American Beauties, or What’s Wrong with this Picture? Paintings and Prints of the Women of Virginia from John White to Joan Blaeu

Ann Rosalind Jones

This essay discusses European pictorial representations of North America women in six prints from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century books. By analyzing the shifting forms in which European artists presented two women of Virginia, I hope to raise some questions about cultural history. What do these related images reveal about the gendered eye of the Europeans who made them and for whom they were intended? What did an artist on the spot think was significant? What does the reworking of previous images by European print artists tell us about the way they imagined women of the Americas? Or about the way their publishers calculated what would appeal to their readers? And why might all this matter now?

Two of these images were engravings printed in the first volume of Theodore de Bry’s America (Frankfurt, 1590), well known now in Early Modern transatlantic studies. For the 1590 book the German publisher commissioned Carolus Clusius to write a Latin translation of Thomas Harriot’s 1588 English account of his countrymen’s settlement in Roanoke. De Bry illustrated this book with his own engravings, based on

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watercolor drawings made between 1584 and 1590 by the gentleman artist John White, who was commissioned to accompany Harriot to Virginia in 1586. After 1590, de Bry’s book was mined by artists of many kinds. My focus is on the fifty-year itinerary of two of de Bry’s female figures: first, a high-ranking Pomeiooc woman standing next to her daughter, as it was reinterpreted by other artists who made prints for costume books (geographically ordered sets of illustrations of the dress worn by people all over the world); and second, a Dasamonquepeuc woman carrying her baby on her back, also reworked for later books.  

By the 1570s, publishers were calculating that a costume book had to contain New World figures to fulfill the curiosity of its potential buyers. For example, the artist Jost Amman collaborated with Hans Weigel to provide a woodcut of a Brazilian warrior for their 1577 *Habitus Praecipuorum Popularum*. From this book, Amman, now commissioned by the inventive and prosperous Frankfurt publisher Sigismund Feyerabend, shamelessly took a print of a Moorish woman of Grenada and relabeled it as a woman of Peru in order to use it at the end of his 1586 collection of women’s dress, *Im Frauenzimmer*. Similarly, Cesare Vecellio promised in his 1590 book *Degli Habiti antichi di diverse parti del Mondo* that he would present figures from the New World in his next book, and he kept his promise in the second edition, this time entitled *Habiti antichi di tutto il Mondo*, by adding twenty woodcuts in a new final section, “America.” Another costume-book artist, Pietro Bertelli, revised de Bry’s engraving of the Pomeiooc mother; Vecellio also reworked de Bry’s mother carrying her baby on her back. In the seventeenth century, two further artists transformed de Bry’s prints: Abraham de Bruyn, in his book of engravings of dress from the

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four continents, published in Antwerp in 1610, and the artist who framed the map of North America published by Joan Blaue at the beginning of volume 12 of his *Grand Atlas* of 1663 (first published as the *Atlas Maior* in 1662). The additions and subtractions in these post-1590 texts point to different ways in which Europeans looked at early images of the women of the Americas through the lens of gender ideology, an ideology internally contradictory enough to lead to radical changes in the presentation of women of Virginia.

It is no surprise, of course, that these images show American women semi-naked. This was, after all, the state in which the English settlers of Roanoke encountered indigenous people — that is, the state in which they perceived and described them — all the more so since de Bry conceived of his engravings of White’s watercolors as a scientific project to circulate accurate illustrations of newly encountered specimens of humanity as widely as possible. In his 1588 text, Harriot was the first to make this ethnographic claim. He opens his commentary on the “Rulers or Chiefs of Virginia” with how the indigenous people “go forth in public” — in other words, their dress — as a traditionally succinct way of presenting a culture. Describing the male chiefs of Roanoke, he uses neutral language to refer to their hair, shaved on the sides with a ridge along the top of their skulls, their tattoos, the animal skins they wear around their waists, and the quivers, bows, and arrows they carry.

But a double standard for native women appears in his following description of the “Noblewoman of Secota,” in which not neutral but more...
gendered and critical terms are used: he evaluates the beauty of these women’s bodies and the lesser beauty of their faces. They are “elegant enough in form” but they have “small eyes, a flat, broad nose, a low forehead, and wide mouth” (62, English; 129, Latin). Of the “Unmarried Noblewoman of Secota,” he thinks a bit more highly because their behavior can be seen as virtuous according to a European norm: “They have a wide mouth, pretty enough eyes, and they often put their arms on their shoulders, covering their breasts as a sign of maidenly shame” (63, 133). The behavior of the woman of Dasamonquepeuc, however, cannot be assimilated: “They have a strange method of carrying their children, one markedly different from ours, for . . . these women grip the child’s right hand and carry him behind, clasping his left leg with the[ir] left arm in a rather surprising and alien fashion” (mira et peregrina, 64, 141).

