

### **The Recorded Other: Ethnographic Drawing, 1800-1900**

by Joachim Rees

In 1800, the Swiss educational reformer Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi found drawing to be “a general human matter,” “eine allgemeinmenschliche Sache.”<sup>1</sup> This maxim is at once both a claim and a vision. Pestalozzi raised drawing to the rank of a fundamental anthropological fact supposedly preceding all ethnic, cultural, social, and professional differentiation. Seen before the backdrop of European tradition, however, the equalization and universalization of drawing claimed here entailed a subtle departure from the dominant art paradigm in which drawing had been embedded since the establishment of the theory of *disegno* in the Renaissance. This privileged status of drawing as the shared foundation of the fine arts was not only useful for separating artists from the sphere of craftsmanship, but had also earned drawing a fixed place in the cultural repertoire of the European upper classes. The ability to express oneself in drawing was a cultural technique where mastery was *de rigueur* for members of both the nobility and bourgeoisie. Using textbooks, drawing lessons, and private drawing schools, the methods of the academic art practice were anchored in the education and lifestyle of the upper classes. The theory and praxis of lay drawing might have differed from professional artistic drawing in terms of expectations, but not in relation to its overarching aesthetic apparatus of categories and “rules of truth.”

The anthropological discourse of the Enlightenment opposed the subordination of drawing to the primacy of “art and mastery,” which up until then had been widely accepted, with the “naturalization” of drawing. Now a “predisposition, “desire,” or “drive” to draw was postulated in “man.”<sup>2</sup> In terms of individual development, this presupposition could be supported with observations about the drawing behavior of children, but the validation of this proposition of a general disposition to draw for the moment was still lacking.

It is surely no accident that the anthropological foundation of drawing occurred in a period when drawing and its related graphic and coloring techniques coloring under the sign of dilettantism became a culturally influential phenomenon with significant effects. Certainly never again in European art history was lay drawing regardless of age, gender, and class divisions as prominent as it was during in the decades around 1800. Now become a mass phenomenon, the dilettantism of visual arts in these years was given its first theoretical foundation, not without warning of the potentially damaging effects of this drawing practice for its practitioners and the professional “art system.”<sup>3</sup>

As Wolfgang Kemp has emphasized, dilettantism around 1800 assumes a fully developed notion of the artist and remains tied to this concept.<sup>4</sup> This also implies that this cultural formation can hardly provide impulses to achieve a definition of drawing that could have emancipated itself from the eager quest of mastery and the imitation of an artistic habitués. All the same, approaches towards forming a legitimization of drawing beyond a normative concept of mastery in representational terms did develop in an area with traditionally imprecise borders between lay and professional image production. For here, heterogeneous tasks of representation were to be carried out that could not be solely covered by a notion of the image molded by art aesthetics. Meant here is not only the practice of travel, transgressive not only in a geographic sense, that in the eighteenth century went through a process of societalization that had with no prior equivalent, and, winged by a postulate of empiricization, developed a highly differentiated toolbox of techniques for observation and documentation. In travel’s repertoire of media, the drawer’s fixation on an object or a event took on the function of a preservatory bringing back of information to the starting point of the motion of travel, and thus “reporting” in a literal sense. This functional role included the constitutive linkage of the image to the text, usually taken down as a diary recording the whole course of travel. Writing and drawing stand here in an unmistakably genetic relationship, they appear as modal developments of a readiness to hand of writing and figuration.

The practice of travel with its specific media of documentation consequently constituted a “space” where things that in theory were distributed on different levels of discourse with hardly any connections between them could be linked to one another. The release of the drawing lay person from the habitués of the artistic, the “export”

of European practices of drawing into “foreign” cultures, and not least the exploration of the question of what “drawing” according to its newly formulated anthropological determination might actually be, since the modern European “art of drawing” was no longer seen as a teleological goal of development history, but increasingly as a historical cultural special case. In the following, stations of this “re-vision” of drawing will be illuminated before the backdrop of a European history of exploration and expansion. At issue is “writing the foreign,” as one would certainly have to literally translated the word “ethnography,” as the dispositif of drawing practice in these snap-shots can with historical distance be seen themselves as elements of a “foreign” (visual) culture that has long been suppressed by other media configurations.

