

THE TRANSFORMATION OF NATIVE AMERICA

In respect of us they are a people poor, and for want of skill and judgement in the knowledge of our things, do esteem our trifles before things of greater value: Notwithstanding in their proper manner considering the want of such means as we have, they seeme very ingenious; For although they have no such tools, nor any such crafts, sciences and artes as we; yet in those things they do, they show excellence of wit. And by how much they upon due consideration shall find our manner of knowledges and crafts to exceed theirs in perfection and speed for doing or execution, by so much the more is it probable that they should desire our friendships and love, and have the greater respect for pleasing and obeying us. Whereby may be hoped if means of good judgement be, that they may in short time be brought to civility, and the embracing of true religion.

Thomas Hariot, *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*

On a slightly chilly Sunday, I stood with my family for an hour and a half as we waited to see an exhibit of John White's paintings and drawings on loan from the British Museum. White and a few others brought to Europe the first glimpses of the animals, plants, and people of the Americas at the time of initial contact between two very different worlds. The title "Mysteries of the Lost Colony" had drawn thousands, but I was there to see firsthand the art I know so well.

For those of you who have never seen a John White watercolor, it is an experience somewhat like smelling the first sweet scent of spring flowers, or tasting a perfectly harvested forest mushroom sautéed with slight hints of garlic and beef. His sensual attention to detail, the provocative feathers and fins, makes seeing his art an experience that lasts for years (Figures 1.1–1.5).

My favorite White paintings include the Algonkian village of Secoton

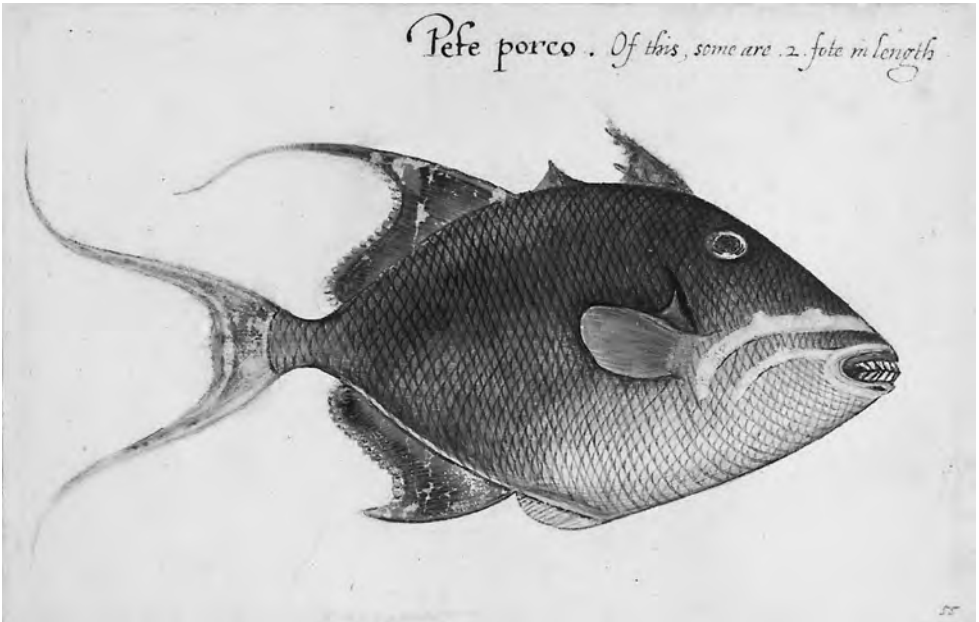


Figure 1.1. *Pefe porco* (Queen Trigger-Fish). Painting by John White and used with permission of the British Museum of Natural History (© The Trustees of the British Museum; Museum number 1906,0509.155).

with several small scenes contained within, the palisaded village of Pomeiock (Pomeiooc), a scene of natives fishing with a weir, and the depiction of two insects, so deftly characterized by White. The captions for the last one are “A flye which in the night semeth a flame of fyer” and “A dangerous byting flye.” Theodore de Bry, a sixteenth-century Belgian engraver, engraved several of White’s drawings from Virginia, as well as those made by Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues, a French Huguenot who was present in the short-lived French settlement of 1562–65 in Florida. DeBry’s engravings and White’s drawings provide a rich visual image of the people who inhabited the Atlantic coast.¹

