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Messy episodes: Indigenous countersigns in Ludwig Choris's diary and ethnographic portraits of Aleut, Kamchadal and Chukchi (1822)

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ABSTRACT

Examining Ludwig York Choris's diary, which was first published in 1999, and representations of Aleut, Kamchadal, and Chukchi people in his *Voyage pittoresque autour du monde* (Paris 1822), my article discusses methods of aesthetic and scientific visualization in an early nineteenth-century research expedition. The album was the outcome of Choris's participation in the Russian circumnavigation of the globe (1815–1818) and is an invaluable ethnographic record of Indigenous cultures in the North Pacific. I use the concept of 'Indigenous countersigns' (Douglas 2014) to investigate whether Aleut, Kamchadal, and Chukchi presence is inscribed in this little studied European work on Indigenous peoples and in Choris's private journal. Going beyond the common binary of 'us' and 'the others', I discuss how Indigenous presence is still traceable in his texts. Further questions addressed concern the illustrations' intended purpose and the influence of the contact zone wherein Choris and the Indigenous actors had to meet for the drawings to be made in the first place. This analysis is supplemented with unpublished letters of Choris to Adelbert von Chamisso, another member of the Russian circumnavigation, which can be found in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preussischer Kulturbesitz, and passages of Otto von Kotzebue's official expedition report (1821). References are made to around thirty, hitherto unknown watercolours by Choris, which are part of the Beinecke Collection, Yale.

KEYWORDS

Aleut (Iñupiat); Chukchi; Kamchadal; ethnographic portraits; Ludwig (Louis) Choris (1795–1828); Kotzebue expedition (1815–1818)

In summer 1818, the brig *Rurik* arrived in St. Petersburg, from where she had set off on a Russian-funded circumnavigation of the world three years earlier, in July 1815. The painter Ludwig Choris was on board. His journal entry comments laconically: 'At nine in the morning we cast anchor at the mouth of the Neva very close to land. – I went ashore' (Choris 1999, 346). When he stepped onto dry land, the young painter brought with

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him a series of drawings that he had made during the expedition and would publish some years later in Paris in the album *Voyage pittoresque autour du monde* (Picturesque journey around the world, Choris 1822).¹ Choris's pictures are among the most impressive testimonies left by the circumnavigation, alongside the official report by the expedition leader Otto von Kotzebue (1821a) and the travel account by expedition member Adelbert von Chamisso (1836). As well as plants and animals, Choris's book portrays Indigenous population groups of the North and South Pacific, their clothing and tools, their weapons and boats, their customs and homes. This makes the *Voyage pittoresque* an invaluable ethnographic record on the Indigenous cultures of the Pacific (Tyler 2017, 35).

In spite of this status, Choris's illustrations have been almost completely neglected in the literature, unlike the written accounts of the expedition by Kotzebue and Chamisso (Berbig et al. 2016; Drews et al. 2016; Görbert 2014; Federhofer 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b; Federhofer and Ordubadi 2011; Federhofer and Weber 2013). The *Voyage pittoresque* has yet to be discovered by art history or the history of science, and neither the book nor the expedition as a whole is mentioned even in recent work on the history of Alaska (Black 2004; Crowell, Steffian, and Pullar 2001). The few, though excellent, studies that address the album² – especially those by the historians Ron Tyler (2017), Bronwen Douglas and Elena Govor (2019), David Iglar (2017), and Harry Liebersohn (1998, 1999) and the literary scholar Monika Sproll (2016) – look at aesthetic aspects; they also focus on the representation of southern Pacific peoples. Not only is the scholarship on Choris scanty, therefore, but it also continues a taste in cultural geography that prevailed among Choris's own contemporaries: they favoured the South, with its 'gardens of pleasure' (Kotzebue 1821b, vol. 3, 261³) and 'charming Polynesians', over the 'dreary north' and the 'northerners' (Chamisso 1986, 91).⁴ Indeed, Choris's illustrations of North Pacific Indigenous peoples – Aleut,⁵ Chukchi, and Kamchadal – have attracted little attention in the past, despite being, in the opinion of artist and art historian Kesler E. Woodward, some of the early nineteenth century's 'most artistically impressive images of Alaskan exploration' (1997, 175 n.13).

However well-founded the admiration for Choris's talent as a painter that these Western studies express, what we lack is an examination of the colonialist context in which his album was created, of the concrete situations within which he made contact with Indigenous people and drew them, and of the reception of the work within its era's European artistic and scientific discourse. This lacuna is the starting point of my paper, which focuses on the ethnographic portraits of the 'northerners'. In search of a deeper understanding, I use written documents to reconstruct the context of Choris's portrayals of North Pacific Indigenous peoples. Choris's journal and Kotzebue's travel account, in particular, offer insights into the situations within which the individual drawings were made. They cast a more nuanced light on what might at first seem the obvious conclusion: that Choris's portraits are just one more manifestation of a Eurocentric aesthetics which helped to objectify and exoticize the colonized ethnic Others and subsume them into the premises of European representation.

Looking more closely at the context, that evaluation proves too simple. The Australian historian Bronwen Douglas has persuasively argued that when examining documents of Western voyages of conquest, whether travel accounts or illustrations, it is not adequate to apply a binary view that distinguishes neatly between European dominance and Indigenous subordination; this overlooks and indeed actively conceals the multilayered

nature of such testimonies (Douglas 2014a, 19–20). Instead, emphasizing the ‘messy, embodied’ nature of their production, Douglas investigates ‘indigenous presence’ in the records of exploratory expeditions (18–19). In her study of eighteenth – and nineteenth-century French travel accounts on Oceania, Douglas notes that ‘the presence and agency of indigenous people infiltrated the writings and pictures produced by sailors, naturalists and artists in the course of scientific voyages and left ambiguous countersigns in the very language, tone and content of their representations’ (2009, 175).⁶ Her use of the term ‘indigenous countersigns’ draws attention to the fact that the textual and visual documents produced by Western expedition members about Indigenous cultures not only took shape in contact with Indigenous people, but also bear the traces of Indigenous agency:

