

Claremont Colleges

Scholarship @ Claremont

2022 Claremont Colleges Library
Undergraduate Research Award

Claremont Colleges Library Undergraduate
Research Award

4-11-2022

Louis Choris and Scientific Illustration: Visualizing Colonialism in New California

Bella R. Pettengill
thebellarose13@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cclura_2022

Recommended Citation

Pettengill, Bella R., "Louis Choris and Scientific Illustration: Visualizing Colonialism in New California" (2022). *2022 Claremont Colleges Library Undergraduate Research Award*. 2.
https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cclura_2022/2

This Sophomore Award Winner is brought to you for free and open access by the Claremont Colleges Library Undergraduate Research Award at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in 2022 Claremont Colleges Library Undergraduate Research Award by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

Bella Pettengill

Professor Chu

Science and Empire

14 December 2021

Louis Choris and Scientific Illustration: Visualizing Colonialism in New California

Introduction

In winter, bands of Indians come from the mountains to be admitted to the mission, but the greater part of them leave in the spring. They do not like the life at the mission. They find it irksome to work continually and to have everything supplied to them in abundance. In their mountains, they live a free and independent, albeit a miserable, existence.¹

Louis Choris, artist

Allow this quotation from the preface of Louis Choris's book of scientific illustrations from his travels along the Pacific to give setting to the era of colonization, scientific exploration, and the production of knowledge from which it came. The way it battles with itself to simultaneously acknowledge and falsify indigenous experience mimics a similar oxymoron of the scientific illustration. The job of a scientific illustration in this era is to capture truth; it is used to classify and to share facts about the world. Though, just as this quote tries to describe its multifaceted surroundings with declarative stoicism, interpretations are not fact. They contain biases and they are always subjective.

It must be asked what the role of historian is then, when analyzing even more subjective sources such as scientific illustrations that masquerade as fact, and have long been acknowledged as such. With hope, I aim to expand upon this question through the examination of the illustrations that were born out of this era of travel, as well as their larger role in the scientific community. Choris, a German-Russian painter, created the book *Voyage Pittoresque autor de*

¹ Louis Choris, Nash and Taylor Taylor, and Porter Garnett, *San Francisco One Hundred Years Ago* (San Francisco : A. M. Robertson, 1913), <http://archive.org/details/sanfranciscooneh00chorrich>.

monde, which is widely considered to be the most beautifully illustrated book of the North American Pacific coast for its time. While it includes details of people, animals, landscapes and objects from Asia and Africa, as well as the Americas, this paper focuses on the section of Choris's Romanzoff expedition to the New California coast, specifically San Francisco. At only 20 years old, Choris joined Russian explorer Lieutenant Otto von Kotzebue on his 1815 voyage aboard the Rurik as the groups' artist. It was his job to document and to *visualize* the science, knowledge and conquests they were in search of.

By academics of his time and even today, Choris is specifically praised for his ability to capture what he saw *exactly as he saw it*.² What is potentially problematic about this, though, is that it reduces the visualization process into something that can be performed in one fell swoop by someone who meets a certain threshold of skill. Rather, in order to make something *visible*, the artist must make a series of unique decisions that culminate into a singular representation of that thing. This idea of visualization is headed by Daniela Bleichmar in her book *Visible Empire* on the subject of botanical scientific illustration during the Hispanic Enlightenment³. Bleichmar addresses the fact that this genre of document– scientific illustration– has generally had no place in art history nor in natural history. Additionally, Bronwen Douglas demonstrated her agreement on the historical merit of scientific illustrations, while still analyzing and acknowledging how indigenous actions shaped their creation.⁴ Another historian, Rebecca Earle, argues how feelings about art, science and sexuality at the time influence the purposes of Spanish casta paintings

² David Iglar, "Indigenous Travelers and Knowledge Production in the Pacific: The Case of Kadu and Ludwig Choris," *History Compass* 15, no. 12 (2017): e12431, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12431>; Harry Liebersohn, "Images of Monarchy: Kamehameha I and the Art of Louis Choris," in *Double Vision : Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific*, ed. Thomas, Nicholas, Diane Losche, and Jennifer Newell (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 44–64, <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/toc/cam025/98046025.html>.

³ Bleichmar, Daniela. 2012. *Visible Empire : Botanical Expeditions and Visual Culture in the Hispanic Enlightenment*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁴ Douglas, Bronwen. "Art as ethno-historical text: science, representation and indigenous presence in eighteenth and nineteenth century oceanic voyage literature." *Double Vision: Art histories and colonial histories in the Pacific* (1999).

beyond that of racial classification.⁵ Building from these previous works, what is most important for our purposes is to uncover the *motives* and *biases* that shape the process by which an illustration is made and who it is made for.

The existing literature on the subject very thoroughly discusses the intellectual aspects of scientific illustration, especially pertaining to *botanical* interpretations. In my research, I intend to tie in socio-political contexts whilst analyzing Choris' *anthropological* paintings as tools of empire in the course of natural history. Through an investigation of Choris's illustrations as scientific documents, I aim to prove that intellectual, social and political factors consciously and subconsciously implement biases into previously assumed "objective and scientific" representative drawings. Further, I argue that the basis in which these documents were created cause them to contribute to the colonization of indigenous history. Simultaneously, a more modern scope reveals a net-positive of the illustrations towards the record-keeping of Ohlone culture. This "net-positive," though, only exists because it relies on the more ingrained institutions of colonization such as taxonomy, imperial competitions, and mission life.

