

Birds by Jacques de Sève

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MARCEL G. ROETHLISBERGER

BIRDS BY JACQUES DE SÈVE

This note concerns for zoological prints. The object is a hitherto unknown volume of 195 drawings of birds attributable to Jacques de Sève (active in Paris c. 1742–1765/89) or to an executive designer working under his orders, done as the final models for four fifths of the 250 engravings of birds in Buffon's *Natural History* of 1770–1783 (Figs. 1–10, 12, 14). The volume, of unknown provenance, is part of the collection of the recently deceased Dr. Kurt Bösch, a scientist from Augsburg permanently settled in Sion, Switzerland, where he established the "Institut universitaire Kurt Bösch". The core of his large and as a whole somewhat disparate collection consists of a library of the most precious books of natural history.

Modestly bound in grey cardboard, this volume contains on 195 pages of 215×170 mm as many meticulously finished drawings in black chalk, 189/190×145/147 mm, each recto representing a different bird, or rarely two or three birds of the same species (most exceptionally two species). The name of each bird is written at the bottom by the same hand. The only other indication in this volume is a later, pale pencil inscription "De Sève" on the back of the cover. The drawings bear at the top later pencil numbers, out of sequence, not corresponding to the pagination of the books.

Each bird is placed into some more or less stereotype landscape setting, occasionally with architectural elements such as rural buildings or, more specifically, a kind of pagoda for the Sarcelle de Chine, Egyptian temples for the Ibis blanc.

The drawings are both totally novel and very familiar-looking, insofar as they are unheard of but correspond down to the details and the frame lines, in the same size

and direction, to the plates of one of the most celebrated eighteenth-century publications (Figs. 11, 13). The execution of the drawings is consistently equal, leaving no doubt that they are the work of a single hand, notwithstanding the fact that a notable unity of style also marks the engravings, although these were executed by a dozen different professional engravers. The handling of the black chalk is comparatively broad, resulting in subtle shadings, whereas the engravers transposed the drawings into a finer, infinitely detailed linear pattern, working out a more precise interpretation of the drawn models, without ever deviating from them or betraying them. The comparative reproductions offered here bear witness to this relationship. The birds' names, written in italics on the drawings, are printed in capitals (in a few rare cases with corrected spelling). Most prints bear at the bottom right the engraver's name, many at the bottom left *De Seve del.* (different spellings); it is obvious that also those without the Sève signature were drawn by him.

The engravings corresponding to these drawings are scattered in a different sequence throughout Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle des Oiseaux*, the first edition of which comprises nine volumes in-quarto, Paris, Imprimerie royale, 1770–1783, with a total of 250 plates (from 22 to 39 plates per volume; the drawings for the remaining 55 prints are not known). This is a portion of the 36 volumes of Buffon's *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière*, Paris 1749–1804¹, containing a total of 1055 plates. This path-breaking enterprise, a complement to Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, occupied at times as many as eighty artists and collaborators. The artistic direction of the ornithological

volumes lay in the hands of the engraver François-Nicolas Martinet (born 1731). Most engravings of the birds bear at the bottom left de Sève's name², almost all at the right the name of one of the nearly two dozen engravers, very rarely with a date ranging from 1770 to 1774: L. Le Grand; Blanchon; F. Hubert; Michel; Magd. Ther. Rouselet; C. Baron; Cath. Haussard; Elis. Haussard; C. G. Guttenberg; R. De Launay le j^{ne}; C. L. Fessard; Duhamel; Mlle Massard; veuve Tardieu, etc. As witnessed by the signed prints, de Sève also provided many drawings for other sections of the publication.

The only author to provide some information about de Sève is Portalis, 1877³, who aptly started by saying that "information on him is very scarce". His birth and death dates are unknown. His ancestors include the painters Gilbert de Sève (Moulins, c. 1615 – Paris 1698), founding member of the Academy in 1648, active also for the Gobelins, and his brother Pierre (Moulins, c. 1623 – Paris 1695), member of the Academy in 1695⁴. Jacques de Sève provided vignettes and illustrations for a number of books from 1742 to 1760. Later dates, mentioned below, are 1765 and 1779–1782. Nagler, 1846⁵, is the only one to call him Jacques Henry de Sève, deceased about 1795. A Jacques-Eustache, called Jacques's son, is likewise mentioned as a draughtsman and engraver, but his dates are uncertain and no documented works are known to me; only the dictionary of Bénézit has him living from 1790 (open to doubt, if he was Jacques's son) to 1830 and active until about 1815. He may have continued the father's activity for further editions of Buffon.

