

A bevy of brilliant sea creatures adorn this rare gem of natural history

Louis Renard, *Poissons, ecrevisses et crabes, de diverses couleurs et figures extraordinaire*s. Amsterdam: Reinier & Josué Ottens, 1754. 15 7/8 inches x 10 5/8 inches (403 x 270 mm), 16 pages, 100 color plates.

In 100 plates containing 460 brilliantly colored engravings that represent a dazzling multitude of fishes, along with crustaceans, grasshoppers, a dugong, and a mermaid, Louis Renard's *Fishes, crayfishes and crabs, of diverse coloration and extraordinary form* displays the most fantastic evocation of exotic aquatic life ever produced.

Renard published his book when the intellectual world of Europe was just beginning to feel the effects of the Age of Enlightenment. The dominant philosophy of the Enlightenment attempted to explain everything in the universe in terms of matter and motion and the forces that could be detected by the human senses. Describers of nature, particularly scientific illustrators, were becoming more concerned with making precise representations of living things. In many ways, *Poissons, ecrevisses et crabes...* is a product of the new interest in scientific inquiry based on direct observation and reason.

Despite Louis Renard's honest attempt to produce an accurate picture of the marine fauna of the East Indies, the work is clouded by embellishment, exaggeration, and outright falsification. Of the 416 fishes depicted, about sixty percent can be identified by species. Only nine percent of all illustrations in Renard's *Fishes, crayfishes and crabs...* might be referred to as truly fantastic, whereas the brief descriptive remarks with each figure, although amusing, are almost all complete fabrication. About the sambia or *loop-visch* (meaning "walking fish"—an anglerfish of the genus *Antennarius*) that was captured by the artist on the sand, he says: "I kept it alive for three days in my house; it followed me everywhere with great familiarity, much like a little dog."

In addition to its tremendous aesthetic value (the marine fauna is hand-colored on beautiful handmade paper), Renard's work is of great importance

as one of the rarest natural history books known: only 16 copies of the first, 34 of the second, and 6 of the third edition survive.

This copy of Renard's legendary book, from the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, is in a binding of quarter dark brown leather with tan paper-covered pasteboards; a blind-stamped ornament is in the center of the front cover. The spine is divided into eight panels with a single gilt thistle in each; the gilt title is in the second panel on a tan leather label. The "Dr. Bloch" whose name is stamped at the foot of the title page is almost certainly Marcus Elieser Bloch (1723–99), a surgeon in Berlin, who, after a late start, became the leading ichthyologist of his day.

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