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An unofficial view: Johann Wäber's first images of Tasmanian Aboriginals

John Webber/Johann Wäber, who accompanied Captain James Cook as official artist on his third voyage, drew the very first images of the Tasmanian Aborigines from a European perspective. Cook had faith in the skills of the artist and acknowledged the importance of Webber's work. He respected the Swiss artist, for he wrote in the official account: "Mr Webber was engaged to embark with Captain Cook, for the purpose of supplying the defects of written accounts, by taking accurate and masterly drawings of the most memorable scenes of our transactions" (Cook 1785:26).

Yet the German philosopher and poet Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) wrote about Webber's celebrated images from this voyage:

(...) still greater deviations may be suspected, to have been committed by the artist, who attended Cook's last voyage. Either he, or the engraver, to whose favourite tool the department of Antarctic forms was entrusted, seems to have sacrificed the realities before his eyes to a faint reminiscence, and stale repetition of Cipriani-Beauties (290).

More than a hundred years later the 'accuracy' and 'mastery' of Webber's work lauded by Cook was still challenged by art historian Bernhard Smith (1916-2011), who held a similar view to Herder. He wrote that

(...) although Webber drew exotic landscapes with great accuracy, his figure drawing retained the facility and attenuated proportions of late mannered baroque draughtsmanship. (...) natives were still seen, for the most part, as noble savages (...) (1960:79-80).

John Cawte Beaglehole (1901-1971), the New Zealand historian was not much kinder in his view of Webber's skill. He notes in 1967 that "portraits and the figure, however, were not his long suit" (*The Voyage* ccxi).

It is astonishing that the important task of official illustrator for an ambitious project such as a circumnavigation of the world should have been entrusted to a person who, according to critics, lacked skills in faithfully reporting what he saw. However, comparing Webber's official drawings (the ones referred to by his critics) with his original drawings, which were not included in the official publication, the discrepancy evident between versions of the same pictures proves that Webber's figure drawings were as accurate as his landscapes. His artistry as a faithful painter of what he saw also extends to the human form in the original drawings, which he made on location. As mentioned above, these drawings were not included in the official account of Cook's third journey but they deserve close scrutiny and explanation. To this end, it is necessary to provide a brief background of the artist, his involvement in Cook's last voyage around the world, and possible reasons for self-censorship.

John Webber's father, Abraham Wäber, was a sculptor who emigrated from Bern to London in 1742 where he married Mary Quant. Living in depressed financial circumstances Abraham could not afford to educate his first-born son Johann and therefore sent him in 1757 at the age of six, back to his relatives in Switzerland. In Bern Johann was apprenticed to the landscape artist Ludwig Aberli for five years. Realizing that Johann was an exceptionally gifted artist, the Bernese Merchant's Guild awarded Johann Wäber an annual stipend, which enabled him to study at the Academie Royale in Paris. He toured the countryside around Paris with the engraver Jean Georges Wille, sketching the landscape. After four years in Paris, Wäber returned to London in 1775 and anglicised his name to John Webber (Hauptman 9-15).

Having been educated on the continent by prominent teachers, it was not difficult for Webber to be admitted to the Royal Academy in London where he had his first exhibition a year later in 1776. Daniel Carl Solander, the botanist on Captain James Cook's first voyage, saw Webber's paintings, recognized the young artist's talent, and recommended him to the Admiralty as the official artist on Cook's third voyage around the globe 1776-1780 (9-15).

Webber joined HMS *Resolution* at Plymouth and, as the official artist of the journey, produced more than 300 paintings, portraits and preliminary sketches. It was his task to make drawings and paintings of people, animals, objects and landscapes encountered on the journey. It is this voyage which defined Webber as artist and which helped him launch a successful career as a painter. All artists on Cook's journeys helped to create a new school of imperial history painting, particularly when they worked up events (such as Webber's painting of the death of Captain Cook in Hawaii) into oils on their return (Marshall 298).