Going beyond the now common inference that there must have been local agency in encounters, I propose the notion of countersign as a strategy for pinpointing residues of such agency involuntarily inscribed in European voyagers’ accounts of their engagements with Indigenous people. (Douglas 2014b, 24)

This view onto the hybrid character of European documents opens up different ways of writing history, argues Douglas: ‘The idea of countersign has general potential for writing histories of subaltern actions from their shadowy traces in European archives and master narratives’ (24). Douglas’s notion of ‘countersigns’ is by no means restricted to signs of protest and resistance. Drawing on the aspect of ‘counter’ that is closer to ‘counterpart’, she also (or even particularly) finds such signs in ‘expressions of doubt, frustration, or fear’ (14). Historiography practised in this way – against the grain, so to speak – can circumvent the simple dualism of dominance and subalternity. When historians with an eye for the ‘indigenous presence’ read European documents as being, if only in part, the signs or results of Indigenous agency, they can give at least an indirect voice to the stories and experiences of Indigenous people.

The switch of perspective demanded by the concept of Indigenous countersigns is particularly fruitful for my project: not only because I do not have an Indigenous background myself and was socialized in a Western academic tradition, but also because the written and visual documents recording the circumnavigation in which Ludwig Choris participated are almost exclusively European ones.⁷ Yet it is only on a superficial view that these testimonies are purely Western, European representations of non-European cultures. On closer inspection, they, too, reveal the traces of Indigenous presence, the Indigenous countersigns that enable us to reconstruct the contributions, participation, and responses of the local population in their production. Choris’s North Pacific illustrations are available to us today only because the inhabitants of the Aleutian Islands, the Chukchi Peninsula, and Kamchatka let Choris draw them, their clothing, and their objects of everyday use (I discuss later in the essay the extent to which their assent was voluntary). That fact alone demonstrates their involvement in the making of the drawings. Furthermore, as I have mentioned, parts of Choris’s journal and Kotzebue’s travel account specifically describe how the local population reacted to Choris’s artistic practices. Those passages offer glimpses (glimpses through European spectacles, to be sure) of an Indigenous perspective on the situations in which the drawings were made. My empirical material is supplemented by little-known watercolours and sketches, now in the Beinecke Collection at Yale University, that Choris made in the North Pacific and

used to create the lithographs published in *Voyage pittoresque*. First, however, I will introduce Choris himself, and his *Voyage pittoresque*, before turning to examine my material, especially the textual documents, for ‘Indigenous countersigns’.

II

The *Rurik* expedition led by Otto von Kotzebue was one of the great Pacific expeditions undertaken by the European powers during the Second Age of Discovery (ca. 1760–1840; see Daum 2019). Anxious not to lose out in the imperialist rivalry between Britain, France, and Spain, Russia tasked the *Rurik* with making the nation’s circumnavigation of the world. Like most other European expeditions around 1800, the Russian undertaking pursued geopolitical and economic interests. Unlike projects such as the French Pacific expedition captained by Nicolas Baudin (1800–1804; see Altmann 2012; Cuvier 1799), however, the *Rurik* expedition did not have an explicit agenda in biological anthropology, and did not carry out experiments designed to demonstrate racial distinctions (Douglas 2014a, 140f.). No official instructions to ascertain alleged racial specificities are known for the Russian expedition, and the scientific instructions published in Kotzebue’s travel account are restricted entirely to phenomena in physics and astronomy (Kotzebue 1821b, vol. 1, 41–84). Nonetheless, the absence of a mission in biological racism does not mean the circumnavigation under Kotzebue was not Eurocentric and colonialist in character.

The expedition’s paramount aim was to find the entrance to the Northwest Passage on the coast of Alaska, and the *Rurik* would explore the southern and northern Pacific for three full years (1815–1818). Although the expedition had not discovered the entrance to the Northwest Passage, it had gathered a wealth of botanical, zoological, geological, ethnographic, and cartographic material. In that sense, it could be celebrated as a success.

This expensive project was funded by the Russian chancellor, Count Nikolai Petrovich Rumyantsev, who was also the principal shareholder of the Russian-American Company.⁸ The state-sponsored trading company, founded in 1799 with the goal of pursuing Russia’s colonialist interests, held a monopoly on goods from Alaska and the Aleutian Islands (both territories under Russian administration until 1867), especially the region’s lucrative animal pelts. The fur trade was one of the Russian Empire’s most important sources of income at the time, but transportation from Alaska to Europe was both lengthy and costly. The Company needed to improve the logistical efficiency of shipping, so the goal of finding a northern trading route between the Atlantic and the Pacific on the Alaskan coast was crucial for the 1815 expedition.

For the Indigenous population of the Aleutian Islands, the Russian fur trade had devastating consequences, criticized more or less openly by some members of the *Rurik* expedition. Choris says little about this in his *Voyage pittoresque* – he had, after all, dedicated the work to the Tsar and added as a frontispiece a portrait of Count Rumyantsev that he lithographed himself. In his diary, however, he overtly and harshly condemns the company’s violent methods:

We were happy to leave the place [Unalaska] where the Russian-American Company has its outpost and its power, wicked and stupid. . . . All the roguish tricks in the world are used here to squeeze the very marrow from the poor, oppressed, good Aleuts. – And to exterminate the tribe – . The company steals from them, pays little or nothing – . But what the upravitels

[Russian colonial officials] got up to, yes ... It is inevitable, for these are men of the coarsest class ... No sense of honour adorns their souls. (Choris 1999, 268–269)

Otto von Kotzebue's censure was more public. In his official travel account, he sharply criticized the Russian-American Company, accusing it of exploiting the Aleut population:

These unhappy people will be the victims of their oppressors, as long as the Company is subjected to the dictates of a monster, who purchases every gain with the blood of his fellow-creatures. (Kotzebue 1821b, vol. 2, 198).⁹

Incidentally, another participant in the *Rurik* expedition, Adelbert von Chamisso, judged the brutal Russian colonization of the Aleut population just as unequivocally:

The author is not in a position to speak about the Aleuts and the Russian-American Company. He would only be able to express his injured sentiment and his pity. Anyone who, even following conventional custom, violates the right of unprotected peoples to their inborn freedom must acknowledge that under these severe skies poverty is misery, and the Aleuts are both poor and miserable. (Chamisso 1836, 379)

In a matter-of-fact footnote, Chamisso presents numbers that document the alarming scale of this exploitation: 'We have been informed officially that the number of Aleuts on the Fox Islands in 1806 was 1134 men and 570 women; in 1817 it was 462 men and 584 women' (Chamisso 1836, 380). In ten years, Russian colonizers had reduced the male population of one group of the Aleutian Islands by almost two thirds.

