New World Images

Native Americans did not consider themselves collectively as one group of people or as a single nation before their encounter with Europeans and had no common term for themselves. Upon discovering the need to adopt a common name to differentiate themselves from the new strangers in their midst, Native Americans may have had little choice but to choose one that the whites had applied to them. In the end both sides adopted the word Indian, based on Christopher Columbus's geographical error in supposing he had arrived in Asia rather than in a new world.

The next most common name used by Europeans was much less attractive. Medieval legend had depicted wild club-swinging men of the forest as hairy, naked links between humans and animals. Named in Latin silvaticus, "men of the woods," they became sauvage in French and savage in English, a word that finally turned into savage.

These and other names bestowed on Native Americans by whites, such as wild-men and barbarian, reflected a belief among Europeans that Indians were essentially their opposites. Defined as "the other," Indians were viewed as heathens who performed human sacrifices and were cannibals. They were seen as dirty, warlike, superstitious, sexually promiscuous, and brutal to their captives and to their women. Evils observed anywhere among Indians, as well as evils not observed but known to be practiced, such as Aztec human sacrifice, were generalized to all Indians.

At the same time, Europeans, troubled by what they regarded as the decadence of their own society, recognized positive traits in the Indians that Europeans lacked. To many Europeans, especially those who never migrated to the New World, Indians seemed direct, innocent, hospitable, courteous, handsome, and courageous. Their independence, proud bearing, and stamina suggested a nobility that Europeans seemed to be losing. From this image came the composite ideal of the "noble savage."

The first attempt by a European to depict the domestic lives of Native Americans can be seen in Figure 1, an anonymous German woodcut published around 1505 and based on explorer and geographer Amerigo Vespucci's account of his voyages between 1497 and 1504 to the New World. The inscription describes natives as "naked, handsome, brown, well shaped in body; . . . No one has anything, but all things are in common. And the men have as wives those who please them, be they mothers, sisters or friends. . . . They also fight with each other; and they eat each other. . . . They become a hundred and fifty years old and have no government."
Figure 1. Unknown German artist, “First European Attempt to Depict the Domestic Life of Native Americans,” ca. 1505.

Figure 2. Unknown Native American artist, drawing of Cortés and Malinche, ca. 1540.
Figure 3. English engraving of John White’s drawing “The Manner of Their Fishing,” 1585.

Not all images of the time presented the Europeans and Native Americans as such opposites. Figure 2 shows a drawing of Cortés and his longtime lover and adviser, Malinche (Doña Marina). Malinche was born and raised an Aztec but was sold to the Maya as a slave and then passed on to another ethnic group in Tabasco, south of the Aztec empire. By the time Cortés arrived on the continent, Malinche spoke many local languages and found that she fit in with the Spanish as well as with any native group. This picture by an indigenous artist from around 1540 suggests a degree of understanding between Europeans and natives that is lacking in many of the more stereotypical portraits of “barbarians” and “noble savages” by European artists, both earlier and later.

Figure 3 shows an engraving made from a drawing by John White, who from 1585 to 1586 lived on Roanoke Island (off the coast of present-day North Carolina), part of the first English colony in North America. White was commissioned to illustrate the first written account of that colony, Thomas Hariot’s pamphlet, A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia, published together with engravings of White’s images in 1588, was “directed to the investors, farmers, and well-wishers of the project of colonizing and planting there” and emphasized the region’s economic possibilities. The caption to the engraving reads in part:
Figure 4. Unknown French artist, “Huron Woman,” 1664.

It is a pleasing picture to see these people wading and sailing in their shallow rivers. They are untroubled by the desire to pile up riches for their children, and live in perfect contentment with their present state, in friendship with each other, sharing all those things with which God has so bountifully provided them. Yet they do not render Him the thanks which His providence deserves, for they are savage and have no knowledge [of Christianity].

In which readings can you find images of Indians most like that of the German woodcut? In which readings can you find images of Indians similar to White’s drawing?

Figure 4 is another domestic scene of Indian life, this time from a French source, François de Creux’s Historia Canadensis, published in 1664. How does it differ from the way in which Figure 1 depicts the Indians? Note that both figures in this image are Indian women. Are Indian men described in different terms from Indian women in the various readings?
Figure 5. Unknown European artist, "Return of English Captives during a Conference between Colonel Henry Bouquet and Indians on the Muskingum River," 1764.
Figure 5 depicts a conference between Colonel Henry Bouquet and some of the Indians he defeated at the Battle of Bushy Run in 1763. Many tribes in the Ohio Valley, led by Pontiac, a chief of the Ottawas, rose up against the British in 1763, laying waste to white settlements in the valley. The engraving’s central focus is the return of white captives taken during these raids. The theme of whites, and especially white women, captured by Indians greatly fascinated the colonists and their European counterparts, and captivity narratives were best sellers on both sides of the Atlantic.

FOR CRITICAL THINKING

1. What perceptions of the New World inhabitants do these images present? How accurate are they? How might Europeans have reacted to these images?
2. Why do you think White’s depiction of the Indians in Figure 3 is so different from that shown in Figure 1?
3. Figure 2 was drawn by an unknown indigenous artist around 1540. What does this portrayal of Malinche and Cortés say about the artist’s view of the couple’s relationship?
4. How might the absence of men in Figure 4 have affected the European view of the character of Indians?
5. What attitude toward the Indians and what view of Indian-white relations are suggested by Figure 5?