



# Barry Lawrence Ruderman Antique Maps Inc.

7407 La Jolla Boulevard  
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## Essai D'Une Carte Polaire Arctique Construite d'apres toutes les connoissances les plus nouvelles pour servir aux Navigations et aux Decouvertes a faire dans la mer Glaciale . .. 1774

**Stock#:** 63339  
**Map Maker:** de Vaugondy  
**Date:** 1774  
**Place:** Paris  
**Color:** Hand Colored  
**Condition:** VG+  
**Size:** 19 x 19.5 inches  
**Price:** \$7,500.00



### Description:

### ***A Cartographic Landmark -- De Vaugondy's Presentation to the French Royal Academy on the Most Practicable Sailing Routes to the Pacific via the North Polar Regions***

Extremely rare polar map produced to illustrate a presentation made by Didier Robert de Vaugondy to the French Academy of Sciences in August 1773, regarding De Vaugondy's theories on possible sailing routes to the Pacific Ocean via the north polar sea.

Of tremendous historical importance, the map illustrates for the first time on a polar map a host of important historical information, combined with the conclusions of one of France's leading mapmakers on the most practicable means for navigating across the polar regions, from Europe to the Pacific.

### **Historic Overview**

Didier Robert de Vaugondy's map is a fascinating and highly important artifact of cartographic history, representing an historical highpoint of the French scientific inquiry into the search for the Northwest Passage and the competing cartographic theories underlying this inquiry. It is also the penultimate map



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proposed by the De Vaugondy family as part of the more than two decade De Vaugondy cartographic family feud with the De L'Isle/Buache family of mapmakers.

Beginning with Joseph Nicholas De L'Isle's return from St. Petersburg in 1747 and his publication of the *Carte Des Nouvelles Decouvertes Au Nord de la Mer de Sud . . . 1750*, the French cartographic community was gripped with an intense period of scientific inquiry into the proper way to depict the Northwestern regions of North America and the contiguous polar regions and Northeast coast of Asia. Over the next decades, J.N. De L'sle and his professional heirs, Philippe Buache and Nicholas Buache de la Neuville on the one hand, and the Robert de Vaugondy family (Gilles and Didier) on the other, would regularly appear before the French Royal Academy to present their increasing argumentative views on this topic. In the process, they would create more than 20 maps and written presentations advocating their respective theories and pushing forward the cartographic knowledge of the region.

Ironically, the resolution of the debate would end not with a clear French victor, but instead by an Englishman, Captain James Cook, whose visit to Alaska and the Northwest Coast in 1778, during this third voyage to the Pacific (1776-1779), would bring to an end this decades old French debate. In a single visit, Cook charted the majority of the North American north-west coastline for the first time, advancing the cartographic knowledge of the coastlines from just south of the mouth of the Columbia River to the Aleutian Islands and thereby mooting what can, in retrospect, be called the greatest cartographic debate of the 18th Century.

#### **De Vaugondy's North Polar Map**

The present map follows Didier's Robert de Vaugondy's presentation in 1773 of his most up to date presentation of his theories on prospective navigation in the high latitudes of the North America. After years of debating the competing theories on internal waterways through North America, in the present map, de Vaugondy focused his attention on presenting what he believed was a viable route from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Convinced that there was no reliably persuasive evidence of a watercourse through the continent, De Vaugondy focused his presentation to the Academy on possible polar routes. He also presented for the first time in the now two decade old controversy, a polar projection map intended to illustrate his hypotheses on the practicable sailing routes. As noted by Mary Pedley in *Bel et Utile*:

*[Didier Robert de Vaugondy's] paper, which remained unpublished, concerned the polar lands and the means of navigating in the northern sea. The map, drawn on an orthographic polar*