Born to a German family in Ukraine, Ludwig Choris lost his parents at an early age and moved to St. Petersburg with his adopted father, the painter Dietrich Jacob Christian Matthes.¹⁰ Matthes taught drawing at the Ukrainian School of Art in Kharkiv before being appointed to teach at the Petersburg Academy of Arts in 1813. His adopted son Ludwig also studied there from 1814 to 1815 (Renn 2004, 188), and in 1815, aged only twenty, he was appointed the painter and draughtsman for Kotzebue's expedition. As we read early in Kotzebue's report on the voyage, 'the praise which has been bestowed upon [Choris] by the most celebrated artists of St. Petersburg, as well as by the president of the Petersburg Academy of Arts, fully justifies the choice of this young and deserving artist' (1821b, vol. 1, 24). After the circumnavigation, Choris settled in Paris, where he resumed his training in art at the Académie des Beaux-Arts, studying with the portraitist François-Pascal Simon Gérard and with Jean-Baptiste Regnault. According to a letter to Chamisso (25–29 January 1823), he practised painting 'after nature' with Regnault. Choris also took instruction in lithography, still a new technology at the time, and published two works: the *Voyage pittoresque*,¹¹ and *Vues et paysages des régions équinoxiales* (Views and landscapes of the equinoctial regions, 1826).¹² In 1827, he travelled to Mexico for the French Natural History Museum to collect plants and make drawings. He was killed in Veracruz during a robbery.

Voyage pittoresque autour du monde was not the work of Ludwig Choris alone. As the title page specifies, Georges Cuvier, Adelbert von Chamisso, and Franz Joseph Gall also contributed texts and supplied Choris with some of the visual material for his illustrations.¹³ In addition, Choris, who knew little French, was assisted in writing up the textual elements by the author Jean-Baptiste Benoît Eyriès (Choris 1822, iv). Choris's collaboration with Cuvier and Gall, especially, should not be overinterpreted when analysing the pictorial functions of his lithographs. I return to this point at the end of my essay; for

now, let me note that since Gall's and Cuvier's contributions make up only a small component of the *Voyage pittoresque* as a whole, and given the substance of Cuvier's texts (as mentioned, he described a sun-hat and a seabird), it would be hasty to categorize Choris's volume as part of a discourse of biological racism on their account. There is, of course, no doubt that Cuvier's and Gall's anatomical and phrenological studies prepared that discourse – but I am not aware of any evidence that they 'infected' Choris's artistic praxis, so to speak. Choris seems to have met Gall and Cuvier in Paris through Humboldt (Choris to Chamisso, 3 April 1820); however, no letter correspondence between Choris and Gall or Cuvier regarding the *Voyage pittoresque* is known to exist (see Outram 1979).

Voyage pittoresque originally appeared in twenty-three separate parts between 1820 and 1822, before being published in a single volume in 1822. It contains more than a hundred hand-coloured lithographs, most of which Choris made himself on the basis of his own drawings. It was by no means a matter of course at the time for painters to make their own lithographic plates: the task was usually delegated to a printer's shop. In his correspondence with Chamisso, Choris stressed more than once that he had improved the quality of his work by making the lithographs himself.¹⁴

Choris groups the illustrations into seven chapters, corresponding to the segments of the voyage,¹⁵ but the sequence does not follow the route sailed by the *Rurik*. That distinguishes Choris's volume from traditional travel accounts, which are usually organized around the chronology of the journey. Some of Choris's texts are descriptions of the areas visited, others describe the items portrayed. It would be fair to compare the book to a museum, an 'exhibition to be explored on the move' (Lubrich 2014, 19), where visitors can choose their own routes. Choris originally had no intention of supplying written commentaries on his illustrations, and only decided to add texts on the advice of Alexander von Humboldt; he admitted privately to Chamisso that he found the writing work



Illustration 1. Ludwig Choris: „Habitans du Golfe de Kotzebue“. In the chapter: “Kamtchatka, le Golfe de Kotzebue et la terre des Tchouktchis” in Ludwig (Louis) Choris: *Voyage pittoresque autour du monde* [...], Paris 1822. Lithography.

'unpleasant' and had undertaken it despite 'not feeling much inclined to it myself' (Choris to Chamisso, 26 March 1821).¹⁶ Choris saw himself as a painter, not a writer.

III

Of the 104 lithographs in Choris's *Voyage pittoresque*, around forty show Indigenous groups in their surroundings or as individual figures, eight of these showing inhabitants of the North Pacific (see illustrations 1–3). In Choris's terminology (and that of his contemporaries), they are referred to as Aleutians, Chukchis, and Kamchadals. A substantial number of illustrations, then, feature human beings, who, unlike landscapes or plants, tools or jewellery, were not simply 'there', ready and waiting to be portrayed. Rather, these drawings arose in situations that first had to be constructed: the people that Choris wanted to portray needed to agree to have themselves portrayed. That agreement, in turn, depended on the painter being able to communicate his project to them and explain what exactly it was that he wanted. The local populations clearly mastered the techniques of draughtsmanship themselves – in his chapter on the inhabitants of the Kotzebue Sound, for example, Choris expressly comments on their 'very pronounced taste for drawing' (Choris 1822, ch. Kamtchatka, 15); and in his own contribution to the *Voyage pittoresque*, the naturalist Georges Cuvier finds an Aleutian sun-hat decorated with pictures of marine animals 'most remarkable' because of the quality of the drawings (Choris 1822, ch. Aléoutiennes, 22).¹⁷ The Indigenous actors were not familiar with the technique of portraiture, however, so Choris had to rely on their participation for his portrait work. Indigenous involvement thus 'infiltrated' (Douglas 2009, 175) the context of the images' production and, as we will see, also the context of their most immediate reception.

