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How New the New World Was

Discovering the New World was a very difficult enterprise, as we have all been taught. But even more difficult, once the New World was discovered, was *seeing* it, understanding that it was *new*, entirely *new*, different from anything one had expected to find as *new*. And the question that spontaneously arises is: if a New World were discovered now, would we be able to *see* it? Would we know how to rid our minds of all the images we have become accustomed to associate with the expectation of a world different from our own (images from science fiction, for instance) in order to grasp the real difference that would be presented to our gaze?

We can instantly reply that something has changed since the time of Columbus: in the last few centuries man has developed a capacity for objective observation, a scrupulousness about precision in establishing analogies and differences, a curiosity for everything that is unusual and unexpected, and these are all qualities that our predecessors in the ancient world and in the Middle Ages apparently did not possess. It is precisely from the discovery of America, we can say, that the relationship with what is new changes in human consciousness. And

it is for that very reason that we usually say that the modern era began then.

But will it really be like this? Just as the first explorers of America did not know at what point they would either be proved wrong or have their familiar preconceptions confirmed, so we too could walk past things never seen before without realizing it, for our eyes and minds are used to selecting and cataloguing only that which responds to tried and tested classifications. Perhaps a New World opens up every day and we don't see it.

These thoughts came to mind while visiting the exhibition America Seen by Europe, an exhibition that brings together more than 350 paintings, prints and objects at the Grand Palais in Paris. All of them represent European images of the New World, from the earliest reports that came back after the voyage of Columbus's caravels to the gradual understanding that emerged from accounts of the exploration of the continent.

These are the shores of Spain: it was from here that King Ferdinand of Castile gave orders for the caravels to set sail. And this stretch of sea is the Atlantic Ocean which Christopher Columbus crossed to reach the fabled islands of the Indies. Columbus leans out from the prow and what does he see? A procession of naked men and women coming out of their huts. Barely a year had passed since Columbus's first voyage, and this was how a Florentine engraver represented the discovery of what at that time people did not know would become America. Nobody yet suspected that a new era in the

history of the world had opened up, but the excitement aroused by this event had spread throughout Europe. On his return, Columbus's report instantly inspired an epic in octaves in the style of a chivalric poem by the Florentine Giuliano Dati, and this engraving is in fact an illustration from that book.

The characteristic of the inhabitants of the new lands that most struck Columbus and all the early explorers was their nakedness, and this was the first detail that worked on the illustrators' imaginations. Men are portrayed as still having beards: the news that the Indians had smooth cheeks apparently had not yet spread. With Columbus's second voyage and especially with the more detailed and colourful reports by Amerigo Vespucci, another feature as well as their nakedness fired the European imagination: cannibalism.

Seeing a group of Indian women on the shore – Vespucci tells us – the Portuguese sent ashore one of their sailors, who was famous for his handsomeness, to talk with the Indian women. They surrounded him, lavishing embraces and expressions of admiration on him, but meanwhile one of their number hid behind his back and clubbed him on the head, stunning him. The unfortunate man was dragged away, cut into pieces, roasted and devoured.

The first question Europeans asked about the inhabitants of the New World was: are they really human? Classical and medieval traditions spoke of remote areas inhabited by monsters. But the lie was soon given to such legends: Indians were not only human beings, but

specimens of classical beauty. That was how the myth arose of their happy life, unburdened by property or labour as in the Golden Age or Earthly Paradise.

After the crude engravings on wood we find the depiction of Indians in paintings. The first American we see portrayed in the history of European painting is one of the Three Magi, in a Portuguese painting of 1505, in other words barely a dozen years after Columbus's first voyage, and even less time after the Portuguese landing in Brazil. It was still believed that the new lands were part of the Far East of Asia. It was traditional for the Three Magi in paintings of the Nativity to be represented in oriental garments and headgear. But now that the explorers' reports provided direct evidence of how these legendary inhabitants of 'India' looked, painters brought themselves up to date. The Indian Magus was portrayed as wearing a feather headdress, as certain Brazilian tribes do, and carrying in one of his hands a Tupinambá arrow. Since this was a painting for a church, this character could not be portrayed naked: he has been given a Western waistcoat and trousers.

In 1537 Pope Paul III declared: 'The Indians are truly human . . . not only are they able to understand the Catholic faith, but they are extremely keen to receive it.'

Feather headdresses, weapons, fruits and animals from the New World started arriving in Europe. In 1517 a German engraver drawing a procession of inhabitants from Calcutta, mixes Asiatic elements (such as an elephant and its mahout, bulls draped in garlands, rams with huge tails) with details that come from the recent