The various series of book illustrations of Jacques are listed by Portalis⁶, who calls him "a draftsman of much talent..., one of the most active collaborators of the fine edition of the *Œuvres de Buffon* of the Imprimerie royale issued from 1749 to 1788. He drew animals faithfully and with much

naturalness and was entrusted by the naturalist to draw them from nature at the Jardin des Plantes, scattering in that voluminous publication ingenious tail-pieces adorned with very finely drawn animals; but by far his most important illustration is the one drawn for the fine edition of the *Œuvres de Racine* in 3 volumes in-4 (1760)."

This comment on the Buffon edition astonishes: the volumes contain indeed many small tail-piece vignettes designed by de Sève and as many head-pieces, but above all the 250 full-page engravings of birds designed by de Sève, which Portalis does not mention explicitly but surely knew. Also his appreciation of the edition of Racine surprises: the three volumes contain a total of twelve fine full-page plates (195×145 mm) illustrating a scene of each play, plus as many small head-pieces and tail-pieces⁷. Technique and style of the plates and vignettes are exactly the same as in Buffon, but for the sheer number of plates, the two sets of books do not compare; for Portalis, birds, even by the hundreds, clearly did not measure up to a dozen figure compositions.

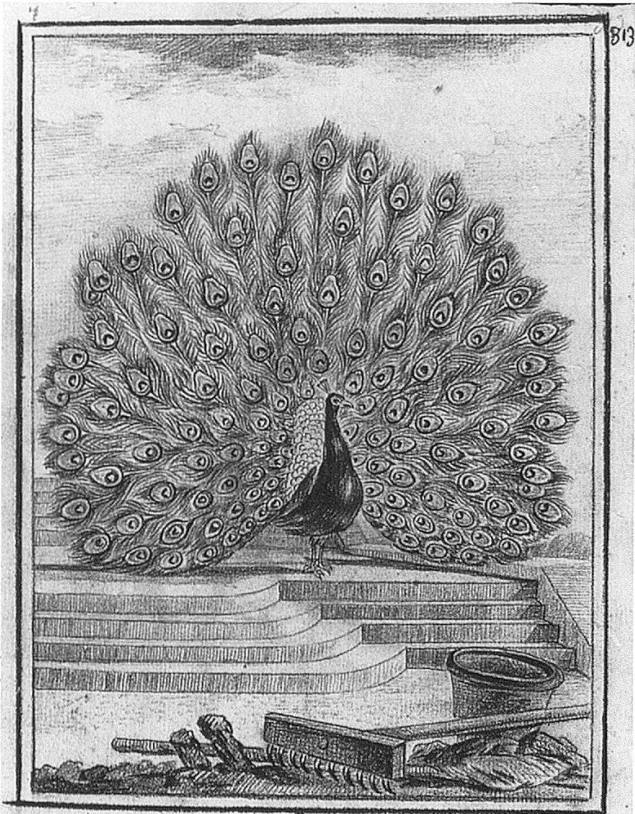
In his concise list of books illustrated by de Sève, Portalis mentions in each case the exemplars known to him which in addition to the prints contained a few or all of de

CAPTIONS TO THE FOLLOWING FOUR PAGES

Drawings by De Sève: Sion, Institut universitaire Kurt Bösch.

- 1 *Le Paon.*
- 2 *Le grand Pingouin.*
- 3 *Le Pigeon-cravate.*
- 4 *La Sarcelle de la Chine.*
- 5/6 *Le Toucan, drawing and engraving.*
- 7/8 *Libis blanc, drawing and engraving.*
- 9 *La Soulcie et le Grivelin.*
- 10 *La Linotte.*
- 11 *Le Râle d'eau.*
- 12 *La l'Alouette.*

The two engravings 6 and 8 from Buffon's "Histoire Naturelle des Oiseaux", Paris, Imprimerie royale, 1770–1783, vol. VII, pl. VI, and vol. VIII, pl. I.

