

First edition. 35 volumes, incorporating some 894 plates, including 45 in original hand-colour. The text volumes in blue or pink paper wrappers as issued, the plate volumes in uniform red straight-grained quarter over “papier maroquiné” boards by Tessier, gilt roulette border, arranged inside an exceptional piece of mahogany furniture embellished with Egyptian style bronzes and based upon the original model from the engraving that supplements the present work.

Collation:

Text

21 volumes in 4to (398 by 258mm) comprising:

1. État moderne: 7 volumes (t. 1: 2 vol.; t. 2: 5 vol.)
2. Antiquités: 8 volumes (Mémoires: 4 vol.; Description: 4 vol.)
3. Histoire naturelle: 6 volumes (t. 1: 3 vol.; t. 2: 3 vol.)
4. Préface (92 pp.), the Avertissement (18 pp.) and the Explication des planches, in-folio, as the plate volumes (below)

Plates

13 volumes including 10 in folio (704 by 530mm) and 3 in-plano (1075 by 690mm) comprising:
5. Antiquités: 5 folio vol. (frontispiece and 425 plates including 30 with original hand-colour) and the map of ancient Egypt.
6. État moderne: 2 folio vol. (171 pl. including the map of modern Egypt).
7. Histoire naturelle: 2 parts in 3 folio vol. (244 pl. including 15 with contemporary hand-colour).
8. 2 volumes in-plano: for the folding plates from each section, 3 parts in 2 vol. (112 pl.).
9. Atlas géographique: 1 vol. in-plano (53 pl. including the engraved title, an assembly plan, a chart of signs and a list of engineers).

A VERY FINE EXAMPLE OF “ONE OF THE GREATEST ACHIEVEMENTS OF FRENCH PUBLISHING” IN ITS ORIGINAL BINDING PRESENTED TO GUY DE LAVAU, PREFECT OF THE POLICE OF PARIS

Description de l’Égypte ou Recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l’expédition de l’armée française.

Author
Commission des sciences et arts d’Egypte

Publication date
1809-1828.

Publisher
Imprimerie impériale – Imprimerie royale,

Publication place
Paris,

Physical description
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Dimensions

Notes

First edition of the first scientific description of ancient and modern Egypt; one of the most important and ambitious publication projects ever undertaken by the French state.

“In an effort to curtail England’s influence in the East, Napoléon Bonaparte embarked on a secret mission to invade Egypt in 1798. In addition to his military goals, Napoleon used the campaign to mount the first large-scale scientific expedition related to the study of both ancient and modern Egypt. He intended to document antiquities, ethnography, architecture, and natural history, taking with him 160 artists, scientists, architects, and printers, who compiled a monumental record of the campaign. [This group of experts were known as the “Commission des Sciences et des Arts en Égypte”] In the end, Napoleon’s forces were defeated. In 1801, in return for transport home, the French agreed to relinquish many of their collected antiquities, including the Rosetta Stone, but not their personal notes and sketchbooks. Once home, the minister of the interior convened the community of Egyptian scholars, who selected a committee of eight to publish the findings of the expedition. The result, Le Description de l’Egypte, was begun in 1803 and took more than twenty years to produce. Including 844 large engraved plates, many in colour, it is one of the greatest achievements of French publishing” (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

The first volumes of text and plates were delivered to the public in 1810 after a very long phase of amassing the texts and the capital, which was also utilised to address a number of technical problems posed by the unfamiliar formats of the paper, the use of special characters, the installation of the intaglio presses in the workshops of the Louvre, and the technical organisation of the printing entrusted to the Imperial Printers. This editorial adventure, as eventful as that of Diderot and d’Alembert’s Encyclopédie, would be completed in 1828 after four other livraisons in 1812, 1817, 1821, with the final one five years later. The book was printed in several hundred copies, cost five million francs at the time, and although it was a financial disaster, was an extraordinary technical and artistic success. Originally conceived as a formidable propaganda tool to the glory of the Emperor and his Army, the book would reveal itself particularly as the prestigious and magnificent witness to a meeting between two civilisations, ancient and modern, and two cultures, Muslim and European, of the late eighteenth century. The Description de l’Égypte is specifically the greatest monument ever raised to the glory of a civilisation:

“the faithful and complete description of the monuments that have adorned the banks of the Nile for so many centuries and make this country the richest museum of the world” (Joseph Fourier, Préface historique).

