



History of sciences

The true world's first sculptures of antediluvian animals, which never were...

Les véritables premières sculptures au monde d'animaux antédiluviens, qui ne furent jamais...

Fabien Knoll*, Raquel López-Antoñanzas

Departamento de Paleobiología, Museo nacional de Ciencias naturales-CSIC, C/ José Gutiérrez Abascal, 2, 28006 Madrid, Spain

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 November 2010

Accepted after revision 14 February 2011

Available online 30 June 2011

Presented by Philippe Taquet

Keywords:

Frémiet

Jacquemart

History of science

Plesiosauria

Pterosauria

Paris

1852

Mots clés :

Frémiet

Jacquemart

Histoire des sciences

Plesiosauria

Pterosauria

Paris

1852

ABSTRACT

In 1852, the French state commissioned the artists Frémiet and Jacquemart to execute bronzes of a plesiosaur and a pterodactyl for the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. The orders were cancelled before the sculptures could be realized, largely because of petty jealousies among the professors of the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, who maintained that the long-extinct animals were too poorly understood for accurate reconstructions. In this way an important opportunity to educate and inspire the French public about the life of the past was lost.

© 2011 Académie des sciences. Published by Elsevier Masson SAS. All rights reserved.

R É S U M É

En 1852, les artistes Frémiet et Jacquemart reçurent une commande de l'état français pour le bronze d'un plésiosaure et celui d'un ptérodactyle, tous deux destinés au Jardin des Plantes. Celle-ci fut cependant annulée avant que les œuvres ne pussent être achevées, en raison d'une rebuffade des professeurs du Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle. Ces derniers alléguèrent que ces animaux des temps reculés étaient trop mal connus pour permettre de telles reconstitutions. Une importante opportunité d'inspiration et d'information du public sur les êtres vivants du passé fut ainsi perdue.

© 2011 Académie des sciences. Publié par Elsevier Masson SAS. Tous droits réservés.

1. Introduction

Although their original purpose was educational, the sculptures by B. Hawkins that have been braving the weather and drawing the gaze of the strollers for more than a century and half at Sydenham are works of art

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: mcnfk854@mncn.csic.es, mcnrl836@mncn.csic.es (F. Knoll).

in their own right. Since their inauguration, they have been widely considered the first attempt to create three-dimensional restorations of long-extinct vertebrates (see e.g., MacDermott (1854), pp. 185–186, McCarthy and Gilbert (1994)).

This view is challenged by a forgotten episode that took place in continental Europe, in the very place that saw the birth of palaeontology as a rigorous science: the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle in Paris. Unfortunately, this institution failed to seize the opportunity to be at the vanguard of sculptural restorations of the outlandish creatures of deep time.

Location of the unpublished documents cited: AN, Centre d'Accueil et de Recherche des Archives nationales, Paris; AM, Bibliothèque centrale du Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, Paris.

2. Order

On June 3rd, 1852, A. Romieu, the freshly nominated director of the Fine Arts in the Ministry of the Interior during the transition period between the Second Republic and the Second Empire, sent a letter to the sculptor E. Frémiet (b. 1824, Paris-d. 1910, Paris) (Fig. 1). In it, he announced that the Minister of the Interior (V. Fialin de Persigny) approved this very day his proposal to commission the artist with the execution of a bronze representing a plesiosaur. Romieu added that the remuneration would amount to 5000F, that the sculpture would have to be 10 feet in dimension (more than 3 m) and that it was destined to decorate the Jardin des Plantes in Paris.

On June 26th, 1852, Romieu sent another letter to the sculptor H.-A. Jacquemart (b. 1824, Paris-d. 1896, Paris) to notify him that, at his proposal, the Minister by decree of June 22th (Fig. 2) gave the artist the responsibility of carrying out a bronze portraying a pterodactyl. He added that the remuneration would be of 7000F, that the artwork would be intended for the Jardin des Plantes and that the sketch was to be submitted to him.

