

A "New" Choris Watercolor

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Louis Choris was one of the most talented artists of California Native American life during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Recently, a previously unknown watercolor by Choris was discovered at the Estonian History Museum. This discovery highlights the importance of searching for further undiscovered treasures in European repositories.

IN 1995, I visited the Estonian History Museum in Tallinn in conjunction with ongoing research on overseas museum collections of California Indian artifacts (Blackburn and Hudson 1990). While there, I inquired about original artworks depicting Native Americans, and was informed that the museum did indeed have a number of such pictures, and that two of them apparently were representations of California Indians. When I expressed an interest in seeing these, I was regretfully informed that the art collection was in storage and temporarily inaccessible. After returning home, I wrote to the museum staff requesting further information on the art collection, but never received a reply (which I subsequently learned was sent but lost in the mail). I temporarily shelved the matter, but resolved to carry out further research at a later date.

In January 2000, I was finally able to contact Curator Heikki Pauts at the Estonian History Museum by email, and was delighted to immediately receive not only a list of the museum's artworks depicting Native Americans, but electronic images of the two pictures of California Indians as well. While one of these (EAM G-3063) turned out to be a later composite engraving of two plates originally published in Baegert's (1772, 1989) account of Baja California (W. M. Mathes, personal communication 2000), the other (EAM G-2878) was clearly a previously unknown watercolor by the talented artist Louis Choris, depicting a neophyte couple residing at Mission San Francisco in 1816 (Fig. 1).

Louis (Loggin Andrevitch) Choris (1795-1828) was arguably the most gifted of the various artists that often accompanied the numerous Russian, British, Spanish, and French expeditions that visited California in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Certainly, his drawings and watercolors depicting mission life (e.g., Fig. 2) probably have been reproduced more frequently than those created by any other contemporary visitor. Choris was born in Russia, of German descent (as were many others who were to play significant roles in both the Russian Navy and the Russian-American Company), and was only 20 when he boarded the brig *Rurik* as the official artist of the Romanzoff expedition (Mahr 1932; Henry 1984). This privately financed venture, which had the dual goals of discovering a northern passage across the North American continent and exploring the Northwest Coast, consisted of a single small ship, with a crew of 20 seamen, under the command of Lieutenant Otto von Kotzebue. The exploring party, although modest in size, included a number of exceptionally qualified men, among them the noted naturalist Adelbert Von Chamisso, surgeon Frederick Eschscholz, and artist Louis Choris. Several different accounts of the three-year voyage were eventually published (Choris 1822, 1826; Mahr 1932; Kotzebue 1967; Chamisso 1986).

Choris created a number of striking sketches and watercolors during the *Rurik's* brief stay in the San Francisco Bay area, some of which were later



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Fig. 1. Watercolor (EAM G-2878) attributed to Louis Choris entitled "Indians from New Albion." Reproduction courtesy of the Estonian History Museum, Tallinn.

reproduced as lithographs in the artist's own account of the expedition (Choris 1822). However, most of the originals were dispersed after Choris' untimely death in 1828, and the corpus of his known depictions of California was not expanded until the relatively recent publication of a few additional, previously unpublished Choris sketches and watercolors by Galvin and Howell (Campa y Cos 1964). When *Drawn from Life* (Kroeber et al. 1977) appeared some years later, the total scope of Choris' legacy seemed clear, and ethnohistorians were simply grateful that a number of his surviving

artworks still remained to provide a glimpse of mission neophyte life.

The existence of another previously unknown Choris watercolor is obviously welcome news to anyone interested in life in early California, since the picture is a significant addition to the body of work produced by one of the most talented of the expeditionary artists. However, it has the additional significance of suggesting that further treasures may lie as yet undiscovered in European repositories waiting to be found, and that the methodical search of overseas archives, museums, and collec-



Habitués de Californie

Fig. 2. Published Choris lithograph showing a group of neophytes at Mission San Francisco, 1816 (Choris 1822).

tions has the potential to significantly expand our basic ethnohistoric data base. The limits of that data base have not as yet been reached, and the technological and communicational revolution that is presently taking place has provided us with important new research tools for expanding those limits in unprecedented ways. Let us begin to use them.

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