's and Lesueur's role was to provide accurate illustrations that would complement their companions' natural history reports; however, unlike earlier missions, the Baudin expedition had been issued with an official 'note instructive' that included particular directions for portraiture. Georges Cuvier desired portraits that would contribute to his research into 'racial' characteristics and, more precisely, 'les rapports entre la perfection de l'esprit et la beauté de la figure'.³⁶ Accordingly, he instructed Baudin's artists to work with 'précision géométrique', always to ensure that 'le profil pur soit joint au portrait de visage', and to depict subjects of diverse ages, genders and 'conditions'. He needed to see 'le véritable caractère de la physionomie' of each people and therefore also explained that the portraits should exclude 'les costumes, les marques' and 'tous les ornements étrangers, les bagues, les pendants, le tatouage', and should show 'la même arrangement des cheveux, le plus simple possible'.³⁷

At Port Jackson, Petit's approach to portraiture conformed to the most essential of Cuvier's wishes: the utmost attention to facial features. However, his concentration on accuracy was so great that the body of work he ultimately produced represents a range of individuals at least as strongly as it does a 'racial' type. Overall, the subjects' noses and lips are similarly formed, but the prominence of their cheekbones, chins and brows is distinctly varied and there are natural differences in muscularity and expression as well. Moreover, Petit deepened the representations by adding to each a sense of cultural context and individual character.³⁸ Contrary to Cuvier's instruction,

Jackson', p. 124.

35 J. Fornasiero, P. Monteath and J. West-Sooby point out, too, that Petit's portraits neither engage in sentimentality nor idealise body shapes and proportions. Moreover, they add that they reveal a degree of the subjects' 'inner life'. See *Encountering Terra Australis: The Australian voyages of Nicolas Baudin and Matthew Flinders* (Kent Town, Wakefield Press, 2004), p. 324.

36 Cuvier, p. 173.

37 Cuvier, pp. 174-5.

38 See also S. Konishi, 'Depicting sexuality: A case study of the Baudin expedition's Aboriginal ethnography', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 41: 2 (2004), p. 110.

he included ornaments, body-paint and scarification, as well as various hairstyles; for example, Bedgi-bedgi wears a string of red beads, wound loosely several times round his neck (Figure 2.8); Y-erran-gou-la-ga wears a prominent nasal ornament and has streaks of red paint on his forehead, chin and cheeks as well as scarification and a distinct design in white paint across his chest and shoulders (Figure 2.9), while Nourou-gal-derri, depicted in full, wears a red headband and string belt, and carries a spear and shield (Figure 2.10).

Figure 2.8: R. Bartholomey (after N.-M. Petit), 'Nouvelle-Hollande, Bedgi-Bedgi, jeune homme de la tribu des Gwea-gal'. Engraving in the *Atlas of the Voyage de découvertes aux terres australes*, 2nd edn (Paris, Arthus Bertrand, 1824), National Library of Australia, an7569774, Plate 22. To view this image, see <http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an7569774>.

Figure 2.9: R. Bartholomey (after N.-M. Petit), 'Nouvelle-Holland, Y-erran-gou-la-ga'. Engraving in the *Atlas of the Voyage de découvertes aux terres australes*, 2nd edn (Paris, Arthus Bertrand, 1824), National Library of Australia, an7573663, Plate 24. To view this image, see <http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an7573663>.

Like Lesueur's Port Jackson views and ethnographic landscapes, Petit's portraits are incongruent with the voyagers' many written statements about these people's character and human condition. The individuals appear strong and healthy and, in their relaxed posture and alert yet open expressions, they do not appear to be hostile, 'vegetating' or unintelligent. They by no means represent the 'fierce', 'cruel' or 'treacherous' faces that Péron describes.³⁹ In fact, while the written accounts reflect a more critical attitude toward Port Jackson's Aborigines than they had toward the Tasmanians, and Lesueur's scenes show a continuity of vision from one encounter to the next, these portraits, as scholars have remarked, indicate that Petit took still greater care and identified yet more closely with the 'natives' of the Colony than with those he had met in Tasmania.⁴⁰ Given the comparative circumstances of the encounters, this is not entirely surprising; as Margaret Sankey suggests, Petit no doubt achieved a much greater degree of intimacy with the Port Jackson subjects.⁴¹ Perhaps, too, as

