



Early Visual Representations of the New World

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Framing Question

How did Europeans interpret the New World through their earliest visual depictions?

Understanding

John White's depictions of Virginia brought a striking naturalism to the visual representation of America even as they were shaped by European cultural habits and preconceptions.

Images

Pair #1:

- John White, *Indian in Body Paint*, watercolor, ca. 1585
- Depiction of Blemmyes (mythical headless men), engraving in Raleigh, *Discovery of Guiana*, 1595 (1603 German ed.)

Pair #2:

- John White, *Indian Woman and Young Girl*, watercolor, ca. 1585
- Theodor de Bry, *Their Solemn Ritual in Consecrating a Deerskin to the Sun*, engraving after Le Moyne watercolor, 1591

Pair #3:

- John White, *Indian Conjuror (The Flyer)*, watercolor, ca. 1585
- Workshop of de Bry, *The Conjuror*, engraving, 1590

Background

On April 9, 1585, a military expedition set sail from Plymouth with the goal of [fortifying](#) and [surveying](#) the New World territory Sir Walter Raleigh had named "Virginia" after Queen Elizabeth. One member of this expedition, John White, who later became governor of the failed Roanoke colony, had the task of recording Virginia in pictures. During the summer of 1585 White produced a remarkable collection of [watercolors](#), now housed in the British Museum, that describes the native peoples, natural history, and geography of the region. Thanks to Theodor de Bry's [engravings](#) of these watercolors, published in 1590, White's pictures would go on to have a profound impact upon how Europeans imagined nature and society in North America.



John White, *Indian in Body Paint (The manner of their attire...)*, watercolor, ca. 1585

Like any artist traveling to the New World in the sixteenth century, John White faced the challenge of depicting a world unknown to Europeans. While the accounts of Greek and Roman authors like Herodotus and Pliny had traditionally provided models for representing the peoples living at the farthest reaches of Africa and Asia, these writers made no mention of America. How could artists make the New World comprehensible in the Old? In 1620 the English philosopher Francis Bacon, frustrated with the dependence of his contemporaries on ancient authors, called upon them to build new knowledge through the direct evidence of the eyes: “all depends on keeping the eye steadily fixed upon the facts of nature and so receiving their images simply as they are.” In the spirit of Bacon, White’s watercolors of Virginia keep our eyes “steadily fixed upon the facts.” At the same time they offer ample occasion to reflect on the visual strategies through which an artist familiarized the New World for his European audience.

Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of images are we dealing with?
2. When were they created?
3. Who created them?
4. For what audience were they intended?
5. For what purpose were they created?

Image Analysis

Pair #1



Left: John White, *Indian in Body Paint (The manner of their attire...)*, watercolor, ca. 1585.

Below: Depiction of Blemmyes, engraving in a 1603 German edition of Sir Walter Raleigh’s *Discovery of Guiana*, 1595.



1. Why might an artist choose to represent Native Americans as Blemmyes (people who according to ancient authors lived in Africa and had their heads in their chests)?

2. How does White convey a sense of cultural and racial difference?

3. How do you think White's audience would have responded to some of the details of his painting, such as the Algonquian's body paint or the tail attached to his garment?

4. What does the gesture of the Algonquian with hands on hips suggest about his character? (Compare with a contemporary portrait of Sir Walter Raleigh and his son, at right.)

5. Unlike the illustration of the Blemmyes, White's Algonquian warrior is not shown in a landscape or in a context of any sort. Why would he have chosen to isolate his subject like this?



Sir Walter Raleigh; Walter Raleigh, oil on canvas, 1602

6. White's caption reads: "The manner of their attire and painting themselves when they go to their general huntings, or at their solemn feasts." Why might White's English audience — which would have included the Queen, Raleigh, and other members of the aristocracy — have been interested in the Algonquians' "attire" on such occasions?

7. Do the two images offer differing interpretations of the peoples of the New World? Explain your answer.

Pair #2



Left: John White, *Indian Woman and Young Girl* (*The cheife Herowans wyfe...*), watercolor, ca. 1585.

Below: Theodor de Bry, *Their Solemn Ritual in Consecrating a Deerskin to the Sun*, engraving after watercolor by Jacques Le Moyne, 1591.



