

geometrically arranged groups. Only once does he seem to have drawn a human portrait, a likeness of himself completed around his fiftieth year. In it he appears self-confident but unassuming, evidently content with his role as an artist and naturalist (figure 1).

John Abbot was born in London on 11 June 1751, the second son of John and Ann Abbot. As a child he developed a 'love for books', a 'peculiar liking for insects', and 'a taste for drawing'.² Abbot's father, a successful London attorney, encouraged his son's interests. He arranged for the engraver and drawing master, Jacob Bonneau, to instruct young John at the family's home. Bonneau's lessons stressed drawing and perspective rather than watercolour. However, Abbot's ten surviving watercolours completed in 1766 reveal his mastery of this medium. The following year he demonstrated his understanding of perspective in an etched vignette of a saddled and bridled work horse.³

Imitating the examples of earlier naturalists, young Abbot perfected a compositional approach for illustrating insects and spiders. With specimens as models, Abbot drew each as close to life size as possible and often included up to a dozen or more figures arranged in a geometric pattern. He sketched each specimen in graphite before applying clear colours. His careful sketching and meticulous attention to detail enabled Abbot to capture the correct textures and coloration of each species. He often illustrated the metamorphic stages of moths and butterflies together with appropriate food plants.

Abbot's personal library included Eleazar Albin's *Natural History of English Insects* (1720), Mark Catesby's *Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands* (1731-43), and George Edwards's *Natural History of Uncommon Birds* (1743-51) and *Gleanings of Natural History* (1758-64). To purchase the latter, Abbot and his father visited Edwards, a renowned ornithologist, at his London home. Young Abbot presented Edwards with a selection of his drawings, and, in his words, Edwards 'praised them much & desired me by all means to continue drawing, saying no doubt I wou'd be a publisher hereafter of some work on Natural history'.⁴ Perhaps to encourage the aspiring naturalist artist, Edwards loaned Abbot a beetle from Jamaica. Abbot illustrated both dorsal and ventral sides of this specimen in a watercolour completed on 28 January 1769.⁵

Bonneau, like Edwards, commended Abbot's insect watercolours. Aware of his student's entomological interests, Bonneau introduced him to another insect collector, James Rice. Through Rice, Abbot met the influential Dru Drury whose enthusiasm for natural history further inspired Abbot's growing devotion to the field. A goldsmith and jeweller by trade, Drury avidly collected and studied insects, publishing his discoveries in *Illustrations of Natural*