### Peripheral Dilettantism

When Captain James Cook took out to sea on August 26, 1768, commissioned by the Royal Society to undertake an expedition in the Pacific, a new stage seemed to have begun in what the anthropologist Stephen A. Tyler called “the vision quest of the west”: Western culture’s drive towards making visible, a drive that makes it epistemologically all the more unassailable, for it explains cognitive processes using metaphors of seeing and recognition.<sup>5</sup> Making visible meant of both Cook’s first exhibition as well as the two expeditions that Cook would complete before 1779 primarily: fixing, arresting by way of drawing. The commission and makeup of the expedition directly reflect this claim: Cook owed his naming as the commander of the expedition ship Endeavour not least to his excellent cartographic abilities: even if the journey failed to achieve its main goal, the discovery of a legendary southern continent, Cook brought dozens of sea maps home, drawn with great precision, which for the first time reliably



traced out the coastlines of Tahiti, New Zealand, and Eastern Australia. The Royal Society as an initiator of the research journey had, penetrated by Enlightenment concept of natural law, declared any claim of territory for the British crown to be illegitimate from the start, but Cook’s maps, which would serve as nautical reference works long into the nineteenth century, were all the same recorded knowledge of domination that remained useful for colonialist practices.<sup>6</sup>

For Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820) as well, a wealthy gentleman botanist who financed his own participation in the expedition, the “recording” of observations in word and image was a constitutive part of the undertaking. Towards this goal he had engaged Alexander Buchan and Sydney Parkinson, two artists with clearly demarcated tasks of representation. Parkinson was entrusted with drawing plants and animals, while Buchan was responsible for the completion of landscapes and the depiction of natives. The division of labor

ordered by Banks was driven by the traditional double functional allocation towards an art of pleasure and an art of edification: while Parkinson’s plant studies were to work towards a botanic taxonomy, Bank saw in Buchan’s pictures of land and people primarily an illustrative use in the entertaining report on the journey in friends at home.<sup>7</sup>

Joseph Banks, Tauschgeschäft eines Maori mit einem englischen Seeoffizier (ca. 1769)

London, British Museum, Department of Manuscripts, Add. MS 15508, fol. 11 (a).

Photo: Joppien/Smith 1985, Tafel 51.

It might well have corresponded to Bank's understanding of himself as a virtuoso that he also drew during the expedition, and not only in the area of botany, but also in the area of landscape and human representation, thus self-confidently negating the very specialization that he had imposed on his own hired drawers. Due to his social background, he had the cultural habitués of the English upper class, for which drawing traditionally enjoyed a high status as a pastime appropriate to class standing.<sup>8</sup> Bank's drawings, exclusively made for personal use and added to his papers kept in the British Museum, were first published in 1968.<sup>9</sup> As can be claimed in general of dilettante travel drawings, these depictions are supplements of verbal description; they are closely linked to the travel diary, even if they were never physically incorporated into this journal. In particular one drawing among the existing eight pages can illustrate how the lay drawings establish its own perspective on the central event of cultural contact that refused then publicly accepted image conventions and therefore opens up the possibilities of a revision of the manifest image sense. The Australian historian Bronwen Douglas has recently on the basis of the rich image material, that the Cook expeditions made across the Pacific, has insisted on the presence of "indigenous countersigns," indicated that subverting the authorial direction of the image, have become inscribed in the representation and can be decoded through a reading that is calibrated in a non-affirmative, ethno-historical, postcolonial light.<sup>10</sup>

Bank's watercolor pencil drawing of an exchange between an English naval officer and a Maori sticks out though a radical tradition of the visual elements to this act of exchange. Between the two persons, an intricate gestural game of give and take plays itself out. The graphically most differentiated structure of this drawing is the lobster that the ships crew as is confirmed in Bank's diary hoped to acquire on the New Zealand coast by offering gifts in return in large quantities. The asymmetry of this exchange becomes immediately clear: the detailed drawn and carefully colored lobster contrasts with an indifferent, white piece of cloth that the officer hands over, an "artificial product," in which the incarnation of the European and the supposedly neutral whiteness of the paper on which the scene is arranged, metonymically condense. <sup>11</sup> The idea, that suggests itself, that the "self" is here recorded in its superior status in that it is shown as normality, while the "foreign" only appears as divergence from this norm, falters nonetheless due to the leveling tendency of Bank's diagrammatic drawing: his schematic treatment of body and face makes his drawing not only unusable for the purpose of a comparative "physiognomy of the peoples" that in the late eighteenth century undertook the attempt to globally classify ethnic groups according to varying characteristics. Also for demonstrating a "superior" European system of representation, as occasionally done by the professional artists of the Cook expedition before the eyes of the natives, the works of the dilettante were hardly suited.<sup>12</sup> Precisely this unwieldy dysfunctionality in the system of a Eurocentric image rhetoric could make lay drawing to an important reference point in an intercultural science of the image that goes beyond inscribed dichotomies possibilities of a hybrid or "third space" in the sense of Homi K. Bhabha: a space that is not entirely controlled by any representational system, that maintains the "foreign" or even only the suppressed in our own present. <sup>13</sup>