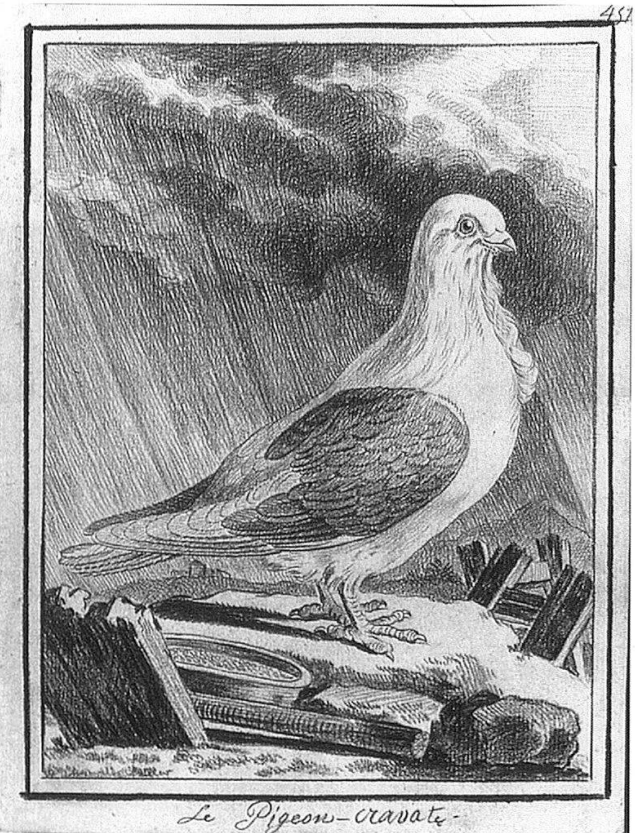


110. ail.

Le Paon.



Le grand pingouin.



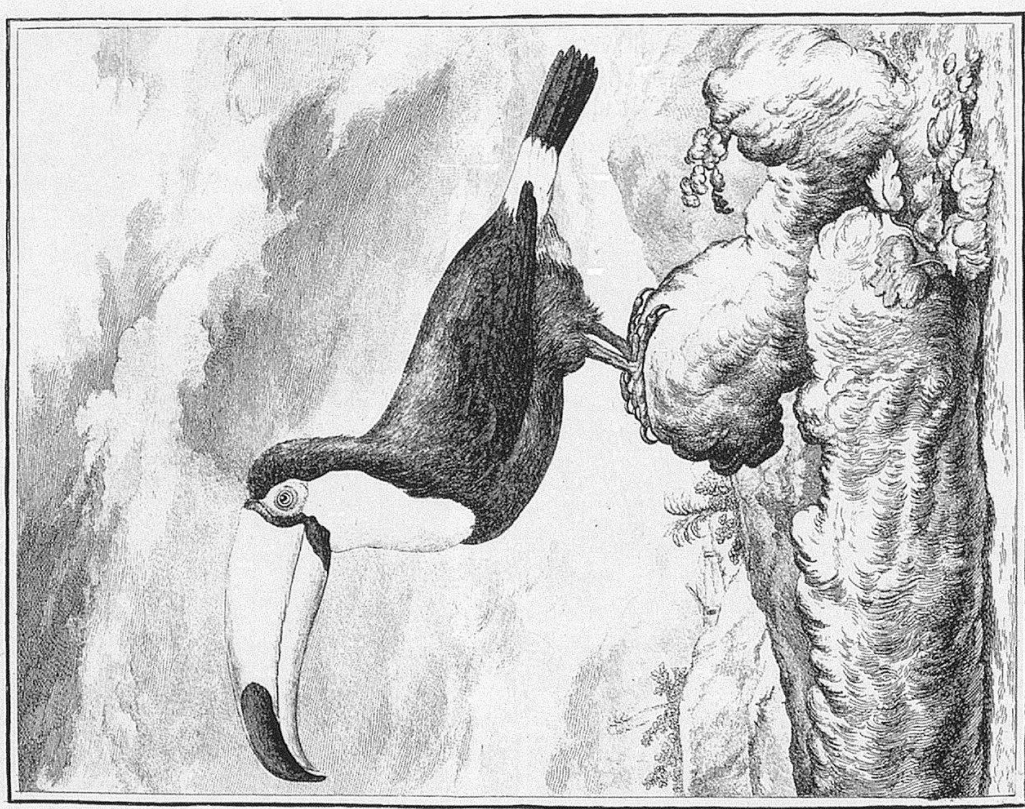
Le Pigeon-cravate.