Over the course of this paper, I will first discuss the foundations of scientific exploration, as well their basis in political conflicts. Then, I will break down the positioning of Mission Dolores in Choris's work as a setting for his work as subjective artworks and historical documents. Lastly, following further visual analysis and an understanding of European audiences, I will conclude with a larger discussion on the role of visual record-keeping in modern indigenous cultures.

⁵ Earle, Rebecca. 2016. "The Pleasures of Taxonomy: Casta Paintings, Classification, and Colonialism." *William & Mary Quarterly* 73 (3).

The Pursuit of Knowledge

To understand the setting in which the scientific illustrations came to be, it is crucial to establish both a scientific, socio-political context and a personal context on the artist himself. Louis Choris, otherwise referred to as Ludovik/Ludwig, was especially prepared to capture the colonial European perspective that was ingrained into scientific illustrations at the time. Born to academic German parents who died young, Choris grew up as the foster child of an art professor. He would later travel to Saint Petersburg, where his botanical drawings would earn him attention in the scientific art world. Before joining the Rurik at only 20 years old, a teenage Choris came of age having already served as an official botanical illustrator for Russian explorer Marshal von Biberstein's scientific expedition to the Caucasus Mountains. In this respect, his reputation as an artist was on the rise. His magnum opus, *Voyage Pittoresque*, was drawn during the 3-year Rurik voyage (1815-1818), with his California drawings dating back to 1816. The book would be published in 1822. After this, he furthered his travels to Central and South America, where he would be killed by robbers in 1828.

For context, before Choris's time, the field of natural history had experienced a sharp increase in popularity all throughout the 18th century, with a new system of classification being the driving force. This would be owed to the modest beginnings of a young Swedish naturalist, Carl Linné, or Linnaeus, who in 1735 would publish his book *Systema Naturae*, or *The System of Nature*. In its essence, this book was an attempt to have a grasp on nature— it aimed to classify every plant on earth according to its reproductive parts. Using Latin, which he believed was “nobody's language”, Linnaeus aimed to develop a sort of neutral system that could be contributed to by scientists internationally.⁶ It would be his second and third attempts, though,

⁶ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Second edition (London New York: Routledge, 2008), 25.

Philosophia Botanica (1751) and the *Species Plantarum* (1753) that would define the progress of natural history in the remainder of the 18th century and onward. What these books inspired within European minds was a drive to discover, a deep curiosity that would manifest and become capitalized into a force of conquest.

Subsequently, in the second half of the 18th century, expeditions became inherently scientific, whether or not they intended to be.⁷ Very often accompanied by a natural scientist and even an artist, voyages were set off with the new purpose of exploring the *interiors* of foreign lands. The Linnaean system of classification was used to justify governing bodies' fervor in pushing onwards beyond coastal outlines of other continents. It was their duty to fill the empty maps and to expand the botanical archives, for the sake of knowledge and of society. Naturally, this decision was made with no invitation from the peoples whose land they were so eager to dissect. In fact, indigenous people were given very little regard at all, besides literally being another species to classify and archive.

I would argue that what began as benign scientific curiosity was in fact what inspired these grander, more reckless ideas of exploration fueled by competition. The Linnaean system of classification offered European governmental powers a justification to explore "in the name of science." England, France and Spain became especially fixated on this pursuit of science, or otherwise growing collection of knowledge, so that each botanical cabinet was larger than the others. This is not to say that competition was the sole proprietor in the growing number of expeditions that were set off to foreign lands. It was competition that motivated governing powers into funding and organizing these expeditions manned by dedicated explorers, who were

⁷ Ibid.: 26.

often driven by their own curiosity. Of course, these explorers too sought the glory of conquering knowledge and were complicit with their sponsors's imperial goals.

Like many expeditions at the time, Choris's specific voyage with Russian explorer Kotzebue was sent off with a myriad of purposes— not only scientific, but also deeply political. Russia, who was arguably not as big of a player as England, France and Spain in the scientific colonial pursuits of the century prior, employed the Rurik voyage to make a statement about their imperial intentions. The Rurik expedition's ultimate goal, as directed by its sponsor, was to discover a Northeast Passage connecting the Pacific to the Atlantic Ocean. Beyond that, it also maintained a scientific focus, employing Adelbert von Chamisso as the official naturalist, Freidrich Eschscholtz as the ship's doctor, and Choris as the designated illustrator.⁸

Interestingly, very few of Choris's illustrations made it into the official account of the trip, causing him to publish his work independently in *Voyage Pittoresque*. In his art book, Choris established a focus on the field of natural science by including essays from his academic colleagues on the Rurik. “[Anatomist Baron] Culvier wrote on the Californian brown bear, Chamisso on invertebrate sea species and coral islands, and [phrenologist F.J.] Gall on the skull collection.”⁹ What Choris ultimately offered in his collection of images was a visual case study on the wildlife, environments and people that inhabited various “exotic” lands, including Asia, Africa, the Americas and the Pacific Ocean. Specifically, it is a visual anthropological narrative on indigenous societies *from the perspective* of European colonial minds.

Mission Dolores as a Setting

At the time in which Choris made his stay in San Francisco, the California region was under claim by Spain, who had built the military base known as the Presidio, as well as the

⁸ Liebersohn, “Images of Monarchy: Kamehameha I and the Art of Louis Choris,” 45.

⁹ Ibid., 45-46.

mission just south-east of it in 1776. This mission, which was a literal manifestation of colonial pursuits, would serve as the setting for Choris's visualization of the Ohlone tribe and the promising land of New California.

Before these institutions were founded, though, European elites thought California was being neglected by its vast indigenous populations, as they did not take advantage of its abundance of resources that it was so praised for. British author John Cambell wrote that its "plains of salt...might prove of great advantage to any civilized people, who were possessed of the country. But the natives do not seem to make use of the salt for curing their fish, which they generally eat raw."¹⁰ Much of what is portrayed to be objective description of lands often ends up being a warped justification of the explorer's presence in them, suggesting they saw promise in the lands where others did not. It is as though they believed they would be able to capitalize on each resource better than the current inhabitants. This writing, which is Campbell's summary of exploratory findings, even criticizes the Spaniards' lack of usage of the land. Additionally, he cites the sheer volume of existing societies as a likely deterrence of the Spaniards installing settlements: "one may reasonably suppose, that the Spaniards have declined sending missionaries, through fear that the people, when civilized, might either prove dangerous neighbors, or by cultivating their lands, invite strangers to settle amongst them."¹¹ In 1776, Father Francisco Palou would finally use the land to found Mission San Francisco de Asís, or Mission Dolores,¹² which would be constructed by native labor over the course of a decade.

¹⁰ John Campbell, *An Account of the Spanish Settlements in America* (Edinburgh: Printed by A. Donaldson and J. Reid, for the author [etc.], 1762), 76, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/U0108806889/MOME?sid=bookmark-MOME&xid=f6df7421&pg=90>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Mission San Francisco de Asís was referred to as Mission Dolores colloquially due to its proximity to the creek Arroyo de los Dolores, or the Creek of Sorrows.

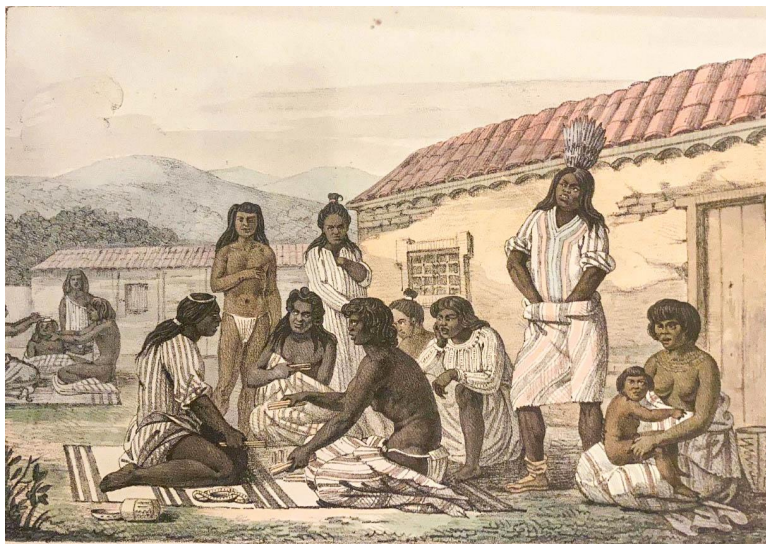


Figure 1. Louis Choris. *Jeu des habitants de Californie*. 1816. Print and Watercolor on Paper. 7.25 x 10.5 in¹³

It was at Mission Dolores where much of Choris's representations of indigenous life and culture would be set. At the time, Mission Dolores was mostly populated by the Ohlone people, who Choris was primarily responsible for documenting visually. At the mission, the people were subject to a new social hierarchy, one that afforded those who converted to Christianity more clout. This even manifested in their clothing, as “neophyte [*new to the mission*] male and female commoners wore woolen shirts (*catones*) in addition to woolen breach cloths (*tapetes*) and skirts (*polleras* or *basquinas*), whereas *alcaldes* [*higher-ranking*] were distinctly dressed in European-style pants and shoes.”¹⁴ The purpose of the Ohlone missions was ultimately to “Hispanicize and Christianize the pagan Ohlone in a nonsyncretic way” through the process of

¹³ Louis Choris et al., *Voyage pittoresque autour du monde: avec des portraits de sauvages d'Amérique, d'Asie, d'Afrique, et des îles du Grand océan : des paysages, des vues maritimes, et plusieurs objets d'histoire naturelle : accompagné de descriptions par m. le baron Cuvier, et m. A. de Chamisso, et d'observations sur les crânes humains, par m. le docteur Gall* (Paris: De l'Imprimerie de Firmin Didot, imprimeur du roi, de l'Institut et de la Marine, rue Jacob, no 24, 1822).