Returning to London after the epic voyage in 1780, Webber busied himself preparing the many drawings he had made for publication in the official journal of the voyage. Natural history artists had to work fast in the field and often sketches were completed years later in studios at home. Overseeing the engravings of his pictures by John Caldwell, Webber remained involved with the expedition for the next three years. His illustrations were extremely popular and he was even invited to show King George III a selection of his works (Hauptman 9-15).

Once discharged from the Admiralty, Webber prepared a series of 16 soft ground etchings published as *Views in the South Seas*. Etched and coloured by him, they were published between 1788 and 1792. The voyage of exploration around the world with Captain Cook had made Webber's career, and in the years to come he benefited from various spin-offs such as designing

scenery and costumes for a pantomime depicting events in the South Seas.¹¹

Webber's reputation was by then well established and he was elected an associate of the Royal Academy in 1785 and a full member in 1791. Between 1784 and 1792 he exhibited around 50 works at Royal Academy exhibitions. As of 1787, Webber began travelling through Europe. He visited Paris, Geneva, Milan and Bern, re-discovering his Swiss roots, and he donated his ethnographic collection from the South Seas to the library in Bern. He died in London in 1793 and since he had remained unmarried, the principal benefactor of his estate was his younger brother. Grateful for the excellent education he had received in his hometown through the generosity of its citizens, he bequeathed to the library of the City of Bern some of his own works. Webber's collection is now held in the ethnographic section of the historical museum in Bern.

As mentioned above, Dr Solander had handpicked Webber as official artist to accompany Captain Cook. This decision was, according to Grenfell Price, "an excellent choice (...), a Swiss painter, who succeeded Hodges as artist" (200). The main purpose of Cook's third voyage was the discovery of a passage connecting the Pacific with the Atlantic, a task which could not be realized. The second purpose of the exploration was to return the South Sea Islander Omai to Tahiti. Captain Furneaux, who was in charge of the second vessel during Cook's second voyage to the Pacific, had brought Omai to England on HMS *Adventure* in 1774. These official instructions for the expedition were supplemented by secret instructions from the Admiralty, stressing the delicate political situation with Spain, urging Cook to avoid all territories which were claimed by his "Catholic Majesty" (202). The paranoia

¹¹ Taking advantage of the public interest in Cook's tragic voyage, Philip James de Louthembourg, a painter and stage designer, presented the pantomime *Omai, or, A Trip Round the World*. This multi-sensory display captured the imagination of the public and was a huge success. It was staged in the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden, 1785.

of being outsmarted by a foreign power, or beaten to discoveries by expeditions not under the British flag, went so far that Cook had strict orders

(...) to demand from the officers and petty officers, the log-books and journals they may have kept, and to seal them up for our inspection; and enjoining them, and the whole crew, not to divulge where they have been, until they shall have permission so to do (...) (204).

Yet this instruction did not prevent some of the crew from hiding their recollections and even having them published before the official account of the journey. One of them, Heinrich Zimmermann, a German cox-swain on the second ship of the expedition, HMS *Discovery*, published *An Account of the Third Voyage of Captain Cook Around the World, 1770-1780*, in Germany in 1781, three years before the official account was published in London.

The secret instructions also underscored the importance of the official artist, whose duty it would be to provide information so that further exploitation of the lands discovered by the exploration could be assessed by the British Government. Cook was ordered

(...) also carefully to observe the nature of the soil, and the produce thereof; the animals and fowls that inhabit or frequent it; the fishes that are to be found in the rivers or upon the coast, and in what plenty; and, to make as accurate drawings of them, as you can (...) (203).

The science of exploration certainly relied on the art of visually recording nature in the time before photography.

Both the Royal Society and the Admiralty collaborated to ensure that research in a whole range of subjects was pressed forward by Cook's explorations. The distinguished scientist Sir Joseph Banks, who was present on the first voyage, regarded drawings as more valuable than works in recording and classifying natural history specimens and other peoples, as well as environmental, astronomical, and meteorological phenomena. The role of the artists and draughtsmen, therefore, was to record the botany,

zoology, and ethnography of the regions visited. They also provided aids to navigation by drawing coastal profiles and they contributed to cartography and to the study of planetary and weather patterns. (Marshall 297).