La Sarcelle De la Chine

Pl. II, pag. 216.

Tom. VII.



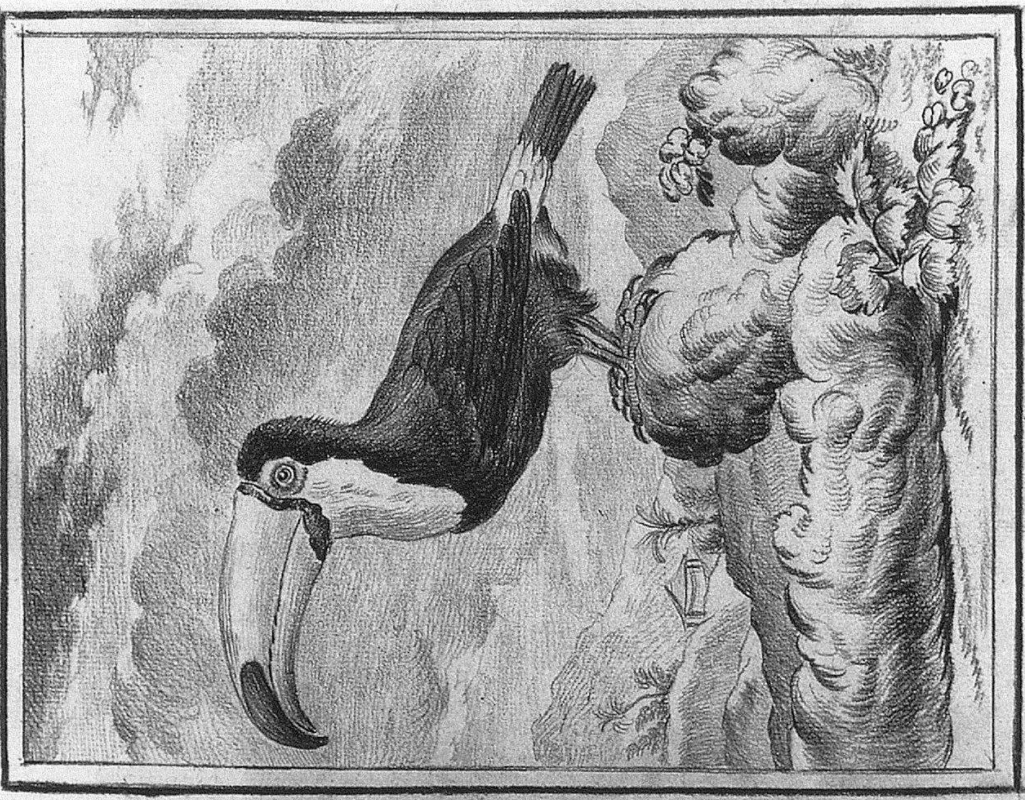
Aggl. Th. Renouillet sculp.

De Sore del.

LE TOUCAN.

