

## Virtual Museum of the History of Mineralogy

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The book section of the Virtual Museum contains about 300 books on mineralogy with bibliographic descriptions and photos of the binding, title page and illustrations for each book. One of the most remarkable books in our collection, the *Histoire Naturelle*, published in 1781 by Jean Fabien Gautier d'Agoty, deserves a special place.

Anyone concerned with the history of mineralogy is certainly fascinated by this book, which is interesting not only because it is the first time that minerals have been depicted in color printing, but also because of the combination of these images as realistic as possible with accompanying texts of the crystallographer Romé de l'Isle.

Initially, Fabien Gautier d'Agoty, a professional engraver and not a scientist, planned to publish a work consisting of plates obtained by color printing (a novelty for the time) and explanatory texts on the three kingdoms of nature. This wish was very original and ambitious, but ran into many problems from the start: in order to achieve the most perfect result possible, the process proved slow, difficult to carry out and very expensive; therefore a very limited number of copies were printed and sold. Unfortunately, Fabien Gautier d'Agoty passed away unexpectedly after the production of the first 30 plates (the first three "décades") of the 80 or 100 planned. Bravely, his widow wished to continue the work with the collaboration of Romé de l'Isle and with new engravers; a total of 70 plates on the mineral kingdom alone were eventually published.

Curtis Schuh wrote that "this book is one of the finest colored mineralogies ever published" and "must also be considered to be among the very rarest of colored mineral books".

Due to this extreme rarity, the Mineralogical Record published a reprint in 1991, but it was limited to 52 copies and therefore difficult to obtain. To our knowledge, there is currently only one digitized version of Gautier d'Agoty's "Histoire Naturelle", limited to the first 40 plates, available on the Internet.

We were able to physically examine 5 original copies from our own collections and from the library of a collector who wishes to remain anonymous. We obtained photographs of a copy in Herb Obodda's collection and examined a digitized copy of the Ecole nationale supérieure des mines de Paris. Two of the 5 original copies had 40 plates, the others had 20, 60 and 70 plates respectively and together they comprise the entire work.

Thanks to these different copies we got a complete picture of the whole publication and we thought it was worth the effort to make all images available on our website. In order to make the book readable for a wider audience, we decided to translate the accompanying texts of Romé de l'Isle from French into English. We have provided each plate with notes regarding the name of the minerals depicted, the location of the specimens shown, the collection to which the specimen belonged and any further comments on the printed plates.

We intend to carry out this work in phases by regularly adding new "décades" (sets of 10 plates). We hope that the improved accessibility of this fantastic book will delight collectors of mineral books and more generally all bibliophiles.

The following texts are currently available:

- a general introduction to the work of Gautier d'Agoty
- information on the examination of the work
- the 1st "décade"

These can all be found on our [Gautier d'Agoty page](#).

Six more "décades" will be added during the coming months.

Comments, adjustments and extra information are welcome.

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