

Wednesday, September 21, 2011

Lear's Parrots - The Prequel

Edward Lear Sketches of Parrots Relating to '*Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots*' (1832), ca. 1830 (MS Typ 55.9). Houghton Library, Harvard University.

A selection of plates from Lear's published book can be seen in the following post from 2008: [The Parrots](#). That book is definitely one of my all-time favourite natural history publications; so I was particularly happy to discover Harvard's intriguing collection of preliminary sketches and practice lithographs by Lear.

To quote myself:

"The balance of critical opinion regards Lear's book on parrots to be the finest ever published on that bird family and among the greatest ornithological works ever produced.

It's not just because such an audacious project was successfully completed by so young a character, or that the subject matter was drawn so sensitively and with great scientific accuracy and naturalistic detail, but because the exceptional quality of Lear's plates - drawn, wherever possible, from living specimens - would significantly influence the work of two contemporary artists, John James Audubon and John Gould, perhaps the greatest ornithological illustrators of all time.

Both Audubon and Gould would employ Lear during the 1830s to assist in their projects and it was only failing eyesight that foreshortened Lear's bird illustrating career."

Note: **Edward Lear** was **TWENTY YEARS OLD** when his Parrot book was published!!



Two parrots : ink, graphite and watercolour drawing. 55.7 x 37 cm.

One drawing cut-out and pasted on composite leaf.

Inscribed upper center:

September. 1830. "*Macrocercus* - ? - from living bird at the gardens."

[Two supplemental pieces of paper [MS Typ 55.9 (22/25a), MS Typ 55.9 (22/25b)] were detached from the sheet for drawing 22 by Lear himself and affixed to drawing 25. One, with colour samples, overlaid the lower right corner of drawing 25; the other was used to extend the feathered crest of the cockatoo beyond the upper edge of the main sheet of drawing 25.]