

A FRENCHMAN DREW THE EARLIEST VIEW OF CALIFORNIA

Founded by Spain in 1770, the small outpost of Monterey, California, was one of the world's most utterly isolated settlements at the north end of the Spanish Empire in the Americas. Reaching it by land or by sea took months of travel fraught with dangers. It is easy to understand why its small population of Spanish soldiers and Franciscan monks awaited the arrival of the annual supply ship from San Blas, Mexico, as the greatest event of the year.

Mid-afternoon on September 14, 1786, brought a surprise. Not one, but two ships emerged from the fog bank that commonly cloaks the coast of Monterey and they flew not the flag of Spain but the fleur-de-lis of France!

*Who were these very first foreign visitors to a Spanish outpost?
What treasures did they carry in their ships' holds?
What valuable memento of their presence in Monterey still exists today?*



The ships had actually been expected for many months. A rumor had reached even faraway Monterey that King Louis XVI of France, a passionate geographer, had ordered the well-regarded seafarer Jean- François de Galaup, Comte de Lapérouse (he preferred that spelling), to circumnavigate the globe in the footsteps of the late James Cook. This voyage was designed to sail routes never before followed by previous navigators, to reconnoiter new lands and remove the innumerable and sometimes imaginary islands that clogged up the world's maps.

It was to establish new contacts, open new maritime routes, and enrich French science and scientific collections. It was also for the embattled French king a desperate gamble to find new sources of wealth, whether in the way of treasures or with profitable new commercial ventures like the fur trade with China.

La Boussole, commanded by Lapérouse, and *L'Astrolabe* commanded by his friend Paul Fleuriot de Langle, were therefore no ordinary ships. They were in fact outfitted like floating laboratories, with the latest equipment in the fields of meteorology, astronomy, geology, ornithology, cartography, botany, chemistry, linguistics and medicine. They had a full library of the latest studies in all these fields as well as the latest maps of the world. A full array of seeds and pits, bulbs and roots, and live trees from France were carefully stored in their holds or on deck, as well as crates filled with enough bartering items to put many of Paris's shops out of business. The ships were spacious and sturdy, the quarters comfortable, the crew's diet aimed at preventing illnesses, in particular scurvy –the ships' surgeon even surreptitiously added an infusion of cedar bark to the seamen's morning grog.



The two 500-ton ships had a total of 223 carefully selected skilled seamen and bright young scientists and artists. The captains, Lapérouse and de Langle, had alone reached their forties. In contrast, the average age of their recruits was 25. There were among them expert engineers, doctors, botanists,

mineralogists, astronomers and map-makers; even the two chaplains were scientifically schooled. Among them too were artists like Duché de Vancy, a court artist; natural history draftsmen Guillaume & Jean-Louis Prévost; and Lieutenant Blondela, a cartographer who dabbled in landscapes. These men had been screened for their expertise, but also for their health and their ties to other members of the crew, whether parents or comrades-in-arms from former sailing missions. Fifteen of the seventeen officers had fought in the American War of Independence.

One of the young Frenchmen who applied for the voyage and made the preliminary list was a sixteen-year old Corsican lieutenant from Paris' Military Academy with great proficiency in mathematics and artillery. His name was Napoleon Bonaparte. He was not hired. Our world's history would have taken a rather different course if that young Corsican had been attached to an expedition that perished in the South Seas.

The residents of the small outpost of Monterey had great cause to rejoice over the arrival of the two ships and their brilliant crews. Both the Governor of the Presidio and the fathers of Mission San Carlos must have prepared for months in order to make their humble settlement look good and welcoming. Dinners with the Presidio's officers and Governor Pedro Fagès and entertainment aboard the Frenchmen's ships were followed by horse-back rides over the coastal hills to visit Mission San Carlos Borromeo in Carmel Valley, the burial place of the Missions' founder Father Junipero Serra.



