

THE CHARLES-ALEXANDRE LESUEUR
SPECIAL COLLECTIONS BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER
THE SECOND WORLD WAR¹

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Introduction

The Charles-Alexandre Lesueur archives compiled during the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, are shared between the Muséum national d'histoire naturelle in Paris and the Muséum d'histoire naturelle in Lesueur's home town, Le Havre.

During the Second World War air raids the Director of the Le Havre Museum, André Maury, was supposed to have placed the archives in a shelter to protect them from bombardments. The shelter was located in the basement of the Graville Priory, a religious edifice and heritage site of feudal origins belonging to the City, that had been converted to an Archaeology Museum during the first quarter of the twentieth century. For nearly fifty years this was the accepted version of events, with researchers making no attempt to learn more about the transport of the items, the organisation and selection process during their removal, or indeed the date of their removal. One simple question could have planted the first seeds of doubt in their minds: which authority gave the order to evacuate the Lesueur collections?

Articles written by Maury himself on the preservation of a small part of the collections, the destruction of the museum and the loss of scientific treasures to fire in 1944, suggest that the history of the institution from the outbreak of the war is not as simple as it seems. It is fitting then to re-examine the facts to ascertain the decisions that were made and to identify the actions which would ultimately lead to the preservation of the Charles-Alexandre Lesueur collections.

¹ Translated from the French by Nadia Barlow.

The evacuation of valuable documents from the city of Le Havre

In October 1939 memoranda from the top administration of the French National Archives, an institution attached to the Ministry of Education, insisted on the need to organise the evacuation of records of high value, particularly from coastal towns which were vulnerable to air raids. In the Department of Seine-Maritime the port of Le Havre was one such town, its coastal and estuarine location contributing to its economic and strategic importance. From 1939 onwards, several rare works from the special collections of the Municipal Library were transferred to the Château de Carrouge (Orne), around 170 km from Le Havre. They would remain there until the end of the war. Some of the Municipal Archives were hurriedly stored in a military fort some time during 1940, then transported one year later to the Graille Priory. Other pieces were packed away in a château near Le Havre (Notre-Dame-du-Bec), before finally being brought back to Graille, at the request of the German authorities.

The Lesueur collections in the Musée d'histoire naturelle in Le Havre, however, are not mentioned explicitly anywhere in the administrative documents. In view of this, it is reasonable then to wonder where they were. With such scarcity of official evidence available, how much credit can be given to a manuscript note written in February 1946 and discovered in file FM R2 C4 L15 in the Municipal Archives of Le Havre referring to the 'return to Le Havre of the collections evacuated to Bonnétable'?

The Lesueur collections preserved at the Museum

The collections of the naturalist Charles-Alexandre Lesueur at the Muséum d'histoire naturelle du Havre fall into three categories. One consists of manuscripts, drawings, notebooks or sketchbooks, many of which relate to the voyage of discovery to the Southern Lands, the Baudin expedition. The second includes animal specimens Lesueur collected during his travels to Australia and America. The third is made up of ethnographic items brought back from these same expeditions (Lennier 1883; Bonnemains 1988 and 1995).

The Lesueur archival collections held at the Museum in Le Havre had come about through donations and purchases made during the second

half of the nineteenth century and the first third of the twentieth century. Other donations were made in 2006 and in 2014, which shows that the collection continues to be expanded, in particular through the continued interest of Lesueur's family and other supporters not connected with the Museum (Rinsma 2007,10).

The collections also included items other than those of the naturalist and explorer Charles-Alexandre Lesueur. This is made abundantly clear in Jacqueline Bonnemains's description (1986a, 1 and 5): 'The Lesueur collection of the Muséum d'histoire naturelle du Havre includes manuscripts, drawings and publications by Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, but also by his father Jean-Baptiste Lesueur, and by Nicolas-Martin Petit, François Péron and a handful of their travelling companions'. In an accompanying note Jacqueline Bonnemains cites Bailly, Boullanger, Depuch, Levillain, Maclure, Milbert, Say, Troost, etc.

One cannot fail to notice the multiplicity of documents and the diversity of media (vellum, paper, parchment, oiled paper), as well as the variety of the types of archives (sketchbooks, loose leaf sheets, publications).

Around 1874 a significant number of notes, drawings and original plates from the *Voyage aux Terres australes* by Lesueur, Milbert and Petit were acquired for the institution by the then director, Gustave Lennier (Bonnemains 1986b, 12). Following this acquisition, the first official donation of illustrations and manuscripts by Lesueur and Péron was made on 4 August 1879, by descendants Lockhart and Pellot (AMH, FC R2 C4 L8; Lennier 1883, 142; Maury 1948, 171; Bonnemains 1986a, 4, 7 and 14).

Another donation of more than 200 drawings, maps, plans and sketches followed on 21 February 1884 (AMH, FC R2 C4 L8). According to the sources a third donation was made on 23 November 1985, totalling seventy-five or seventy-six drawings of fossils and cliff profiles (AMH FC R2 C4 L 9; Bonnemains 1988a, 68; Bonnemains 1986a annexe n° 1,7, line 10).