It is unclear if Webber knew of the secret instructions about keeping a diary, or if he simply was too busy with his artistic work to keep one. The paucity of written material by Webber and the complete lack of his own written record of the journey leave us only with his artistic representations and the question of whether his critics have a point or if he recorded what he saw faithfully. Webber's importance for the success of the exploration relied on his accurate eye and his artistic skills. During the four years of the journey his work included landscape and ethnographic drawings and paintings of extraordinary breadth and the catalogue of his work is one of the most famous results of Cook's voyage. One of Webber's most iconographic paintings is that of Captain Cook's death on Hawaii in 1779. The expedition continued after Cook's death under the leadership of Captain Charles Clerke on *Resolution* with Lieutenant Gore in charge of *Discovery*. Their aim to find the Northwest Passage in the Arctic could however not be realized. Smith wrote "from the cold south in Kerguelen's land to the cold north in Nootka sound" (109) Webber had seen so great an area of the world's surface as no other artist before him. Back in England in 1780 Webber completed his composition of Captain Cook's death in 1784.

Perhaps more important than this well known picture, which Webber painted according to eye witness accounts, for he himself was on board *Resolution* at the time of the battle, are the drawings he made in Van Diemen's Land. Not only are these the first known visual records of Tasmania, then known as Van Diemen's Land, but Webber also drew them according to nature. On 24th of January 1777 Captain James Cook in *Resolution* and Captain Clerke in *Discovery* arrived at Adventure Bay on Bruny Island, south of present day Hobart, as Furneaux had done four years earlier. Cook ordered two parties ashore to collect wood and grass for the livestock. The astronomer William Bayly pitched his

tent to carry out observations and Webber began sketching two Aborigines whom John Henry Martin, a seaman on the *Discovery* described as perfectly happy, “for they frequently wou’d burst out, into the most immoderate fits of Laughter & when one Laughed every one followed his example Emediately [sic]” (CCS 2).



Fig.1. The death of Captain Cook, painted in 1784

It is Webber who provides us with the first images of the fauna and the people who lived on the island. The copper engraving of Webber’s lizard is testimony to his skill as an artist representing nature. Cook described the lizard thus: “(...) we killed a lizard which was 15 inches long and six round, beautifully clouded with yellow and black” (Cook 1785:26). The veracity of Webber’s drawing is underscored by illustrating not just the lizard in fine detail, but also its habitat, that is the sandy soil that it traversed.¹²

¹² A picture of the lizard is on page 119 in Rex and Thea Rienits, *The voyages of Captain Cook*. A copy of the original painting could not be sourced for this essay from the British Museum, or the British Library.

The same cannot be attributed to the ringtail possum, which Webber also drew while in Adventure Bay. Dependent on light, Webber had to draw the possum during the day. However, possums are nocturnal animals and almost exclusively tree-dwelling. Webber's drawing of the possum is that of an animal that had been shot down from a tree. Lieutenant John Gore wrote about the possum, "here is a little animal Something Larger than the Cane Rat has a Tale like it, but its Other Parts are more like the Racoon, it runs up Trees, and into holes of tress when Persued, one of our Gentlemen Shot one, (...) [sic]" (Beaglehole 58). Not aware of the animal's tree-dwelling habits, he drew the possum standing outstretched on the ground, something which possums rarely do. On live animals, the eyes are slightly bulging, something that probably could not be observed on a dead animal. Nevertheless, Webber's drawing is distinguished by the extraordinary accuracy of other physical details of the animal, such as the texture of the fur, the tapering prehensile tail with the white tip, which is coiled when not used. The ears are short, rounded and have a characteristic white patch behind. Webber's drawing of the possum is not an accurate scientific depiction and documentation, but it is a work of artistic achievements fusing the sciences with the arts.