3. Reaction

On June 28th, 1852, Romieu wrote to the trustees of the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle to inform them about the two bronzes that would be placed in the Jardin des Plantes. Romieu added that these artworks would be paid for by the Ministry (AN F/21/88 (dossier 24), AM 5 (chemise 11)).

The issue was dealt with as the 11th point examined at the meeting of the professors of the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle that was held the following day. The learned assembly was composed of C. Duméril, M.-E. Chevreul, G.-L. Duvernoy, L. Cordier, A.-C. Becquerel, A. Serres, A. de Jussieu, H. Milne Edwards, A. Valenciennes, E. Frey, A. Brongniart, P. Flourens and J. Decaisne. The minutes of the gathering (AM 5 (chemise 11), AM 55) indicates that the group of distinguished savants begged the director of the Muséum, Duméril, to see Romieu so as to inform him that science did not possess any data on the external characters of the pterodactyl and the plesiosaur, and that fantastic animals could result from their

realization in sculpture. It must be emphasised that normally the Muséum communicated with the director of the Fine Arts by mail: the meeting of Duméril with Romieu, which sounded the death knell of the project, was not commonplace.

The minutes do not name the opponent(s) to the artistic project of Romieu. Yet, of all the professors present that day only Duméril, Duvernoy and Cordier may have had an influence on this issue because they were experts in the zoology of lower vertebrates, comparative anatomy and geology, respectively. The record suggests that Duméril was not among the outraged professors. As for Cordier, he showed very limited interest in palaeontology. In contrast, Duvernoy paid steady attention to this discipline (see e.g., Focillon (1855)). As a successor of H.-M. Ducrotay de Blainville (himself G. Cuvier's chair heir) and before the creation of a chair of palaeontology at the Muséum, Duvernoy was actually seen as the one with an enlightened opinion on every topic related to extinct vertebrates. This is supported by Bartlett (1891a) (p. 173) charging "the professor of paleontology at the Jardin des Plantes" with this affair. We suggest, therefore, that Duvernoy was probably the most virulent adversary to Romieu's order.

4. Journalistic coverage

Although it was a short-lived project, Romieu's idea spread in the press. According to an article published in the June issue of the *Revue et Magasin de Zoologie pure et appliquée* edited by the entomologist F.-E. Guérin-Ménéville (Anon, 1852a), Romieu planned to order sculptural restorations of most large fossil animals known at the time. The author of the paper (most probably Guérin-Ménéville himself) also indicated that the plesiosaur and the pterodactyl were in the process of being executed. It should be emphasised that, in contrast with the timorous professors of the Muséum, he was most enthusiastic about Romieu's initiative because of its potential for popularizing palaeontology.

The issue was also picked up by the newspapers. For example, *La Presse* (one of the foremost journals of the time in France) announced on July 2nd (Anon, 1852b [and republished in *La Lumière* of July 31st (Anon, 1852c)]) that Frémiet was commissioned to execute the "*Plesiosaurus doctyclodarius*" (sic, in fact *Plesiosaurus dolichodeirus*) and Jacquemart the "*Pteradactylus crastirostris*" (sic, actually *Pterodactylus crassirostris*). The author added that these were two of the antediluvian animals with colossal proportions found and described by Cuvier. In fact, the latter was not involved in the original description of either of these species, let alone their discovery. Nevertheless, the mention of these taxa is interesting as it provides a clue as to how the statues of Frémiet and Jacquemart might have looked had they had the chance to complete them (Fig. 3).

In a way, the most interesting press coverage of the project is found in the famous satirical newspaper *Le Charivari*. It began on June 30th with a piece that recalls the concern of the professors of the Muséum (Huart, 1852). It evoked the supposed quandary in which Frémiet and Jacquemart found themselves on the brink of beginning their sculptures. The humorous author pointed out that

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4746335>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4746335>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)