White’s painting was the basis for de Bry’s engraving of the “Married Noblewoman of Pomeiooc,” including her gesture of resting her arm in a long necklace of pearls or copper beads (see Figs. 1a., 1b.). White and de Bry also show the noblewoman holding a round, long-bodied jar that typifies the earthenware pottery Harriot praises Virginian women for making. Her little daughter, however, steps outside the ethnographic focus into a world of colonial hybridity: she holds a doll dressed in Jacobean style and a belled rattle, for they are “most delighted with the dolls and little bells brought over from England” (64, 137). The daughter in fact wears clothing much scantier than the English doll’s complicated Jacobean gown and plumed hat. But Harriot’s description of the Pomeiooc girl’s clothing contradicts White’s picture; he encourages his readers to visualize what the print only partly shows: her waist is “girded with a leather belt, which, hanging down from the back, is drawn under the buttocks between her legs and tied above the navel, tree moss being inserted to hide the genitals” (63, 137). The text invites the onlooker to imagine this young Secotan from the back, even though the two artists’ depictions make such a view impossible.

What is striking about later renderings of this scene is that artists deleted the child so as to focus on the mother alone. This move was partly an adaptation of the generic format of the costume book, in which single figures are usually set on separate pages, but it transformed the visual effect
Paintings and Prints of the Women of Virginia

Figure 1a. John White, 1588, watercolor drawing. © Trustees of the British Museum, 5¼ × 10¾ in.

Figure 1b. Theodore de Bry, Noblewoman of Pomeiooc, 1590, engraving. Robert Dechert Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania, 7½ × 4¼ in.
of White’s upright, rather shy-looking mother. The three later versions of White’s watercolor show an evolution from mother to shapely half-nude. (See Fig. 2).

In contrast to White, de Bry gives his woman a stylish contrapposto with her weight on her right hip and her head tilted further toward the side, balancing the curve of her hip against the curve of the jar on the other side of her body. All three print artists also sharpen the focus and increase the length of the fringe at the hem of the mother’s skirt, with the effect of pulling the eye down to her mid-thighs. Pietro Bertelli was the first to show the mother alone, in his engraving, “Virginiae Insulae Habitatrix,” in Diversarum Nationum Habitus. 5 (The print reverses de Bry’s so the woman faces right rather than left, indicating that de Bry’s print was copied onto a copper plate and reversed as the plate was turned face down to be passed through the press.) Bertelli repeats her gestures of resting her wrist on her necklace and holding the pot, but he excludes the daughter. In addition, his

5 Pietro Bertelli, Diversarum nationum habitus (Padua: Alciatus Alcia, 1594), Bk. 2, plate 27.
caption identifies the woman without any indication of her rank or specific location: she is simply a “Woman Inhabitant of the Island of Virginia,” that is, a type. I propose that these changes also make her a more erotic figure, a caryatid holding a jar that echoes the shape of her body.

In Cesare Vecellio’s woodcut, too, “Clothing of the Women of Virginia Island” in his Habiti Antichi et Moderni di Tutto il Mondo (504), the child has been removed. We see the mother alone, now with long, flowing hair and high, round breasts that fit her into a classical body style: a youthful Venus, even one rising from the waves. She looks downward in a modest way that invites a freely moving gaze rather than looking back at the viewer. Vecellio shapes his beauty no longer as part of a mother-child couple, but as a model designed to appeal to a Venetian connoisseur of feminine desirability.

De Bry, however, transforms White’s watercolor of the “Woman of Dasamonquepeuc” in a way more typical of his prints than his single view of the Pomeiooc mother. He splits White’s more or less back view into a dissected pair, showing this mother from both front and back (see Figs. 3a. and 3b.). In de Bry’s figure on the right, no gaze from the subject herself, flirtatious or modest, intervenes between the viewer and this double presentation, reminiscent of the dissected back and front sections of contemporary anatomical diagrams. Though such frontal/dorsal positions sometimes interested Vecellio, too, he usually followed the frontal view most often used in costume books. But here, he shifts the axis of de Bry’s perspective to show this mother in profile (see Fig. 4).

