

An *Aeshna affinis* watercolour by Pierre Léonard Vander Linden (1797-1831) found in the Selys collection

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Abstract. A yet unknown watercolour by Pierre Léonard Vander Linden showing a male of *Aeshna affinis* was found in the collection of Edmond de Selys Longchamps in the Royal Belgian Institute for Natural Sciences (RBINS) in Brussels. The circumstances of discovery and a biographical sketch of the artist are provided and the biographical chronology of the drawing is established.

Further key words. Odonata, dragonfly, Edmond de Selys Longchamps, Brussels

Introduction

In the past years MW and KV have studied all watercolours, pen and ink and pencil drawings and notes accompanying them in the collection of Edmond de Selys Longchamps (1813–1900), which is housed in the Royal Belgian Institute for Natural Sciences (RBINS) in Brussels. Many illustrations were executed by Selys himself or by Guillaume Severin (1862–1938). Very few were produced by others. Some illustrations are dated and these can all be placed in the period between 1870 and 1900.

An unexpected watercolour discovered

On 18 February 2016 MW found one of the watercolours (coded Ae75a) to be exceptional. Below the drawing the name of the odonate depicted is written in pencil »Æ. affinis ♂ adulte« (adult male of *Aeshna affinis*) and then in ink »Dessin fait par Vander Linden en Italie« (Illustration made by Vander Linden in Italy) (Fig. 1). Both notes appear to be written in Selys' hand. They indicate that the drawing was executed by Pierre Léonard Vander Linden who described several Odonata species in 1820 and 1825 and who carried out studies in Italy between 1817 and 1821 (MORREN 1833). This is an exceptional find for two reasons. Firstly nothing of the collections or belongings from Vander Linden, except for his publications, is known. Secondly this depiction of *Aeshna affinis* (Vander Linden, 1820) must have been produced in Italy between 1817 and 1820, while a lithograph of it was published with its description in VANDER LINDEN (1820b). This means that the illustration is now nearly 200 years old, much older than all the other artwork in the collection of Selys.



Fig. 1. Two parts of the watercolour of *Aeshna affinis* by Pierre Léonard Vander Linden in Italy, found in the collection of Edmond de Selys Longchamps in the RBINS. Above: *Aeshna affinis* well depicted in its beauty and details and below: the accompanying text.

The illustration by Vander Linden was treated the same as all other watercolours in Selys' collection and has been glued to a carton mount. But the paper, on which the drawing was made differs from the frameless machine-made paper generally used at the time of Selys or Severin. It is a greyish laid paper, with a watermark of closely tight parallel lines, testifying that it was hand-made much earlier.

Pierre Léonard Vander Linden

Pierre Léonard Vander Linden was born in Brussels on 12 December 1797. In his early youth he was already interested in natural history. During the first years of his education he attended the Collège Thérésien and the National Lyceum, both in Brussels. With a stipendium he travelled in October 1817, aged 19, to Southern Europe. In Paris he visited Pierre André Latreille (1762–1833), an entomologist working at the Musée national d'histoire naturelle who had described *Aeshna mixta* in 1805. At Bologna in Northern Italy Vander Linden studied under the botanist Antonio Bertoloni (1775–1869), the zoologist Camillo Ranzani (1775–1841) and the physician Giacomo Tommasini (1768–1846). On 17 April 1821 he finished his medical exams and then travelled with friends further south to Naples and Sicily. At the first locality he collected *Lindenia tetraphylla* (Vander Linden, 1825). On his return journey he lingered to take medical courses in Paris and translated an Italian medical publication into French. In 1822 he returned to Belgium where he received his doctor degree on 15 July 1823 at the University of Leuven. Vander Linden worked as physician and as a teacher of natural history in both botany and zoology.

Vander Linden started working on Odonata as a student and he published two articles on 30 Odonata occurring around Bologna under the titles '*Agrionες Bononienses descriptae*' and '*Aeschnae Bononienses descriptae*' (VANDER LINDEN 1820a, b). In these two papers he named nine new species, of which three are still regarded as valid and one as a valid subspecies. Both articles from 1820 were extremely rare (SELYS & HAGEN 1850) and were published unaltered in 1823 in the journal *Opuscoli Scientifici* (VANDER LINDEN 1823a, b). His most important odonatological contribution was *Monographiae Libellularum Europeanarum specimen* (VANDER LINDEN 1825) in which he treated 37 species. Of the twelve new species in this publication, seven are still regarded valid. According to CORBET (1991) Vander Linden with the 1820 papers initiated infra-ordinal classification within the Odonata.

In 1826 he was appointed as the first professor of zoology in Belgium, at the Musée des Sciences et Lettres in Brussels. As professor he published his last odonatological paper, concerning the description of a fossil dragonfly (VANDER LINDEN 1827a). Other published entomological articles were on European Hymenoptera (especially digger wasps, with 17 new species; VANDER LINDEN 1827b, 1829a) and Asian Coleoptera (tiger beetles of the Dutch East Indies, with 27 new species; VANDER LINDEN 1829b).

In March 1831 he became ill and on 5 April 1831 he died from a gastrocephalitis (a kind of typhoid fever) at the age of 34. The primary source for his life is MORREN (1833), which includes an illustration of the funerary mask of Vander Linden (Fig. 2).