The most important acquisition from an artistic point of view occurred in 1918 when Dr Adrien Loir, who was the Director of the Museum at the time, purchased several books and, more importantly, 224 watercolour plates from Mlles Lockhart, including 189 on vellum (Mail 1918, 42; Déro 1918). In her work on Lesueur, Hélène Loir (1920, 82) mentioned 217 drawings and watercolours, all of which were transferred to the Museum on 15 May 1918. J. Guiffrey (c. 1933), probably relying on Hélène Loir's work

(1920), which he cites widely, refers to the same number of drawings and watercolours which he claims relate mainly to Australia.

Consequently, on the cusp of the Second World War, the Lesueur collections of the Museum were more than 8,000 items rich. As there was a variety of different formats, types and qualities, not to mention the writings, notes and drawings done in ink, watercolour, lead pencil, gouache, etc., in what condition would the documents have been preserved?

In his 'Report to the Mayor of the City of Le Havre on the Operations of the Musée d'histoire naturelle', dated 26 December 1879, Gustave Lennier added as follows: 'being responsible for the classification and the sorting of the drawings and manuscripts, I wish to apply to the Budget Committee for an additional sum of 500 francs to have the Lesueur drawings bound and placed in protective coverings, and to have the Péron and Lesueur notes and manuscripts bound' (AMH, FM R2 C7, L 2; Bonnemains 1986a, 14).

Each document was then thumb indexed and placed in protective coverings, which in itself shows the value the Director of the Museum attached to them. The volume of the Lesueur collections can be estimated at around one and a half cubic metres. But to really give an idea of its scale, we also need to take into account, in addition to the rare manuscript archives, all the books, articles and publications directly related to Lesueur's expeditions. This could be estimated at around ten linear metres, which would add up to around one cubic metre of additional volume.

The density (1.5 cubic metres) and the weight (between 400 and 600 kg) of the special collections alone, placed in boxes or protective covers, required expert organisation for their evacuation.

The zoology collections included fish, turtles and invertebrates, preserved either in alcohol or by taxidermy, classified according to types. These were true scientific treasures, since they served as the basis for Lesueur's scientific drawings and descriptions. These specimens were displayed on shelves in glass cabinets, and although they were of exceptional scientific value, they did not receive any special attention or care.

As for the ethnographic collections, they were largely unknown to the general public. Attracting hardly any interest from the scientists, they were simply displayed in glass cabinets like ordinary objects.

The Museum of Le Havre at the dawn of the Second World War

In Le Havre, one of the last major efforts to promote the city's scientific heritage outside of France was led by Dr Adrien Loir in the late 1930s. On 9 February 1938, addressing members of SHED (Société Havraise d'Études Diverses), the Director brought to their attention the coming celebrations in Sydney of the city's 150th anniversary (26 January–25 April 1938). Loir reminded them of the visit to Sydney of the expedition led by Captain Baudin at the turn of the nineteenth century, with Charles-Alexandre Lesueur on board. The Director, stressing the value of the naturalist's materials held at the Le Havre Museum, suggested that the municipality send the Royal Society of New South Wales (RSNSW)—SHED and RSNSW were associated—a handful of reproductions of artworks depicting indigenous people and the Port Jackson area (Loir 1938, 10–113).

The proposal was accepted and Dr Loir was given the task of selecting not only illustrations, but also Aboriginal songs (SHED 1939, 99). A booklet featuring a commemorative leaf, five Lesueur reproductions and an Aboriginal song with both male and female parts was sent to Sydney (Laurent-Cernières 1938, 101–102 and two plates). Warm thanks on behalf of the RSNSW dated 28 May written in the hand of A. P. Elkin, honorary secretary of the association and Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sydney (Elkin 1938, p. 112–113) were duly received by Laurent-Cernières, the president of SHED.

In early March 1939 Dr Loir put in his application for retirement with the local council. His application was formally approved, to come into effect 1 April 1939 (AMH CR CM, meeting 21.3.1939, 350). He then retired to Paris, leaving the management of the institution in the hands of Henri Leuret who, as deputy director, acted in the position of director even though no official decision regarding the filling of the post had actually been made.

Hoping to find a solution swiftly, the Council began the recruitment process for a new director on 6 July 1939 (AMH CR CM, meeting 6.7.1939, 387–388). A name was subsequently put forward by the Muséum d'histoire naturelle in Paris, a certain Dr Laurent, a colonial doctor and zoologist who worked in the Mammology Laboratory in Paris. On 3 September, France declared war on Germany and Dr Laurent was subsequently drafted. He was soon demobilised, but on arrival in Le Havre he was informed by the

Administration that ‘due to circumstances it will not be possible to employ him’: indeed on account of financial constraints the recruitment had been deferred (Régnier, correspondence, December 1940; AMH CR CM, meeting 21.3.1941, 209).