As with all art, though, the early images of America are filtered through the eyes and interpretive lens of the artist. For most artists of the early Americas, almost anything they encountered was novel, and their choice to depict people’s appearance, or architecture, or plants, or animals, was partially their personal preference—what caught their eye, so to speak. Imagine walking with your camera while traveling in a new place. It is spring and a particular flower has a wonderful, almost iridescent purple color in the sunlight. It is with five or six similar flowers among an entire field of white daisies. You adjust your focal length so that the purple flow-

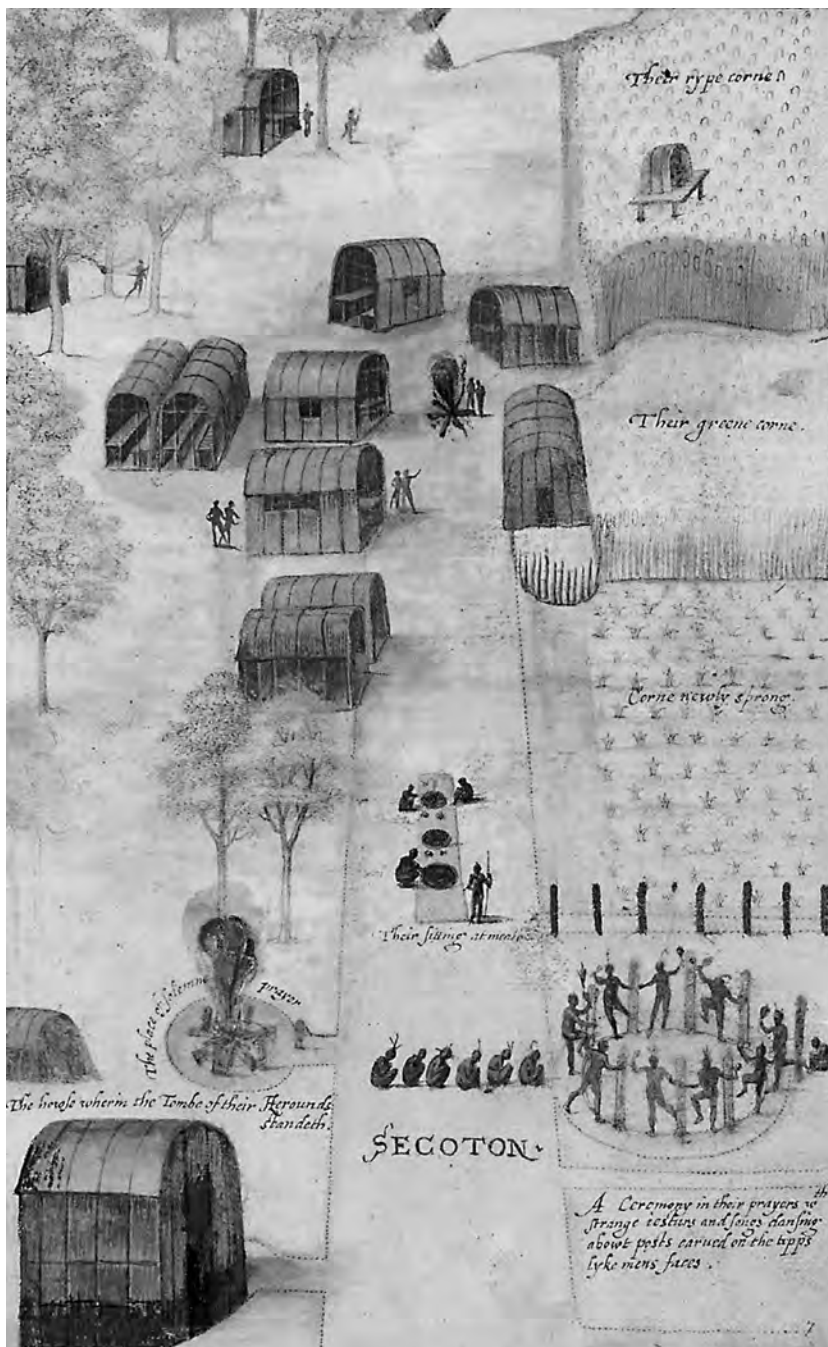


Figure 1.2. *The Towne of Pomeioco*. Painting by John White and used with permission of the British Museum of Natural History (© The Trustees of the British Museum; Museum number 1906,0509.1.8).