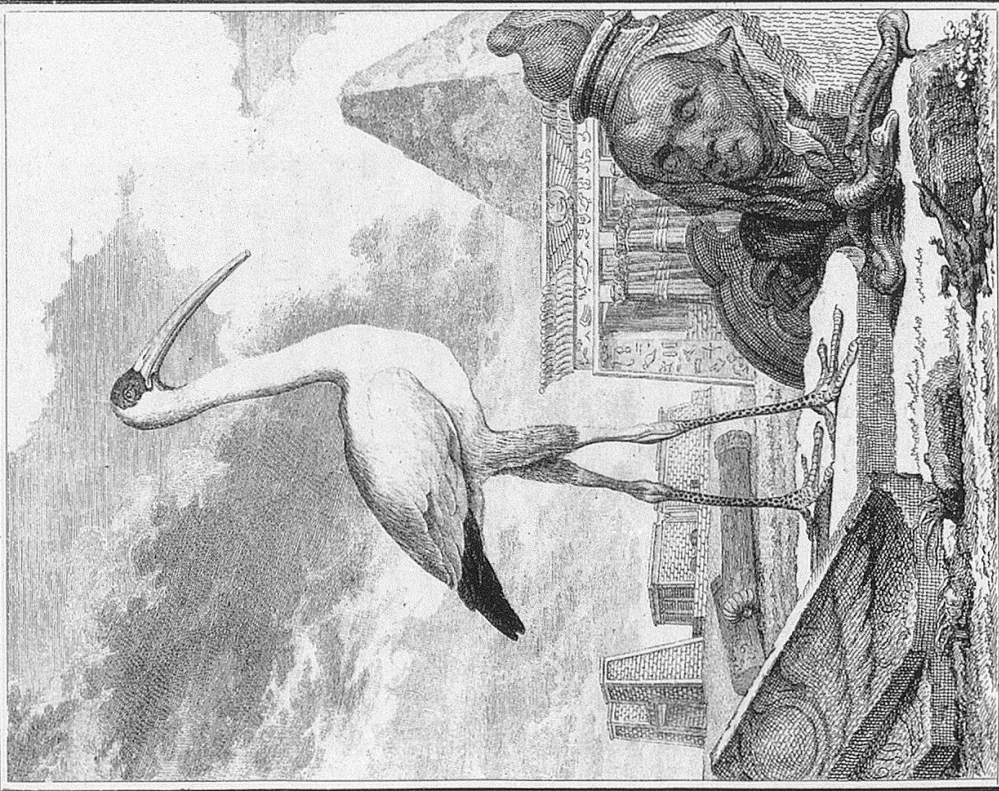
6

55



Le toucan.

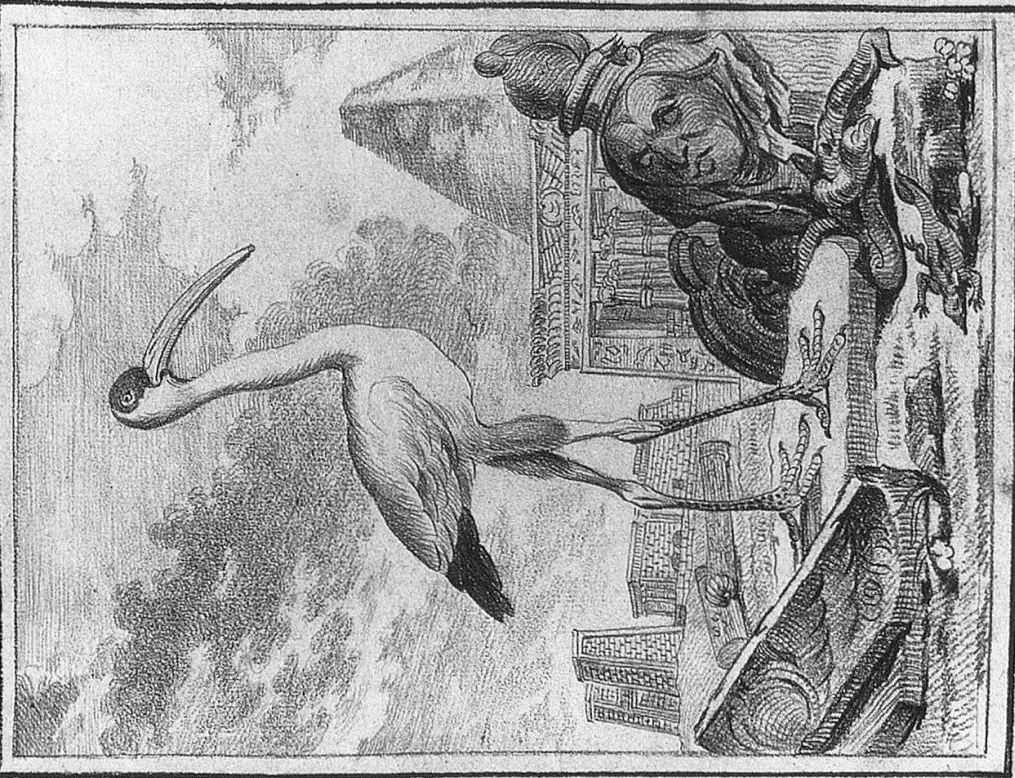
5



De Cuvier del.

