

# Early French explorers and Australia

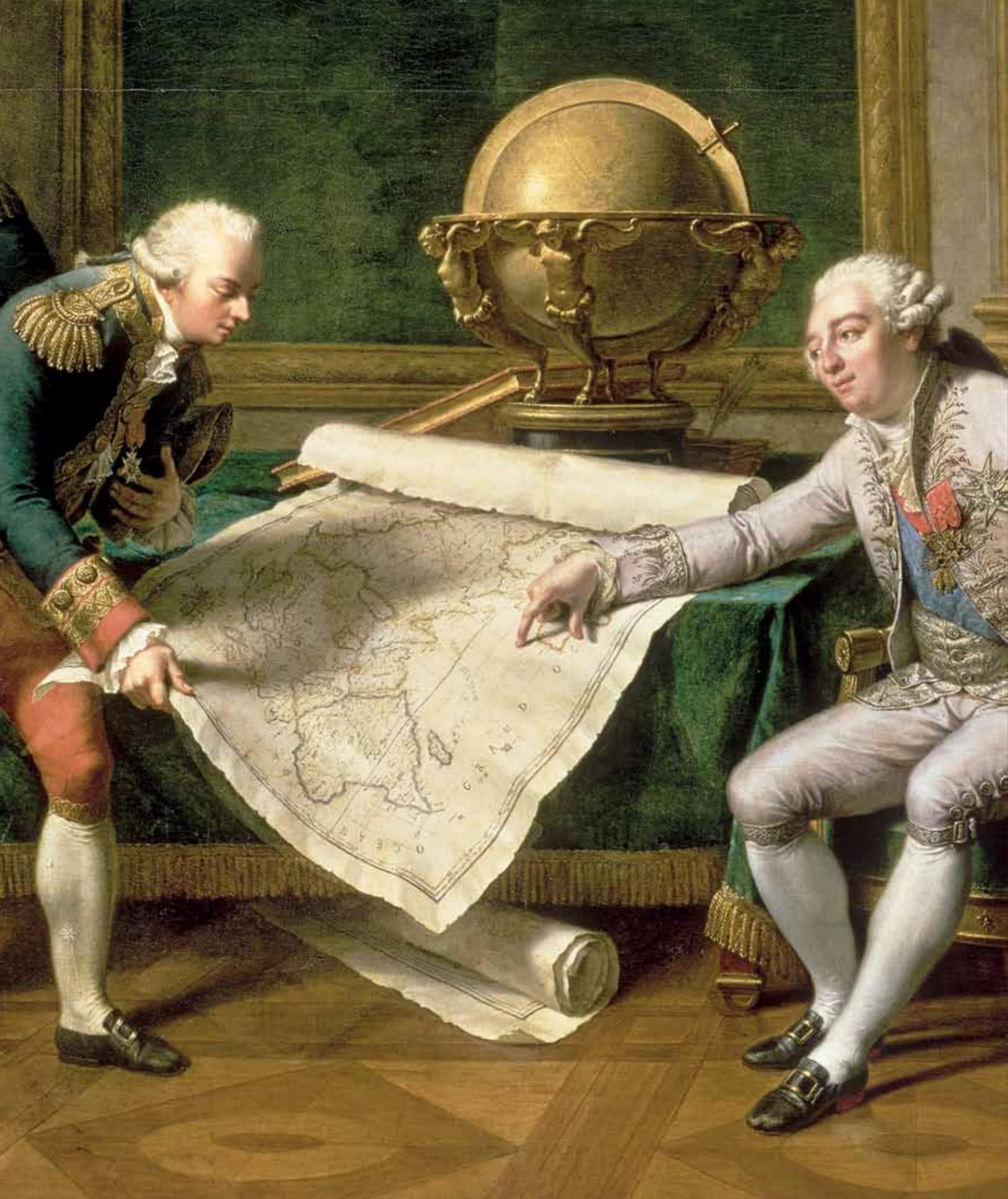
The British occupation and colonisation of Australia have obscured the significant role of the French in the European discovery, charting and documentation of the mysterious land mass known in the eighteenth century as New Holland, as well as its flora, fauna and human inhabitants. France was a leading centre of the Enlightenment which exalted empirically gathered knowledge of nature in all its manifestations and the use of reason to better understand and improve the universe. As the hallmarks of civilised society, these ideals shaped exploration, replacing at least in part both commercial and political motivations.

The publication by the *Philosophe* Charles de Brosses of a two-volume book, *Histoire des navigations aux Terres Australes*, in 1756 – summarising all thus far discovered about the southern seas, including the explorations by Abel Tasman and William Dampier – fuelled scientific and expansionist endeavour and was probably decisive in Louis XV's decision to support an exploratory expedition.<sup>1</sup> Rivalry between England and France cannot be dismissed as a contributing motivation, spurred on by news of Captain James Cook's 'discovery' of the east coast of Australia in 1770. Beginning with Louis XV, French rulers pursued a policy of exploration of 'Terre Australe' that focused as much on scientific study of the land and its inhabitants as on charting its coastline.