Some time in September 1939 Henri Leuret also decided to retire, another dramatic turn of events at the Museum. His last day of work was set for 31 October 1939 (AMH CR CM, meeting 3.10.1939, 679). The departure of both the Director and the Deputy Director and the postponement of the appointment of a new director were hard blows for the Museum. The institution was now left with no scientific authority at its head.

Museum under threat

From the first bombing on 19 May 1940 to the end of November of the same year, the city was subjected to more than fifty German air raids, some of them devastating: they destroyed and burnt many of the buildings in the city centre. During the night of 18 September, bombs were dropped at less than one hundred metres from the Museum. What was happening within the institution itself?

Paradoxically, nothing. Faced with the growing threat of the destruction of the scientific heritage of the Museum, the director of the *Muséum d’histoire naturelle* of Rouen, Robert Régnier, was increasingly anxious about the situation. On 5 December he expressed his concerns in a letter to the Prefect of the Department of Seine-Inférieure: ‘on my most recent trip to Paris the situation of the *Muséum d’histoire naturelle* du Havre, which has recently been exposed to air raids, was brought to my attention by the National Museum in my capacity as president of the association [the Association of Directors of France’s Public Collections]’. He continued: ‘whereas precautionary measures have been taken to protect the Lesueur drawings and watercolours held by the Library, this does not appear to be the case for the collections which include items of exceptional value from an ethnographic and prehistorical point of view, as well as from a paleontological point of view. There are also some outstanding zoological specimens.’

He concluded with the following statement: ‘In the event that additional measures to ensure the protection of these valuable items have not

been taken, I would request, Monsieur le Préfet, that you notify the Mayor of Le Havre of the need to act.'

This cautionary letter, which has a certain finality about it, is prudently couched in a conditional form with regard to potential protective measures for the Lesueur collections. Yet it appears that in December 1940 no action had been taken, and for good reason, as those with any capacity to act were no longer with the institution.

The Mayor of Le Havre, F. Risson, finally received Régnier's letter a fortnight later by way of the Deputy Prefect on behalf of the Prefect. The Mayor then forwarded the document to the Council's Secretary-General who in turn added in the margin, in an imperious tone: 'call in Lebret' (Deputy Prefect, 19.12.1940). Had they forgotten that the person called upon was no longer an active employee of the organisation?

More time passed, and Lebret was finally brought in on 27 December by the Secretary-General who asked him, probably as an additional favour, to urgently draw up a list of the most valuable collections to safeguard.

On 6 January 1941, Lebret presented the Secretary-General with a list detailing the 'valuable collections' requiring protection. From Ethnography he selected the Archinard, Leroux and Thierry African collections, but curiously he made no mention of the Bruni d'Entrecasteaux, Delessert and Le Mescam Oceania collections. From the Library, he selected the entirety of Lesueur's drawings and watercolours as well as Gustave Lennier's collection of books. In Zoology, he considered that it was impossible to remove the specimens, given the care they permanently required. For Mineralogy, he concentrated on the precious metals. Finally for Palaeontology, because of the size, weight, fragility and the large number of items, he decided that it was not possible to remove them, except for a small number of items from the Lennier collection. Lebret made no mention of the Prehistoric collection.

He recommended that the items to be removed be packed into crates and that they be identified by means of an alphabetical inventory. Two copies of the list were to be produced: one for the administrative authorities, while the other to be kept at the Museum. (Deputy Director, 6.1.1941).

Packing the items for safekeeping

It is clear that at this stage the retired curator, whose services were still required by the powers that be, was overcome by the scale of the task. Understandably so, because in addition to the growing threat of the irreversible destruction of the collections due to air raids in the proximity of the museum, he was working with very limited resources.

The next two weeks were spent preparing the crates and filling them with the so-called ‘valuable collections’. On 22 January, six crates labelled from A to F were set aside for the Lesueur collections. The remaining space in crate A was filled with a box of precious metals and garnets and three African ethnographic objects. Crate E was topped up with a tam-tam, a comb (both from the Archinard collection), kites from the Marshal Islands (from the Le Mescam collection) and various books belonging to the Library. However the Library, several hundred works rich, was not moved in its entirety.

Lebret did not choose many palaeontological specimens. Only two *Lepidotus lennieri* fish fossils, found by Gustave Lennier, were included for safe keeping in crate E. They were, however, major pieces, the most complete of the two being the holotype.

Lebret was determined to save the mineralogical specimens. Their value seems to have been more financial than scientific. Of the sixty-one items selected, an overall dominance of precious metals stands out (gold, platinum and silver), as well as precious and semi-precious stones (emeralds, garnets). The valuable items of the special collections were essentially concentrated in crate A. The different leaves (atlas and text) from the *Voyage de Découvertes aux Terres Australes* were distributed between crates A, B, C and F.