¹⁴ Russell K. Skowronek, “Sifting the Evidence: Perceptions of Life at the Ohlone (Costanoan) Missions of Alta California,” *Ethnohistory* 45, no. 4 (1998): 675–708, <https://doi.org/10.2307/483300>; Randall Milliken, *The Founding of Mission Dolores and the End of Tribal Life on the Northern San Francisco Peninsula* (California Mission Studies Association, 1996).

allure, restraint and indoctrination.¹⁵ The Ohlone people were initially believed to be brought in with the promise of “gifts of glass beads, cloths, ribbons and other trade goods.”¹⁶ Through frequent congregations and forced labor, Spanish missionaries converted young neophytes and attempted to break down elders set in their “pagan beliefs.” They discovered that the children of the natives were much less likely to resist conversion, but simultaneously, it was the neophytes who were more persistent about cultural preservation through the maintaining of tribal traditions. When Choris depicts these traditions, the Ohlone people are often shown crowded together within the mission walls. Figure 1 and Figure 2 both demonstrate instances of cultural preservation from the Ohlone tribe, a game and dance respectively. It is interesting that what Choris was especially drawn to document were these moments of resistance.

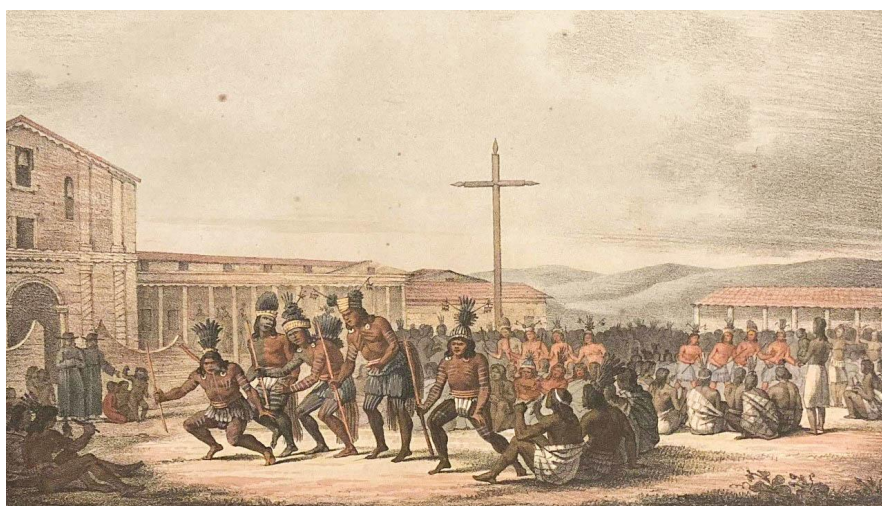


Figure 2. Louis Choris. *Danse de habitans de Californie à la mission de sn. Francisco*. 1816. Print and Watercolor on Paper. 7x12 in.¹⁷

In order to understand the difference between the two concepts, Figure 2 can be understood as both an artwork and as a document. As an artwork, *Danse de habitans de*

¹⁵ Skowronek, “Sifting the Evidence.”

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Choris et al., *Voyage pittoresque autour du monde*.

Californie à la mission de sn. Francisco, as it is titled, depicts the tribe performing a traditional dance to a modest audience of fellow native people within the mission walls. The subjects— the dancers— blend in well with their surroundings; the scene is consistent in its colors and linework. A soft atmospheric perspective is put on the crowd, mission walls, and mountains that sink into the background. The foreground is given the opposite treatment: weeds and audience members are darkened to push the perspective and center the subject. These are all modest techniques, but they work to draw attention to the middle, where the dancers, who are not offered any significant identifying details, stand mid-pose for the metaphorical European audience that Choris presents them to. The dancers do not take up more focus than is necessary for them to be identified as the subjects of the work. However, they battle for the audience’s attention against the cross that towers over them. As an artwork, the illustration demonstrates a struggle between cultural preservation and the religious, colonial oppressors that surround them. Compared to the cross above them, the tribe becomes small, reduced into a single mass of people subject to the conditions imposed upon them. This is ironic given the position of the artist— a European elite— and the purpose of the art, which was to document life at the mission as he saw it.

When Figure 2 is taken for what it is meant to be, a scientific and sterile documentation of California native tribes, it offers a new perspective. Rather than telling a story, it proposes a truth. Choris created his work with the intention of sharing it throughout European spaces as a proper glimpse into the societies of the New World. In this sense, the illustration is meant to be a direct representation of what Choris observed during his stay in Mission Dolores. Specifically, it is what Choris observed and deemed significant enough to record. It cannot be known if Choris created this image while he watched the dance or if he did so after the fact or if he even transplanted the dance into the location. The dancers are in full tribal paint, which could be either

true to reality or a choice made to culminate cultural observations into one. Either way, the decision to visualize this act and *how* to visualize it was in the hands of Choris. What this image states is that, at the time, there were groups of men who continued to perform traditional dances whilst living at the mission. It demonstrates to its audience the “exotic” behaviors of indigenous people while situating it within mission as a way of demonstrating the progress European efforts were making in the New World. The “California inhabitants” continued to perform their traditions, but they would be represented in a setting that ensured they appeared out-of-place.