LIBIS BLANC.

J. M. H. de Smeets del.



Libis Blanc.

425

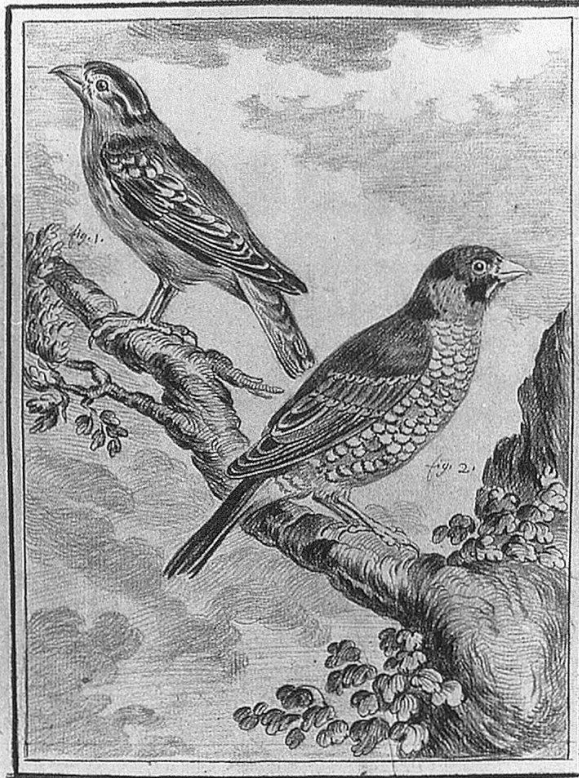


fig. 1. La Soudie. fig. 2. le grivelin.

9

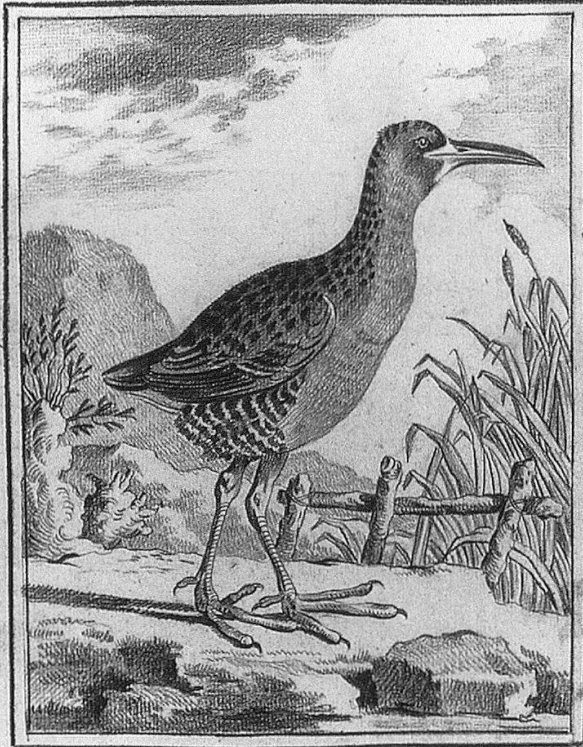
518



La Linotte.