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*projection, uses the technique of line gradations for certain and uncertain coasts . . . As it is a navigational map, it shows a series of dotted spiral lines representing wind rhumbs. It also incorporated a good deal of geography which Vaugondy had previously rejected: the Lac de Fonte (here named Ouinipigouchin) and the Lac Barnarda (here, Lac Michinipi). He adopted the islands from the Japanese map of Hans Kaempfer which had been used by Buache to support Russian discoveries in the North Pacific. He filled the Bering Straits with the archipelago of Aleution islands (Iles Alexiennes) and copied his north coast of North America between 110° and 150° longitude from the Captain Alexander Cluny in The American Traveller (London 1769). All these features formed part of the maps Didier Robert de Vaugondy was preparing for the Supplement to the Encyclopedie.*

Buache / Kaempfer / Hans Sloan Map: [{{ inventory\\_detail\\_link\('44043'\) }}](#)

While De Vaugondy went to great lengths to illustrate many of the conjectural Northwest Passage routes, he did so in large part because he ultimately believed that none of them was actually viable. As such, in the interests of advocating what he believed was the most viable prospective passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific, De Vaugondy meticulously mapped and described what he hypothesized as the optimal choice for a passage by water to the Pacific through the north polar regions.

#### **Robert de Vaugondy's Proposed Northwest Sea Route From the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean Via the North Polar Regions**

As noted by Mary Pedley, the primary purpose of Didier Robert De Vaugondy's presentation to the French Academy of Sciences was to discuss 3 prospective routes for a Northwest Passage and to specifically identify one of these routes as the preferred route, as illustrated in his *Essai d'Une Carte Polaire* . . .

*Robert de Vaugondy's presentation to the Academy discussed three possible routes across the north pole to the Pacific. His map illustrated what he thought was the most feasible of the three, a free and open sea which could be traversed during the summer, taking advantage of the perpetual daylight. He outlined the problems related to the mapping of an expedition of this kind, such as the kind of compass to take, the method for counting days (since there would be no night), the measurement of winds and currents, and what to do if the winds and currents were opposed to the proposed routes, as well as the type of projection to employ.*

*The Academy approved both the map and paper for publication, though only the map was printed, in 1774. . . .*



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#### **De Vaugondy and Comparative Cartography as a Means of Depicting Competing Cartographic Theories**

Perhaps the most important feature of this map and the other maps produced by De Vaugondy in this period was their graphic depiction of the apex of the comparative cartographic debate over how to synthesize competing conjectural theories and generally incomplete and disparate information onto a single sheet of paper. In the tradition of his predecessors, dating back to Guillaume De L'Isle, De Vaugondy embraced a willingness to depict questionable information, so long as the information wasn't completely contradicted by more reliable cartographic source information.

This attempt to reduce multiple and inconsistent details onto a single sheet of paper has, in modern times, been misconstrued by a number of commentators as Robert De Vaugondy's attempt to perpetuate the alleged accuracy of outdated and erroneous information. In fact, exactly the opposite was true. As noted by De Vaugondy in his final *Memoire*,

*"It may seem astonishing that after the publication of the works of MM. Delisle and Buache on the relative positions of Asia and America, someone could find something more to say on the subject. My aim is merely to reconcile the works of these two authors with some prior information and perhaps to introduce some possibilities and probabilities in so doing. Thus will we have the means of arriving at the truth, which should be the object of all research".*

*(Translation drawn from Bill Warren's A Most Curious Map:*

<http://www.artwis.com/articles/a-most-curious-map/>)

The commentators who have criticized De Vaugondy's maps focused only on the content of the maps and gave little or not consideration to the accompanying descriptions set forth in the papers and treatises produced by De Vaugondy to accompany his maps. As noted by Mary Pedley:

*[In 1774], Vaugondy continued his "northern" presentations to the Academy with the Memoire sur les Pays de l'Asie et de l'Amerique situes au Nord de la Mer du Sud (Paris: Boudet, 1774). As a supplement to his previous work, this paper discussed current knowledge of northeast Asia and north west America and was illustrated by a "Nouveau System Geographique par lequel on concilie les anciennes connoissances sur les Pays nord-ouest de l'Amerique avec les nouvelles decouvertes des Russes au nord de la Mer du Sud" [A New Geographical System in which older information on the northwest of America is reconciled with the new discoveries by the Russians in the north Pacific] [Cat. 456] Vaugondy called it a "Nouveau Systeme" to*