Louis XVI (1754–1793), who ascended to the throne at his grandfather's death in 1775, was a keen geographer, an avid reader of the accounts of Captain Cook's voyages and a determined rival of Britain's maritime supremacy. In 1785, he commissioned Jean-François de Galaup, Comte de La Pérouse (1741–1788), to circumnavigate the Pacific – an undertaking for which public enthusiasm ran high. While Australia had always been intended as the final stop of La Pérouse's itinerary, Louis XVI was made anxious by news of the departure from England of Arthur Phillip with the first prisoners destined to colonise Botany Bay. La Pérouse was then asked by dispatch to proceed there in all haste. He sailed into Botany Bay on 26 January 1788, only days after Phillip and the First Fleet had arrived there to establish the first European colony in Australia. After spending six weeks in Botany Bay, La Pérouse set sail to New Caledonia, and he and his ships were never seen again.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, his journal, charts and other papers were dispatched to France before his disappearance.

A party led by Joseph-Antoine Bruny d'Entrecasteaux was sent in search of La Pérouse in 1791; while unsuccessful in that venture, it nevertheless added substantially to the scientific knowledge and charting of south-western Australia and Tasmania. As a student at the prestigious *École Militaire*, the fifteen-year-old Napoleon apparently sought to join La Pérouse's expedition to the South Seas, demonstrating an early passion for exploration and science. It is not surprising, then, that as First Consul Napoleon supported Nicolas Baudin's now famous expedition to Australia in 1800 (p. 139).<sup>3</sup> The scientific and cartographic achievements of this expedition added immeasurably to the sum of knowledge of the *Terres Australes*. Although the British first claimed and colonised Australia, it was the French who fully embraced and made known the richness and diversity of life in this land.

Elizabeth Cross



Nicolas-André Monsiau  
French 1754–1837  
*Louis XVI giving his instructions to the Comte de La Pérouse (Louis XVI donne ses instructions au Capitaine de vaisseau La Pérouse)* 1817 (detail)  
oil on canvas  
172.0 x 227.0 cm  
Versailles, musée national du château  
(Inv. MV 220)

## Revolutionary period skeleton clock

On 5 October 1793 the National Convention instituted by decree a new system of counting time, the Republican or Revolutionary Calendar, which replaced the former Gregorian Calendar. Although the date of the beginning of this new calendar was set at 22 September 1792, the day on which the Republic had been proclaimed and the autumn equinox, it was not brought into force until 6 October 1793. Based on the decimal system, it divided the day into ten hours of a hundred minutes each and replaced the week by a *décade* of ten days, a month being formed from three *décades*. The year was made up of twelve of these months, with five supplementary days added at the end of the year (but six for *sextile* or leap years), these days being called *sanculotides* and devoted to Republican celebrations. But it proved difficult to change French habits, and on 18 Germinal, Year III (7 April 1795), the Convention suspended 'indefinitely' the decree relating to the decimal hour. The Republican Calendar endured for thirteen years before being abolished by Napoleon on 9 September 1805. The Gregorian Calendar was restored on 1 January 1806.

Until 1795 clockmakers were thus obliged to fabricate watches and clocks corresponding to the new divisions of time created by the adoption of the Republican Calendar. An especially rare object, this skeleton clock, with its splendid enamelled decoration by Joseph Coteau, has in its central and lower dials coexisting Gregorian and Republican calendars, the upper dial showing the phases of the moon. Indicated on the central dial are the Gregorian duodecimal hours, minutes and seconds, along with the Republican days of the week. The new Latin-based names for the days of the

Joseph Coteau (enameller)  
French 1740–1801  
**Skeleton clock (Pendule squelette)**  
c.1793–95  
gilt and enamelled bronze (chased),  
marble  
43.0 x 26.0 x 14.0 cm  
Fondation Napoléon, Paris  
Donation Lapeyre (inv. 809)

*décade* are clearly visible: *primidi*, *duodi*, *tridi*, *quartidi*, *quintidi*, *sextidi*, *septidi*, *octidi*, *nonidi* and *décadi*. On the lower dial appear the Republican decimal hours and minutes, as well as both the Republican and the Gregorian months. The poet Philippe François Nazaire Fabre, known as Fabre d'Eglantine (1750–1794), had been asked to create new names for the months of the year, and his terminology is still renowned. Inspired by the rhythm of the seasons and associated agricultural activities, it begins with the autumn months: *vendémiaire*, a name which evokes the *vendanges* or grape-harvests, *brumaire* (the *brumes* or mists) and *frimaire* (the *frimas* or frosts). Next come the winter months: *nivôse* (the month of *neige* or snow), *pluviôse* (*pluie* or rain) and *ventôse* (*vent* or wind); followed by the spring months: *germinal* (*germination* or sprouting), *floréal* (*fleurs* or flowers) and *prairial* (*prairies* or meadows); and finally the summer months: *messidor* (*moissons* or crop-harvests), *thermidor* (*chaleur* or heat) and *fructidor* (fruits).

