

THE LANDSCAPE AND HISTORICAL
PAINTINGS OF CHARLES MERYON
(1821-1868)

Charles Meryon's career as an etcher has understandably overshadowed the early years of his artistic activity, yet the series of trials and errors which can be followed through the 1840s contains some pointers to the future. Admittedly the traces of his interest in sculpture are too few to lead the art historian very far, but the drawings of this decade are linked to some of the etchings of the 1850s and 60s, and the evidence of his ambitions as an historical and landscape painter is sufficiently extensive to merit a closer look.

After leaving the *Rhin* at Toulon in September 1846, at the end of the 4-year voyage to the Pacific, Meryon returned to Paris and there decided to embark on a career as an artist, as he explained in a letter to his father on November 5, 1846.

I have just taken a great decision, at least a decision of the greatest importance for me; weary of the profession I have followed up to now, still young enough to take up another, I am preparing to devote myself entirely to the study of Art, to devote all I have to it. I do not know what awaits me; perhaps Poverty, but I can assure you that I would regret it all my life, not to have tried my luck in this direction. If, two, three or four years from now, I can have a talent which will give me enough to live on, I swear that I will find there rather than anywhere else that *inner satisfaction* which *alone* can give a few moments of happiness.¹

His partial colour-blindness, of which he was already aware—as another letter to his father written late in December of the same year indicates²—did not daunt him, and it is conceivable that he could have made a successful career as a painter despite this disability, as some of his pastels suggest. He studied for a time under Philippe, a former pupil of David, who set him drawing from casts of classical sculpture, but he soon turned to the fund of experiences his years in the Pacific had given him.³ On August 10, 1847, he wrote to his friend and former fellow-officer, Antoine-Edouard Foley, asking for the return of some of the sketches he had done during the cruise, and by mid-January of the following year he was well advanced on a large composition inspired by his New Zealand recollections.

As for the subject of my work, it's a large drawing, a New Zealand scene for which I am drawing on my sketches, notes, souvenirs, etc.—A good half of it is done;