8. What is happening in each of these pictures?

9. What kind of encounter do we witness in the Jacques Le Moyne image? In what ways does Le Moyne suggest similarity between the two cultures? (Note for instance the relationship between the fashionable slashed clothing of the French soldiers and the tattoos of the Timucuan Indians.) In what ways does Le Moyne suggest difference?

10. What does Le Moyne's picture suggest about the role that religion played in the encounter between Europeans and Native Americans?

11. How does each picture confront the issue of contact and communication between Europeans and Native Americans? (Note that in the John White watercolor, the young girl holds an English doll in her hand.)

12. Why might John White focus on the relationship between a youth and an adult? What kind of relationship does he suggest between the two figures?

13. Why might John White be interested in the receptivity of Native Americans to a European doll? What does the picture suggest about the potential for the Algonquians to adopt English customs?

14. Compare White's picture of the mother and daughter with the portrait at right of Raleigh and his son. In what ways is White drawing upon standard conventions of European portraiture?

Activity: Compare the Artists

Compare the details and captions of two early illustrations of Native Americans.



Sir Walter Raleigh; Walter Raleigh,
oil on canvas, 1602

Pair #3



Left: John White, *The Flyer*, watercolor, ca. 1585.

Below: Workshop of Theodor de Bry, *The Conjurer*, 1590.



15. Why do you think White entitled his watercolor "The Flyer"? What does that term suggest about the figure and his role within Algonquian society?

16. Look closely at the details of White's picture: the bird attached to the figure's head, the pouch at his side, the outstretched and waving arms. What do these visual details tell us about this individual?

17. Do you see similarities between White's "Flyer" and contemporary representations of the Greco-Roman god Mercury, like the one at right? Do you think White was using Mercury as a model? Why?



Giambologna, *Mercury*, 1580

18. In the engraving, what visual changes have been made to the watercolor, and what is the significance of these changes?

19. How does the title change from “flyer” to “conjuror” change the meaning of the image?

20. Carefully read the caption to the engraving, which was written by White’s partner in surveying Virginia, the English scientist Thomas Harriot: *“They have commonly conjurers or jugglers which use strange gestures, and often contrary to nature, in their enchantments: For they be very familiar with devils, of whom they inquire what their enemies do, or other such things. They shave all their heads saving their crest which they wear as other do, and fasten a small black bird above one of their ears as a badge of their office. They wear nothing but a skin which hangs down from their girdle, and covers their privates. They wear a bag by their side as is expressed in the figure. The Inhabitants give great credit to their speech, which oftentimes they find to be true.”* Note that the caption was written during a time when belief in witches and magicians was widespread throughout Europe. How does Harriot’s own cultural and religious background shape his understanding of the Algonquian medicine man?

21. Do you think that describing this figure as a “conjuror” would have been an effective means for a European audience to understand the shaman’s role as a go-between who moves between the human and spirit worlds?

Glossary

fortifying: strengthening

surveying: examining

watercolor: a painting method using a transparent paint

engraving: a print made from an engraved plate

comprehensible: able to understand

ample: more than enough

solemn: serious and formal

interpretation: an explanation

Images

- John White watercolors, ca. 1585. The Trustees of the British Museum. Reproduced by permission.
 - *Indian in Body Paint (The manner of their attire...)*. Image 00025875001.
 - *Indian Woman and Young Girl (The cheife Herowans wyfe...)*. Image 00025876001.
 - *Indian Conjurer (The flyer)*. Image 00025879001.
- Images from Archive of Early American Images, John Carter Brown Library, Brown University. Reproduced by permission.
 - G. van Veen (de Bry workshop), *The Conjurer*, engraving after John White, in Thomas Hariot, *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*, 1590. Call No. J590 B915v GV-E.I [F] / 2-SIZE.
 - Depiction of Blemmys [Blemmyae], engraving in a 1603 German edition of Sir Walter Raleigh, *Discovery of Guiana*, 1595. Call No. T7d V3b.
- Theodor de Bry, *Their Solemn Ritual in Consecrating a Deerskin to the Sun*, engraving after watercolor by Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues, in Le Moyne, *Brief Narration of Those Things Which Befell the French in the Province of Florida in America*, 1591. Courtesy of the Florida Center for Instructional Technology, University of South Florida.
- Unknown artist, *Sir Walter Raleigh; Walter Raleigh*, oil on canvas, 1602. © National Portrait Gallery, London. NPG 3914.
- Giambologna, *Mercury*, 1580. Bronze, height 180 cm. Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence.