

## [1585: John White paints Virginia](#)

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### "COUNTERFEITED ACCORDING TO THE TRUTH"

England's first attempt to plant a self-sustaining colony in America was a short-lived affair. The "Cittie of Raleigh," established in 1587 in the Outer Banks of what is now North Carolina, fared poorly in its first months and by August the colonial governor, John White, was forced to return to England for supplies. He never reunited with the members of what has become known as the Lost Colony, and the English would not boast a successful settlement in America until the Jamestown colonists discovered the value of tobacco as a commercial crop in the early 1600s. But if England's early expeditions to Virginia during the 1580s failed to establish a colonial presence in the New World, they were quite successful as a knowledge-making enterprise, thanks in no small part to John White's efforts.

Two years before he assumed the role of governor, White sailed as a member of a military expedition that aimed to fortify and survey the Virginia coast. His role on that voyage was painter, and during the summer of 1585 he produced a remarkable collection of watercolors, now housed in the British Museum, depicting the native peoples and natural history of the region. This collection would have a profound impact on how Europeans imagined nature and society in North America. Particularly after they were popularized as printed engravings, White's images began to play an important part in the European trade in scientific knowledge and remained a crucial bank of visual information about America into the nineteenth century.

The title page of White's original album of watercolors describes the contents as "the pictures of sondry things collected and counterfeited according to the truth," and the surviving pictures are indeed "sondry." They include maps of the eastern coast of North America; bird's-eye views of forts and encampments in the West Indies; coastal profiles; naturalistic studies of fruit and flowers, as well as fish, insects, birds, crabs, turtles, and other New World animals; ethnographic studies of Carolina Algonquians, along with views of their towns and various customs and practices. In making the claim that his pictures of Virginia were "counterfeited," White was drawing on a new language of image making. To "counterfeit" was to engage in a reportorial mode of visual depiction that recorded things and events as they were witnessed by the eye, not as they were composed by the artist. It was not a particular style or subject matter that defined the counterfeit; rather, it was defined by its epistemological status as uninterpreted nature. Through his counterfeits, White helped transport America back to Europe in raw, visible fragments.

A basic characteristic of White's visual rhetoric, a characteristic that one might even say constitutes the *modernity* of his collection, is its decontextualization of America. Whether he is representing a firefly, an Algonquian religious man, or the cooking of fish on a barbecue, White avoids all extraneous information by isolating his subjects and setting them against an empty background. In contrast to the depictions of Florida by his contemporary Jacques Le Moyne, who had traveled to Florida with a Huguenot expedition in the 1560s, White's pictures of Virginia never complicate the observer's own point of view by showing scenes of encounter between Europeans and Americans. Nor does White rely on visual conventions such as that of the "monstrous races," an iconography that had the advantage of making the exotic intelligible within the outlines of a sacred Christian geography. A 1599 German edition of Sir Walter Raleigh's *Discovery of Guiana*, for instance, invokes the tradition of the monstrous races by picturing the natives of the New World as men with heads in their chests. White resisted such contextualizing devices, choosing instead to locate his carefully described subjects within the timeless space that modern anthropologists

would label the "ethnographic present." It was an approach that allowed his images to function as informational commodities that, seemingly unburdened by context, lent themselves to free circulation within an emerging European market for knowledge.

Such a mercantile model of image circulation was already being articulated in early modern England by White's younger contemporary, Sir Francis Bacon. In *The New Atlantis* (1627), a utopian text that became an important inspiration for the founding in 1660 of the Royal Society of London for the Improving of Natural Knowledge, Bacon imagines an ideal nation, located somewhere off the coast of America, where the most esteemed institution is a group of scholarly bachelors "dedicated to the study of the works and creatures of God." Among these scholars are certain "merchants of light," traders in knowledge who sail from country to country and "maintain a trade, not for gold, silver, or jewels, nor for silks, nor for spices, nor for any other commodity of matter, but only for God's first creature, which was *Light*." True knowledge is figured as pure light, as visibility itself. In Bacon's view, too much immersion in ancient authorities and other "idols of the mind" had dimmed that light for most people. If "God's first creature" was to leave its true imprint upon the mind of the interpreter of nature, then that individual had to discard all preconceived notions and begin looking at nature with innocent eyes. Bacon—who was himself quite actively engaged in the business of New World discovery as a stockholder and member of the council for the Virginia Company—surely modeled his merchants of light on the work of knowledge gatherers like John White, whose Virginia watercolors soon became sought-after goods in the expanding business of European science.

Immediately after his return from Virginia in 1585, White's collection began circulating within London's scientific community. Some of the earliest surviving references to White as a painter appear in Thomas Penny's 1589 manuscript for the *Theater of Insects*, in which the author notes White's contribution of four of the watercolor drawings that are pasted into the manuscript—of a butterfly, a gadfly, and two fireflies. And long after White's death, English naturalists continued to benefit from his work. In the late seventeenth century, the great collector Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753), founder of the British Museum, got his hands on a set of handmade copies of White's watercolors and incorporated them into his own visual library. Sloane's friend Mark Catesby (1683-1749) later reproduced several of these images (without attribution to White) in his influential *Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands* (1729-1747). Through the activities of naturalists like Penny, Sloane, and Catesby, White's images helped provide the visual matter on which the new science founded itself.

Unquestionably the most important reproductions of White's collection, the reproductions that made his images of Algonquians so familiar to European and later to American audiences, are the copper-plate engravings made by the Flemish publisher and printmaker Theodor de Bry (1528-1597). In 1588, while de Bry was visiting London, he acquired a set of White's ethnographic studies and returned with them to his family workshop in Frankfurt. De Bry engraved these pictures for his 1590 publication *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*, a folio-size book that combined high-quality illustrations with written descriptions of the Algonquians by White's partner in surveying Virginia, Thomas Harriot. This brief volume, published in four languages including English, became the first of thirteen volumes that would ultimately constitute de Bry's extraordinarily popular *America* (1590-1634).

Through de Bry's many editions of the *Report*, and through the many later texts that borrowed directly or indirectly from de Bry's engravings, White's collection continued to serve into the nineteenth century as a visual prototype for images of the North American Indian. De Bry's plates were reproduced and adapted, often creatively and in the service of various agendas, in descriptive accounts of the New World such as

William Strachey's *The Historie of Travell into Virginia Britania* (1612), John Smith's *Generall Historie of Virginia* (1624), and Robert Beverley's *History and Present State of Virginia* (1705); they also proved to be indispensable material for some of the most important early anthropological studies of American Indians, such as Bernard Picart's *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* (1723-1743) and Joseph-François Lafitau's *Moeurs des sauvages américains, comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps* (1724). Aside from this recycling of de Bry's plates in later texts, the *Briefve and True Report* itself remained a widely known and authoritative book long after its publication in 1590. When John Adams wrote to Thomas Jefferson in 1812 for suggestions on where to learn about the traditions of the American Indians, one of the texts to which Jefferson directed his friend was de Bry's *America*, the first three volumes of which he proudly held in his own library.

Audiences kept returning to White's Virginia images because they satisfied a need to witness the radical difference of the New World with one's own eyes. To be sure, the idea that one had to see America in order to believe it had been expressed regularly since the earliest European accounts of the Americas. But it was not until almost a century after Columbus first landed in the West Indies that New World images actually began to circulate widely throughout Europe. De Bry certainly played an important part in this phenomenon by recognizing and tapping the public's appetite for visual spectacle (later volumes of de Bry's *America* become increasingly sensational), but those who actually planned and sponsored expeditions to the Americas were also increasingly aware of the importance of commissioning visual accounts. Jacques Le Moyne's pictures of Florida from the 1560s; Francisco Hernández's monumental *History of the Plants and Animals of New Spain* made for Philip II in the 1570s (comprising multiple volumes with thousands of color illustrations, all of them destroyed by fire in 1671); John White's Virginia watercolors from the 1580s; the stunning visual record of Dutch Brazil created by Albert Eckhout and Frans Post between 1637 and 1644: all of these artistic projects exemplify the growing significance of visual documentation within the nexus of political, commercial, and scholarly interests that motivated early modern colonial expeditions in the Americas.

As metropolitan sponsorship of scientific expeditions in the Americas continued through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it stimulated the work of colonial naturalists like William Bartram (1739-1823). Inspired in part by Catesby's illustrated natural history of the southern colonies and the Caribbean (and so indirectly inspired by White), Bartram set out in 1773 on a four-year expedition through the southern colonies, during which he made numerous drawings of flora and fauna for his London patron, Dr. John Fothergill. Culminating in his influential *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida* (1791), Bartram's work signals an intensifying phase of interest in natural science and ethnography in the early national period. Other notable endeavors in the visual documentation of America at this time include the founding in the early 1780s of Charles Willson Peale's natural history museum in Philadelphia, the publication of Alexander Wilson's *American Ornithology* (1807-1814), and the work of Titian Ramsey Peale and Samuel Seymour on the federally sponsored Long expedition to the Rocky Mountains (1819-1820). All of these artists were continuing the work of counterfeiting the New World initiated by White, but in their hands this empirical work became a distinctly national project as well. The visual cataloging of the American landscape and its native inhabitants held the promise of discovering the universal knowledge that a broad public might agree upon, a set of indisputable truths that would provide a common foundation not only for further scientific work but for a project of nation building. While competing ideas could all too easily lead to dispute and faction, the careful observing and cataloging of nature could lead to what the Philadelphia naturalist Benjamin Smith Barton in 1796 called a "democracy of facts."

The scientific community of the early republic was thus strongly invested in seeing nature with Baconian eyes, uncorrupted by preconceptions. As Bartram wrote to Fothergill, "I attempt only to exhibit to your Notice, the outward furniture of Nature, or the productions of the Surface of the earth; without, troubling you with any notions, of their particular causes or design by Providence, such attempts I leave for the amusement of Men of Letters & Superior genius." Jefferson similarly wrote that "the plan of creation is inscrutable to our limited faculties." Extrapolating from experience into the deepest causes of nature was considered the province of European science, and for that very reason a cause for suspicion. Of the three European texts on North American Indians that Jefferson recommended to Adams, he thought that none was fully satisfactory. In his *Moeurs des sauvages ameriquains* the Frenchman Lafitau was far too in love with his own "preconceived theory." The *History of the American Indians* (1775) by the Englishman James Adair was likewise to be approached with care, for despite the fact that this book contained a "great deal of instruction," Adair's science was hampered by his theory that the Indians of America were all descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel. De Bry, on the other hand, could be admired for lacking any "favorite system," but he also lacked proper scientific methods: Jefferson writes that in de Bry's volumes "facts and fable are mingled together."

Witnessing the New World with innocent eyes was difficult, indeed impossible work, and yet the stakes in doing that work were very high. Before the American landscape and its inhabitants could be put into the service of science or politics, they had to be transformed into facts. In the United States, federally sponsored survey expeditions would continue through the nineteenth century and would ultimately replace the artist's brush with the mechanical eye of the camera. On the government surveys that followed the Civil War, photographers made the western landscape available to scientists and policymakers in the East by transforming it into a collection of mobile, visible fragments. These new merchants of light were carrying on the work White had begun in Virginia 300 years before.

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