There was at the time of their emergence no context of reception for Bank's drawings. According to the criteria of academically formed drawing styles, they contributed all too clear to the index of "lacking mastery inability." That drawings of this kind were kept at all is primarily due to the extraordinary conditions of their emerge and their "exotic" content of the presentation is to be attributed to. The exceptionality in particular of the overseas travel experience secured lay drawing up into the nineteenth century a legitimacy that it increasingly lacked in an increasingly professionally specialized system of art and science. The continuing life of an "aristocratically" defined type of unspecialized drawings and scientific practice under the conditions of increasing professionalization can be exemplified by Prince Maximilian zu Wied (1782–1867), who according to the model of Alexander von Humboldt in 1815 without institutional commission undertook a two year journey to Brazil. As the offspring of a Rhinish family of princes, drawing was for Wied –as for Humboldt – a self-evident element of his own education and upbringing. The prince obviously strove to document the journey in drawing just as much care as for the written report in the diary was anyway self-explanatory. Over 200 existing works, usually colored drawings of ink and pencil, evince this double track practice of documentation.<sup>14</sup> The depictions clearly have a reportage-like character, since Wied makes the often difficult and sometimes dangerous movement across the Amazon itself to the object of image. The researcher develops through this an external observe position on his own action and presents the condition of possibility of his own drawing in a self-reflexive way. At the same time the drawings receive through this a dynamic of space-time that is fed by the constant emergence of new sensory data and its successive processing by the observer. One example from the first phase of the travel can make clear the complexity of this "system of visual inscription" [Aufzeichnungssystem]. The page titled "Ship Journey on the Rio Doce. December 1815" in his own hand shows a boat, occupied by eight persons, including Wied and his escort. <sup>15</sup> The movement of the boat is blocked by luxurious vegetation and toppled trees. Overlaid on this is a visual descriptive taxonomy that transfers what might seem to be impenetrable vegetation into an ensemble of species that can be labeled and named. The botanic nomenclature (including possible cases of oount) is entered in the abbreviated figuration, further indexes point to explanations outside the image field. For the taxonomic gaze of Wied the botanist, who, here also following Humboldt, was not interested in the preparation of individual species, but in their grouping within the ecological habitat, this kind of "iconotext" represented unquestionably an efficient form of the visual storage of information.

For the graphic preparation of the page in the framework of the publication of Wied's travel report, this homogenous transition of signs and text had however to be reversed. Indebted to the principle of the "space of illusion" that could not make any claim on the foreign system of signs, are in the copper print the botanical notes are again removed. Wied found himself prior to publication just as ready to do this, as to the revision of all his sketches by academically schooled artists. The layperson saw this process of transformation of his drawings by professional image producers with an indecisive ambivalence.

In the foreword to his travel journey, Wied informs, that his sketches completely "on site" were later

“more completely filled out,” but in preparing for print, “a few inaccuracies had sneaked in.”<sup>16</sup> In this dilemma between the claim to artistic completeness and the risk of documentary “incorrectness,” on the other hand, the only way out seen by the layman was to suspend his own drawing praxis. On his next extensive journey to the prairie Indians of North America, Wied took a professional artist along with him and retreated to the written documentation of the course of the journey.<sup>17</sup> With Bank’s south sea drawings, Wied’s Brazil drawings share the fate of an extremely delayed public reception.<sup>18</sup> Only the visual experiences of modernisms, and the arrival of an artist type who demonstratively relies on “anti competence as a positive sign of modernity”<sup>19</sup> were drawings of this kind able to free themselves of this stigma of the deficiency.



