

## All Mapped Out:

### Drawing, Colonialism and Dutch Cartography in the Seventeenth Century

Cartography, the art of map-drawing or map-making, rose to particular prominence in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century. This ascent can be attributed to several key reasons. Most significantly, Dutch commercial and imperial expansion, both eastwards and westwards, created a need for geographical documentation – maps. An emergent middle-class, buoyant with this new wealth, and increasingly literate, also led demand for ‘exotic’ collectibles from the ‘New World’. Meanwhile, maps were perhaps the simplest and most presentable format for presenting news of the nation’s exploits on the international stage, enabled by enhanced printing technologies and booming demand for knowledge. Maps feature prominently in many of Johannes Vermeer’s celebrated paintings of interiors, with *The Art of Painting* (about 1666) [Fig. 1] providing an illuminating example of a map on display in a domestic setting.

Freed from the oppressive Spanish Habsburg rule, the fledgling Dutch Republic sought to establish a strong foothold on an international stage via maritime trade. Corporate ventures such as the Dutch East India Company (VOC) relied on public investment, and domestic politics reflected this. Active participation in current affairs naturally gave rise to an enthusiastic population of ‘armchair travellers’.<sup>1</sup> Crucially, these ‘armchair travellers’ were not simply those in power. The Dutch presence in the Atlantic, in particular, became a popular fascination that in its turn, prompted a market for the artist’s illustration.



[Fig. 1] Johannes Vermeer, *The Art of Painting*, 1666–68, oil on canvas, 120 x 100 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. © KHM-Museumsverband.

*An Allegory of the Americas* [Fig. 2] is a preparatory drawing for a map of the Americas. It forms the cartouche of a map in the *Atlas contractus orbis terrarum praecipuas ac novissimas complectens tabulas* ('Concise world atlas containing excellent and most recent maps'), published in Amsterdam by Nicolaes Visscher the Elder between 1657 and 1677.<sup>2</sup> The drawing presents a central figure, surrounded by various subjects busy at work. Drawings such as this would have been utilised by the publisher to adorn maps, as artists were employed to specialise in decorative scenes.



[Fig. 2] Nicolaes Berchem, *An Allegory of the Americas*, about 1665, pen and brown ink with brown wash over black chalk, 146 x 274 mm. Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2021.

These decorations would have been viewed as visual aids for consumers, an alluring and ‘exotic’ footnote providing an allegorical or symbolic summary of any given imperial exploit. Of course, such depictions had little to do with realities. Designed for the ‘armchair traveller’, the map was highly contrived image of a ‘New World’ for the domestic Northern European audience. These images were carefully constructed by artists such as Berchem. In this sense, the artist was employed as a propagandist of sorts – the craftsmen of empire.

The central allegorical figure stands before the viewer, inviting, by her gesture, inspection of a large painted scene.<sup>3</sup> The space between the figure and this image is filled by a pile of gold ingots. The painted scene itself shows indigenous ‘heathens’ worshipping, before a temple of idols. Berchem uses the close proximity of gold and heathenism as a shorthand for Dutch imperial exploits in the Americas. Following the success of the Dutch East India Company in Asia, the Dutch West India Company (GWC) was established in 1621 to merge Dutch commercial shipping firms into one state-controlled organisation for participation in the Atlantic slave trade, via the colonisation of the Americas and the west coast of Africa. Colonial violence could not only be justified, but commercially manipulated for a Dutch audience. While maps published in the

Netherlands served as vital practical resources for students, scholars, businesses and politicians alike, Berchem’s job was to sell the collector an attractive vision of colonial morality. Violence was not only justified commercially but also underpinned by a missionary imperative: God in exchange for gold. The rationale for the exploitation of indigenous people and resources was the spread of Christianity.

Such visions of imperial expansion were in high demand in Amsterdam, where Visscher’s publishing house was based. Foreign policy captured the imagination of the domestic population; an imagination that desired pictorial evidence. Certainly, this allegorical drawing did not necessarily purport to be a lifelike representation of the indigenous population. Crucially, however, the scientific basis of map-making lent such depictions an authority. Empirical observation of colonised peoples was much harder to come by for domestic artists and engravers – it was simpler to copy existing published material. And, for competing publishers, this approach was far cheaper. Commodities such as popular illustrated travel books played fast and loose with such imagery; for the consumer, this perhaps mattered little, although it caused consternation for some. The philosopher Robert Hooke lamented, in 1694, that:

... if we enquire after the true Authors of those Representations, for the Generality of them, we shall find them to be nothing else but some Picture-drawer, or Engraver, here at Home, who knows no more the Truth of the Things to be represented, than any other Person.<sup>4</sup>



[Fig. 3] Nicholas Visscher, Map of the Americas, about 1658, hand-coloured engraving, 457.2 x 558.8 mm. Geographicus Rare Antique Maps.

Though allegorical, Berchem's cartouche – visible here on Visscher's map [Fig. 3] – more than satisfied conceptions of an 'exotic' New World. Indeed, this vision of America was plagiarised by competing publishers in Amsterdam, Paris and London. Furthermore, stereotypes were collapsed into a unified, pan-European visual schema for colonised subjects, instigated and virulently propelled by a booming cartographic industry. Dutch cartography had a universal appeal in this period, spreading from 'Stockholm to Naples and from Dublin to Dresden'.<sup>5</sup> Published in several languages, Dutch maps reconfigured the world in simple, attractive terms and sold it across Europe.

Nicolaes Berchem was a prolific draughtsman and painter, who worked closely with engravers and publishers during his career. An Allegory of the Americas is just one example of how his work was utilised within the manifold commercial mechanisms that flourished in the Northern Netherlands in the seventeenth century. In this instance, his drawing was weaponised as a profitable means of imperial self-fashioning.

## Sam Robinson

### Further Reading:

Elmer Kolfin, 'Tradition and Innovation in Dutch Ethnographic Prints of Africans 1590- 1670', *De Zeventiende Eeuw. Cultuur in de Nederlanden in interdisciplinair perspectief*, 32/2, 2017, pp. 165-84

Benjamin Schmidt, 'Mapping an Exotic World: The Global Project of Dutch Cartography, circa 1700', in *Empires of Vision: A Reader*, edited by Martin Jay, and Sumathi Ramaswamy, North Carolina, 2014, pp. 246-65

Elizabeth Sutton, *Capitalism and Cartography in the Dutch Golden Age*, Chicago, 2015

Michiel van Groesen, *Amsterdam's Atlantic: Print Culture and the Making of Dutch Brazil*, Philadelphia, 2017

<sup>3</sup> Michiel van Groesen, *Amsterdam's Atlantic: Print Culture and the Making of Dutch Brazil*, Philadelphia, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> A cartouche is the decoration on a map that may contain the title, the printer's address, date of publication, the scale of the map and legends.

<sup>5</sup> An allegory is a story, poem, or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one.

<sup>1</sup> Hooke, 'An instrument of Use to take the Draught or Picture of any Thing. Communicated by Dr Hook to the Royal Society, Dec. 19, 1694', in: W. Derham (ed.), *Philosophical Experiments and Observations of the late Eminent Dr Robert Hooke [...] and other Eminent Virtuoso's in his time*, London, 1726, p. 294

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Schmidt, 'Mapping an Exotic World: The Global Project of Dutch Cartography, circa 1700', in *Empires of Vision: A Reader*, edited by Martin Jay and Sumathi Ramaswamy, Raleigh, 2014, p. 259.

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