The concluding note describing the crates is very interesting. It reads: ‘These documents have been packed into six crates, two of which are locked by key, labelled Museum of Le Havre and an alphabetical letter corresponding to the catalogue. In accordance with the instructions of the Secretary-General, these crates have been transported to the vaults of the Museum of Fine Arts’ (H. Lebret, 22.1.1941, 3).

If some of the books and the archives from the Lesueur collections were the first to go in the crates, by contrast it appears that neither the types

preserved in jars, nor the specimens preserved by taxidermy, considered too fragile, made it into the selection. Similarly, the few Australian and American ethnographic items from the Lesueur collections were forgotten in their glass cabinets.

The Museum of Fine Arts and the Graille Priory

Was the Secretary-General's order to move the valuables from the Museum strictly in response to the Prefect's request made exactly six weeks earlier? The practical resources for packing up the collections were not up to the standard of the job. The overall conditions were not conducive to a good outcome. But action had been taken; honour was restored.

At the very beginning of June 1940, in accordance with a recommendation from Léon Meyer, the Mayor of Le Havre, the Director of the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Alphonse Saladin, proceeded to evacuate nearly two hundred works of art in twelve crates. Travelling across France in a state of panic, the truck reached La Roche-sur-Yon within a few days. Saladin actually went to this town, situated at 500 kilometres from Le Havre, to personally deliver the works of art himself. He thought they would be safe there.

By the end of January 1941, when Lebret had succeeded in removing some of the valuables from the Muséum d'histoire naturelle, the Museum of Fine Arts had been partially emptied of its contents. However a number of sculptures and paintings were left stored in the Museum's basement. Lebret knew Saladin personally and probably asked him whether he would be able to accommodate the six crates of collections and rare archives of the Muséum d'histoire naturelle in that same basement.

Meanwhile for twenty-two months the Museum had had no director. Towards the end of 1940 the local Council's Secretary-General asked André Maury, Professor of Science and an influential member of the hard-working Board of the Geological Society of Normandy and of the Friends of the Museum of Le Havre, to take charge of the institution. Maury, a seasoned naturalist, knew the institution and was a motivated and involved practitioner. He was the person they needed, the Secretary-General thought, to deal with Lebret, who was proving to be indecisive and incompetent. After much procrastination, the local councillors got behind the idea. In the end Maury

was not made director, but simply contracted to handle the ‘preservation of the collections’ (AMH CR CM, meeting 21.3.1941, 209).

Drawing near to the end of March 1941, in a museum closed to the public for several months, Maury quickly assessed the situation. His first task was to locate the file for the transfer of the rare archives of the Lesueur collections. There was also, for that matter, the question of the animals in the vivariums and the aquariums to deal with. With supplies becoming scarcer every day, Maury took responsibility for getting rid of the most cumbersome of live specimens. It was Lebret, however, who took on the messy job. Tarantulas, snakes and caimans were all humanely killed (Vincent and Lemerrier 2008).

Air raids by the English were now an almost daily occurrence. The urgency to act was rising. During the weeks that followed his arrival, Maury considered different solutions for evacuating the scientific collections which remained on site. He focused on saving the ethnographic items. Thousands of objects from Africa, Asia and Oceania were displayed in glass cabinets and on the walls of the main staircase.

The collections selected were mainly from Africa and Oceania: some items were very well known (Delessert collection) as were a few items from Vietnam. It was at this point in the evacuation process that Maury, going from room to room and opening the 385 glass cabinets containing the Museum’s scientific treasures one by one, made the decision to include a small, seemingly insignificant Aboriginal necklace among the objects to be saved. This necklace has since proved to be the only one of the ethnographic items brought back by Lesueur in 1804 from the expedition to the Southern Lands still in existence (Vincent 2012b).

The selection of items that belonged to Lesueur amounted to this one item alone: Maury passed up the beautiful native American axes collected by the explorer during his trip to America. It is true that under the pressure of urgency there was no longer time to examine piece by piece the tens of thousands of items that were kept in glass cabinets. Between 19 January and 7 February 1942, he managed to put together six crates, six crates only, to be transported to the Graville Priory (Vincent 2012a, 58).

In early March 1942 the fate of the collections remaining in the Museum was sealed forever. The entirety of the Museum’s scientific legacy was now held in twelve crates, stored in part in the basement of the Fine Arts

Museum and the remainder in a room in the basement of the Archeological Museum in the Graille Priory.

1942: the year of the evacuations

Early in the year of 1942 the Graille Priory became the prime sanctuary for the valuable collections of the City of Le Havre. It was there that the whole of the city's historical archives could be found grouped together, as well as some of the rare books of the Municipal Library. With the benefit of a coordinated evacuation plan, these documents had been packed carefully into 243 crates and transported by train to the Château des Vaux (Department of Eure-et-Loir), between 22 April and 4 August 1942. But the crates from the Museum, either forgotten or neglected, were not included in this journey.