Figure 1.3. *The Manner of Their Fishing* (Indians Fishing). Painting by John White and used with permission of the British Museum of Natural History (© The Trustees of the British Museum; Museum number 1906.0509.1.6).



Figure 1.4. *Fireflies and Gadfly*. Painting by John White and used with permission of the British Museum of Natural History (© The Trustees of the British Museum; Museum number 1906,0509.1.67).



Figure 1.5. *The Towne of Secoton*. Painting by John White and used with permission of the British Museum of Natural History (© The Trustees of the British Museum; Museum number 1906,0509.1.7).

ers are the point of focus, with the other plants slightly out of focus in the background. Another time, or day, the sunlight might be different, or you might choose to set the focus on the surrounding plants, or you might photograph instead an insect on the plants. You assign your prized photograph a caption on social media that says *Spring in Virginia*. At least some viewers will assume it is a common scene, not one that happens to be rather rare. A painting of the scene would allow for even more artistic liberties, such as including plants not actually in the scene being viewed.

We have come to realize that, in much the same way, the early art of the New World contains more than simple images of the people and things encountered by early explorers and colonists. It contains misconceptions, misrepresentations, propaganda, and perhaps even lies.² What complicates things is that we want to believe the pictures. Without them we have no images of the early Americas.

Accuracy is always a problem when dealing with representations of the past and, for that matter, of the present. It is often unclear whether the information is witnessed firsthand or comes from another source. Did the author have a stake in the portrayal of the “facts” and outcome reported? How much did the author really know about the subjects and events portrayed? Was a report made shortly after the incidents that occurred, or years later?

Archaeological remains suffer from the same problems of accuracy—usually only a portion of the original materials is preserved, or the remains represent accumulations over long time periods, or the original context has been either accidentally or purposefully altered. No matter what, depictions of the past are probably biased in some fashion. Like the visual art presented through the lens of the artist, historical documents and archaeological remains present only one view of a past situation, one snapshot. The view is not complete, and whether by conscious intent or accidental preservation, only some of the original content and context is present.

The problems of interpretation go even deeper, though. Whether visual art, historical documents, or archaeological remains, those snapshots go through a second translative lens—that of the observer—and the translation occurs in a different time, place, and cultural context. The original context is literally re-created. Consequently, we need to be careful in making our translations. We need to consider as many sources as possible, recognizing that each source offers particular strengths and weaknesses, and that each source represents an incomplete and possibly distorted picture of the events, pro-

cesses, and details portrayed. We hope the sources complement each other and fill in the gaps that each possesses.



Just prior to the sixteenth century, somewhere between 900,000 and 18,000,000 people inhabited the Americas, north and south. There is a lot of disagreement on how many native people there actually were at the time of European arrival, partly because of the relative absence of written documents, and partly because of the events that occurred later.³ Despite disagreement about the actual numbers, though, we know that sometime after 1492 a few European explorers and potential colonizers began slowly to drift into the Americas. Their advance was often made from the Caribbean islands, where for the first two decades or so, Spaniards mined for gold and established sugar plantations. In that short period, native populations were decimated, and landscapes changed. Then, Europeans slowly reached the long yardarms of their sails outward from the islands and planned their next territorial advance.

In 1519 Hernan Cortés marched with a substantial army into the Valley of Mexico with the intent of rapidly subduing the native inhabitants there. He was in for a surprise. In one of the largest assaults on the capital city of Tenochtitlan, the famed *Noche Triste* (sad night), the Aztecs sent the conquistadors running. But then something unexpected happened. Another Spaniard, Pánfilo de Narváez, arrived with orders to arrest Cortés and return him to Spain. The king, Philip, was worried about Cortés' defection from the Spanish crown. The story goes that one of Narváez' men had contracted smallpox while in the Caribbean, and thus it was introduced to the natives of Mexico. Smallpox, it is said, became the true conqueror.

Historic accounts by the Spanish are particularly powerful at presenting the impact of smallpox on the Aztecs:

Those who did survive, having scratched themselves, were left in such a condition that they frightened the others with the many deep pits on their faces, hands and bodies. And then came famine, not because of want of bread, but of meal, for the women do nothing but grind maize between two stones and bake it. The women, then, fell sick of the smallpox, bread failed, and many died of hunger. The corpses stank so horribly that no one would bury them; the streets were filled with them.⁴