39 Péron, *Voyage of discovery*, vol. 1, p. 375.

40 Fornasiero, Monteath and West-Sooby, *Encountering Terra Australis*, pp. 323-4.

41 Sankey, 'The Aborigines of Port Jackson', p. 124.



Figure 2.10: R. Bartholomey (after N.-M. Petit), 'Nouvelle-Holland, Nouvelle-Galles du Sude, Nourou-gal-derri s'avancant pour combattre'. Engraving in the *Atlas of the Voyage de découvertes aux terres australes*, 2nd edn (Paris, Arthus Bertrand, 1824), National Library of Australia, an7569780, Plate 25.

Jean Fornasiero and John West-Sooby propose, it is possible that he viewed these people as somewhat 'tamed' by the influences of the Colony and thus more familiar.⁴²

⁴² J. Fornasiero and J. West-Sooby, 'Taming the unknown: The representation of Terra Australis by the Baudin expedition 1801-1803', in A. Chittleborough, G. Dooley, B. Glover and R. Hosking (eds), *Alas for the pelicans: Flinders, Baudin and beyond* (Kent Town, SA, Wakefield Press, 2002) p. 78; and Fornasiero, Monteath and West-Sooby, *Encountering Terra Australis*, p. 368.

On occasion, Petit did turn away from individuals in order to sketch certain ethnographic scenes. In 'Nouvelle Hollande, Port Jackson: Cérémonie préliminaire d'un mariage chez les sauvages', he depicted two groups of men performing a tug-of-war over a woman. They pull at her arms and hair, some brandishing spears, while, pushed down on one knee and apparently crying in anguish, the woman seems helpless and tormented.⁴³ However, this violent scene does not correspond to any of the Frenchmen's written accounts; in fact, it is as likely to have been based on British anecdotes or images as on a personal observation. It represents a long-standing stereotype of 'savage' sexuality, as Shino Konishi points out⁴⁴, and bears little relation to the French-Aboriginal encounter of 1802. The three scenes 'showing Aborigines copulating', one sketched by Petit and one (of which there are two variants) by Lesueur, further demonstrate the ethnographic interest in sexuality.⁴⁵ As Konishi observes, they are depictions of an act rather than of individuals; for example, the couple's facial features are drawn quite differently than those in Petit's portraits.

However, in two of these scenes, the couples' affection is represented quite clearly: in one the subjects embrace and in the other they look into each other's eyes. The third image, Konishi suggests, was modified to show more explicit detail and to give a more voyeuristic effect, for the purposes of profit should the image be published.⁴⁶ Like most of Petit's and Lesueur's works discussed here, these scenes are not visibly associated with the colonial context. Yet neither are they detailed drawings imbued with a sense of the artists' connection with their subjects. Instead, they reflect the lingering influence of 'savage' tropes, the increasingly invasive methodology of the 'natural history of Man' and a tentative attitude: they are only roughly sketched and, in the end, were not published in the *Atlas historique*.

To return to the published portraits, it is notable that, as more empathetic renderings of humanity than those Petit produced of uncolonised Aborigines, and

43 S. Leroy, 'Nouvelle Hollande, Port Jackson: Cérémonie préliminaire d'un mariage chez les sauvages', engraving after N.-M. Petit, plate 104, in Arago and Pellion, *Voyage autour du monde: Atlas historique* (1825).

44 Konishi, 'Depicting sexuality', p. 101.

45 The three sketches are all entitled 'Scene showing Aborigines copulating'; they are held at the MNH Le Havre, Collection Lesueur, and catalogued 16055, 16056.1 and 16056.2. Both 16055 and 16056.1 are reproduced in Bonnemaïn, Forsyth and Smith, *Baudin in Australian Waters*, pp. 98-9.

46 Konishi, 'Depicting sexuality', pp. 110-12.

as representations so silent about the colonial context, these portraits differ distinctly from those produced by French voyager-artists in Port Jackson subsequently, when the scientific approach to studying human diversity was more developed. During his visit with the Freycinet expedition in 1820, for example, Alphonse Pellion drew two Aboriginal men in jackets — torn, dirty and worn askew — with their genitalia exposed, and a look of profound weariness on their faces and in their posture (Figure 2.11).