Traces allowing us to infer how Indigenous actors reacted to being portrayed by Choris or how they participated in the portrayal – that is, Indigenous countersigns – can be found in certain, rather rare passages of Choris's journal and Kotzebue's travel account. We may



Illustration 2. Ludwig Choris: „Habitués des îles Aléoutiennes“. In the chapter: “Iles Aléoutiennes” in: Ludwig (Louis) Choris: *Voyage pittoresque autour du monde [...]*, Paris 1822. Lithography.



Illustration 3. Ludwig Choris: „Habitans des îles Aléoutiennes“ In the chapter: “Iles Aléoutinnes“ in Ludwig (Louis) Choris: *Voyage pittoresque autour du monde [...]*, Paris 1822. Lithography.



Illustration 4. Ludwig (Louis) Choris: Paintings and Sketches (Kamtchadales). Digital Collections of the Yale Library (Beinecke Collection): <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/10604603>.



Illustration 5. Ludwig (Louis) Choris: Paintings and Sketches (Kamtchadales). Digital Collections of the Yale Library (Beinecke Collection): <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/10604603>.

safely assume that when they sat down to write, neither Choris nor Kotzebue consciously intended to offer space to an Indigenous view of the contact with Europeans. Their comments record local people's reactions to having their portraits taken just as they record any other geographical or anthropological, botanical or zoological peculiarity. In what follows, I ask whether these hints at Indigenous presence, still visible in what is fundamentally Eurocentric written material, do more than document a power imbalance between a European superiority and an Indigenous subalternity. Do they enable – behind the backs of their authors, so to speak – a switch of perspective that also gives us a view of what happened between the portraitist and his subjects from an Indigenous standpoint? Of course, this attempted reconstruction does not claim to excavate a singular Indigenous perspective, or an unfiltered one, given that the material is so strongly shaped by the perceptions and conventions of a European position. What the *Voyage pittoresque* offers is primarily a Western view onto the Indigenous population of the North Pacific. The information the reader or viewer receives about Indigenous people is regulated by the narrators, Choris and Kotzebue. The Indigenous view is mediated and 'translated' by European techniques of cultural appropriation in writing and portraiture. Yet that does not obviate the fact that Indigenous responses, rejoinders, and perspectives find their way into the narrative, if in a mediated form. To cite Douglas, the 'signs and countersigns of indigenous behaviour, appearance and lifestyle are intrusive elements in written and graphic texts' (2015, 104).

Voyage pittoresque itself gives no detailed information on the situations within which Choris made his portraits of Indigenous people of the North Pacific, but he does occasionally discuss the context of his drawings in his journal (Choris 1999). Reading this journal –

which, unlike *Voyage pittoresque*, was not intended for publication – we find that the pictures were produced during the summer campaign of 1816, when Kotzebue was searching for the entrance to the Northwest Passage in the Bering Strait. Choris clearly took his role as expedition artist very seriously; at least, in his journal he presents himself as someone who gathers his records whenever he can: ‘I seek out every opportunity merely to be there, to see everything, to draw everything, etc.’ (191).¹⁸

Choris’s sparse comments do not allow us to judge how voluntarily the portrait situations came about or how willingly the local people allowed him to draw them. For a present-day reader, the impression remains ambivalent. When the expedition came across Indigenous homes on the Alaskan coast in summer 1816, and Choris ‘rejoiced to have such an opportunity to contemplate the domestic life of the savages here’ (1999, 178), he nevertheless followed the advice of the expedition leader, Kotzebue, not to enter the dwellings, on the grounds that the people were ‘very timid’ (178). This could be interpreted as respectful behaviour towards the Indigenous population. But at another point – the expedition was now on the Asian side, with the Chukchi – Choris writes: ‘I then went into several yurts, where I freely drew the wenches and had them expose their arms and breasts’ (190). We do not learn whether the painter was welcome in the ‘yurts’, or whether the women allowed themselves to be sketched without further ado, although Choris does note in his journal that ‘the married ones’ removed their clothes only ‘with the permission of their husbands and the girls with that of their mothers’ (190).

Also in summer 1816, on St. Lawrence Island, there was another encounter between the painter and a young Indigenous woman whom he painted, recorded in one of the few detailed descriptions of a drawing situation to be found in Choris’s journal:

Many women – Not bad, but dirty. Some of the girls very pretty. Drew a few of them. When I called one to me, she didn’t understand. Blushed immediately and was embarrassed. – But I quickly brought her round with presents – and sat her down opposite me, as I required. She still did not look me straight in the eye – but was extraordinarily embarrassed –. (Choris 1999, 185)

Evidently, the young woman found it more than unpleasant to sit for a portrait, and her sitting was not voluntary. Choris interprets this as an inability to understand the situation. We may conjecture that despite very likely finding the European practice of sitting for a portrait incomprehensible, she perfectly well understood the setting in which that practice took place. It was a setting strongly marked by power asymmetry: the young woman felt compromised and threatened by the demands of a European stranger. She reacted to the situation in her own way, by timidly and reluctantly acceding to Choris’s wishes in order to avoid a further escalation. The whole scene seems coercive and voyeuristic, and the drawings born of a male, white gaze onto someone who is doubly Other: a member of another gender and another ethnicity.

