



THE LAPÉROUSE MUSEUM COLLECTION

Carole Roussel

The exploration of the Pacific Ocean was a prodigious undertaking that lasted for over three hundred years. It began as a European search for a new, direct route to the lands of spice and treasure in the Far East, and culminated in seventy-five years of feverish activity between 1768 and 1842, when more than twenty national expeditions sailed into the Pacific for the purposes of commerce, colonisation and scientific discovery. Such great voyages were technically the equivalent of space travel and exploration today. Though many ended in sickness and tragedy, they brought an accumulated wealth of knowledge and inspiration to everyday life, which in turn laid the foundations for the huge technological and social changes of the 19th century.

The story of Cook's voyages, leading to the arrival of the First Fleet in Australia, is well known and documented in Australia, but the role of the French navigators has received much less attention.

However, on February 23, 1988, the Lapérouse Museum opened in Sydney containing a remarkable collection of maps, globes, documents, navigation instruments, relics of explorations, antique objects and models of ships. Assembled from France, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Canada, Britain and Australia, they provide detailed accounts of the historic voyage and dramatic disappearance of one of the most famous of all French navigators, Comte de Lapérouse.

Lapérouse is best known in Australia because of the Sydney suburb named after him, commemorating the extraordinary coincidence that his two ships *La Boussole* and *L'Astrolabe*, arrived in Botany Bay on January 26, 1788, only a few days after the arrival of Captain Arthur Phillip and the First Fleet. After witnessing for six weeks the birth of the colony of New South Wales, Lapérouse sailed north — and was never seen again. His was one of the most intriguing chapters in the story of the European discovery of the Pacific.

Above: Plaster bust of Louis XVI; painting from the original in National Museum, Chateau of Versailles — 'Louis XVI gives his instructions to Lapérouse' by Nicholas-Andre Monsiau. On loan from Mitchell Library, NSW; and, globe of wood, England 1802, its map taken from charts used on Captain Cook's voyages

Note: Alternative spellings are LaPeyrouse (the Sydney suburb) and occasionally LaPeyrouse.

*Right: Model of the corvette Astrolabe sailed by Dumont D'Urville who reached the Lapérouse wrecksite at Vanikoro in February 1828. On loan from Musée de la Marine, Paris.
Photo T. Hickson*

Despite the turmoil of the revolutionary decades, the fascination, the concern and the mystery remained very much alive. France continued to mount expeditions to explore the Pacific and to search for the lost ships and crew of Lapérouse. No trace was found for thirty-eight years but vast areas of the Australian coastline and the Pacific Ocean were charted and the arts and sciences were enriched.

The museum occupies the south wing of the 100 year old Cable Station at La Perouse, overlooking Frenchman's Bay and the rocky headlands at the entrance into Botany Bay. Its nine exhibition rooms retrace the 3 year voyage of Lapérouse, as well as other expeditions of discovery in the Great Southern Ocean and those also sent to search for Lapérouse and his lost ships. Rare original maps, dating back to the 16th Century, show early attempts to chart parts of the Australian coastline and certain areas of the Pacific. Maps, etchings, prints and facsimiles help to place the voyages in their historical, scientific and social context.

The story of navigation was one of developing instruments to supplement observation and ships strong enough to withstand long voyages in all weathers through mountainous or icy seas. Advances in ship design and perfection of the marine chronometer by the Englishman John Harrison in 1735 meant that European navigators were at last well enough equipped to venture far from land into unknown waters. They could fix longitude as well as latitude and the great age of Pacific exploration began. Scientific information reached Europe to feed the curiosity of people already stimulated by Chambers Encyclopaedia or Diderot's carefully illustrated Encyclopédie. It was the three voyages of James Cook between 1768 and 1780 that were to define the fundamental nature of the Pacific.

In 1774 Louis XVI came to the throne of France. A child of the Age of Enlightenment he had a passion for science and geography, knew Louis-Antoine Bougainville's voyage round the world (1766-1769) by heart, and was eagerly following the voyages of Captain Cook whose achievements he longed for France to rival.

The king and his advisers drew up detailed plans for an ambitious four year voyage around the world. Together with the "Académie des



Compound Culpeper microscope has 14 attachments, English late 18th c. The wicker plant basket is a replica of those used by naturalists on the expedition to transport and store plants



A 17th century French diptych sundial made of ivory, similar to one owned by Lapérouse

Sciences" and the "Société de Médecine", the two most prominent learned societies in France, they devised programmes for important astronomical, geographical, botanical and zoological observations.

The mission was entrusted to Jean-François de Galaup, Comte de Lapérouse, the eldest son of a wealthy family of provincial nobility from Albi, in south-west France. Lapérouse had an impressive record as a captain in the French navy and had displayed great flair and ability in battles against British forces during the American War of Independence.

The Lapérouse Museum has an excellent reproduction of the famous painting by Nicholas-André Monsiau which shows Lapérouse receiving his instructions from Louis XVI. The scene is a representation painted in 1817 of what took place in the chateau of Versailles on 29 June, 1785.