Choris’s images are at the crossroads of being both artwork and documents in that, by nature, they carry the subjectivity of being representations, while still being some of the sole records for life at the time. They bear the burden of presenting facts through a mode that stores thoughts and biases in each decision made. Because of this dichotomy, the images reliably tell us more about the history of natural sciences and exploration than they do about the very people they represent. Of course, this does not erase the fact that these images are sometimes the only records that exist to represent the indigenous groups. Through an understanding of how the images and the artist are situated in the history of natural sciences and exploration, it is possible for the benefits to still be reaped. That is, Choris’s illustrations still hold significant value for the cultures he depicted, a multi-faceted position that requires further discussion later on. First, it must be understood how the visualization process occurs and its biases are implemented.

Drawing from Life

In many texts about Choris, he is frequently praised for his ability to be objective. It is thought to be his gift to capture the world exactly *as he sees it*, though I would argue that visualizing something cannot be an objective process. A European man with both conscious and subconscious colonial intentions in a foreign place is bound to project preconceived

understandings of indigenous cultures onto his work. This could be through the literal choices in linework, composition and color, or even through his *selection* of what he deemed worthy of documenting.

To use a term coined by Robert N. Proctor and used in the context of natural history by Londa Schiebinger, the choice *not* to document an aspect of indigenous life falls under “agnotology,” or the study of the production of ignorance.¹⁸ As seen in Figure 3, tribal rituals were documented likely because they seemed foreign to Choris, while more mundane activities would be deemed too unremarkable to warrant documenting. This is the issue with taking visuals at surface value, they do not tell a full narrative, whether that be through the absence of knowledge or the misuse of it. This is further discussed in a quote by Harry Liebersohn:

And there is a concern with typicality in the volume: his images of Chilean, Aleutian and San Francisco Bay peoples, for example, show individual human faces, yet offer them as representative of a people. Taken together they contribute to a world gallery of phenotypes in the making.¹⁹

What this notes is the impact that misrepresentation of knowledge or even the production of ignorance has on the scientific community. Especially given Choris’s intention to draw life and to use his drawings to expand scientific knowledge, it is dangerous to select five men and five women and introduce them as representatives for the “Inhabitants of California” so plainly (see Figure 3 and Figure 4).

¹⁸ Londa L. Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹⁹ Liebersohn, “Images of Monarchy: Kamehameha I and the Art of Louis Choris,” 47.



Figure 3. Louis Choris. *habitans de Californie*. 1816. Print and Watercolor on Paper. 6 x 13 in.²⁰



Figure 4. Louis Choris. *habitans de Californie*. 1816. Print and Watercolor on Paper. 7 x 12 in.²¹

It is crucial to consider how an artists' conscious and subconscious biases pervade through their work, especially by understanding social and political factors that factor into the artist's opinions. For instance, one tribe– the Tcholovoni people– were politically situated in line with European intent, and this can arguably be seen through descriptions and artistic portrayals of them. In his journal, Choris writes,

²⁰ Choris et al., *Voyage pittoresque autour du monde*.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Another tribe, the Tcholovoni, differ considerably in feature, in general physiognomy, and in a more or less attractive exterior from all the others...They have formed an alliance with the Spaniards against all the Indian tribes. They make beautiful weapons...fashioned with great skill.²²

Accompanied with Figure 6, one can begin to see how the “descriptive fact” of Choris’s drawings from life may be skewed by the artists’ own preexisting beliefs. The poses, for instance, when compared with previous drawings of, say the Olhone peoples at Mission Dolores, show much more grandeur and confidence. The Olhone people are seen situated within the walls of Mission Dolores, performing traditional rituals under a towering cross (see Figure 3). The two Tcholovoni men, however, are seen in action, hunting, hair flowing, weapons poised, and birds soaring above a beautiful landscape. It is also interesting to note that the figures are nude; we cannot know if Choris captured this accurately to life or if he made the deliberate decision to express their independence to colonial efforts, or associated “primitiveness,” through nudity. I would argue the latter is more likely, given the frequency at which nudeness is associated with being distant from European culture, or otherwise “uncivilized.” This could also be to more clearly represent the muscular physiques of the Tcholovonis, which Choris makes note of in his journal entries, as if to show their prowess as a people.

²²Choris et al., *San Francisco One Hundred Years Ago*, 11-13.



Figure 5. Louis Choris. *Tcholononis à la chasse dans la baie de sn. Francisco*. 1816. Print and Watercolor on Paper. 6.5 x 7.4 in.²³

Essentially, it is dangerous to take Choris's illustration of the Tcholononi men as a true-to-life historical and scientific document, as it has been used in the past, particularly given the amount of decisions that go into making a work of art. This is especially true since this image was likely not a single figure drawing sitting, where the subjects posed before Choris, but an interpretation after the fact. With each aspect of the illustration— the pose, the symbols, the background, the figures— Choris had to make an artistic decision during which he was able to consciously or unconsciously implement his biases.

This also brings into consideration the idea of indigenous agency when it comes to the creation of an illustration. This is explored further in an essay by Douglas, where she writes that “Indigenous presence is predictably sharper in more immediate, less consciously rewrought renditions of experience, such as journals and working drawings.”²⁴ This is to say that when more time is put into an illustration, versus a live sketch, it allows for these artistic decisions to

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Douglas. "Art as ethno-historical text."

be made and biases to seep through. In the same vein, each scientific illustration is based on the agency of indigenous people to act and to represent their culture. It is through the visualization process that these actions can become diluted, depending on the severity of the biases.