Whereas Choris notes in his journal only episodes concerning portraits of women, mainly young women – situations that emerge from his notes as intrusive and steeped in sexism – Otto von Kotzebue’s travel account records very different responses to Choris’s portrait-taking. The gender distinction is striking: Kotzebue comments on the behaviour of Indigenous men, who were certainly not expected to expose their arms and chests, and who seem to have enjoyed the portrait drawings, perceiving them as

highly realistic. In August 1816, when the expedition was sailing the western coast of Alaska, Kotzebue recalls:

We had nearly reached our quarters when we met M. Choris with his book, in which he had drawn several of the Americans of this part. Our friends [that is, the locals] were very much pleased at it, and were quite beside themselves, when M. Choris, in walking, sketched the features of the old man hastily on paper, and the son held his sides with laughter when he saw his father's face drawn in the book. (Kotzebue 1821b, vol. 1, 230)

In this case, the act of portraiture is not associated with coercion. Far from eliciting shame and embarrassment, the drawing of a portrait gives rise to a situation of joking and fun. Another scene took place shortly afterwards, this time on the Asian coast among the Chukchi, who had evidently seen the portraits made earlier in Alaska:

They immediately recognized several portraits, which M. Choris had taken on the American coast, by the bones below the under lip; and one of my guests cried with vivacity, drawing his knife, 'If I meet such a fellow with two bones, I shall pierce him through.' (Kotzebue 1821b, vol. 1, 262)

Choris's portraits clearly had a high mimetic value, since the local people recognized themselves in them. One might regard this passage as a compliment to the careful and naturalistic execution of Choris's drawings. Admittedly, this would obscure the other, gender-specific aspect of Indigenous presence, which emerges in his journal entries: whereas the men laugh, joke, or strike pugnacious poses, the women act under pressure, not of their own free will.

IV

Despite the emphasis placed by modern scholars on the singularity of Choris's pictorial work, Choris was clearly part of a visual tradition, and had precursors in the representation of North Pacific Indigenous people (Henry 1984; Woodward 1997). Particularly relevant are Sven Waxell, the expedition artist on Vitus Bering's second expedition (1741–42); Mikhail Levashov, who accompanied the 1768–70 expedition of Pyotr Krenitsyn; Luka Voronin, a member of the Joseph Billings expedition of 1787–92; and John Webber, the expedition artist on Cook's third voyage in 1776–80 (Henry 1984, 8–9, 11–15, 18, 74–79). I have not been able to establish exactly how familiar Choris was with their illustrations, but he had definitely read travel accounts by James Cook and Georg Forster (Choris 1999, 143, 269).

Like the images made by these artists, Choris's portraits of North Pacific Indigenous people are located in the genealogy of the ethnographic portrait, which differs from the conventional European portrait in several ways. The emergence of European portrait painting in the Renaissance was, argues the art historian Gottfried Boehm, inextricable from the 'discovery of the individual' (Boehm 1985, 80). The visual arts in antiquity and the Middle Ages made representations of human beings, but the content of these images 'was not the autonomous individual' (13). The independent portrait could only arise when, in the early modern era, people had learned to see the human being as having, and being defined by, individuality (31; see also Preimesberger, Baader, and Suthor 2003, 26). This criterion implies that the person depicted is known personally to the painter and, assuming the portrait is given a title, can be identified by the viewer.

It is here that a portrait embedded in the visual tradition of uniqueness and identifiability differs from the ethnographic portrait.

The concept of the ethnographic portrait has, as far as I am aware, been discussed only rarely by art historians. An exception is Rebecca Parker Brienen, whose study of the Dutch artist Albert Eckhout engages in some detail with the concept (Brienen 2007, 73–93).¹⁹ She defines the ethnographic portrait as ‘a European genre of representation’ that emerged ‘as a distinct visual form in the early modern period, most closely allied to colonization as part of the European expansion’ (90). Studying Eckhout, a seventeenth-century painter, Brienen shows how the artistic practices of ethnographic representation changed over history. If clothing, jewellery, and hairstyles were what flagged ethnic difference in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries skin colour and external physical attributes became crucial distinguishing features (74).²⁰

As Brienen explains, these shifts in visual practices for representing non-European people went hand in hand with changing views of ethnic difference. Whereas well into the seventeenth century, naturalists believed that all humans shared a single origin, at the turn of the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, scholars began to argue that different human groups had different origins, deploying the concept of race to classify those groups on the basis of skin colour, external physical features, and allegedly distinct intellectual characteristics (87–88). In the nineteenth century, scientists would ‘apply a definitive hierarchy to these groups and greatly expand the racist ideology’ (88). The art of ethnographic portraiture did not, thus, take place in a vacuum, but in historically mutable contexts in which the notion of the ethnic Other was legitimated on changing theoretical foundations and on the basis of changing indicators.

Alongside these historical variables, a further important determinant of ethnographic portraiture is its ‘fundamental tension between the real and the abstract’ (Brienen 2007, 91). Unlike the traditional portrait, which as a rule portrays an identifiable individual with his or her characteristic physical features, portraits of non-European subjects vacillate between individual uniqueness and typicality or generalizability. On the one hand, painters created their images by, in most cases, taking the portrait of an actual individual; on the other, these portraits were intended to represent a whole ethnic group. Thus, ‘the ethnographic portrait emphasizes those aspects of a person that are not his alone but are considered characteristic of a larger . . . group. In this way it homogenizes the human subject’ (91). Tellingly, ethnographic portraits only very rarely give the name of the person represented, their captions tend to be generic (Henry 1984, 15, 51). The actual person who sat or stood for the portrait can no longer be identified. Assuming that an ethnographic portrait does capture particular characteristics, then that individual is indirectly present, but is simultaneously made to vanish by the concern to visualize typical features of a group *through* the individual (see illustrations 2 and 4).²¹

Choris’s illustrations are no less deeply marked by his era’s discourse on ethnic diversity; they, too, hover between individuality and generalization. In none of the eight representations of Kamchadal, Chukchi, and Aleut people in *Voyage pittoresque* does Choris supply the name of the subject. The only people to be named specifically in the texts and captions are King Kamehameha I of the Sandwich Islands, some of his family members, and Kadou, an Indigenous guide accompanying the expedition. For the North Pacific illustrations, Choris always chooses generic captions such as ‘habitans des îles Aléoutiennes’, ‘Kamtchadales’, or ‘Tchouktchis et leurs habitations’ (Choris 1822, ch. Aléoutiennes, plates

III, IV, IX; ch. Kamtchatka, plates I, II, X). The people portrayed stand for a collective; they are no longer identifiable as individuals (see illustrations 1–4).