Many of the objects on display in the museum are relics recovered quite recently from the wrecks of *La Boussole* and *L' Astrolabe* on the reef at Vanikoro in the Solomon Islands. It took thirty-eight years of searching to discover their exact whereabouts, and almost two centuries before divers

dared to fully explore the wrecks. On loan from the Queensland Museum in Brisbane are Spanish silver pieces of eight and Chinese ceramic pots acquired during the voyage. Several French naval uniform buttons are touching reminders of the lost crew. Cut gem stones, glass trade beads and a scent bottle were part of an enormous quantity and variety of trade goods loaded aboard at Brest in 1785.

A range of other important relics on loan from the Musée de la Marine in Paris include the re-assembled altar stone used by the chaplains Receveur and Mongez to celebrate mass during



Chinese ceramic pot from wreck at Vanikoro. On loan from Queensland Museum. Photo Angela Raymond

the expedition. Battered by two centuries of reef exposure, relics such as a simple pewter plate and goblet, or a section of a copper lightning conductor chain which could be run up the ship's mainmast during electrical storms, are not intrinsically beautiful objects but speak rather of the daily lives and hazards faced by those on board.

Navigational instruments like a brass Borda Circle made in France in the early 19th century, signed Lenoir, have a technical beauty and refinement.

In the development of navigational instruments the octant first appeared in 1757. Precise and elegant in design are an English 18th century octant of ebony, ivory and brass, signed Wallace, and a French early 19th century brass sextant signed Lorieux. Like the octant, the sextant used the reflecting mirror principle to measure from a ship the angular distance between two points: for instance, between a celestial body and the horizon.

For detailed observations the scientists on the expedition would have used a Gregorian telescope similar to the one on display. Made in France together with its very pleasing stand somewhere between 1733 and 1755, it is of brass covered with black sharkskin and signed "Paris à Paris".

One of the most delicate and beautiful objects in the collection is also one of the oldest, a 17th century French diptych sundial made of ivory with floral inlays on all four faces. Lapérouse owned a similar one.

One of the museum showcases contains two armillary spheres both made in France in the 18th century of wood and paper. One sphere relates to the planets; the sun is at the centre of the system and together with the other planets the earth is shown with its satellite, the moon, mounted on an axle. The horizontal circle depicts the zodiac signs. On the other sphere the earth is at the centre of the system while the circles represent the equator, tropics, poles and meridians. Armillary spheres first appeared around 1600 and were used by scholars in their libraries to study navigation. Their advantage over earlier globes was a three dimensional representation of the heavens and the movement of celestial bodies.



Sword guard, found on island of Tikopia in 1826, providing the first clue of the disappearance of Lapérouse

There is a handsome French 17th century flintlock pistol, such as would have been carried by Lapérouse and his officers, according to Paul Duffy, of the Antique Arms Collectors Society of Australia. This smooth bore front-loading style pistol fired the same lead shot as the examples recovered from the wreck by the Association Salomon of Nouméa.

As antique collectors know, even the finest and most valuable objects need to be displayed carefully and artistically. Guy de Compiègne, an architect with Quadrant Design, created and realised the interior design of the museum in harmony with the many different types of exhibits and the historic and cultural environs of the site. He commissioned a young French artist from Normandy, François Olivier Cosnefroy, to create stencilled motifs inherent to the theme of each room, and to blend the many subtle colours which decorate the museum.

Together with Commandant François Bellec, from the Musée de la Marine in Paris, Dr Anne-Marie Nisbet,



17th century French pistol. Its light engraved iron furniture was once silver plated or gilded. The barrel is 37.5cm long of smooth bore and is fully stocked in a carved slender wood. The chiselled iron pommel and the long ears attached to the pommel extending up the grip of the pistol are evidence that it was manufactured in the late 17th century as are also the flat surfaces of the lockplate and the cock. Personal gift of Pierre Roussel, President of the Lapérouse Association for the Australian Bicentenary

director of the French-Australian Research Centre (University of NSW), carried out the research and assembled the exhibits. Stanislas de Hautecloque, as museum director, arranged and supervised all the details of preparation and installation. The Lapérouse Museum had its genesis in the work of the Lapérouse Association for the Australian Bicentenary, a group of French residents in Australia and Australians with an interest in this subject who wanted to make a significant contribution to the Bicentenary. The project took four years to plan and execute. The government of New South Wales through the National Parks and Wildlife Service made the Cable Station available, and the Association's president, Pierre

Roussel, raised funds to cover the cost of restoring the building and establishing the museum. The budget included grants from the NSW Bicentennial Council, various French government ministries, and generous donations from numerous French business organisations and private individuals.

Readings:

François Bellec, *La Généreuse et Tragique Expedition Lapérouse*, Ouest, France, 1985

John Dunmore, *Pacific Explorer, The Life of Jean-François de Lapérouse 1741-1788*, The Dunmore Press, 1985

Anne-Marie Nisbet, *French Navigators and the Discovery of Australia*, School of French, The University of N.S.W. 1985 *The Lapérouse Museum Guide*

Below: French early 19th century brass sextant, used to determine latitude at sea. With graduations from 45 to 60 degrees, it allowed a navigator a sighting field of 120 degrees. Right: Gregorian telescope, French c.1733-1755, brass covered with black sharkskin. Signed 'Paris à Paris'