When viewing these illustrations in their original form, I began considering how to interpret the colors as an artistic decision, like that of the background, symbols, or figures. For Choris's *Voyage Pittoresque*, the printed illustrations were colored in watercolor after the fact, very likely by a separate artist. It is unknown whether Choris left separate, unpublished notes for the colors of the drawings, but assuming he did not, we will go off of the fact that the coloring existed separate from the illustrating. Thus, in these illustrations meant to accurately represent indigenous lives, the colors were chosen based on preexisting knowledge, basic assumption, and what may have been noted in Choris's journals.

The scans that have been shown thus far display the illustrations as color-corrected to an extent, while the images in their tangible form have colors that have faded with time. Therefore, when analyzing the use of color in Choris's images, it is important to think critically about the state of the original hue versus its current form. With that, when viewing images like Figure 4 and Figure 5, it is interesting to note that the skin appears green. This is likely due to the fact that the watercolor artist used *black* pigment when painting the skin, which is a faux-pas to any modern artist. The black pigment turns to green with time, as the blue pigments within it (on yellowing paper) take the longest to fade. Essentially, black pigment largely does not capture darker skin tones, which exist with much richer and warmer colors (which is arguably better portrayed in Figure 3). The choice to use black pigment may have stemmed from the artist's lack of understanding of dark skin, or rather, their lack of experience viewing it. The coloring process was tied to the publishing process, meaning it occurred back in Europe in a realm completely

separate from the lives of the indigenous people in the images. Thus, the colors chosen are not accurate to life as they are advertised, but rather represent the belief that dark skin equals black skin equals green skin, which has larger implications for representation and the (de)humanization of indigenous people in documented history.

Additionally, smaller details contribute to aspects of misrepresentation of people of color in the eyes of scientific-minded Europeans. For instance, the skin of the people pictured is very dark, but there is no accurate melanin distribution depicted as would be found on the palms and hands. It appears as though the watercolor artist approached the skin as they knew skin to behave—like white skin. The blush colors of many Alaskan natives in *Voyage Pittoresque* (see Figure 6) feel unnatural and bright, as they mimic the pinks and reds of white skin. It is through these subtle mistakes in color and in detail that the identities of indigenous people were to be classified by, which was so critical in a time where ideas of race were just forming.



Figure 6. Louis Choris. *Kamtchadales*. 1816. Print and Watercolor on Paper.²⁵

²⁵ Choris et al., *Voyage pittoresque autour du monde*.

Audiences and Socio-Political Effects

In order to fully interpret an illustration's role in constructing natural history, we must also analyze the system by which these visuals are consumed and interpreted by the minds of mainland Europeans. It is through the combined understanding of the visualization process and its purposes afterwards that an illustration may be analyzed as a historical document and colonial tool.

It is interesting to note that Choris's *Voyage Pittoresque* was deliberately addressed to the elites of France, Prussia and Russia, who had just triumphed over Napoleon and now craved a return to "traditional authority." As Liebersohn describes it, "It was this double impulse, glorifying the leadership qualities of established elites but conjoining them with modern science and government, that Choris's volume flattered." Choris had dedicated his book to the Russian monarch as an indebted patron, during a time when artists and scientists were expected to dedicate their work to the *public* as a *civil servant*.²⁶ By understanding his audience, it is very likely Choris constructed his visuals (choosing the subjects, the theme, the tone, etc.) to develop something that would be of worth to the aristocrats purchasing and circulating his book. In addition to possible choices made for the visuals, deliberate choices in publishing (choosing the visuals, the titles, the text, etc.) were made with great care to appeal to buyers.

With this, we can understand the audience of *Voyage Pittoresque* as an elite one, and its purposes to be profoundly political. Choris's book, while decidedly beneficial to the record-keeping of anthropological natural sciences at the time, was quite conservative. It acted as a representation of the colonial prospects of those who wished to return to order in the post-revolutionary era. Science and exploration as a field were therefore tools to capture public

²⁶ Liebersohn, "Images of Monarchy: Kamehameha I and the Art of Louis Choris," 49.

interest while simultaneously pushing an expansive, religious, and power-minded agenda. The *Voyage Pittoresque* captured nature in a way that reassured disillusioned nobles— natural, more “primitive” societies too had structure and leadership. To the nobles, this must have seemed like scientific *evidence* that conservative government systems like their own were in fact natural.

Additionally, international endeavors sought out more than just scientific knowledge to benefit their political agendas; they were also scoping out the forms of societies that existed outside of Europe so that they may assess and build international relationships. As discussed with the case of the Ohlone and Tcholovoni people, relationships between indigenous people and European explorers were not uniform. In a section on the Sandwich Islands, now Hawaii, Choris published a portrait of their first ruler, Kamehameha I. While Choris’s images did largely serve as scientific documentation, a clear identifiable portrait like that of Kamehameha’s introduced audiences to a new political figure.