In early January 1942 the Director of the Fine Arts Museum of Rouen, Fernand Guey, was given the responsibility of monitoring the precautionary measures for the protection of the artworks of the Department of Seine-Inférieure. He contacted the Directors of the Museums in Dieppe and Le Havre to assess the actions already taken as well as those yet to be taken by the Directors.

Guey travelled to Le Havre on the 6 May 1942. Saladin was asked to continue his work evacuating the items from the Fine Arts Museum. He filled another fifty or so crates. It was probably at the time of Guey's and his Rouen colleague's visit to Le Havre that, during the inspection of the basement of the Fine Arts Museum, the six crates from the Muséum d'histoire naturelle were at last noticed.

Ignoring André Maury's advice, Guey then ordered the fifty odd fine arts crates, including one containing valuable objects from a church and the six from the Muséum d'histoire naturelle, to be transported to the Château de Sassy (Department of Orne). From this point onwards the Lesueur special collections were no longer in Le Havre. Some of them had finally been evacuated, albeit a little late and due to a sequence of quite unexpected circumstances which ultimately resulted in a portion of the scientific treasures ending up in a château in a department a long way from the coast.

For administrative reasons the storage space in Sassy was gradually decommissioned in favour of the one in Bonnétable (Department of

Sarthe). The transfer was started from August 1943. The crates from the Museum arrived there on 6 September, but the manager of the storage space informed the Director of the Le Havre Museum that he would not accept any responsibility for the content of the crates.

The Director of the National Museums, informed of the arrival of the collections in the depot managed by the Ministry of National Education, was surprised to discover the presence of six crates from a museum which was not within his jurisdiction. He then contacted Maury, who replied rather sharply that he himself had also just discovered that the crates had been moved by the authority of Fernand Guey. Tension was mounting between the two men, with the Director of the National Museums reporting to the Mayor of Le Havre that he considered Maury to be an ‘incapable curator’ with an intolerable attitude.

Despite the diplomacy displayed by the Mayor, the Director was portrayed in Maury’s letters as unbearable. Maury stuck to his guns but it is obvious that at this stage he had definitively lost any remaining opportunity to evacuate any further zoology, palaeontology and ethnography collections. He remained inflexible, refusing to give in to requests to visit collections, and despite their immense heritage value, he lost all interest in the future of the crates that had now been relocated to Bonnétable.

The collections at Le Havre and the end of the war

On the night of 5 September 1944 the city of Le Havre was destroyed by English air strikes. The following day, 6 September, the suburbs in the north-east of Le Havre, including Gravelle, were flattened by more than 1,500 tonnes of bombs, also English (Lefort 2009, 92). The apse, two supporting walls and a section of the roof of the church were hit. The gardens and the cemetery were devastated (Priem 1961, 11; Dubosq & Dubosq 2006, tome 2, 571–573). Even though part of the monastic buildings was also badly damaged, by chance the basement remained completely untouched (Priem 1965, 6). The six crates of the Museum’s ethnography collection came out unscathed, escaping disaster once more.

The fate of the remaining collections at the Museum was less auspicious. The building, in the midst of an air raid zone, did not withstand the fire caused by the bombs. In an article on the history of the Museum,

Georges Priem notes: '[...] the Museum burned with such an intensity that even ten days later the thick bed of ashes was so hot that it was impossible to stand on the ground floor' (Priem 1973, 8). It is therefore obvious that nothing remained of the collections which had not been evacuated.

In a letter addressed to the Secretary-General dated 17 October 1944, Maury states: 'It is with great sadness that I have learnt of the complete devastation of our institution [the Museum] but on the other hand I am happy to report that the collections I had moved to the Graville Priory have escaped the onslaught. I think it would be useful to conduct a search of the debris at the Museum, in an attempt to recover any objects that may have survived the mayhem, in particular from the mineralogy and palaeontology collections. It is for this reason that I am enquiring as to the possibility in the near future of my having access again to the services of the temporary caretakers recruited by Public Education' (AMH, FC, R2 C4 L 15).

Priem and Maury both wanted to launch operations to attempt to find any possible remains from the collections in the ruins left by the fire. These operations were indeed carried out. The mission was concluded with the recovery of a small number of charred remains, amongst them the exotic axes which were found to be those brought back by Lesueur from his trip to the United States, as well as some ushabtis and a few palaeontological relics, in particular large reptile fossils, which were yet to be identified (Watté et Bonnemains 1987; Vincent 2009). It was clear that none of the zoology collections had survived, including the types. The few objects collected from the ashes were relegated into buckets and crates and left to their devices, until almost sixty years later, when three scientists at the Museum set out to discover their story.

In November 1945 the Mayor of Le Havre requested that the collections which had been relocated to Bonnétable be returned home, but they would remain at Bonnétable until February 1946 (hand-written note, AMH FC R2 C4 L15). Saladin organised the repatriation. He travelled to the Château himself to oversee the sixty-seven crates which included sixty crates of artworks from the Fine Arts Museum, six crates from the Muséum d'histoire naturelle and one crate of items from the church in Le Havre.