The French explorer wrote in his journals: “*We were received like the lords of manors when they first take possession of their estates.*” Gaspard Duché de Vancy chronicled the prestigious Count's visit to the humble mission. De Vancy was a court artist of noble lineage trained by Parisian master Joseph Vien, who used to paint women's portraits and love scenes, promenades or coach rides in the manner of Antoine Watteau. His task for the expedition was to document observations of new lands and people. Attention to detail was crucial. His drawing therefore provides much information that contributes to the value of the sketch as a historic memento of a unique moment in the history of California and France.

The scene captures Father Matias Noriega at center, inviting Captains Lapérouse and Langle to approach the humble church thatched with straw. In the distance Father Lassuen is awaiting them at the church entrance “*in his ceremonial vestments and with his holy water sprinkle in hand,*” as Lapérouse reported, with two neophytes, as Mission Indians were called, and three newly-arrived Franciscan monks at his side: Jose Arroita, Cristobal Oramas, and Faustino Sola. Lapérouse added in his journal that the church was illuminated in the same manner as on the great feast days. Another detail adds to the sensory quality

of the moment: three men to the right of the church are ringing bells loudly, confirming Lapérouse's remark: "*We heard the sound of bells announcing our arrival.*"

It is natural to assume that it is the expedition's translator Barthélémy de Lesseps who stands slightly behind and to the right of Lapérouse, Langle & Noriega, close enough to translate. In the foreground, two groups of one monk and two or three French officers on each side also prepare to enter the church behind their Captains.

The contrast in clothing is striking, with the Friars in plain brown frocks and their French visitors in fashionable 18th century courtly attire: powdered wigs, tricorne hats in hand or under arms, and swords showing from under long coats. Other official pictures of Lapérouse confirm his appearance in this sketch: vest and long coat over stockings and short silk pants tied under the knee.

In the drawing, Frenchmen and Padres are greeting each other between two long lines of neophytes stretching from the foreground all the way to the church. Lapérouse described them in his journal: "*Before we entered the church, we passed through a square in which the Indians of both sexes stood in a line.*" These lines really would have been long, as Lapérouse noted that there were 740 Native men, women and children living in the village next to the Mission. Two children have broken rank as children will do.

The explorer was surprised by the Natives' attitude: "*They exhibited no marks of surprise in their countenance, and left us in doubt whether we should be the subject of their conversation the rest of the day. ... On coming out of the church we passed through the same row of Indians whom the Te Deum had not induced to abandon their post. Only the children had removed to a small distance and formed groups near the house of the missionaries.*"

The striking contrast between the barren simplicity of mission and missionaries, and the brilliance of Lapérouse's entourage is very evocative of the era when such different cultures came into contact. The educated European public craved tales and pictures of little-known lands and people like Monterey for that very reason.

This particular drawing never actually reached France and did not appear in the published journal of Lapérouse's voyage: he presented the original to the Padres probably as a token of appreciation for their hospitality. It stayed at the mission for decades and then vanished at the time of the secularization of the missions in the 1830s. Two copies were made of it however in 1791, one by Tomas de Suria, the other by Jose Cardero, both artists of the Italian navigator Alessandro Malaspina's expedition. The copies are almost exact duplicates of each other.

The Mission was only sixteen years old at the time of this historic visit. Since no earlier views of California have surfaced in over 200 years, this makes de Vancy's drawing *the oldest view of our Golden State.*

For more on Lapérouse's visit to California and de Vancy's drawing:

- Claudine Chalmers' art book "*Splendide Californie, Impressions of the Golden State by French Artists, 1786-1900*," Book Club of California, 2001 (available at Abebooks.com)
- Malcolm Margolin's "*Life in a California Mission, The Journals of Jean François de La Pérouse*," Heyday Books, Berkeley: 1989.
- Gilbert Chinard's "*Le Voyage de Lapérouse sur les côtes de l'Alaska et de la Californie*, » The Johns Hopkins Press : 1937.

The drawing by Duché de Vancy was reproduced from "Splendide Californie". The original by Jose Cardero is held at Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Honeyman Collection. The others can be found in Chinard's book and on the website of Musée Lapérouse in Albi, www.laperouse-france.fr.

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