In an interpretation of the Rurik’s texts, historian David Igler identified a key anecdote in the creation of such political art. Kamehameha, who was initially skeptical of being “transferred to paper,” was persuaded by Kotzebue to sit for a portrait by Choris. Knowing the image would represent himself to global monarchs like Alexander I, Kamehameha chose to dress in a red European suit in order to invoke respect in the eyes of the foreigners. After a brief sketch with the red vest (Figure 7), Kamehameha approved of the image; though, Choris did not. After the sitting, Choris redid the portrait, portraying Kamehameha in his “native” robes, the version Choris wanted to present from the beginning (Figure 8). This would be the version that was published, without any approval from Kamehameha. After all, Choris understood that his European audiences were only interested in exoticizing foreign societies, rather than appreciate them as equals. In re-rendering Kamehameha’s portrait, Choris effectively stripped him of his

agency to represent himself and his people, a deeply political play that would alter the perceptions of Pacific societies in the eyes of elite European audiences.²⁷



Figure 7. Louis Choris. *Kamehameha I in a Red Vest*. 1816. Print and Watercolor on Paper.²⁸

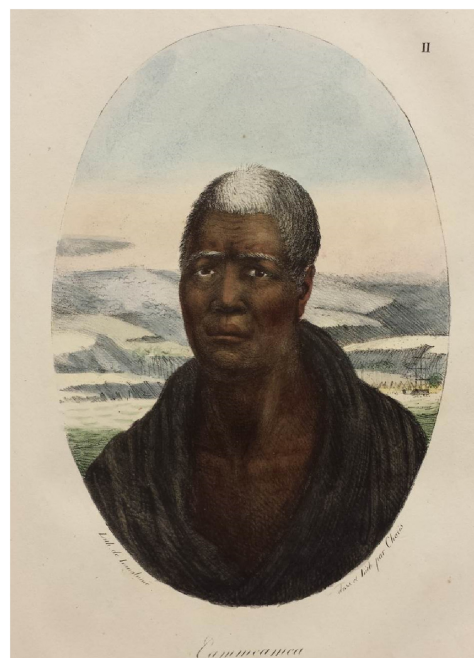


Figure 8. Louis Choris. *Kamehameha I*. 1816. Print and Watercolor on Paper.²⁹

While this instance is not situated within our focus on New California, it offers a solid example as to the self-awareness of these explorers. Choris especially is praised for his detail and “generosity” he offers indigenous societies when representing them. I would challenge this, not by disagreeing that Choris’s work is more detailed than previous anthropological work, but by arguing that new political, social and scientific factors push the need for these details. The details themselves do not dismiss the biases, but are rather effects of the biases that exist to appeal to audiences.

²⁷ Iglar, “Indigenous Travelers and Knowledge Production in the Pacific,” 11-12.

²⁸ “About Our Name - Ka’iwakiloumoku - Hawaiian Cultural Center,” accessed December 13, 2021, <https://kaiwakiloumoku.ksbe.edu/article/kaiwakiloumoku-about-our-name>.

²⁹ Choris et al., *Voyage pittoresque autour du monde*.

Documenting Indigenous History

Choris's *Voyage Pittoresque* is interesting in that it serves as a historical record for both natural sciences and indigenous history. When documenting the former, it succeeds in presenting the literal perspectives of the ones constructing the institution of natural science— Europeans. In other words, the perspective of the images are congruent with the founders of this form of natural science (taxonomy, race, etc.). Though, when Choris's images are seen as a historical record for indigenous history (their more common use), there is an incongruence between perspective and subject. In this paper so far, I've employed the illustrations as evidence to identify relationships between explorers as scientists and indigenous societies as science. However, this neglects the more obvious significance of the images, which is to document and describe the lives of indigenous people. As I have argued, the images do not do so without biases. This is not to say, however, that they offer no contribution to the record-keeping of indigenous cultures. In fact, when consulting modern tribes, the images are of great significance.

The images created by Choris remain some of the sole documents left to represent Ohlone life at this time, and they are even cherished by the present-day tribe. For instance, the official website for the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco area features four images by Choris on their homepage³⁰. Likewise, another acts as the group's Facebook header.³¹ This places the images in an interesting dichotomy between decolonization and their record-keeping significance. In this way, it is difficult to say whether one outweighs the other. I would argue, though, that when placed in a modern perspective, it is not unreasonable to say the images offer a net-positive. To specify, the narrow process by which the images were made, or the interactions

³⁰ "Muwekma Ohlone Tribe, Muwekma Ohlone Tribe San Jose, CA Home," accessed December 13, 2021, <http://www.muwekma.org/>.

³¹ "(20+) Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area | Facebook," accessed December 13, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/muwekma/>.

between Choris individually and his subjects, are less negative than the positives brought on by the preservational qualities of the images today. The larger system is not redeemed by this benefit. Choris in no way had any altruistic intention for this to happen, but it is interesting that it did.

I have argued that the images clearly carry more than documentation in their intentions; they were born during a period of intense colonization and exotic fixation. Many images at the time ended up in the hands of audiences seeking to exoticize and self-actualize by culturing themselves with knowledge of the “other.” Though, it would be unfair to only acknowledge this historical use and ignore the modern one. The illustrations have undergone a process in which they were made for the political and scientific interests of elites, consumed as a means of amassing global knowledge, and have now been reclaimed as a means of cultural preservation.

Crucially, though, the images are a technical net-positive today only because the colonial institutions that supported their creations still persist. The images are positive in that they are a detailed, Western-style documentation from the past in a now entirely Westernized American culture. If the colonial institutions were never put forth in the first place, there would be no need for these documents at all. Rather, these documents’ significance in today’s modes of history erase indigenous forms of record-keeping that could have upheld Ohlone culture independently.

