

Swimming through Time



The
Grandeur
of
Life



Above: The discovery of the "Maastricht animal," a mosasaur, from Barthélemy Faujas-de-St.-Fond, Histoire naturelle de la Montagne de Saint-Pierre de Maestricht, 1799

Below: The world of Mesozoic reptiles, detail of a drawing by Benjamin W. Hawkins, from James Reynolds, Pictorial and Descriptive Atlas of Geology, ca 1854.

Below Right: Two plesiosaur fossils, lithographed by J. Erxleben, from Richard Owen, The Design of Limbs, 1849.

In 1780, a large fossil skull was unearthed in a quarry in Maastricht, Holland. Some thought it a whale, others a crocodile, until George Cuvier determined in 1808 that it was an extinct marine reptile, perhaps forty feet in length. It would later be called a mosasaur. Fossils of other marine reptiles were discovered in the early nineteenth century, including ichthyosaurs and plesiosaurs. All of them were found in rock strata that were called "Secondary" at the time, and which we now call Mesozoic. By 1854, these non-dinosaur denizens of the Age of Dinosaurs were well enough known that Benjamin Hawkins could place life-size reconstructions on the grounds of the Crystal Palace in Sydenham Park, London.