Figure 2.11: A. Pellion, 'Sauvages de la Nouvelle Galles du Sud (d'apres nature dans leur Camp pres de Sidney, 20 dec. 1819)', 1819. State Library of New South Wales [SLNSW], SV/118. To view this image, see <http://acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/item/itemLarge.aspx?itemID=446493>.

Even Pellion's more experienced companion, artist Jacques Arago, in his more realistic and sensitively sketched portraits, did not flinch from the effects of colonisation on Aboriginal people. Almost all his subjects wore shirts, and some also wore a jacket or a hat. Moreover, while Pellion did also publish a sketch of Port Jackson Aborigines in a 'state of nature', it is a grotesque caricature (Figure 2.12). The subjects' features are exaggerated, even in comparison to the accompanying written ethnography⁴⁷, and they contrast sharply with the portraits of various uncolonised individuals of the Pacific Islands, which were all rendered with a relative sense of attention to accuracy and of empathy.

Figure 2.12: E. Forget (after A. Pellion), 'N^{lle} Hollande: Port-Jackson. Sauvages des Montagnes-Bleues'. Engraving in J. Arago and A. Pellion, *Voyage autour du monde: Atlas historique* (Paris, Pillet Aîné, 1825). National Library of Australia, an9032044, Plate 101. To view this image, see <http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an9032044>.

It is also notable that it was in Arago's and Pellion's *Atlas* that Petit's 'Cérémonie préliminaire d'un mariage' was finally published. Clearly, as Marc-Serge Rivière demonstrates, the naturalists and artists of the Freycinet (1817-20), Bougainville (1824-26) and d'Urville (1826-29) expeditions engaged closely and

⁴⁷ See also J. Arago, 'Five portraits of Aborigines from around Sydney', 1819, SLNSW, <http://acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/album/albumView.aspx?acmsID=52166&itemID=823406> (accessed 13 June 2013); and L. Freycinet, *Voyage autour du monde: Atlas historique*, tome II, livre III (Paris, Chez Pillet Aine, 1826), pp. 703-908.

more dispassionately than their Revolutionary predecessors with the social problems of the colonial project at Port Jackson.⁴⁸ Indeed, much occurred to influence French colonialism in the years between these voyages: French colonists and soldiers lost their battle against the former slaves of Saint-Domingue, and the independent Republic of Haiti was declared; slavery in the remaining French colonies was re-introduced; and the Napoleonic Empire rapidly expanded and, just as swiftly, drew to a close. The principle of equality became firmly embedded in French society but, by the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy, few imagined it might be applied beyond the nation's borders. This was a time when 'observations of Man' were less motivated by philosophical and political questions than by scientific aims to explain differences and classify peoples: a time when debate about establishing a penal policy in Oceania was vigorous. Indeed, it was inevitable that the voyagers' view of the Eora, in the Restoration period, would be more critical and more conspicuously framed by colonial concerns than that of their predecessors.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The turn of the century, when Baudin's ships set sail for the *Terres australes*, was a time of optimistic colonial visions in France. While the study of humanity was certainly becoming more systematic, French observers were still strongly invested in the concept of universalism. This historical moment combined with the circumstances of the expedition and of the Aboriginal people at Port Jackson to produce a particular mix of sentiment and science in Lesueur's and Petit's ethnographic art. While the romance of the noble savage concept is in evidence, especially in Lesueur's scenes, the realistic lines and shades of Petit's portraits indicate that the myth was in fact penetrated. Through the intimacy of both the contact zone and the portraiture process, and through the demands of natural history illustration, the Aborigines' fundamental human nature was exposed to Petit and Lesueur. It was, however, only partly set down on paper. The artists from the Revolution era were open to signs of a shared humanity because it was what they expected and wanted to find, and they concentrated on the comforting sense of universality. Yet their absolute determination to exclude the

48 M.S. Rivière, 'Distant echoes of the enlightenment: Private and public observations of convict life by Baudin's disgraced Officer, Hyacinthe de Bougainville (1825)', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 41: 2 (2004), pp. 170-85.

49 J. Dunmore, *French explorers in the Pacific*, vol. 2: *The nineteenth century* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 386.

colonial context from their images suggests that they could not otherwise maintain this insight. Neither were they prepared, as later French voyager-artists would be, to venture an explanation of Aboriginal humanity as it stood on the middle ground.

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