Fig.2. An Opossum of Van Diemen's Land, 1777

It is well known that Webber was the first European who sketched the Tasmanian Aborigines, even though the island had been discovered by Europeans 135 years earlier. The Dutchman Abel Tasman named the island Van Diemen's Land in 1642. He and his crew did not encounter any aboriginal inhabitants. Since then the island had been visited by Marion du Fresne in 1772 and Tobias Furneaux, who captained the *Adventure* during Cook's second voyage in 1773. While the French expedition under Marion du Fresne did encounter Aborigines, a skirmish broke out and the French had to retreat after shooting one person and wounding several others. A year later, Furneaux did not encounter any aboriginal inhabitants when anchoring at Adventure Bay.

An unfinished pencil sketch by Webber of Cook meeting inhabitants of Van Diemen's Land in 1777 is kept in the Naval Historical Branch, Ministry of Defence, London (Smith 1960: 113; Smith 1992:199).

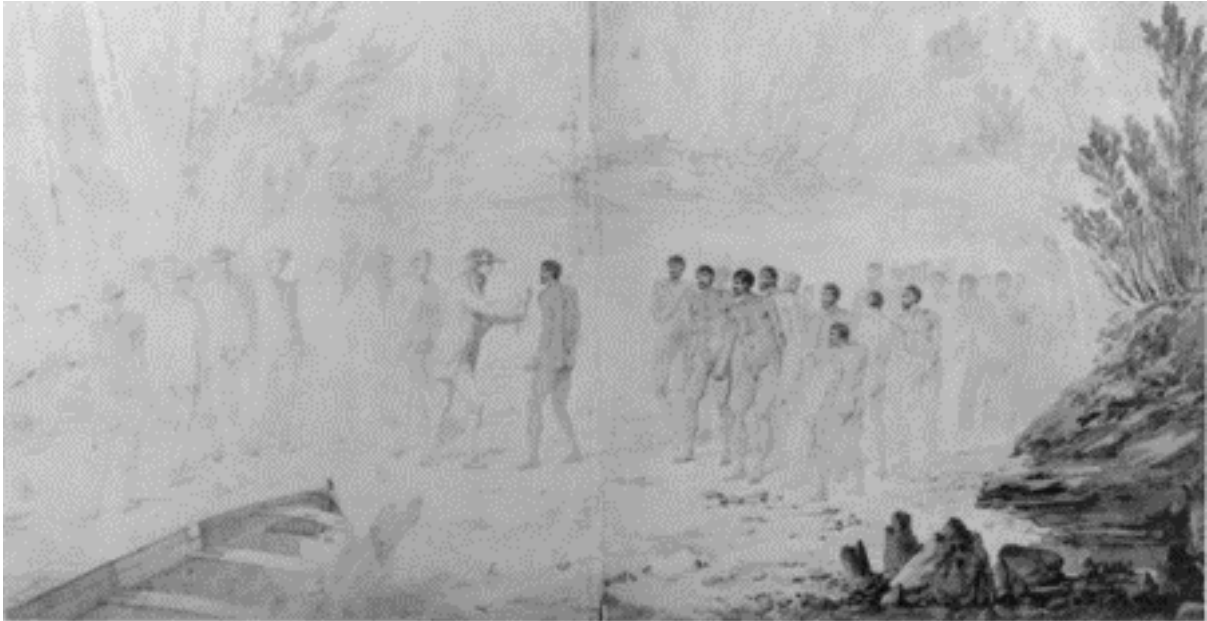


Fig.3. Captain Cook's interview with natives in Adventure Bay, Van Diemen's Land, 29th January 1777

David Samwell, surgeon's first mate on *Resolution*, recalls the encounter with the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land

We had not be[en] long landed before about twenty of them men and boys joined us. The Men has not been long with us before they were joined by ten or twelve Women, some of them carrying their Children on their Baks supported by the skin of some wild beast thrown over their shoulders & tyed before[sic] (CCS 2).

