

Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique, (1804-05)

Jean Gabriel Charvet

1750-1829, France (Designer)

Joseph Dufour

1742-1827, France (Printer)

Block-printed on paper (20 panels)

Gift of Anna Rice Cooke, 1928 (2692)

Conservation treatment supported by Mr. and Mrs. Christian H. Aall

In 1804, French wallpaper manufacturer Joseph Dufour commissioned painter and designer Jean Gabriel Charvet to develop what became the most elaborate wallpaper scene of its time consisting of an unprecedented 20 panels stretching 30 feet across. The panoramic wallpaper set *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* reimagines the exploratory voyages of Captain James Cook, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, and Jean-François de Galaup La Pérouse in the Pacific between 1769-1779. Designer Jean Gabriel Charvet looked to the drawings and engravings by shipboard artists William Hodges and John Webber to inform his renderings. He combined these references with his own botanical and landscape studies produced while he was working in the Caribbean during the 1770s.

Wallpapers with designs imitating architectural, textile, and geometric motifs replaced tapestries as wall covers in European homes during the 18th century. Achievements in paper-making techniques associated with hot air balloon technology enabled the production of large-scale paper decoration. Dufour harnessed this process to support innovations in wallpaper concepts, and influenced the direction of 19th century French interior design by manufacturing extravagant paper sets, such as *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*. Composed of multiple panels placed side by side, the wall coverings formulate a continuous mural-like scene where the first and last strips of the cycle join to create a panorama capable of enveloping a room.

The designs were printed on handmade paper using a variety of hand-brushing, stenciling, and woodblock printing techniques. Rendering figures in wallpaper designs required specialized expertise on behalf of artists who could carve intricate facial features into the woodblock for reproduction. The densely populated landscape in this scene made it especially impressive, and also limited the number of editions that could be reproduced in high quality. Each color is applied using a separate woodblock. The flesh tones of each figure required as many as seven blocks, and it is speculated that upwards of a 1,000 blocks were required to execute the panorama in full.

This set of 20 scenic panels was produced to satisfy the growing demand for images of the exotic in European taste and decoration. Using tropical vegetation to break up the narrative, Charvet depicted various scenes and incidents from Cook's voyages, including excerpts featuring Tahitian dancers, the people of Nootka Sound drying fish, and the death of Cook. However, the papers are anything but geographically, botanically, or historically accurate. The panels conflate disparate events, people, and locales that speak to French culture of the time instead of the Pacific cultures after whom the piece is titled. Charvet modeled garments after Roman and Greek

antiquity, depicted European enlightenment themes expressed through artistic conventions of the early Napoleonic period, and Dufour manufactured the scene using methods achieved through French industrialization—all popular attributes of French Neoclassical aesthetics—resulting in a scenic fantasy far removed from the realities of the Pacific. The museum's complete set of *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* is one of only nine known to exist in public collections.