Close scrutiny of these three figures shows that White positions his mother in an oddly twisted front-and-back posture — what Stephanie Pratt describes as a Mannerist pose. Standing with her back leg in profile but her front leg at the beginning of a turn toward the viewer, she is sharply twisted backward at her waist so as to show the baby on her back at the same time that she looks over her shoulder—a strained position suggesting that White asked his live model to adopt a stance that allowed her to keep

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6 Stephanie Pratt, “Truth and Artifice in the Visualization of Native Peoples: From the Time of John White to the Beginning of the 18th Century,” in European Visions, ed. Sloan, 35.
Figure 3a. John White, The wyfe of a Herowan of Pomeiooc, © Trustees of the British Museum, 5½ × 10in.

Figure 3b. Theodore de Bry, Woman of Dasamonquepeuc, 1590, Robert Dechert Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania, 7 × 5in.
her balance while she also displayed what he wanted to represent as the odd, even bizarre aspect of her behavior. Using a different perspective, in his rear view de Bry rationalizes the mother’s posture by turning her legs away from the viewer, which allows him to show her curving calves from behind. He also uses the sharper technique of engraving to emphasize her glance back over her shoulder, so that her gaze engages the viewer’s, inviting him into the world in which she stands so gracefully. While White’s figure has a round-faced innocence, de Bry’s, somewhat out of sync with his scientifically doubled anatomical presentation, offers an invitation. Providing yet another view, V ecll io keeps the balanced body posture that de Bry gives the mother in his dorsal view but presents her face in profile, eliminating the fetching gaze, with the effect of focusing the viewer’s eye on the ethnographic detail of her one-armed grip on the baby, shown with his right leg parallel to her spine — a position remarkably uncomfortable-looking for the child, but one in vertical symmetry with the mother’s body as a whole. Here, as in his Secotan mother without the child, V ecll io seems to be aiming for a kind of sculptural balance in what he considers an ennobling pose. More, his remark about this fashion of carrying a child
reverses Harriot’s unease with it as strange and alien. Vecellio calls it *un bel modo,* “a pretty way,” with the connotation of clever neatness or well-judged suitability (504).

The artists give their viewer, then, three different possibilities for looking at the represented woman: a twisted body with a soft backward glance, a glamorously balanced body with a fascinating gaze, and a neoclassically dignified body returning no gaze but coolly modeling a cultural behavior praised rather than distanced as strange and unfamiliar. There is nothing seductive about Vecellio’s Virginian mother; if anything, he gives her a sturdy independence from the viewer. White and de Bry, however, respectively represent a yielding obedience and an alluring glamour. The business of these beauties is to be admired by European eyes that will respond to their erotic appeal as much as to ethnographic fact.

A different kind of revision governs two later reworkings of the White/de Bry figures: an additional transformation through which the male partners of the women, implicitly present but visually absent in the 1590s images, are made emphatically present. In 1610, the Antwerp engraver Abraham de Bruyn expanded his costume book, *Omnim paene Europae, Asiae, Africæ atque Americae Gentium Habitus* (first published in Cologne in 1577), to include a Virginian couple. In his version the woman has a jar, a child, and — newly — a husband (see Fig. 5).

What is extraordinary about these two Americans is their complete ethnographic inaccuracy as a pair. The mother figure condenses the details of earlier prints of Virginia, with the addition of a Roman-looking toga and feather crown; but the male figure comes straight from prints of the warrior Tupis of Brazil.7 No Virginian Algonquian wore a thigh-length feather skirt, even less the *enduap,* the peacock-like feather tail de Bruyn attaches to his “vir in America.”8 Seen in the light of earlier representations, de Bruyn’s “Indica mulier” absorbs the details of earlier images of Virginian

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women, but the husband assigned to her belongs to a different continent. I take this strange pairing not as a sign that de Bruyn was suffering from New World “overkill” as a response to the ever-increasing images of Americans published by 1610 but from the effect of what he and his contemporaries perceived as a cultural necessity: a woman with a child made sense to Europeans, but without the child by 1610 she had to be assigned to a visible husband — whatever realm of the hazily imagined Americas he might inhabit. As Ivan Kamp puts it in his essay on a contemporary muse-
um display of other cultures, “If the ‘other’ is defined simply in terms of . . . what it lacks, then it becomes impossible to produce a positive account. Negative imagery needs positive associations to make it work; otherwise, the consumers of the image would have nothing to grasp.”