### Indigenous Drawing

In the media repertoire of travel, drawing increasingly lost in importance over the course of the nineteenth century. The increasing practicability of photographic image processes, primarily encouraged by drawing dilettantes<sup>20</sup> and enthusiastically welcomed by traveling lay drawers like Alexander von Humboldt,<sup>21</sup> gradually reduced the status of drawing to the rank of a mnemonic notation, that at best was of importance for internal practices of documentation. In the disciplinary and institutionally still by and large unregulated ethnographic practice of the second half of the nineteenth century, however, drawing took on a new function, that sought to support the postulated cited at the beginning of Pestalozzi, that drawing is a “general human activity”: with empirically acquired material.

One of the first ethnographers in the German speaking world who not only, as it long was dominant practice, brought drawn illustrations of primarily “unstudied” indigenous populations from his trips, but also animated “natives” themselves to draw in special notebooks, was Karl von den Steinen (1855–1929).<sup>22</sup> On his first journey to the source of the Central Brazilian Xingú river in 1884, that Steinen undertook with the claim of a pioneer, but without clearly defined research program, these situations of drawings resulted more occasionally and served primarily to prepare and stabilization of friendly relationships to the peoples’ visited. In an especially graphic way, Steinen describes such scenes of drawing in the tribe of the Suyá on the Upper Xingu that resulted after a long period of step for step approach.<sup>23</sup> One illustration, added to the travel report published in 1886, made after a sketch of the painter Wilhelm von den Steinen, a cousin of the ethnographer, in a striking pictorial way, depicts the “drawing hour” that took place on the night of a full moon in the light of candles and petroleum lights. The Suyá, recognizable on their lip and ear plates, have sat down on the camp of the traveler and draw with pencil in the provided sketch-books. In a telling contradictoriness, Karl von den Steinen reports of the more precisely situation of this practice of drawing: on the one hand, the Suyá, after they had given the notating ethnographer patiently information about their language, themselves “desired” paper and pencil, on the other hand, the author noted the drawing achievements of the natives was paid with useful objects, like kitchen knives. The



prospect of such an exchange helped drawing to achieve among the Suyá an unexpected popularity that soon would become a hindrance.<sup>24</sup> What began on this first trip as von den Steinen carried out an informal, situational bound practice on his second expedition, undertaken in 1887–1888, to the Xingú in a systematic, comparative way. Now, drawing samples were collected from various peoples that were then published in following published travel report. <sup>25</sup> In so doing the relationship between the (European) drawer and the (indigenous) model, as up until that time usual, reversed itself in a marked way.

Time and again, Karl von den Steinen asked his test-persons to draw him, the ethnographer, and his escort. Thus, a series of portraits of the European travelers emerged, that were arranged for publication to “group portraits”. This was complemented, adapting to the European art practice, as “original “or “hand drawings” [Handzeichnungen] named works with a theory of indigenous drawing, that Karl von den Steinen sought to derive in terms of the history of development from the “explanatory signage.” <sup>26</sup> He relied there primarily on the small format pencil drawings, initiated by him, that for such a theory of the birth of drawing from the spirit of gesture are scarcely appropriate.

It was inherent in the radical consistency of this practice of appropriation that the ethnographer Theodor Koch-Grünberg still before the publication of his report on his research stay in Brazil in the years 1903–04 under the title *Anfänge der Kunst im Urwald* presented an album of “Indian hand drawings [Indianer-Handzeichnungen].” <sup>27</sup> The collection of facsimiles saw itself as a continuation of von den Steinen’s research and at the same time went beyond this, in that these works sought from now on named “indigenous” drawings expressly sought to be subsumed under the paradigm of “art.” While Koch-Grünberg emphasized that he as an ethnographer only had “the least part” in the production of these drawings., instead they represented “the pure intellectual property” of his “brown friends,” <sup>28</sup> it can hardly be overseen that the presented works owe their emergence first and foremost to the provision of European drawing utensils like pencil and sketchbook.

Both Karl von den Steinen, trained psychiatrist, as well as Theodor Koch-Grünberg, originally a school teacher, completed – here in the tradition of the dilettantism of the eighteenth century – on their journeys sketches as supplements to their geographic, botanic, and ethnographic descriptions. But they hid their drawings behind the products intended for the public reception carefully headed on behind the products of the fellow traveling professional artists and photographers. The lay draftsman instead handed over pencil and sketchpad to the “jungle artists,” whose “original drawings” received the public attention that the dilettante from Europe could no longer dare to hope for his own works.

