Clark's Drawing of White Salmon Trout

By William Clark

The image reproduced here is a copy of a sketch made by William Clark in February 1806. It depicts what Clark labels a “white salmon trout,” later known as a coho salmon (Oncorhynchus kisutch). This was one of many sketches Clark made of newly discovered plants and animals during the long winter at Fort Clatsop.

The acquisition of scientific knowledge was an important goal of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. In his instructions to Meriwether Lewis, President Thomas Jefferson wrote that one of the objects of the Expedition was to describe the “the animals of the country generally, & especially those not known in the U.S.,” as well as other “objects worthy of notice” such as “the soil & face of the country, its growth & vegetable productions…and…mineral productions of every kind.”

Jefferson’s instructions to observe, describe, measure, and classify natural phenomena can be seen as a reflection of Enlightenment ideals. The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that rejected traditional religious and political dogma, emphasizing instead rationality and empirical observation in the pursuit of “useful knowledge.”

Science tended to work hand-in-hand with commerce and empire during what historians have labeled the “Age of Enlightenment.” The Lewis and Clark Expedition clearly reflects this. The Expedition was first and foremost an imperial endeavor, organized by Jefferson in order to advance the interests of the rapidly expanding American empire and to extend its territorial claims. But it was also a voyage of scientific discovery, as this sketch of the newly discovered coho reveals, as well as a commercial enterprise with the goal of finding “the most direct & practicable water communication across this continent, for the purposes of commerce.”

This combination of science, commerce, and empire was not unique to the Lewis and Clark Expedition, but rather characterized most exploratory endeavors during the Enlightenment period.


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