THE PLATES OF THE *ENCYCLOPAEDIA*

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Part 1 – Composition of *Encyclopaedia*'s illustrations plates

Let us now tackle another great innovation of the *Encyclopaedia*, its illustrations, or plates. Diderot said: "A glance at an object or of its representation says more than a full page of speech." He thought that after describing knowledge in the *Encyclopaedia*'s volumes of articles, it was necessary to illustrate it. Produced under his direction, we'll first present the eleven plates' volumes on sciences, liberal arts and mechanical arts with explanations, which came out between 1762 and 1772.

These boards, accompanied by their explanations, were first drawn and then engraved. The signatures of illustrators and engravers usually appear at the bottom of the page. For example, here, a marine board, shows how the anchors were forged; on the left you see Goussier, the illustrator's name, and on the right Bonard, the engraver's name. These volumes, which included 2,626 plates in all, were among the finest achievements of drawing and engraving of the 18th century. See this engraving of a pineapple, a very rare fruit at the time.

Part 2 – Topics covered in the *Encyclopaedia*'s plates

What topics are covered by these illustrations? Apart from arts and crafts, which we will look at later, let us take a closer look at the major subjects covered by these boards, first natural history, plants, animals and minerals. In the animal kingdom for example, besides animals known in Europe like the beaver, we also uncover some exotic animals still poorly known then, and represented somehow from descriptions, verbal reports, never drawn on the spot. See here the elephant legs. Among plants, some exotic plants such as cocoa or cinnamon. Another subject covered with illustrations, human anatomy. This skeleton in the position of a thinker, or of a philosopher, belongs to what is called "moralised anatomy", which is an ancient tradition still widespread in the 18th century. On the other hand, on this other plate, the heart is represented in a modern way. It is all about transmitting positive knowledge.

Agriculture is another topic detailed in the boards. First a general view, then the tools: the plough, the coulter. And of course, sciences: mathematical sciences, algebra and arithmetic. Here, Pascal's arithmetic machine. Mathematical and hydraulic sciences there, with Marly's machine. The plates are often divided into two parts as you just saw. Most are simple spread but there are double page spreads like here, on the Louvre's colonnade. Sometimes, more rarely, triple spread of very large size, on three sheets. This one, on the Irish Giant's Causeway. You will probably have noticed the omnipresence of the human figure in these illustrations. Even in plates depicting wilderness like this one, we still see humans in a corner of the image. People talk, gaze at the majestic landscape while others gather shells and scholars weigh basalt. Everywhere in nature, we see men.

It is one of the *Encyclopaedia*'s great lessons. It is dedicated to the human race, and Diderot writes in the article "Encyclopaedia": "It is the presence of man that makes the existence of living beings interesting. Regardless of my existence and the happiness of my peers, why would the rest of nature matter to me? "