Contemporary readers of Choris's book perceived his illustrations primarily as documentary, scientific drawings that served to represent an alien reality. Two reviews make explicit reference to that documentary value. One notes admiringly that Choris's drawings 'introduce us to the physiognomy of the savages, their habitations, their weapons, their utensils, and even several previously unknown animals' (Malte-Brun 1821). The other praises 'the remarkable picture gallery of so many peoples and tribes from all human races, which he [Choris] has assembled with exceptional diligence', because it 'consists in real and very lifelike portraits of particular individuals, and deserves the fullest confidence of the anthropologist' (Chamisso 1823).²²

Because Choris's images, as ethnographic portraits, also claim to visualize typical facial features of Indigenous groups, they cannot be viewed in isolation from contemporary comparative anatomy and craniology, which claimed that the anatomy of the skull permits inferences on intellectual and moral traits. The naming of Georges Cuvier and Franz Joseph Gall itself situates the work in a context of colonialism and racial ideology. That is further consolidated within the album, which contains three lithographs of human skulls – one showing the skull from the front and in profile – and Gall's description of one of them.²³ As I mentioned earlier in the paper, however, the significance of this context should not be overstated. The collaboration between Choris, Gall, and Cuvier was not close, and there is no evidence that Choris referred to their scientific work or views in his artistic praxis.²⁴

In this setting, it is worth pointing out that neither Gall nor Choris uses the word 'race' at any point in *Voyage pittoresque*.²⁵ Physiognomic and anatomical descriptions are nowhere to be found. Choris's journal describes at just one point the facial form of a young woman whom the expedition encountered in Kamchatka (Choris 1999, 171); otherwise, he is far more interested in the Indigenous population's facial and body tattoos (Choris 1999, 171, 177, 183, 185, 188) – an interest also noticeable in his watercolours and lithographs, which include some representations of tattooed faces or body parts (see illustration 1). Returning for a moment to Choris's collaborator Cuvier: in his instructions for the Baudin expedition, Cuvier requested that only the anatomical traits in the faces of Indigenous people be reproduced (Cuvier 1799; Altmann 2012, 121f., 130) – a requirement, incidentally, to which the expedition painter, Nicolas-Martin Petit, by no means adhered. For Choris, in contrast, tattoos, jewellery, and clothing, in fact Indigenous cultural forms in general, were just as important as morphological precision in his visual portrayals.

Two textual passages further indicate that Choris approached the portraiture of Indigenous people from a position that was certainly Eurocentric, but not fully determined by colonialist racism. Brief as they are, these passages problematize two facets of colonialist visual culture: the use of profile and the portrayal of skin colour. Importantly, Choris and Chamisso discuss these issues in an artistic context and negotiate them aesthetically. In a letter to Chamisso, Choris describes his dislike of profile drawings, the very form of representation that best enables anatomical differences to be compared: 'Profiles, do not think that I take pleasure in drawing them! – I have to! – but be assured that I will not make too many of them' (Choris to Chamisso, 26 March 1821).²⁶

Another visual technique for marking ethnic distinction and legitimizing sociopolitical hierarchies is the representation of skin colour. Recent art historical studies on the semantics of skin colour in eighteenth – and nineteenth-century portraiture trace the intertwining of aesthetic, medical, and political discourses, within which choices on how to reproduce skin colour could be politically motivated because of their racist and colonialist framework (Fend 2015; 2017, 156–163; Rosenthal and Vanderbeke 2015). Chamisso and Choris were interested in the faithful reproduction of skin colour, but from an evidently technical, painting-related perspective that is committed to the premises of realism. Discussing Choris's portraits of inhabitants of the southern Pacific, Chamisso criticized his colleague for failing to record the gradations of skin colours during the expedition by means of a colour palette, and instead 'haphazardly' adding the colour later on 'as an artist' (Sproll 2016, 167f.).

Although Choris's gaze onto his North Pacific subjects is assuredly an exoticizing one, and although he is embedded in the colonialist visual culture of the nineteenth century, it is difficult to categorize his portraits unambiguously as part of a colonial scientific (or pseudoscientific) project of classifying and dominating the ethnic Other by means of visual techniques. His portraits hint at a functional shift in the portrait, with a gap opening between aesthetic and epistemic validity claims. Citing Gottfried Boehm, we might say that Choris's portraits make manifest an 'iconic distinction' between aesthetic and epistemic knowledge (Boehm 1994, 29f.). This is the distinction between different orders of representation – an artistic one and a scientific one – that are simultaneously present in an image (Altmann 2012, 8–10). Choris's own preferred view of himself was as 'only a painter, nothing else' (Choris to Chamisso, 26 March 1821), and he saw *Voyage pittoresque* as first and foremost an artistic undertaking, not a scientific one.²⁷ From a postcolonial viewpoint, his self-evaluation may appear naive and contradictory; after all, Choris necessarily participates in the contemporary scientific discourse on humanity and nature through his publication. In that sense, his artistic practices are not 'innocent', and neither are they without consequences. Yet it would be wrong to dismiss his own statement as merely blinkered or unreflecting. By insisting on the intrinsic value of an artistic endeavour that refuses to bow to the objectives of science, Choris vividly presents the genuine tension or contradiction between the aesthetic function of image-making and its epistemic function.

The 'iconic distinction' between aesthetic and scientific stakes that permeates Choris's illustrations should not obscure a further dimension: the Indigenous presence and interactions that have, indirectly, left their mark. Though Choris clearly paid tribute to Western artistic conventions and scientific interests as he worked, and though the reception of his pictures registered an exotic alterity and subsumed it into a colonial discourse, it would be reductive to ignore the Indigenous presence in the drawings. The coloured sketches and watercolours that Choris made during the expedition and later used to produce his lithographic volume show that the making of these portraits must have depended on situations in which particular individuals (even if we no longer know their identity) had their portraits taken (see illustration 4).²⁸

It is little known today that the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, part of the Yale Collection of Western Americana, holds sixty-one watercolours and sketches made during his stay in the northern Pacific, now accessible online.²⁹ Of these images, thirty-eight are portraits. It would be an interesting venture to compare some of these

watercolours with the final lithographs, but this must be left to art historians; here, I will content myself with some general closing comments.