Additional documentation

The work is offered together with a remarkable archive of original documentation, comprising manuscripts recording appointments and honours bestowed upon Guy de Lavau, rare printed ephemera describing the collation and furniture, and manuscript documentation relating to the presentation of this particular copy.

Appointments and Honours

1. Document signed on header of the Royal Order of the Legion of Honour (l’Ordre royal de la Légion d’Honneur), 30 April 1821. 1 p. 4to. Appointment of Guy de Lavau to the rank of Knight of the Order of the Legion of Honour (chevalier dans l’ordre de la Légion d’Honneur).

2. Document signed by the Minister of the Interior, Comte Jacques-Joseph de Corbière, 20 December 1821. 1 p. folio. Appointment of Guy de Lavau to the rank of Prefect of the Police of Paris.

3. Document signed by the Minister of Justice (Garde des Sceaux), Comte Pierre-Denis de Peyronnet,

6 September 1824. 1 p. folio. Appointment of Guy de Lavau to the rank of Councillor of State Extraordinary (Conseiller d'État en service extraordinaire), with two copies for certification.

4. Document signed by the Minister of Justice (Garde des Sceaux), Comte Portalis, 10 January 1828. 1 p. 4to. Appointment of Guy de Lavau to the rank of Councillor of State (Conseiller d'État ordinaire).

Documentation relating to the presentation of this particular copy.

1. Document signed by the Minister of the Interior, Comte Jacques-Joseph de Corbière, 23 November 1826. 1 p. folio. This confirms that the Comte de Lavau is to be given a copy, and instructs him to contact the editor Edme-François Jomard:

"by his ruling of the 12th of this month, the King has granted you a copy (on fine paper) of the Description de l'Égypte (…) you are kindly requested to follow up with Mr Jomard, Commissioner of the Government at the Palais de l'Institut"

2. Document signed by Edme-François Jomard on header of the "Commission of Egypt", 28 November 1826, 2 pp. 4to. This remarkable document explains the various possible bindings for the Description de l'Égypte and gives the name of the binder (Tessier). It includes two very precious plates: the table of collation and the engraving of the piece of furniture.

"before handing over your copy to the Commission's binder to be bound as usual, (for discussion with him) I am honoured to inform you that the expenditures for the binding of the plates in colour paper amount to 185frs for the five publications (…) The folio text is delivered as issued (…) The half binding of the 14 volumes of plates, with morocco spine, and the covers in "papier maroquiné" and gilt roulette, will cost 425frs (…) As soon as we have received your response (…), I will have your copy prepared by Sr Tessier, the Commission's binder (…)".

Printed ephemera describing the collation and furniture

1. A bibliographical description of all the plates of the book giving their order, format, the branch on which they depend, and the livraison to which they belong ["General table and summary of the plates of the Description de l'Égypte (first edition)"].

2. The engraving of a piece of furniture made to hold all the volumes of the work, giving the necessary dimensions ["a proper piece of furniture to enclose the volumes of the Description de l'Égypte"].

Bibliography
Literature: Brunet, Manuel du libraire, II, 616; Atabey, 343; Blackmer, 476

Provenance
Provenance:
1. Guy de Lavau (1787-1874), Prefect of the Police of Paris (1821-1828), Counsellor of the State (1828), Officer of the Legion of Honour (May 1825).
2. Library of the Château de Meslay (in the Loir-et-Cher region).

Price:

Inventory reference: 11970

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