Some studies of early modern cartography have focused on the increasingly accurate representations of the Americas, but as Valerie Traub points out in her influential essay, “Mapping the Global Body,” the relocation of figures from the center of maps to their borders “gave new import and meaning to the human form. Abstracted from their environmental context, figures are suspended along a grid of regularly measured . . . space . . . arranged by an implicit order of hierarchy and difference.” She points out two effects of this kind of gradated border:

It made possible a more pronounced differentiation of skin color and clothing, as peoples across the globe are placed according to their physical location and displayed so as to represent a particular culture. On the other hand, it inaugurated a shift away from portraying the world’s peoples as generically male, engaged in activities of labor and warfare, and toward a dyadic composition . . . in pairs of men and women, often captured in static poses that emphasize both their domesticity and their representativeness.

One such frame for a map combined earlier images into just such a couple: another pair of Virginians, in a very small engraving in the left border of the map of the Americas that opens the twelfth volume of Joan Blaeu’s *Grand Atlas* (Amsterdam, 1663) (see Fig. 6). Here, the man is accurately based on White and de Bry’s depictions of a poised elder of Virginia, probably

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the Roanoke chief Wingina, but from the solitary, dignified figure of the 1590 book, he has here become the partner of the Dasamonquepeuc mother. Neither the female nor the male American is now acceptable as a single figure occupied with her or his own particular activity. The command to be fruitful and multiply—a central exhortation in the increasing number of marriage manuals published throughout Europe in the late sixteenth and earlier seventeenth centuries—has supplanted the interest in what American mothers and men might do or look like on their own.

All these images interpret differently the fascinating strangeness of peoples on the other side of the world: the half-naked mother of a strangely dressed American child, a freestanding nude, or a Virginian woman bizarrely coupled with a Brazilian warrior. In early modern Europe, the Virgin Mary was entitled to a respectful representation of her pregnancy as she saluted Elizabeth, the mother of another Christian hero in the making;

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11 On the identity of this figure, Plate III in de Bry, see Kupperman, “Roanoke’s Achievement,” in European Visions, ed. Sloan, 7.
the Virgin as mother with a sacred child was an equally honored subject for artists. But the versions of the secular representation of these Virginian mothers was very different.

One reason for the shift away from mothers with their children to women alone to mothers with their children’s fathers may have been the ongoing agenda of colonialism. De Bruyn and Blaeu made the inhabitants of Virginia (and Brazil) seem less strange by representing them in the married state familiar to Europeans themselves. There was an advantage in this shift. Thomas Harriot in his *Briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia* had assured the English patrons who funded the four voyages there between 1584 to 1587 that the indigenous people were malleable partly because they were not so different from the English: “of such a difference of statures only as we in England,” that is, neither the giants nor the pygmies of old travelers’ legends (47). Though they lacked European tools, “yet in those things they do they show excellence of wit” (48); they were almost monotheists because they believed in “one only chief and great God” and in an afterlife (48); and in the moderation of their diet, they were models for what Europeans should be doing. To show couples, then, as de Bry did in two engravings, one of a woman and man cooking stew in a large pot and one of a man and his wife eating on the ground (Plates XV and XVI), was a further guarantee that these people would be manageable by English settlers. In de Bruyn’s print, the presence of the Brazilian man represents the continued presence of the Dutch in Brazil, for whose governor-general, Johan Maurits, the painter Albert Eckhout completed in 1641 a series of twenty-one depictions of Tupi men, women with children, and the vegetables and fruits they cultivated. Peaceful profit: such was the promise that normalizing accounts and images of the New World made to their regents and to the supporters of their expeditions.

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12 Comment accompanying Plate XV, 67–68 (English), 151 (Latin).
13 For reproductions and an excellent series of essays on Eckhout’s illustrations of Brazil and, interestingly, the depiction by his contemporary, Jacob van Campen, of a *Triumphal Procession with Treasures from East and West*, see *Albert Eckhout: A Dutch Artist in Brazil*, ed. Quentin Buvelot (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, and The Hague: Royal Cabinet of Paintings, Mauritshuis, 2004).
But the significance of the pictorial shifts from the mother with her child to the alluring woman on her own to the safely coupled wife is worth considering. Is this progress? And is it over? What were people seeing or thinking they saw? Without simplifying the differences among early modern prints of American women circulated in Europe from the 1590s to the 1660s, one obvious conclusion is this: what women wear — and don’t — is always perceived through the particular genres used to frame gender ideology. Women’s bodies over time have been deployed in different media both to reinforce and to unsettle the demands that hedge this sex around. Clothed, semi-clothed, or unclothed, they continue to be sifted through publishers’ changing estimates of what the public will want and what, accordingly, they can profitably commission artists to represent — that is, what will fascinate, shock, or reassure the public to whom a report on newly explored territories, a costume book, or an atlas is addressed.