10

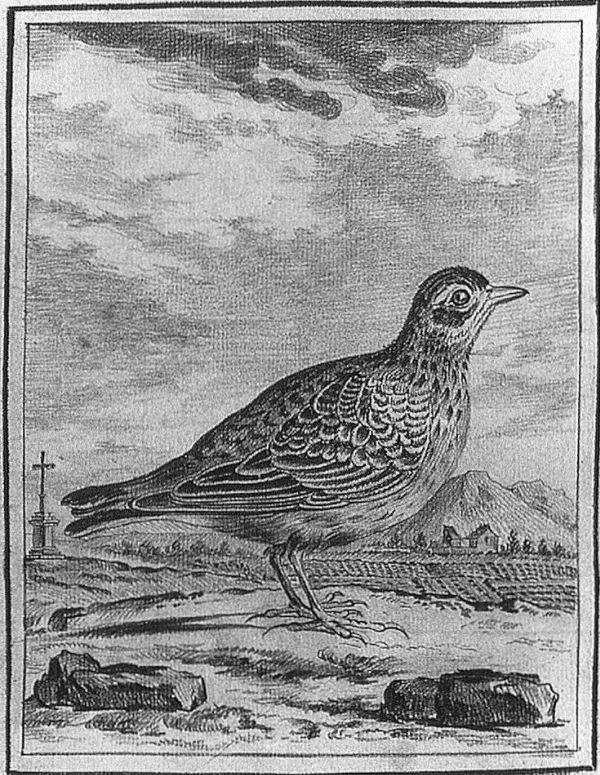
670



Le râle Beau.

11

534



La Calouette.

12

Sève's preparatory drawings for the prints (in various private collections and some sales). Among them is the *Traité des arbres fruitiers* by De Hamel du Monceau, Paris 1755, 2 vols., an exemplar of which, comprising original drawings, was in the library of the Louvre, "where it was no doubt destroyed by fire". Under Buffon, Portalis mentions a copy of the books belonging to himself with four pen drawings of vignettes signed by de Sève and dated 1785–1789. None of these drawings are known to me, though they may conceivably survive in rare book libraries or collections of drawings. Portalis also mentions as by de Sève a "volume of 152 animal drawings done from nature in Paris, as commissioned by Mr. de Buffon, 1765, large in-4°, in red leather, sales of Mirabeau, 1791 (4700 fr.), and Baroud, 1821 (95 fr.)", hence unknown. In view of its smaller number of drawings but larger measurements (at least c. 300 × 240 mm), this was not identical with the volume discussed here but would have been destined for another part of Buffon's publication such as the quadrupeds.

What were de Sève's models? Here is not the place to investigate this most interesting question. It stands to reason that many of the foreign birds could never have been seen live by him. That he would have drawn "from nature" is a common, traditional expression, not to be taken too literally. Invoked by Portalis, the Parisian Jardin des Plantes, founded in 1626, was and is the city's botanical garden, of which Buffon was the intendant from 1739 to his death in 1788. Already before him, the Jardin des Plantes's museum contained on the so-called *Vélins du Roi* (the king's parchments) innumerable samples of drawings of plants, animals, stones and an infinity of natural curiosities, to which Buffon added galleries of natural history. The material of the *Vélins* was accumulated over generations on expeditions or supplied by naturalists from the world over. Much of this material, of diverse interest and quality, is still extant in

the Jardin des Plantes's Museum d'Histoire Naturelle, never catalogued or studied in extenso and inaccessible to the non-specialist because of the gigantic scope of the collection. Whether or not it contained at the time stuffed animals is not certain; some live ones have been there only since the 1790s. The assumption is that de Sève drew some of the more common birds from live or stuffed samples and that he relied in most cases on the available visual sources of the Museum, unifying the entire set of his drawings in a homogeneous style.

A manuscript account book at the Museum d'Histoire Naturelle⁸ lists "Desseins qui ont été faits par les Sieurs de Seve et Buvée pour les cinquième et sixième etc Volumes de l'Histoire naturelle jusqu'au premier Juin 1754" – a mere summary account without details or actual drawings; another list of the same volume enumerates about a hundred drawings of birds supplied from 1 June 1756 to 1 June 1757 (the authors, not specified, are understood to be the same; the respective birds all figure in the final publication).

The only other drawings by de Sève (no initials) known to me, differing in type and technique from the chalk drawings of birds, are three dozen sheets with mammals, scattered in four volumes of mixed, mostly eighteenth-century materials – predominantly writing – at the Museum⁹. Volume 267 contains twelve drawings in soft grey wash signed by de Sève, with dates from 1776–1782, c. 190 × 180 mm, similar in style to drawings by Jacques de Favanne in the same volume. Volume 268 contains one rather careless watercolor by de Sève (*Le Loir*), volume 269 contains 20 pages of watercolors by him, including three pages of poultry, some comprising two animals, with dates 1779, 1781, 1782; some of these drawings are very similar to watercolors by Desmoulins in the same volume. In type, these wash drawings and watercolors by de Sève are unlike the highly finished illustrations in Buffon. Though animals of the

same species recur in the engravings, these drawings are not final models for them. By de Sève they are, but is he in fact Jacques or possibly his son Jacques Eustache?