On 29th January 1777 Cook observed about the aboriginal men they encountered that they "were quite naked and wore no ornaments except large punctures or ridges raised on the skin" (Beaglehole *Journals* 55). Cook continued,

(...) their hair is perfectly woolly, and is clotted with grease and red ochre, like that of the Hottentots. Their noses, though not flat, are broad and full, as is the case with most Indians, and the lower part of the face projects considerably. Their eyes are of a moderate size, and though not very quick or piercing, they give the countenance a frank, cheerful, and pleasing craft (Hogg 1293).

The lack of any observable activity that could be attributed to any known production of material goods was noted by Heinrich Zimmermann, "as far as I could discover in so short a time their

food consisted of mussels, oysters, and other fish, also all sorts of roots. There was no trace of agriculture or of fruit trees, and we did not see any huts; they accepted the bread we gave them, but threw it away immediately" (Howay 37). Not able to observe any form of cultural activity Cook nevertheless remarked "They display, however, some contrivance in their method of cutting their arms and bodies in lines of different directions raised above the surface of their skin" (Cook 1785:26).

Webber's picture of an aboriginal man is that of a handsome black person with the incisions referred to by Cook barely visible.



Fig.4. "A man of Van Diemen's Land," (Nicol and Cadell Plate No 6)

Describing the women of Van Diemen's Land, Cook noted:

The former [women] wore a Kangaroo skin fastened over their shoulders, the only use of which seemed to be, to support their children on their backs, for it left those parts uncovered which modesty directs us to conceal. Their bodies were black, and marked with scars like those of the men; from whom, however, they differed, in having their heads shaved; some of them being completely shorn, others only on one side, while the rest of them had the upper part of their heads shaved,

leaving a very narrow circle of hair all round. They were far from being handsome; however, some of our gentlemen paid their addresses to them, but without effect (*Beaglehole Journals* 55).

David Samwell was less charitable than Cook, he thought that the women were "the ugliest creatures that can be imagined in human shape" (Rienits 118).



Fig.5. "A woman of Van Diemen's Land," (Nicol and Cadell Plate No 7)

Looking at Webber's engravings, which were part of the official folio to illustrate the published journal of the voyage, we are at once struck by the discrepancy of Cook's and Samwell's written description from the depictions. While Cook does not attribute beauty to them, Samwell's view of their appearance is harsh. Yet Webber's Aborigines are handsome and the woman in particular has a quiet grace about her, which is not what one would expect from Cook's account. The modesty Cook refers to seems to have been an obligation for Webber, who apparently drew his subjects'

upper torso only, leaving their nakedness to the imagination of the spectator. Indeed, the kangaroo skin, which cradles the baby on the woman's shoulder, could be imagined as a cloak covering the rest of her body. Webber is faithful to the hairstyle of both men and women and also includes the tattoos, albeit in a rather faint and unobtrusive way.

Peter Marshall states "the tendency in portrayals of Pacific peoples by Cook's artists was to present them in what was thought to be a sympathetic light, sometimes as noble savages approximating to classical ideals" (297). That European artists were imbued with Rousseau's (1712-1778) concept of the noble savage is also pointed out by Smith who wrote "(...) natives were still seen, for the most part, as noble savages (...)" (1960:114). Webber's official portraits of the Tasmanian Aborigines comply to this ideal; they are portraits of people his European compatriots could embrace. Indeed, the Aboriginal woman and her child chosen for the official publication have a virginal, almost religious quality, taking the idea of the noble into the realm of the sacred.

