

JEAN-GABRIEL PRÈTRE



Jean-Gabriel Prêtre, *Study of Wasps*, c. 1810. Watercolor and gouache on paper. 11 x 9 inches.

Jean-Gabriel Prêtre (1775-1840) was a Swiss-French painter and illustrator known for his natural history paintings and illustrations featuring birds, mammals, and reptiles. His watercolor and gouache works on paper appear as illustrations in many books, including *Flore d'Oware et de Benin* (1804).

Born in Geneva in 1775, Prêtre began his career as an illustrator documenting the fauna at Empress Joséphine Bonaparte's horticultural haven and menagerie at the Château de Malmaison. Following her separation from Bonaparte in 1809, Joséphine stewarded Malmaison into a flourishing botanical center and home to fauna that roamed freely among its grounds and gardens, these included kangaroos, emus, black swans, zebras, sheep, gazelles, ostriches, chamois, a seal, antelopes, and llamas. Many of these animals were brought to France from extensive expeditions across Europe, Africa, America, and Australia, including Captain Nicolas Baudin's maritime expedition to Australia 1800-1803. Commissioned by Napoleon Bonaparte, Baudin's expedition had a stated mission for the "observation and research relating to Geography and Natural History."

While Prêtre did not accompany the expedition, his depictions of these animals refer to the opportunities for artists to study and produce reproductions of flora and fauna specimens, given the escalation in global colonial missions in the age of Enlightenment. Prêtre later went on to work as an illustrator for the Natural History Museum in Paris.

Caroline Webb, 2019

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