Even more than the ‘tidied-up’ and carefully wrought lithographs, the watercolour sketches reveal a specificity of facial features, an attention to detail in recording hairstyles and jewellery, that strongly suggest these were portrait sketches of actual individuals. A rather ephemeral genre in comparison to lithography, the watercolour offers a snapshot, and for that very reason warrants the authenticity of what has been seen. It goes without saying that Choris’s watercolours primarily reflect the viewpoint of the seer – the painter Choris – and reveal much about Western ways of looking at northern Pacific people. Yet they also constitute an Indigenous presence that gives us access to what was seen, to the Indigenous women and men of the North Pacific whose portraits they are. These people’s everyday life, clothing, and visual appearance are realized in the illustrations, and they are real to us because the individuals whom Choris drew were part of a contact situation. At the same time, the material I have discussed here also shows that Indigenous presence and identity in the early nineteenth century is accessible to us only in a mediated, indirect form and in relation to a hegemonic discourse. The Indigenous gaze is turned back to the eye of the European viewer. Using Homi Bhabha’s term, Indigenous identity is constructed or processed in the form of ‘negative transparency’ (Kapoor 2010, 568; Bhabha 2004, 157), that is within a Western colonial discourse.

Translated by Kate Sturge, Berlin.

Notes

1. Choris’s book has never been translated into English in its entirety, though excerpts are found in Vanstone (1960) and Mornin (2002). In the following, I cite the French edition in my own translation.
2. The work was originally to appear under the title ‘Collection d’estampes’ (Choris to Chamisso, 2 October and 9 December 1820). Choris’s unpublished letters to Chamisso are held in the Adelbert von Chamisso papers at the State Library of Berlin. I thank Monika Sproll, Bielefeld, for generously giving me access to summaries and transcriptions.
3. See also Chamisso (1986, 179).
4. Kotzebue also sets up a North-South dualism between the ‘lively South Sea Islanders’ and the ‘serious inhabitants of the North’ (Kotzebue 1821b, vol. 1, 211).
5. I use the terminology of Choris and of his contemporaries. Today’s name for the group of Alaska Natives is Inupiat.
6. Douglas takes her term ‘countersign’ from the feminist literary scholar Shari Benstock, who coined it in the 1980s to describe the palimpsest strategies of modernist women authors (Douglas 2014a, 21; 2014b, 14 n.12; also Benstock 1986, 349–51).
7. One exception is Chamisso’s zoological text on whales of the North Pacific. Although it appeared in Latin, it uses the Aleut designations of the whale species, and Chamisso’s illustrations are based on small wooden models of whales that the local population carved for him (Federhofer 2012).
8. On the history of the Russian-American Company, see Pilder (1914); Okun (1951); Tikhmenev (1978); Wheeler (1979, 1988); Dmytryshyn (1989); Bown (2010).
9. The ‘monster’ referred to is Alexander Andreyevich Baranov, who had been chief manager of the Russian-American Company since 1799 and directed the company from the outpost in Sitka, Alaska. The *Rurik* expedition’s members did not have personal contact with Baranov during their journey.
10. Little is known about Matthes. He was born in Hamburg in 1780, died in St. Petersburg in 1835, and was the son and pupil of the painter Nikolaus Matthes, later known as Suhrs. He

- taught drawing at the University of Kharkiv from 1803 and at the Petersburg Academy from 1813. He seems to have been highly respected at the Russian court. See Müller (1979, 150).
11. The title expression was not unusual at the time. Other ‘picturesque journeys’ would later appear: a *Malerische Reise* to Brazil by Johann Moritz Rugendas (1835, translated into French as *Voyage pittoresque* in 1853), and a *Voyage pittoresque* to Mexico by Carl Nebel (1836).
 12. Presumably not unintentionally, Choris’s choice of title echoes Alexander von Humboldt’s *Voyage aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent*. This was translated into English as ‘Picturesque Atlas of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent’ (Humboldt 1814).
 13. Chamisso contributed the drawings and texts for ‘Vers marins’ (plates I und II), ‘Coqueiro du Brésil’ (plate V), ‘Spathe du coqueiro du Brésil’ (plate VI), and ‘Fucus antartique’ (plate VIII). He also supplied a description of his excursion to the ‘Volcan de Taal’ including drawings, and a text about Pacific coral islands. Cuvier contributed a text on a seabird (‘Le Macareux huppé’, plate XII) and a ‘Chapeau de Bois’ (plate V), while Gall described a skull.
 14. Choris to Chamisso, 14 November 1821 and 6–13 May 1822; see also Chamisso’s criticism of the quality of illustrators in a draft letter to Choris (Sproll 2016, 157, 168).
 15. The chapters are: Traversée de Cronstadt au Chili; Kamtchatka, le Golfe de Kotzebue et la terre des Tchouktchis; Port San-Francisco et ses habitants; Îles Sandwich; Îles Radack; Îles Aléoutiennes; Îles Mariannes. They are preceded by a dedication to the Russian tsar and an introduction, and followed by Chamisso’s ‘Notice sur les Îles de Corail du grand Océan’, two maps of southern Pacific archipelagos, and a general map of the Pacific showing the *Rurik*’s route.
 16. The passage runs: ‘I presented several descriptions of lands and peoples to Baron von Humboldt, he seemed reasonably satisfied but insisted that in my text I should, though as briefly as possible, include everything about our voyage that I could . . . – especially since all hope has been lost of ever seeing Kotzebue’s account published – unpleasant as it is for me, and feeble as my capacity, I am obliged to follow the Baron’s advice since he has really been so good to me so I undertook the task despite not feeling much inclined to it myself.’ Transcription of the original German by Monika Sproll.
 17. The hat ‘is extremely remarkable for the paintings with which it is adorned, which represent very well the most notable species of these seas, with very recognizable characteristics, and which prove that these savage peoples have examined them with great care.’
 18. A caveat: the context of this passage shows that Choris is justifying himself to Kotzebue, who has accused him of failing to finish up his projects and reminded him that he ‘is in service and it is not [his] duty to rest’ (1999, 191).
 19. Brienen adds detail and sophistication to the concepts of the ethnographic portrait proposed by Richard Brilliant (1991, 106–107), Peter Mason (1998, 3), and Bernard Smith (1992, 80). Altmann (2012, 116–149) dedicates a separate section to ‘ethnographic portraits’, but does not define the concept more specifically.
 20. Likewise, Brienen (2007, 84) notes: ‘During the sixteenth century, artists created gendered types of the world’s nations not via distinctions in physical appearance but through clothing, ornamentation, and hairstyle.’
 21. An exception to the deindividualizing pattern is found in the portraits of Aboriginal Australians made during the French Baudin expedition, which record the name of the person portrayed (Altmann 2012, 123).
 22. Choris’s album left a further faint track, in the shape of a phrenological work by Gall’s occasional collaborator Johann Gaspar Spurzheim (I thank Ingeborg Høvik for alerting me to this connection). In the section ‘Of National Faces’ in his book *Phrenology*, Spurzheim briefly mentions Choris’s *Voyage pittoresque*, from which he borrowed the portrait of a Malaysian: the ‘figure is taken from the work of M. Choris’ (Spurzheim 1836, 201). In this section, Spurzheim seeks to show that ‘the majority of individuals composing nations have something characteristic in their countenances’ (Spurzheim 1836, 199), and illustrates those physiognomic distinctions using portraits not only of Europeans (Cato, Joseph Addison, Isaac Watts) but also of Hannibal, a Jewish man, a Mongolian, and that very ‘Malayan’ (Spurzheim 1836, 200). Whether Spurzheim’s *Phrenology* should be classed as racial theory is a moot point