The Swiss artist had been taught by his masters in Europe to be faithful in his representations, because the degree of accuracy in the absence of photography was a requirement for the advancement of the sciences. Few pictures capture the fact that Tasmanian aboriginal women shaved their heads, presumably not to be hindered by hair when diving for mussels. John Hawkins postulates that the decorative circle just above the ears of Aboriginal women was achieved with either a flint or by singeing the hair by fire (21). Yet, as mentioned above, if one compares the official engraving of the Tasmanian Aborigines with Webber's original drawings there is a considerable discrepancy between what was published in 1784 and what the artist actually saw. Webber's original representations of Tasmanian Aborigines drawn in 1777 were re-worked to suit the expectations of the time, namely to show that the costly expedition resulted in peaceful contact with people Britain could engage with. Cook himself gives

a clue to the almost impossible task Webber had to perform, namely, to be a faithful, but entertaining painter:

(...)that we might go out with every help that could serve to make the result of our voyage entertaining to the generality of readers, as well as instructive to the sailor and scholar, Mr Webber was pitched upon, and engaged to embark with me, for the express purpose of supplying the unavoidable imperfections of written accounts, by enabling us to preserve and to bring home, such drawings of the most memorable scenes of our transactions, as could be executed by a professed and skilful artist (Cook as quoted in Smith 1960:77).

The degree to which Webber adjusted the drawings to the taste of polite society in Europe and his employers, the British Admiralty, does make his official work essentially illustrative as Smith pointed out (1960:77) and subjected him to Herder's criticism. Yet while Herder's and Smith's criticism refers to the drawings included in the official publication, Beaglehole had knowledge of the unofficial earlier drawings by Webber, copies of which he included between the pages 48 and 49 of *The Voyage of the Resolution and Discovery 1776-1780*, Part I.

The original of the earlier drawing of "Woman of Van Diemen's Land", which was not part of the official folio, is kept in the British Library. Comparing the two images of the woman, we see that while the face of the woman is almost identical, other physical features are not. The original drawing shows a mature woman, one who clearly is able to breastfeed a child. While in the later drawing the baby's head and right hand rest peacefully on the mother's shoulder, the baby's head in the earlier drawing hangs back in a rather uncomfortable position. The kangaroo's skin is not draped over the shoulder of the woman suggesting lower torso cover; instead, the cover ends before the parts of the body Captain Cook considered that "modesty directs us to conceal" (Beaglehole *Journals* 55).