For the duration of the stock-taking, the paintings were moved to the Pavillon Grosos (used as a temporary Town Hall), while the six crates belonging to the Museum were sent to Graville where they were reunited with the six others which had been there since the war, relegated to the

damp crypt of the church. In late November, in response to an enquiry by Alexandre Bigot, the Dean of the Faculty of Science at the University of Caen, Maury responded: ‘[...] We saved the Lesueur manuscripts and drawings, evacuated in 1939, as well as a good selection of the ethnography collections (evacuated in 1942) [...] I tried, during the period from 1943 to 1944, to remove some other remarkable items, but the ill will of the occupiers and the Council’s legitimate concern to look after the people first and foremost, prevented these attempts from succeeding [...]’ (Breton 1987, 9).

This was not entirely accurate. In omitting the actions of Lebret, the real hero of the Lesueur collections, Maury was attempting to make himself look better.

The recognition of the importance of the Lesueur collections

In the early days of the summer of 1947 Gilbert Chinard, Professor of French Literature at Princeton University, who had a passionate interest in Lesueur’s stay in the United States between 1816 and 1837, approached André Maury about the state of preservation of the Lesueur collections. Maury informed Chinard that by and large the documents were safe but that no guarantee could be given for the perfect preservation of the American drawings of the collection (Chinard 1949, 114).

From this it can be surmised that until the summer of 1947 the Lesueur collections had not been visited and were still at Gravelle, in the same crates in which they had first arrived there in January 1941. During the winter of 1947–1948, under the impetus of Chinard, the management committee of the American Philosophical Society’s Library in Philadelphia (APS) undertook to raise finance to organise the ambitious project of copying the Lesueur collections onto microfilm. It was by all accounts on Chinard’s recommendation that all of the crates were transferred from the crypt to the vaulted room of the Archaeology Museum in early 1948 (Chinard 1949, 118). It was probably in June 1948 that they were moved again from Gravelle to Le Havre.

With the financing on track for the American library’s microfilm project, on 12 June 1948 Chinard requested, on behalf of the APS, permission from the Deputy Mayor in charge of culture to photograph Lesueur’s notebooks on America. Permission was given the very next day (AMH, FC

R2 C4 L15). The Council also approved the use of one of the rooms on the first floor of the École des Beaux-Arts for the photographer's benefit. The photos were taken under satisfactory conditions, in the presence and under the supervision of André Maury.

As there was nowhere else to locate them appropriately, the Lesueur collections remained temporarily in the room at the École des Beaux-Arts (Krebs 1951, 3). It was established by A. Krebs (1952, 51) that they were still there at the beginning of the 1950s.

The Lesueur collections could well be considered as the nucleus around which the first group of scientists and associates of 1948 would gather, forming the embryo of the restored Muséum d'histoire naturelle.

The Americans were not the only ones interested in the scientific heritage of their country, which is what the texts and drawings gathered by Lesueur represented. From 1962 to 1964 the Australians took their turn in organising the transfer of the archives, writings, sketches and drawings of the Australian and Tasmanian expeditions onto microfilm, so that the Library of South Australia would possess a copy of these priceless collections for their own perusal. The correspondence during the period from 27 November 1963 to 30 April 1964 between the Australian researchers, in particular Brian Baldwin, archivist at the State Library of South Australia from 1960 to 1986, and Mme Couturier, who was commissioned to supervise the project, as well as the Curator of the Municipal Archives of Le Havre and the Director of the Museum, André Maury, can be consulted at the Municipal Archives of Le Havre. It is a testimony to the great interest generated by the photographic project, which produced thirty-six rolls of microfilm and at least 149 slides: the list is reproduced in an appendix to a letter (Dossier 'Correspondance', fichier Bio AMH).

According to information kindly provided by Professor Margaret Sankey, Brian Baldwin and a group of Australian librarians travelled to France in 1963 to consult documents first at the National Archives and then at Le Havre with the photographer Axel Poignant to photograph the vellums produced during the Baudin expedition. These photos are available online at the University of Sydney's Baudin Project website: <http://sydney.edu.au/arts/research/baudin/project/>.

On 21 November 1968 Maury was finally able to move into the first rebuilt offices of the Museum, at Place du Vieux Marché. The Museum was still under construction and would be for the following four years (Breton

1987, 10). At the beginning of 1968, in a bid to protect the Lesueur collections better than they had been up until then, André Maury planned to purchase a safe. In 1977 the bulk of the Lesueur special collections (manuscripts, notes and drawings by Lesueur and the scientists on board the expedition to the Southern Lands, not including publications, articles and studies) could be estimated at 8 linear metres and a volume of 0.75 m³. Comparing this with the material held before the war, one can conjecture a significant loss of original documents.

Were all the evacuated Lesueur collections returned to the Museum?