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*differentiate it from his Carte Systematique of 1768. in fact, the two maps are quite different, especially regarding the Aleutian islands and the land of Yeço.*

Nouveau Systeme: `{{ inventory_detail_link('44089') }}`

Carte Systematique:

<http://international.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/h?intl/mtfront:@OR%28@field%28NUMBER+@band%28mtfxmp+f76802%29%29%29>

*Like in the "Essai d'une carte polaire," this map did not pretend to show a geographical reality but attempted to reconcile different geographical hypotheses . . . De Vaugondy stressed that his map was a "system" by which discoveries, whether real or not, might be illustrated; it was not a depiction of the true nature of the land or sea. To emphasize this caveat, he opened his treatise with Cicero: " . . . (We follow things which are probable; we can not proceed beyond that which is likely to be true; and we are ready to refute without stubbornness and be refuted without anger.) . . .*

*Didier Robert de Vaugondy's willingness to present the de la Fuente discoveries in this new system was an extension of the positive geography . . . comparing and reconciling differences. When faced with regions about which no information is certain, the geographer can only try to co-ordinate equally uncertain accounts. The de la Fuente story, though in itself improbable, did in fact coincide with earlier explorers' accounts. Indeed, this was the basis on which Philippe Buache had accepted the de la Fuente narrative twenty years earlier. Thus, reasoned Buache then and Vaugondy now, any truth in de la Fuente's explorations would be confirmed by the more secure authenticity of others who described similar geography.*

*On the other hand, Vaugondy continued to reject the Sea of the West because it did not coincide with earlier accounts or with the more recent reports from the Indian Moncacht-Ape . . . The Indian reported not a sea in the west but a great river, La Belle Riviere, that flowed from the center of the continent to the Pacific. In addition, the Indian described a salt lake, 300 leagues long and 30 leagues wide, similar to that reported by Baron de La Hontan at the end of the seventeenth century, shown by Guillaume De L'Isle on his map of Canada in 1703. Thus not only the location but existence depended on reconciliation of sources.*

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*By such operations, Didier Robert de Vaugondy worked towards a system which would illustrate a current state of "probable" knowledge by reconciling all sources. Unfortunately, Didier's adjudicators at the Academy were not persuaded by his results: "He [Vaugondy] opposes conjectures with conjectures, arguments with arguments, relations which are hardly decisive with relations only a little more conclusive. An unbiased mind would leave this discussion a little more uncertain than it was before."*

*Robert de Vaugondy's intent, however, was to stress that a northwest passage was highly conjectural and fraught with problems, and that the polar route he advocated offered a greater chance of success. The arguments in the Memoire sur les pays septentrionaux very much reflect the sentiments of Engel found in the Encyclopedie. Vaugondy quotes his correspondence with Engel throughout the Memoire, and it is probably safe to attribute the logic supporting the northeast passage to Engel rather than to Vaugondy, whose concern was to illustrate the idea.*

#### **Conclusions**

While the great French debate ended in an intellectual stalemate, having been mooted by the discoveries of Captain James Cook in 1778, De Vaugondy's *Essai d'Une Carte Polaire* is arguably the single most resonant of the maps from this two decade clash of French intellect. As noted by Mary Pedley, De Vaugondy's purpose in proffering this polar projection was in fact to encourage the French inquiry to move past the still unsubstantiated internal water routes through North America and to focus the French Academy on the viability of a route through the polar seas.

De Vaugondy's map was in fact the only map in the entire debate to rely upon a polar projection--all prior maps had been more Pacific Ocean-centric in nature. Therefore, the great irony is that while Cook's discoveries relegated most of this great episode of French geographical pamphleteering directly to the history books, De Vaugondy's primary premise, which was to look past the more southern routes and refocus upon a polar sea transit, was implicitly validated by Cook's discoveries.

#### **Rarity**

De Vaugondy's polar map is very rare on the market. We are aware of only 3 other examples to come to market in the past 30 years.



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**Detailed Condition:**

Original outline color.