Since the 195 chalk drawings discussed here are unique, it must be asked if they are indeed by Jacques de Sève, or by an unknown executive designer, or on the contrary anonymous copies done after the prints. Regarding the option of their repeating the prints, it would a priori make no apparent sense to copy the prints faithfully in such large numbers, although inexplicable curiosities do admittedly exist. The draftsmanship is that of an accomplished specialist, not of an amateur; the few spelling errors of names in the titles of the drawings, but not of the prints, would be hard to explain in the case of copies. Within the working process of the publication, final drawings of precisely this kind must necessarily have existed for each print (whether the resulting prints are in reverse or in the same direction is immaterial, as both options were practised in the history of printmaking). The extant drawings of this volume correspond exactly to this stage of final models for the engravers. As mentioned above, Portalis knew several collector's items of books containing both the prints and de Sève's own preparatory drawings for them. While the known wash drawings by de Sève cited above shed no compelling light on the attribution, they are not incompatible either with the chalk drawings. Bearing all things in mind, one may say that in view of de Sève's documented involvement in the Buffon publication, the attribution of the chalk drawings of the birds to him or to an unknown draughtsman working under his direct supervision seems acceptable, their function being that of the ultimate models destined for the team of engravers.

However important Buffon's ornithological compendium was in terms of novelty and scope, specialists take issue with the generally stiff poses of the birds. To put

the publication into a wider perspective, its plates were later surpassed in beauty, accuracy, and technique by a few luxurious folio compendia, whose ever larger color plates reached unsurpassed peaks of virtuosity. Arguably the most sumptuous of them is Cornelius Nozeman's *Nederlandsche Vogelen*, Amsterdam 1770–1829, in five volumes, plates by Christiaan Sepp (deceased 1775) and his son Jan Christiaan (1739–1811).

NOTES

¹ By Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707–1788). In 7 parts, each from one to 15 volumes, the specific parts including *minéraux*, *quadrupèdes*, *poissons*, *cétacées*. The nine volumes of birds are the volumes XVI–XXIV of the *Histoire naturelle*, with a second, separate numbering as *Oiseaux*: I 1770, II 1771, III 1775, IV, V 1778, VI 1779, VII 1780, VIII 1781, IX 1783. For the details of the editions, see C. Nissen, *Die illustrierten Vogelbücher*, Stuttgart 1953, p. 98, and his *Zoologische Buchillustration*. Stuttgart 1969–1978, vol. II, numbers 672–676. The various early editions of Buffon differ in the number of volumes and plates. Luxurious exemplars carried various numbers of hand-colored prints.

² Various formulations such as *Dessiné par De Seve*.

³ Baron R. Portalis, *Les dessinateurs d'illustrations au dix-huitième siècle*, Paris 1877, pp. 618–622.

⁴ Portalis calls them Jacques's grandfather and father, which is impossible. The two studies by Nissen (op. cit. in Note 1) appear to confuse father and son. Also the term "le jeune" occurring in some dictionaries for Pierre, Jacques, and Jacques Eustache, remains inconsistent.

⁵ G. Nagler, *Neues allgemeines Künstler-Lexikon*, 1846. He cites Buffon only incidentally and does not mention a son.

⁶ Illustrations for Perrault 1742 (small vignettes), La Fontaine 1746, Deshoulières 1747, La Bruyère 1750, Moncrif 1751, Du Hamel du Monceau 1755, Barbou, Scarron 1752, Racine 1760 (some details given).

⁷ Same size and framing as the birds in Buffon. The plates in Racine are signed *Jac. De Seve inv.* (vol. 1), *Jac. De Seve inv. del.* (or: ... *inv. et fec.*; vols. 2, 3), one is dated 1759 (vol. 1, *Les Plaideurs*). Partly the same engravers as for Buffon.

⁸ *Cat. Général des manuscrits des Bibliothèques Publiques de France/Paris*, II, Paris 1914, pp. 34, volume 218, n.p.

⁹ *Cat. Général des manuscrits des Bibliothèques Publiques de France/Paris*, II, Paris 1914, pp. 44, 141.