It would appear that in the nineteenth century and the first third of the twentieth century no comprehensive inventory of the Lesueur collections had been made. A description of the manuscripts and books that formed the Charles-Alexandre Lesueur special collections and of some of the books evacuated in 1941 from the Museum's scientific library is available thanks to the list drawn up by Lebret. The comparison between the retrieved lists and the current documents shows a difference. The fact that the majority of the valuable pieces evacuated were saved is in itself a cause for celebration. Aside from this positive aspect, initial informal consultation with researchers who had a close familiarity with the Lesueur collections or who had worked on them, and who therefore had a good knowledge of the documents which the collections should have contained (although at dates difficult to specify), reveals that the following items (among other manuscripts) appear to be missing since the end of the war:

- Vellum depictions of birds and eggs
- Personal journals
- Hand-written notes
- Plans
- Maps

From the comparison between the catalogues and transcriptions of the eighty files of the Lesueur collections currently held in the Museum and the estimates based on the inventory of the boxes of drawings, binders and books stored in Lebret's six crates, we can conclude that about ten to twelve percent of the collection of archives and books is missing.

With regard to the books only, a cross-check of the lists of books directly linked to the Lesueur collections and those currently held in the Museum Library gives an idea of the loss of the heritage items, but this varies considerably according to categories. For example, the absence of eighteen volumes of text and two atlases of the *Voyage de Découvertes aux Terres Australes* is particularly disturbing: the evidence of the donation by the Lockhart and Pelot descendants can be found in the lists of items handed over in 1879 and in 1884 (AMH FC R2 C4 L8). The same applies to the five items comprising a copy in two volumes of the account of the *Voyage aux Terres Australes*, ‘two atlases of map etchings, an album of reproductions of drawings and watercolours depicting the inhabitants of those countries’ according to the declaration made in the report produced by the Commission and submitted to the local Council on 30 April 1918, when the two Mlles Lockhart made the donation to the City of Le Havre (Déro 1918, 575). At the time of the arrival of Jacqueline Bonnemains, the Curator of the Lesueur collections in 1978, there were only four volumes left of Péron’s *Voyage de Découvertes aux Terres Australes*. The Curator was determined to purchase an atlas dating from 1824, giving the Museum Library a complete set.

In addition to these gaps there was also the absence of two volumes of the account of the *Voyage de La Pérouse* (two volumes and an atlas are still in existence), and of two of the three volumes of Dumont d’Urville’s *Voyage autour du Monde*. The same goes for the extremely rare atlas of Karl Bodmer’s *Voyage en Amérique du nord* which is not present in the catalogue of the Museum Library (a copy of a recent re-print has been purchased).

In total, following the method outlined in this study, the overall loss of the collections can be evaluated at around thirty volumes, of which twenty-two belong to the single category of expeditions/great voyages.

Of all the categories combined, these confirmed absences make up around fifteen to twenty-five per cent of the items evacuated from the Museum, but they represent sixty-six and a half percent of the volumes relating strictly to expeditions/great voyages.

These irreparable losses are due to the management of the collections during the period from 1948 to 1973. They are not all attributable to the years following the return of the collections. Notebook 39A (see above), which was transferred to microfilm in 1948, was lost some time during the period between 1986, the date of the last publication of the originals, and 1996. Consequently it was necessary to rely on the 1948 microfilm for the

publication of the 2002 catalogue. In the current state of the investigations, and despite a search undertaken in December 2012 in the online files of the Armand Salacrou Library and in the reserve sections of the Historical Museums and the Malraux Museum, as well as in the books which make up the special collections of the Société Géologique de Normandie et des Amis du Muséum du Havre (SGNAMH), it has not been possible to locate the missing items of the Lesueur collections.

One certainty we can put forward with regard to the lists drawn up in 1941 is that the items in these lists did exist and were evacuated, as was shown on the storage card in the hand of Mr Terrillon and addressed to Henri Lebret, dated 11 February 1941. We can reasonably surmise that the books as well as the ethnographic and mineralogical collections were still fully preserved in 1947 when the crates were re-opened, having not been touched since their evacuation from the Museum. On the other hand, anything is possible during the period from 1948 to 1977, the year before Mme Bonnemains took over the management of the collections. On her arrival at the institution, she began to draw up a full list and a comprehensive inventory of the collections as part of her duties as curator.

The need to establish the truth therefore requires a quick verification of the Lesueur collections, both the manuscripts—which were not able to be checked in the scope of this study—and the evacuated books, the full list of which is now available.

With the help of the list-inventory of original documents evacuated in January 1941, it should now be possible to carry out an extensive check of the documents currently present in the collections, in order to ascertain whether all the books, all the handwritten notes and the drawings preserved in binders, and all cited volumes from the Lesueur collections before the war can actually be identified and located.

