

Ernest Auguste Goupil

A YOUNG MAN AND HIS ART

ELIZABETH TRUSWELL REVEALS THE GENTLE CHARACTER AND POIGNANT DEATH OF A FRENCH ARTIST WHO JOINED AN 1837 EXPEDITION TO OCEANIA AND THE SOUTH POLE

ARTISTS PLAYED A KEY ROLE IN THE major European expeditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Theirs was the task of recording the places and people, and the fauna and flora that they encountered. Science was trumpeted as the reason for much of the exploration of the New World, but there is little doubt that most ventures were driven by nationalism and the impulse to secure colonial possessions, and by the idea that all the treasures of the world could be recorded, claimed and, where possible, collected.

A French expedition to 'Oceania and the South Pole' departed on two navy corvettes, the *Astrolabe* and the *Zélée*, from Toulon on 7 September 1837. Onboard the *Zélée* was a young artist by the name of Ernest Auguste Goupil. The vessels were being commanded by Jules Sebastien-César Dumont d'Urville (1790–1842), who ranks alongside Captain James Cook in his skill as a navigator. It was his second voyage to the Southern Hemisphere, his orders being 'to further hydrography, trade and science'. In addition, King Louis-Philippe of France requested that



the expedition attempt to cross the Antarctic Circle and penetrate beyond 74° south, the latitude reached by the English sealing captain James Weddell in 1823.

Very little has been published of Goupil's life and his role aboard *Zélée*. Most of what we know comes from a eulogy written anonymously by 'one of his friends, a companion of the voyage', in volume 8 of Dumont d'Urville's *Voyage au Pôle Sud et dans l'Océanie* (1845), held in the National Library of Australia. From this account, penned with great affection, we learn that Goupil was born in 1814 at Chateaudun, in the Loire Valley.

A delicate boy, he resolutely toughened his constitution by travelling and painting in the local countryside. He trained in Paris, tutored by Jules Coignet (1798–1860), whose paintings are described as romantic landscapes, ordered in their composition, an approach that clearly influenced his young pupil. Goupil painted, often in the company of fellow artists, around the Mediterranean coast of France. He also travelled to Algiers on a scarcely seaworthy vessel, and painted in North

ABOVE
Ernest Goupil (1814–1839, artist), Leon Jean Baptiste Sabatier (d.1887, lithographer)
Les corvettes louvoyant dans l'intérieur de la banquise le 5 Fevrier 1838
hand-coloured lithograph
30.3 x 47.7 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an9224435

BELOW LEFT
Louis Le Breton (1818–1866, artist), Adolphe Jean Baptiste Bayot (1810–?, lithographer)
Passage du cercle polaire, le 19 janvier, 1840, parages Antarctiques 1846
lithograph; 34.5 x 54.5 cm
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ABOVE
Ernest Goupil (1814–1839, artist), Leon Jean Baptiste Sabatier (d.1887, lithographer)
Île Éléphant, Îles New South Shetland 1846
lithograph; 34.5 x 54.5 cm
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BELOW
Ernest Goupil (1814–1839, artist), Emile Lassalle (1813–1871, lithographer)
Vue des environs de Port Famine, detroit de Magellan 1846
lithograph; 34.5 x 54.5 cm
Pictures Collection
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Africa. At 21, he was already exhibiting in the Paris Salon.

When news of Dumont d'Urville's proposed new voyage reached Goupil, he eagerly applied for the position of artist. Dumont d'Urville was impressed not only by the evident skill of the young painter, but also by his sea-going experience. Goupil was only 23 years old when appointed by the Marine Ministry as draftsman to the expedition. On the *Zélée*, his engaging nature made him a popular figure. His eulogist wrote:

his humour, gentle and joyful, his happy character, his fresh and open face, reflecting his lovely soul, earned the affection of all his travelling companions ... the Artist! was a magic word which brightened faces and brought a smile to many lips.

The expedition made its first attempt on the Antarctic during January and February 1838, crossing the Straits of Magellan and meeting thick ice off the Antarctic Peninsula. The men's hopes of penetrating further south than James Weddell were frustrated. The corvettes spent hazardous days locked in pack ice, before being freed. Forced to retreat, the expeditioners explored the islands north of the peninsula, including the South Shetland and Elephant islands. During the passage into Antarctic waters, Goupil drew constantly, holding his pencil in frozen fingers, covering the pages of his album with drawings of the *glaçons*—the ice forms which surrounded the men.

Clear of the ice, the expedition sailed into the Pacific and Goupil revelled in the opportunity to draw during brief visits to the tropical islands en route. He was frustrated, though, that the vessels rarely stayed long enough for him to be satisfied with his work. But it was these islands, so enjoyed by Goupil

and his fellow sailors, that were to furnish, according to his eulogist friend, 'the germs of a terrible scourge that was to take, in a little while, more than thirty of our companions'.

In the eyes of his friend, Goupil's dedication to his art proved his undoing. European sailors considered the north coast of Java notoriously unhealthy due to 'miasmas' arising from coastal swamps. At Lampung Bay, Indonesia, Goupil spent hours under a hot sun, on the bank of a foetid canal next to a local village. There, the ships filled their water tanks, which was probably a fatal move.