The Republican Calendar also assigned a new name to each day of the Roman Catholic Calendar of Saints, replacing the saints with more unusual names such as *raisin* (grape), *tournesol* (sunflower), *citrouille* (pumpkin), *charrue* (plough) and *cochon* (pig)! Fruits and vegetables, farm animals and agricultural tools formed a comical list that inspired a number of given names for infants born during the Revolutionary period, before a new law of 11 Germinal, Year XI (1 April 1803), forbade their use.

Karine Huguenaud



## Manufacture de Sèvres

### *The Emperor in coronation robes, 1812*

One of the functions of the Sèvres manufactory was to glorify the Emperor by disseminating his portrait. In addition to varied pieces ranging from small cups to porcelain plaques and biscuit busts (p. 110), between 1806 and 1813 Sèvres produced eleven *fuseau*, or spindle-shaped vases, decorated with a portrait of the sovereign, eight of which copied the official portrait of Napoleon in his coronation robes, which had been painted by François Gérard.<sup>1</sup> Nicknamed by his contemporaries ‘the painter of kings and the king of painters’, Gérard was official portraitist to Napoleon, the Imperial family and the First Empire’s important dignitaries. His painting showing the Emperor in full coronation regalia was commissioned in 1805 for the residence of the Minister for Foreign Affairs. In keeping with the kingly tradition of grand full-length ceremonial portraits, Gérard depicted Napoleon as an absolute monarch bearing all the insignia of power. His portrait pleased the Emperor and was soon the subject of numerous important copies intended for the main rooms of each foreign diplomat’s residence or consulate. It served similarly as a model for works made by the Imperial manufactories, such as Gobelins tapestries and Sèvres porcelains.

Some of these *fuseau* vases were paired with a pendant example decorated with a portrait of the Empress: Josephine until 1809, and then Marie-Louise until the end of the Empire. These exceptional pieces were usually gifts intended for the highest dignitaries. One pair, for example, was offered in 1806 to the Minister of the

Interior, Monsieur de Champagny, on the occasion of Stéphanie de Beauharnais’s wedding to the heir-apparent of Baden. Another pair was delivered to Empress Josephine on 11 March 1807. In 1810 a vase from this series was sent to the new Empress’s uncle Ferdinand III, former Grand Duke of Tuscany and from 1806 Grand Duke of Würzburg. At the giving of New Year’s gifts in 1811, one of Napoleon’s sisters, Caroline Murat, Queen of Naples, received one as did Prince Eugène, the Viceroy of Italy, at the end of the same year. Jérôme Bonaparte, King of Westphalia, also received one, in 1812.

The Fondation Napoléon’s *fuseau* vase is the most richly decorated of the series; a veritable synthesis of Imperial symbolism surrounds the bust of the Emperor. The *beau bleu* (deep blue) ground on the body of the vase is decorated with a pattern of golden bees, and the gilt-bronze handles, made by Thomire, are in the form of eagles’ heads, while at the base of the belly a frieze alternates the Imperial Eagle standard, an antique *glaive* (broadsword) and the extended Hand of Justice. On the back of the vase, the coronation crown rests on a cushion, surmounted by the Imperial Eagle clutching a thunderbolt. Costing 2000 francs, this vase was delivered to the Tuileries Palace on 28 December 1812, in order to be offered by Empress Marie-Louise as a New Year’s gift to the Duchesse d’Elchingen, the wife of Marshal Ney.

Karine Huguenaud

Manufacture de Sèvres (manufacturer)  
France est. 1756  
Pierre-Philippe Thomire (goldsmith)  
French 1751–1843  
*The Emperor in coronation robes, after Gérard, tapered spindle vase, 2nd size (Vase fuseau, 2me grandeur: L’Empereur en costume de sacre d’après Gérard) 1812*  
(front and back view)  
porcelain (hard-paste), gilt bronze  
54.5 cm height  
Fondation Napoléon, Paris  
Acquisition 2002 (inv. 1165)



# Australia at Malmaison

From her acquisition of Malmaison in April 1799, Josephine was intent upon indulging her passion for the natural sciences by transforming its grounds into a living floral and faunal experiment. The significant number of Australian plants and animals at Malmaison exemplified the deep fascination that both Josephine and Napoleon held for this little-known southern land. Within the first four years, Josephine was cultivating a variety of Australian plants and had acquired several species of Australian animals, including kangaroos, emus, cockatoos and black swans. Amazingly, a number of these animals roamed free in her 70-hectare enclosure, alongside animals from China, South Africa and South America.