- and will not be discussed here. In her review of Poskett's study, Conklin usefully warns against a hasty identification of phrenology with racial theory, remarking, with a critical eye to Poskett's procedures, that 'if phrenology was as important a source globally for disseminating ideas of racial difference as race science, we need a stronger case for how the two worked together' (Conklin 2021, 111).
23. These are a lithograph in the chapter 'Îles Aléoutiennes', captioned 'Crânes des habitans des îles Aléoutiennes', and two in the chapter 'Kamtchatka', captioned 'Crâne de femme trouvé dans le Golfe de Kotzebue (dans la collection de Monsieur le Docteur de Gall)'. Gall describes this female skull, also briefly discussing the skull illustrated in the Aléoutiennes chapter (Choris 1822, ch. Kamtchatka, 16–17). Incidentally, *Voyage pittoresque* does not contain any illustrations of skulls in the chapters on the southern Pacific population. On the images of skulls in the album, see also Glaubrecht et al. (2013).
 24. A fascinating recent study by the historian James Poskett, *Materials of the Mind*, traces phrenology's development into a global science in the course of the nineteenth century. Poskett notes that this 'novel mental science' was initiated in the late eighteenth century by the phrenological studies of Gall, whose 'doctrine of the skull' had not, however, spread very far by 1828, the year he died (Poskett 2019, 1–2). Only in the mid-nineteenth century, thanks not least to dissemination by the Scottish phrenologist George Combe, did this 'science' attain a global reach. Unfortunately, Poskett gives no concrete pointers to the Russian and German-speaking context that would allow us to simply apply his findings to the case of Choris. In her very favourable review of Poskett's book, Alice L. Conklin rightly criticizes his general focus on the 'Angloworld', particularly Edinburgh (Conklin 2021, 105–106). See also Martin Staum's evaluation (2003, 51): 'In contrast to Britain, however, there does not seem to be any evidence of widespread popular enthusiasm in France, at least after the initial fascination with Gall.'
 25. Sigrid Oehler-Klein, author of the most detailed available study on Gall's phrenology and its nineteenth-century reception, offers a balanced view of Gall's contribution to measurement procedures in race theory (Oehler-Klein 1987, 197). On Gall's contribution in Choris's *Voyage pittoresque*, she notes: 'the craniological analyses . . . performed by Gall and published by Choris clearly show that Gall by no means intended to integrate his theory into . . . the physiognomic study of facial expressions, for he strongly emphasized the individual distinctions that characterize skulls, regardless of race but dependent on the size of the organs.' (204–205). The recent biography of Gall by Stanley Finger and Paul Eling makes no mention of his contribution to Choris's *Voyage pittoresque* (Finger and Eling 2019).
 26. Choris's representations of North Pacific Indigenous people are mainly portraits in full frontal or three-quarter view, seldom in profile. This is a common representational practice in European portraiture (Pointon 1993).
 27. That Choris consciously placed himself in a visual tradition of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century portraiture is indicated by the fact that when the expedition ended, he went to Paris to continue training as a painter with the portraitist François Gérard; visiting London, he met the portrait painter Thomas Lawrence and enjoyed viewing the portrait paintings in the city's museums (Choris to Chamisso, 25–26 May 1823).
 28. A letter from Chamisso to publishers Hoffmann of Weimar, dated 30 August 1821, documents his manner of working: 'The complete collection of the drawings he [i.e., Choris] has made was bought from him in Petersburg and has remained at the disposal of Mr. von Kotzebue . . . Choris makes his lithographs after his first, rapid sketches, which he has kept for himself' (transcription of the original German: Monika Sproll).
 29. Louis Choris: Paintings and Sketches. Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, WA MSS S-260, Beinecke Digital Library records. The drawings were donated to the library in the 1950s by the financier and collector William Robertson Coe, who had acquired them with the help of the antiquarian bookshop Edward Eberstadt and Sons. Coe had been offered a larger number of Choris's watercolours, but was interested only in the illustrations of the North Pacific region. My thanks for this information to

George Miles, curator of the Western Americana Collection, personal communication, 20 April 2020.

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