Shortly after leaving the Sunda Strait, there were some 12 men with dysentery on the *Zélée* and eight on the *Astrolabe*. The men began to die. Dumont d'Urville decided to make the long dash to the temperate climate of Hobart Town, where he was acquainted with Lieutenant-Governor Sir John Franklin. Goupil was among the most profoundly ill. His companions tried to shield him from the pain and dying of other victims, and succeeded, in spite of narrow spaces and thin partitions in the ship's interior. He survived the two-month long voyage to Hobart, where the ships arrived in December 1839.

There, Colonel Elliot, acting for the Lieutenant-Governor, welcomed the French sailors. Ashore, in a makeshift hospital set up to accommodate the sick, Goupil briefly rallied, but hope of his recovery was short lived. Sensing that his end was approaching, he nonetheless appeared calm. He asked for a glass of champagne and:

held the glass in his weak hand, while Commander Jacquinot, who had a particular affection for Ernest, came to see him. 'You see, Commander,' he said, making an effort to smile, 'death is not as sad as you imagine!' At the sight of this angelic resignation, the tough sailor, who had seen death close to him without flinching ... turned away to hide his tears.

Goupil died during the night of 31 December 1839, in the presence of his friend M. Honoré Jacquinot, assistant surgeon of the *Zélée*. The expedition could not be delayed for Goupil's funeral, Dumont d'Urville being anxious to take advantage of the short summer to make another attempt on the ice. An hour after the death of his friend, Jacquinot went back onboard and the vessels set sail. After Goupil's death, the role of expedition artist fell solely



to Louis Le Breton, assistant surgeon and naturalist on the *Astrolabe*.

In Hobart on 4 January 1840, at the instigation of the Lieutenant-Governor, Goupil was accorded a military funeral, with honours befitting his rank. *The Hobart Town Advertiser* recorded the order of the funeral. Goupil's coffin, draped in the French flag, was accompanied by 50 troopers while four lieutenants acted as pallbearers. Townspeople too joined the procession. Goupil and a number of his colleagues were buried in the Catholic cemetery. In 1911, when St Virgils College was built over the site, the bones were transferred to Cornelian Bay Cemetery, where a large marble monument lists the names of all the French sailors who died, either at sea or ashore, during the devastating dysentery epidemic.

Artists, such as Goupil, who had trained in the classical genre of landscape painting, experienced a certain tension between its conventions and the demands of scientists and navigators. While Goupil seems to have been driven by a desire to record nature realistically, his admiration for the classical landscape painters was clear. His friend reported his source of inspiration thus:

He had written in large letters, on a sheet of paper, these two names: Claude de Lorraine—Huysmans, and had stuck this inscription on the front of his desk, in such a way that it was always before his eyes and his thoughts, the names and the work of these two great artists, whom he had chosen as models.

Claude Lorraine, one of the great masters of the seventeenth century, often drew on classical antiquity to present nature as serene, harmonious or majestic; the lesser known

Ernest Goupil (1814–1839, artist), P. Blanchard (lithographer)
Canal de Samarang, Iles Java
1846
lithograph; 34.5 x 54.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an20824841



Ernest Goupil (1814–1839, artist), Emile Lassalle (1813–1871, lithographer) *Etablissement Anglais à Port-Essington, côte N. de l'Australie* 1846? lithograph; 27.2 x 39.0 cm Pictures Collection nla.pic-an6016310

Flemish painter, Cornelis Huysmans, rendered landscapes similarly, using rich, warm tones. While these artists adhered to the strictures of the classical genre, they nonetheless represented a certain reality in nature. Such an approach impressed Goupil, who believed ‘nature alone could furnish him with his material’.

The Library holds 52 of Goupil’s drawings, reproduced as lithographs, in the two-volume *Atlas pittoresque; Voyage au Pôle Sud et dans l’Océanie* published in 1846, six years after the completion of the voyage. Close examination reveals their combination of realism and romanticism. The realism is apparent in the fine detail, for example, in the rendering of botanical details in Manga Reva in French Polynesia. His drawings of southern

icebergs—some of the earliest portrayals of these—are also intensely realistic.

However, it is in the careful composition of Goupil’s drawings that his classical training is evident. The conventional threefold division of landscape into foreground, middle and background is clear. In most cases, activity is focused in the middle ground—the ships in the ice sit there, as do the human figures—and this is apparent in his drawing of Port Essington, his only landscape on Australian soil. He also frequently made use of framing devices, such as the trees that lean inward over the canal at Samarang, and an effective repetition of forms, as in his dramatic drawing of Elephant Island in which the mountain masses echo the shapes of the foreground waves. His rendering of skies carries more than a hint of the sublime; in his drawing of Port Famine in South America, windswept trees echo the direction of the clouds.

For this young artist, like others who accompanied early exploring expeditions, the recording of science was inextricably linked with the notion of the picturesque. One can only speculate about what directions his art would have taken had he not died in Hobart at the age of 26.

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