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The glacier views of Jean-Antoine Linck - a milestone for the Mont Blanc glacier history from the 18th to the 19th century

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Interdisciplinary approaches are needed to reconstruct the behaviour of glaciers beyond the beginning of systematic, direct measurements. Particularly for the period of the Little Ice Age (LIA), historical documents have been very valuable to successfully reconstruct former glacier extents at different sites. An analysis of historical documents on the well-documented Mont Blanc region, for example, provides unique insights into the LIA glacier development.

The Mont Blanc area became popular with artists, scientists, and travellers in the mid-18th century, including Jean-Antoine Linck from Geneva, who is probably the artist to whom we owe the greatest number of unique glacier views. Jean-Antoine Linck was particularly interested in the icy regions, which he discovered and drew with alpinistic daring and naturalistic accuracy, preferably in gouache, although many pencil sketches have also been preserved. From a glacier history perspective, Linck's work is indispensable, even if many of his artworks are not precisely dated by the author: It represents the whole development of the Mont Blanc glaciers, specifically the Mer de Glace and Glacier des Bossons, but also other glaciers during the period from the end of the 18th century until the 19th century glacier maximum around 1820. As an amazing novelty, Linck was probably the first observer to show a glacier advance with the help of two realistic and accurate views from the same position; one as the Glacier des Bossons retreats and the other as it advances. In addition, various views by Linck make it possible to quantify smaller glacier extents, e.g. around 1800 at the Glacier des Bois (Mer de Glace), which were depicted much more rarely.

To distribute his work, Linck subtly used the etching technique to create easily reproducible plates in large format, which are then hand-coloured with gouache and watercolour. This technique allowed him to create numerous reproductions of the same view, while still giving them a unique and original aspect, views that are remarkable for their serenity and silence, while offering luminous atmospheres. These illustrations introduced the realistic representation of the high mountains into the iconography of Genevese painting and thus led to a new kind of landscape painting with a permanent character.

In terms of glacier history, the work of Jean-Antoine Linck has the same significance for the Mont Blanc area as that of Caspar Wolf and Samuel Birman for the central Swiss Alps or that of Thomas Ender for the Austrian Alps in terms of glacier iconography. Linck was therefore both an artist and a glacier historian.