Fig.6. Earlier drawing of "Woman of Van Diemen's Land," 1777

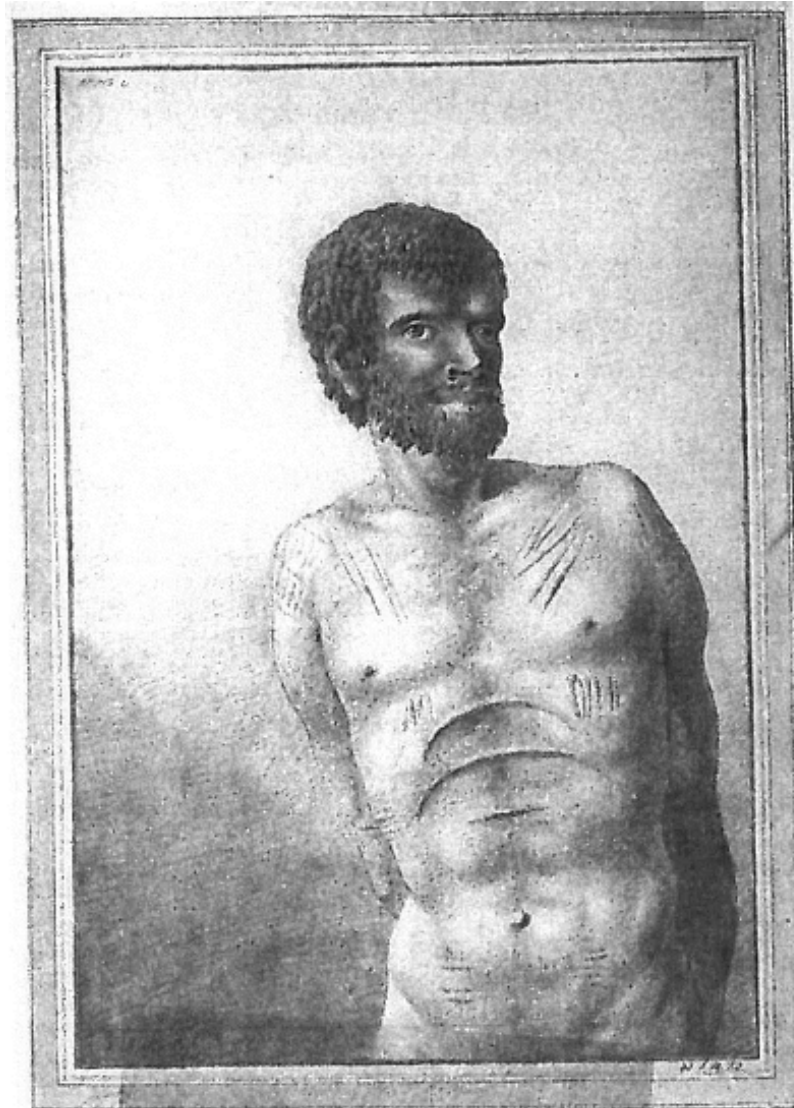


Fig.7. Earlier drawing of "Man of Van Diemen's Land," 1777

The body in the original drawing of the "Man of Van Diemen's Land" looks tortured, more savage than in the official drawing. The scars seem deeper than the faint incisions on the official engraving and the hair is matted with ochre mud. This original drawing too, is kept in the British Library in London. This drawing was also reproduced on page 297 in *Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Empire*, 2001, Part I.

By 1985 Bernard Smith (Joppien and Smith) had come across Webber's earlier drawings and in 1992 Smith concluded that the 1777 drawings were not part of the official portfolio, because Webber included the drawings under the heading "New Holland

Van Diemens Land" [sic] (Smith 1992:199). "New Holland", as Australia was then called, was however not part of the route of Cook's third journey. Cook only anchored in Van Diemen's Land during his third voyage before proceeding to New Zealand. At that time it was believed that Van Diemen's Land was part of the Australian continent, a belief that George Bass and Matthew Flinders disproved in 1798/99.

Smith also argued that Cook somehow censored the pictures which should be included in the official publication. He wrote that: "What it would seem Cook did approve of was a drawing of a man and another of a woman of Van Diemen's Land which would indicate nudity without actually representing it" (1992:199). While this may be true as far as Cook's sentiment about nudity is concerned, Smith's statement is nevertheless puzzling. Cook may have seen Webber's original 1777 drawings, but since he died in 1779, he could not have seen Webber's reworked versions, the ones that were inserted in the 1784 official portfolio.

Beaglehole on the other hand did not postulate as to why the original drawings were not used for the official portfolio. He recognizes that they are essentially the same drawings and notes that "the wash drawings by Webber were engraved by J. Caldwell 'head and shoulders only'" (*The Voyage* xvi).

Webber's ability for self-censorship is not in doubt: he re-worked the unofficial original drawings. However, neither the official portraits, nor the earlier drawings of Tasmanian Aborigines by Webber are representations of reality. The official pictures 'thematise' the Aborigines to fit into the image of the noble savage, a practice which Levinas criticises as a "reduction of the visage, or face, of the Other to a projection of the Same (xii)". Webber bowed to convention and expectation and censored his own earlier works.

The original pictures drawn by Webber while in Tasmania disclose otherness, which Herder and Smith (1960) seem to indicate were missing in the official portraits. However, Webber's images of the

Aborigines are types, they have no name; they are entirely identified with their country of origin. They are examples of a people, specimens of a population, reducing the Tasmanian Aborigines to objects of perception.

Webber captured the physiognomy of the Tasmanian Aborigines he encountered as best he could. His 1777 drawings are imbued with rare historical value. Webber's Aborigines from Van Diemen's Land/Tasmania are the first of a handful of portraits of a free people living their lives in their own country according to their own custom. Once colonialism reached the island, the Tasmanian Aborigines became some of the most photographed ethnic group in the British realm, but by then they were no longer masters of their destiny.

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