To conclude, it is true that Choris offered the field of natural history valuable and detailed images of societies that had never been seen before; what is misleading is assuming these images exist without any colonial bias. The visualization process can only represent something after a series of artistic decisions are made with conscious or subconscious consideration of one’s audience, purposes and opinions. The images found in Choris’s *Voyage Pittoresque* are no exception to this notion, as they propose truths that are carefully constructed by social, political

and intellectual factors. This must especially be understood when establishing how these images function as documents in both natural history and indigenous history. Visualizing foreign societies as anthropological science is a deeply subjective process, and dismissing this reality only contributes towards the colonial structures that situated Choris within New California in the first place.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

“(20+) Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area | Facebook.” Accessed December 13, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/muwekma/>.

Burney, James. *A Chronological History of the Discoveries in the South Sea or Pacific Ocean*.

Vol. 2. London: Printed by L. Hansard, 1803.

<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/U0109163055/MOME?sid=bookmark-MOME&xid=27384a6c&pg=255>.

Campa, Miguel de la, John (Editor) Galvin, Louis Choris, Lawton Kennedy, and Calif) John Howell Books (San Francisco. *A Journal of Explorations: Northward along the Coast from Monterey in the Year 1775*. 434 Post Street, San Francisco: Published by John Howell--Books, 1964.

Campbell, John. *An Account of the Spanish Settlements in America*. Edinburgh: Printed by A. Donaldson and J. Reid, for the author [etc.], 1762.

<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/U0108806889/MOME?sid=bookmark-MOME&xid=f6df7421&pg=90>.

Choris, Louis, Georges baron Cuvier, Adelbert von Chamisso, F. J. (Franz Joseph). Gall, J. B. B. (Jean Baptiste Benoît). Eyriès, Otto von Kotzebue, and Firmin-Didot (Firm). *Voyage pittoresque autour du monde: avec des portraits de sauvages d'Amérique, d'Asie, d'Afrique, et des îles du Grand océan : des paysages, des vues maritimes, et plusieurs objets d'histoire naturelle : accompagné de descriptions par m. le baron Cuvier, et m. A. de Chamisso, et d'observations sur les crânes humains, par m. le docteur Gall*. Paris: De l'Imprimerie de Firmin Didot, imprimeur du roi, de l'Institut et de la Marine, rue Jacob,

no 24, 1822.

Choris, Louis, Nash and Taylor Taylor, and Porter Garnett. *San Francisco One Hundred Years Ago*. San Francisco : A. M. Robertson, 1913.

<http://archive.org/details/sanfranciscooneh00chorrich>.

“Muwekma Ohlone Tribe, Muwekma Ohlone Tribe San Jose, CA Home.” Accessed December 13, 2021. <http://www.muwekma.org/>.

Vanstone, James W. “An Early Nineteenth-Century Artist in Ahska: Louis Choris and the First Kotzebue Expedition.” *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (1960): 145–58.

Secondary Sources

“About Our Name - Ka‘iwakīloumoku - Hawaiian Cultural Center.” Accessed December 13, 2021. <https://kaiwakiloumoku.ksbe.edu/article/kaiwakiloumoku-about-our-name>.

“American Journeys Background on Voyage Pittoresque Autour Du Monde [Illustrations--Excerpt].” Accessed December 13, 2021. <https://www.americanjourneys.org/aj-087/summary/>.

Bleichmar, Daniela. *Visible Empire: Botanical Expeditions and Visual Culture in the Hispanic Enlightenment*. 1 online resource (xii, 286 pages) : illustrations (some color), map vols. Chicago ; The University of Chicago Press, 2012. <http://chicago.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.7208/chicago/9780226058559.001.0001/upso-9780226058535>.

Douglas, Bronwen. "Art as ethno-historical text: science, representation and indigenous presence in eighteenth and nineteenth century oceanic voyage literature." *Double Vision: Art histories and colonial histories in the Pacific* (1999).

Earle, Rebecca. “The Pleasures of Taxonomy: Casta Paintings, Classification, and Colonialism.”

William & Mary Quarterly 73, no. 3 (20160701): 427.

Igler, David. "Indigenous Travelers and Knowledge Production in the Pacific: The Case of Kadu and Ludwig Choris." *History Compass* 15, no. 12 (2017): e12431.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12431>.

Liebersohn, Harry. "Images of Monarchy: Kamehameha I and the Art of Louis Choris." In *Double Vision : Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific*, edited by Thomas, Nicholas, Diane Losche, and Jennifer Newell, 44–64. Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1999. <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/toc/cam025/98046025.html>.

Milliken, Randall. *The Founding of Mission Dolores and the End of Tribal Life on the Northern San Francisco Peninsula*. California Mission Studies Association, 1996.

"Mission Dolores--Early History of the California Coast--A National Register of Historic Places Travel Itinerary." Accessed November 5, 2021.

<https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/ca/ca36.htm>.

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. Second edition. London New York: Routledge, 2008.

Schiebinger, Londa L. *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Skowronek, Russell K. "Sifting the Evidence: Perceptions of Life at the Ohlone (Costanoan) Missions of Alta California." *Ethnohistory* 45, no. 4 (1998): 675–708.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/483300>.