Final remarks and conclusion

During World War II the special collections of the Musée d'histoire naturelle were partially evacuated, but at a much later date than the paintings from the Fine Arts Museum, the Library's rare books and the historical documents from the Archives of the City. The Museum, considered by the national scientific authorities as holding one of the richest collections in France, was

left to its own devices. No doubt, the National Museum showed concern over its plight in late November 1940, but the only action taken was to flag the situation to the President of the Association of Curators of Public Collections of France, without dispatching a curator or an academic, or making any assistance available.

We are now aware of the particularly difficult conditions under which the evacuation first of the Lesueur collections and then of one part of the ethnographic collections must have taken place. It is customary to consider that André Maury was the person responsible for the removal of the ethnographic collections, which is in part true, but the salvaging of some remarkable items such as the tam-tam of Bandiou Diara, the kites from Ambrym and a silver ceremonial sabre, is the result of the transfer organised by Henri Lebret, to whom we also owe the survival of Lesueur's most valuable documents.

One year after his appointment, Maury had only managed to evacuate six crates of additional ethnographic objects. While Lebret had concentrated on the items brought back by General Archinard, Thierry and Hugues Leroux (Maury 1950, 11), Maury saved additional African items from the Archinard, Millot, Halley, Loir and Lennier collections, as well as some from the Oceania collections of Le Mescam, Herval, Delessert and most certainly Bruni d'Entrecasteaux, and an extremely rare, and indeed unique, object from the voyage to the Southern Lands in which Charles-Alexandre Lesueur had taken part (Vincent, 2012b). By and large it was more an operation of random salvage than one of thoughtful and coordinated preservation. It should especially be noted that as a result of his lack of diplomacy, two years later, in 1943, Maury lost a unique opportunity to proceed with the evacuation of, among other items, some scientifically important objects of the zoological collections (types that were both dried and preserved in alcohol), as well as of the palaeontological and prehistoric collections, which had been completely ignored up until then.

It was three decades later that the Museum was reborn, literally from its ashes, with a public re-opening on 16, 17 and 18 February 1973. But time has taken its toll on memories. Only a return to the original sources with an analysis of the official documents would enable researchers to note the differences between the content of studies on the Museum during the war and the administrative documents.

This verification has not been done, with researchers settling for what was claimed, relying on the statements of those who thought they knew or believed they remembered.

André Maury passed away in 1983. It was only thirty-one years after his death that the file on the evacuation of the special collections of the Museum was found, after being forgotten yet again in the archival boxes. This brings us to another question: how can it be explained that the person newly responsible for the collections could take possession of those official documents and keep them for more than two thirds of a century unavailable to the scientific community and unknown to the Municipal Archives, their legal guardian?

The answer probably lies in the instability of the war period and the circumstances of the time. When André Maury was appointed to look after the ‘preservation of the collections’, not only did he have to take fast action to safeguard the heritage collections, but he also had to deal with the omnipresence of Lebreton. Maury, most likely briefed by the Secretary-General regarding the first stage of the evacuation of the collections, would then have retrieved the ‘Lesueur’ file which had been put together by the unpaid retiree. Recognising the importance of the documents, he then took the papers home and perhaps never even had a chance to consult them in detail. The urgency was elsewhere. It was in the daily management of an institution in the middle of an occupied city that was being bombed regularly. This meant that the file spent the war under cover away from the Museum, which would explain not only why it was not transferred to the administrative services of the Town Hall Archives, as it should have been, but also that it was not kept at the Museum. In either case it would have been destroyed during the September 1944 air raids. As for the second copy of the inventory, which should have been returned to the Secretary-General as of January 1941, I found it myself in the archives of the Musées Nationaux in Paris. Maury had by his own authority passed it on to the Director during the tense exchanges that took place in September 1943.

Regarding the file from Le Havre that contained official handwritten notes of prime importance, it is by the greatest coincidence that it remained, completely forgotten but well preserved, in the personal files at the home of the Director of the Museum. It remained there until the early 1990s when Maury’s descendants, wishing to sell the property, asked Gérard Breton in his capacity as the Secretary-General of the Geological Society of

Normandy and the Friends of the Museum of Le Havre, to come and collect what they thought would be of scientific interest to the association.

As vice-president of the Geological Society of Normandy and the Friends of the Museum of Le Havre from 1930 to 1933, president for forty-two years (1934–1976) and finally honorary president from 1977 to 1983, Maury had accumulated a large number of documents on the life of the society. The file on the removal of the six crates of collections in 1940–1941 had been hiding among account books, minutes of meetings and miscellaneous correspondence.

The rediscovery of these archives containing the only clues to the evacuation of the Museum's special collections during the war represented an exceptionally emotional moment in this investigation of the legacy, either lost or still present, of the Muséum d'histoire naturelle du Havre. These documents were finally restored to the Director of the Municipal Archives of the City on 18 September 2014.

Le Havre, France

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SOCIÉTÉ GÉOLOGIQUE DE NORMANDIE ET DES AMIS DU
MUSÉUM DU HAVRE

Administrative archives of the Société Géologique de Normandie et des Amis du Muséum du Havre, from 3.12.1947 to 24.4.1949.

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