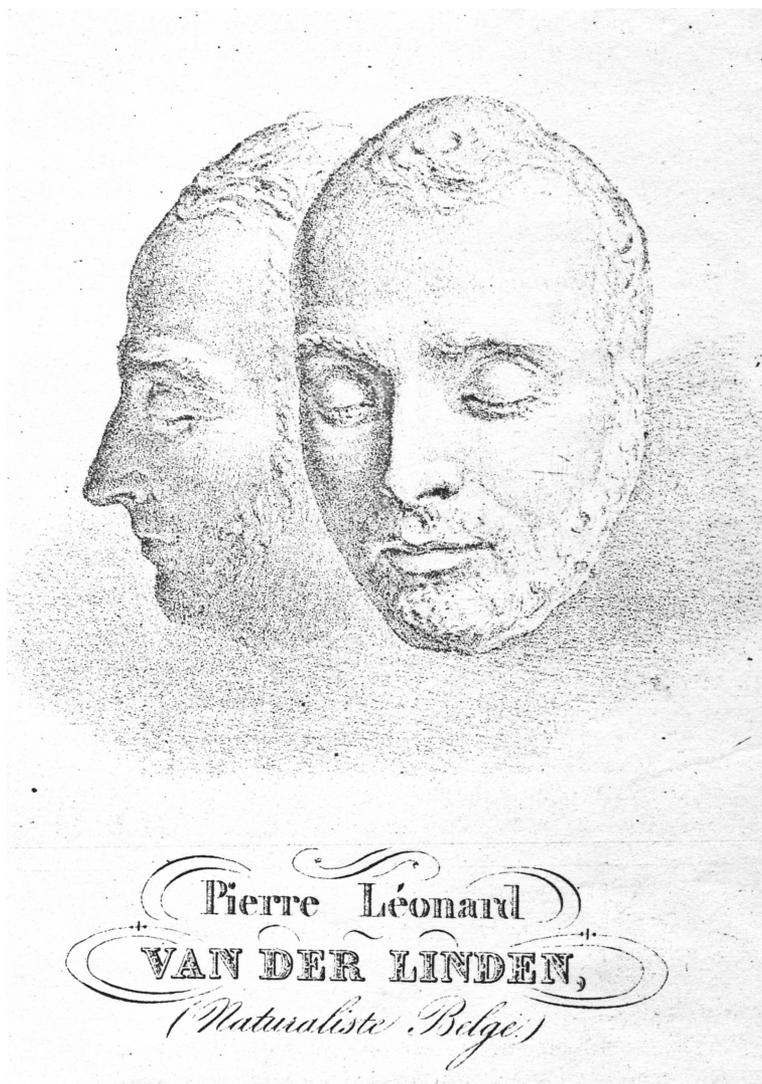


Fig. 2. Funerary mask of Pierre Léonard Vander Linden (from MORREN 1833).

The Vander Linden collection

After his death, the Vander Linden collection went to the ‘Petit séminaire’, a catholic secondary school in Malines (Mechelen) (SEGERS 1965). The most likely reason for choosing this institute was that two of his brothers were connected with this school: namely Joseph Jean Vander Linden and Marcel C. Vander Linden who were respectively professor and student in theology at this institution (MORREN 1833).

In 1843 Selys planned to visit the Vander Linden collection and mentioned it in his diary (CAULIER-MATHY & HAESSENNE-PEREMANS 2008): »3 Mars 1843, Partir pour Malines au Petit séminaire pour revoir la collection van der Linden et surtout la femelle sans abdomen de ma *tetraphylla* mâle sans tête.« (3 March 1843, Left for Malines [Archdiocese of Mechelen-Brussels] to the catholic secondary school to review the collection from Vander Linden and especially [to search for] the female without an abdomen from my [*Lindenia*] *tetraphylla*, [of which I have a] male without a head). Selys may have obtained the *Aeshna affinis* watercolour there.

Over a hundred years after Selys’ visit two attempts were made to trace this very important collection of Vander Linden. In 1957 Albert Collart, head of the RBINS entomology department in Brussels, had written a letter to the Archdiocese of Mechelen in search of the collection. The answer, dated 22 August 1957, provided no information of its whereabouts. At the same time, Georges Matagne, an entomologist living in Mechelen, wrote to Albert Collart that he made an additional and thorough search, but without success (both letters in Collart’s archives). The third author, RC, who worked on the Brussels dragonfly fauna from 1964 to 1966, was also searching for the Vander Linden collection. He approached the abbot Pierre Houssiau (1920–2010), at that time the director of the Collège Jean XXIII at Woluwé-Saint-Pierre near Brussels, the secondary school which RC had attended as a boy. Pierre Houssiau was the brother of the honorary canon of the Mechelen Saint-Rombaud metropolitan chapter, Albert Houssiau, who later became bishop of Liège, and was thus well connected in Mechelen ecclesiastical circles. Should the collection be rediscovered, it was intended to be deposited in the RBINS where it could be better conserved. However the collection of Vander Linden was never located. Houssiau and RC came to the conclusion it was most probably destroyed by carpet beetles or other *Anthrenus* sp., as had been the fate of other old and privately kept insect collections.

So far the watercolour of *Aeshna affinis* found in the Selys collection is perhaps the only surviving item of the collections and belongings of the man who can be regarded as one of the founders of Odonata taxonomy.

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