The Australian plants, numbering more than two hundred species, were grown throughout the garden beds and in the *Grande Serre chaude* (Large Hothouse), where Josephine cultivated her extensive collection of rare and exotic plants. From early on she made concerted efforts to acquire Australian plants. The more ordinary examples probably came from herbaceous tree and plant nurseries around Paris, but the rarer specimens were most likely obtained from the Jardin des Plantes in Paris and from Jacques Martin Cels, a passionate horticulturalist who was actively cultivating his own commercial garden of rare and exotic plants in Montrouge, outside Paris.<sup>1</sup> Other plants and seeds were obtained from the Scottish nurserymen Lee & Kennedy in Hammersmith, London, and from correspondents in England, in particular Sir Joseph Banks and Sir James Edward Smith, the founder and president of the Linnean Society.

Félix Delahaye served as Josephine's head gardener at Malmaison from 1805 until her death in 1814. Having travelled to Australia as a gardener on d'Entrecasteaux's 1791 expedition (p. 44), Delahaye had made his own extensive collection of plants and seeds, which he documented meticulously and eventually brought back to France in 1797. When Delahaye became Josephine's head gardener, he was, in effect, the only gardener in Europe to have observed Australian plants growing in their native habitat, and he surely also supplied Josephine with seeds from his considerable collection.<sup>2</sup>

In June 1803 and March 1804, the two ships from Nicolas Baudin's expedition to southeastern Australia (p. 139) returned to France, providing Josephine with an overwhelmingly rich new source of animals and plants. The scientific expedition returned piecemeal yet laden with floral and zoological specimens that included the skins of animals, as well as those living specimens that had managed to survive the horrendous voyage back to France. When the first ship, *Le Naturaliste*, arrived at Le Havre in June 1803, intense rivalry developed between Josephine and André Thouin, Professor of Horticulture at the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, for possession of its precious cargo. Thouin was at Le Havre to meet the ship and to supervise the unloading of the collections and their transport back to Paris. Determined that they should come to Malmaison, however, Josephine persuaded Napoleon to have the Minister for the Interior intervene. On 13 June, the minister wrote to the professors at the museum, politely 'inviting' them to set aside all plants desired by Madame Bonaparte. This first request was ignored and was thus followed by a second letter stating: 'It is in the interest of Science and for the glory of France to encourage [Madame Bonaparte's] distinguished taste and I invite you to back her aims as well as mine by every means you have at your disposal'.<sup>3</sup>



Pierre-Joseph Redouté  
Flemish 1759–1840  
*Mimosa distachya* 1800  
plate no. 20 in *Description des plantes nouvelles et peu connues, cultivées dans le jardin de J. M. Cels* (*Description of new and little-known plants, cultivated in the garden of J. M. Cels*) by Étienne Pierre Ventenat, published by l'imprimerie de Crapelet, Paris  
engraving  
46.6 x 32.6 cm (page)  
Rare Books Collection, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne (RARESEF 580.V56)

(opposite)  
Robert Lefèvre  
French 1756–1830  
*Empress Josephine with a Herbarium on the table beside her* (*L'impératrice Joséphine avec un herbier*) 1805 (detail)  
oil on canvas  
216.0 x 175.0 cm  
Museo Napoleonico, Rome (inv. MN 22)

(below left)  
**Pierre-Joseph Redouté**  
 Flemish 1759–1840  
**Louis-Jean Allais** (engraver)  
 French 1762–1833  
*Josephinia imperatricis* 1803–04  
 from *Jardin de la Malmaison (The garden at Malmaison)* 1804  
 engraving, state proof  
 54.6 x 36.0 cm (sheet)  
 Musée national des châteaux de Malmaison & Bois-Préau, Rueil-Malmaison (M.L.M.1040 Pl.67 (1))



(below right)  
**Pierre-Joseph Redouté**  
 Flemish 1759–1840  
**Louis-Jean Allais** (engraver)  
 French 1762–1833  
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 54.6 x 36.0 cm (sheet)  
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**Pierre-Joseph Redouté**  
 Flemish 1759–1840  
**Louis-Jean Allais** (engraver)  
 French 1762–1833  
*Josephinia imperatricis* 1803–04  
 plate no. 67 in *Jardin de la Malmaison (The garden at Malmaison)* Vol. 2 by Étienne Pierre Ventenat, published by L. H. Herhan, Paris 1804  
 colour engraving  
 54.6 x 36.0 cm (page)  
 Rare Books Collection, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne (RARESEF 580.V56J, vol.2)

